

T.C
EGE ÜNİVERSİTESİ
SOSYAL BİLİMLER ENSTİTÜSÜ
Amerikan Kültürü ve Edebiyatı Anabilim Dalı

**“WORD SENDERS”: AMERICAN INDIAN POETS RE-LOCATING
INDIAN IDENTITY**

DOKTORA TEZİ

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İZMİR - 2007

Ege Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Müdürlüğüne sunduğum **“Word Senders”**: **American Indian Poets Re-Locating Indian Identity** adlı doktora tezinin tarafımdan bilimsel, ahlak ve normlara uygun bir şekilde hazırlandığını, tezimde yararlandığım kaynakları bibliyografyada ve dipnotlarda gösterdiğimi onurumla doğrularım.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing this dissertation was a long and difficult but at the same time the most rewarding journey of my life. Without the following people it would not be possible and as satisfying. First, I would like to thank my advisor Prof. Atilla Silkü who kept me on schedule, and at the same time supported me endlessly even though I often chose to walk on the road not taken. The originality of this work owes much to his kind encouragement and appreciation of hard work and commitment. I would also like to thank Prof. Ayşe Lahur Kırtunç, the department head, for supporting my studies and sharing my excitement when I first met Sherman Alexie's poetry.

Robert M. Nelson, a noted emeritus professor of English and Native American Literature from University of Richmond has been of invaluable help all the way from the beginning, clearing out my question marks and sending me hope from the States via e-mails when I most needed. My poets, Joy Harjo, Kimberly Blaeser, Mark Turcotte, and Sherman Alexie have also been very kind in answering my questions and showing interest in my work. Sherman Alexie provided me with such controversial answers that I had to remind myself- once again- that this dissertation is about real people, not plastic images. I have special thanks to Mark Turcotte who has become a valuable and a dear friend during this journey providing me with books, comments, and self-reliance.

I am also grateful to my friends and family for being so patient and understanding when I gave them a hard time. My most special thanks goes to Vine Deloria Jr. whom I could not have the privilege to meet, but who became the mentor for this study via his books. I know he hears me somewhere. I would like to dedicate this study to the memory of him for inspiring us all, Indian and non-Indian.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This is who we are;

we are the words

Wendy Rose

Turtle Island (the Americas) before the European invasion was a much better place to live than Thomas More's Utopia itself. Native American political systems, although varying from tribe to tribe, were admirable. Women were the equal participants of the system, and tribal leadership could only be held in hand through the consent of the tribe, not for a fixed period of time. Bands composed clans, clans composed tribes, and smaller tribes composed federations- like the Iroquois. No tribe tried to impose its customs, religion, and/or language onto any other tribe. Each and every difference was accepted with respect on the intertribal level.

Native Americans also set up their lives in total harmony with their natural environment. For instance, Great Plains tribes (such as the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Pawnee) lived mainly on hunting and gathering, lived in tipis made of buffalo skin or in earth lodges in wintertime, and wore leather clothes and moccasins whereas the Southeastern Woodland tribes (such as the Seminole, Choctaw, and Cherokee) lived on hunting, fishing, and agriculture, and lived in chickees (stilt houses) and asis (wattle and daub houses)- suitable for the warmer climates, and wore loincloths or aprons alone.

Children were raised and educated in a loving and a happy environment instead of being pushed into a race among themselves. Their natural development were respected and waited for patiently. Literature was part of everyday life as was religion. People were not scared of Great Spirit as a prime punisher; on the contrary, he/she/it

was praised for being the protector and the creator of them. The tribe gathered for the purpose of ceremonies such as naming, puberty, funerals, and harvesting as well as simply for fun and entertainment in powwows.

Tribal life was simply crime-free. Goods were commonly shared and social control within the tribe was achieved through storytelling, orating, or use of humor and irony without hurting the individual feelings. There were no slaves, no prisoners, and no sly capitalists exploiting other people's labor. Medicine was in the service of each and every tribal member as long as needed. No elder was pushed out of the society and let feel useless. They assisted the tribe with their experiences, educated the young, and were respected on the utmost level. No one died in hunger, poverty, loneliness, sorrow, or sickness. Death, on the other hand, was accepted as the continuation of life and part of the life cycle, and was not feared. The dead ones were also respected and remembered, and their spirits were honored and well taken care of as their remains, believing that their spirits watch over the tribe.

Native tribes in the Americas have also managed to establish magnificent civilizations. They excelled in astronomy, math, medicine, agriculture, arts and literature. Some tribes like (the Aztecs and the Mayans) built stone houses, temples, and pyramids, and city-states. Long before the European contact Native Americans made calendars, knew the concept of zero in math, and built amazing irrigation canals.

Moreover, they did not build their civilizations on the sweat or lives of the poor masses, they did not kill animals to the extreme or made them extinct, they did not destroy the natural fauna or the ozone layer, or they did not try to exploit other tribes

and their resources. In short, Indians led spiritually and materially full and happy lives, and did nothing but good to the world they lived in.

Their contribution to today's American culture and science is noteworthy. For instance, there are over two hundred Indian drugs being used in America at the moment, their knowledge of astronomy and their star maps have amazed and inspired many astronomers, their careful observation of animals and learning the secrets of plants from them have become a new science called zoopharmacognosy, and their legends and stories giving actual information on some geological events inspired another new science, geomythology (Deloria, Red Earth White Lies 43-45). The examples are numerous.

Another outstanding contribution to contemporary American culture is their literatures and the function of literature as suggested by them. Indian literatures today as a whole have been the oldest, one of the richest, and more importantly the only true 'native' literature of America. It has had thousands of years of existence, heritage, and traditions all of which make literature practically a part of everyday life- through healing songs, harvesting and hunting ceremonies, powwows and etc.. Contemporary American Indian literature still feeds upon this immense and diverse literatures and carries certain characteristics and function of this tradition as well as adopting new forms and styles of expression. Hence, it can be observed that American Indian poetry today is very different in form and context, and even in function from the rest of the poetry being written in America.

Some of the distinct qualities of its form would be its constant move between prose and poetry- making the two almost inseparable-, the clarity in style, the

repetitions, circular narration, its performative character both as a sound and as a visible performance on paper, and its dialogic character making the reader a part of the experience. The context is also distinct in making nature, natural kinship with nature and animals, history, resistance and endurance, and stereotypes among the most common issues to be discussed. Moreover, it turns out that the extensive use of irony and humor- a traditional way of communication- can also be observed in these poems. Lastly, but most importantly, American Indian poetry is a communal act. Both the form and context carry intense communal qualities and concerns.

Therefore, inevitably, contemporary American Indian poetry becomes a tool of personal expression of communal articulation of Indianness. As can be expected, this communal act has gone through a change over the years. When between the 1960s and the 1990s more of a collective, a unified sense of 'Indianness' was observed, within the 1990s and onwards it turned out that American Indian poets have multiple ways of articulating Indianness; therefore, there cannot be any mentioning of a singular Indian identity today. Instead, there are multiple definitions and locations- or re-locations to be more exact- of Indianness.

This study will try to demonstrate how such diverse nations formed a united sense of Indianness within the 1960s and onwards, and how this identity location in America is altered by the Indians themselves from the 1990s onwards by examining the Indian poetry in detail. Special attention will be given to the efforts of re-location of identity beginning from the 1990s; hence, the poetry of Joy Harjo (Muscogee), Kimberly Blaeser (Anishinabe), Mark Turcotte (Chippewa), and Sherman Alexie

(Spokane and Coeur d'Alene) will be evaluated in detail as being some of the acclaimed representatives of American Indian poetry today.

However, before putting down the first words, there appeared the need to refer to them by a politically correct name among the many: Indian, American Indian, Amerindian, Natives, Native American, Indigenous Nations, Indigenous Peoples, First Nations, and etc. Unfortunately, the consensus on the issue is yet to be achieved both in political and literary arenas.

Even though it was commonly used by some Indians and non-Indians since the 1970s, the recently popular term Native American is not adopted in this study as it has met rejection by the Indians themselves for it is an imposed definition on Indians as a sign of political correctness, and diminishing their position to almost historical figures. Moreover, the term was questioned even by whites themselves who also believed to be alienated by this term after being born and living on the same land for successive generations now ("Native American Name Controversy" par.37). Besides, self-definition of Indian and American Indian were never left by the Indians themselves. Even though some of them are uneasy with the term 'Indian' today, as some others are with Native American, the term does not have any racist or offensive connotations like Red Skins or Red Indians.

Furthermore, the US government, concerned with political correctness, uses Indian and American Indian as standard terms. The Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian- opened in 2004- is not called The Smithsonian National Museum of the Native American, just as its quarterly publication is called American Indian, not Native American (qtd. in. "Native American Name Controversy" par. 13). Thus, maybe

even the term Native American is beginning to lose its politically correct image. Russell Means is particularly against the use of it as he also states in an interview he gave in 2006:

I hate the word Native American. Its a government term, which was created in the year 1970 in the Department of the Interior, a generic term that describes all the prisoners of the United States of America. Those of us who are forced to live on trust territories, the Micronesians, the original Hawaiians, the Aleuts, the Inupiates, the Upics, who are erroneously called Eskimos, and all of the 500 nations of the American Indians are so-called "Native Americans." I refuse to be defined by a government, any government; so I am an Indian. Because I know where that came from, a bastardization of two Spanish words: In Dios, "in with god." And Columbus wrote la gente indio, "a people in with God;" so I much prefer to be called Indian rather than Native American. (4)

The articles and books published on the field use both Native American and Indian- or American Indian- interchangeably, some preferring one to the other. Just as there is no consensus between the Indians and non-Indians, there is no agreement among the Indians themselves, either. Playwright Drew Hayden Taylor (Ojibway) seems tired of this debate saying, "Oh, Just Call Me an Indian":

"We're/You're no longer called Indians!" I was told over and over again.

...

While we were growing up, we were all proud to be “Indians.”
The word had a certain power to it that set us aside from the white kids.
(Or should I say children of occidental descent?)

...

I guess at 29 I’m out-of-date.

...

And these names or classifications have nothing to do with any tribal affiliations- they are just generic names used to describe us “Indians.”

Grab some aspirin and let me give you some examples.

We’ll start with the basics: status, nonstatus, Metis. So far, painless. I guess next would come the already mentioned Indian, followed by native aboriginal, indigenous and First Nations. Pay attention, there is going to be a test afterward. From there we can go to “on-reserve,” “off-reserve,” urban, treaty.

Got a headache yet? How about the enfranchised Indians, the Bill c-31 or reinstated people, the traditional Indians, the assimilated Indian? I’m not finished, yet.

There are wannabes (the white variety), the apples (the red variety), the half-breeds, mixed bloods and, of course, the ever popular full bloods.

...

Get the picture? Right- there are a couple of dozen separate names for our people. Where does it all stop? ...

Even I get confused sometimes. That's why I usually use the term "Indian." I'm just too busy or too lazy to find out which way the political wind is blowing, . . . (281-83)

The major reference for this study was the poets themselves who often defined themselves as Indians or American Indians when they do not mention of their tribal identity. Sherman Alexie cleared out the way:

November 1994, Manhattan: PEN American panel on Indian literature.

N. Scott Momaday, James Welch, Gloria Miguel, Joy Harjo, me. Two or three hundred people in the audience. Mostly non-Indians, an Indian or three.

Questions and answers.

"Why do you insist on calling yourselves Indian?" asks a white woman in a nice hat. "It's so demeaning."

"Listen," I say. "The word belongs to us now. We are Indians. That has nothing to do with Indians from India. We are not American Indians. We are Indians, pronounced In-din. It belongs to us. We own it and we're not going to give it back."

So much has been taken from us that we hold onto the smallest things left with all the strength we have.

("The Unauthorized Autobiography of Me" 13)

Thus, in respect to the Indian poets and their self-definition, and to keep this study away from the political winds, the term Indian will be used with the hope that it

will not discomfort the Indian reader. The terms Natives or Native Americans will also be used only to refer to the native peoples living in the Americas at the time of or before the European contact. Sometimes, to refer to the contemporary Indians and/or authors who have been in close contact with the dominant culture, or to stress its influence, the term American Indian will also be employed, too. The term indigenous peoples, on the other hand, will be used when the inherent rights of Indians to land is to be emphasized.

During the course of this study it is observed that survival for Indian literatures, as it is for Indians, is a respectful achievement considering what they have gone through over the centuries. It is estimated that there were over a thousand tribes within the borders of the United States at the time of European contact and all had their own traditions and literatures. A great deal of these literatures had been lost with the annihilation of peoples and many tribes by European settlers. Another great deal of them was destroyed when they were translated into English and transformed from oral to written form. During this translation process Indian poetry was ‘invented’ out of poetic oral narratives that assumingly often shifted from prose to poetry and vice versa.

Even though Indian literatures had still so much to offer to the knowledge and awe of the newcomers, they were overlooked for centuries and were not even accepted as literature as they came from the ‘savages’. Until the mid-20th century, Indian literary works were mostly of interest to anthropologists alone. Few Indian writers could publish works either with great difficulty or with English names such as John Rollin Ridge (Cherokee) and Alexander Lawrence Posey (Creek).

Indian literature in the 20th century could find a proper ground to introduce itself to the wider public only after N. Scott Momaday (Kiowa) won the Pulitzer Prize in

1969 for his novel House Made of Dawn, which became the turning point starting the Native American Renaissance- as Kenneth Lincoln called it. Since then, American Indian literature is growing and blooming- for the second time- with amazing speed and variety and bringing new issues, forms and styles to poetry as well as to other genres.

Today American Indian poetry, as it seems to me, has closer links to its traditional oral narratives maybe more than any other genre. It employs the stories and the storytelling techniques very often, it makes use of tribal legends, healing songs, and prayers, and it has a communal voice in the form of poetry in which personal voice is most expected. Moreover, some of its characteristics in form such as its circular narrative style, dialogic character, using repetitions, and shifting between prose and poetry give its form a unique character as well. That's why, I think, Indian poetry has an exceptional place and contribution to contemporary American literature today. In that sense, studying American Indian poetry is significant in not only studying one of the roots of today's American literature but at the same time in getting acquainted with one of the most interesting and valuable parts of contemporary American literature and culture.

On the other hand, it should be remembered that Indian poetry should not be studied as simply a minority literature trying to survive in this multicultural and multiethnic environment. Indians cannot be diminished to the definition of a minority group on their homeland- although they are minor in number. Hence, I usually prefer to use the term 'ethnic group' instead of 'minority' to be able to separate Indians from rest of the minorities. Nonetheless, minority groups in America have never had any concern of being wiped out from the face of the world nor have they rightfully had any claims

on any piece of land to govern themselves freely within the borders of the United States. They just- rightfully- seek equal share in social, political, and cultural areas as being part of the society.

American Indians, on the other hand, have been demanding appreciation, respect, and complete independence rather than participation. They do not want to gain their rights for the first time; they want to take back their rights- and preserve the treaty rights they hold-, including tribal sovereignty and title to tribal lands taken from them by fraud. For that reason, while the ‘difference’ discourse excludes minorities from the society, meaning discrimination for them, for the American Indian it is almost the insurance of their existence. Sitting Bull (Hunkpapa Sioux) when asked why he does not want to live on a reservation, said,

Because I am a red man. If the Great Spirit had desired me to be a white man he would have made me so in the first place. He put in your heart certain wishes and plans, in my heart he put other and different desires. Each man is good in his sight. It is not necessary for eagles to be crows.
(qtd. in Deloria, God Is Red 198)

Indian poetry underlines and cherishes this difference as a confirmation of identity. That’s why I believe that studying the issue of Indian identity within this context would provide a different look to the overall issue of identity in America and her literature as well.

To be able to see the picture from the Indian side, the first chapter “Indian Social History to the 1960s” will describe and compare Indian life before and after the European invasion. This chapter will try to provide the reader with a different sense of

history reporting it from the 'other' side. It will examine the genocidal killing of Indians, their forced removal from their tribal lands to deserted areas- and later into the cities-, and their resistance strategies and ways of survival and continuance.

Throughout the chapter the destruction of Indian lives and lifeways and the change and loss in their cultures will also be displayed. The missionary activities in reservations, the boarding schools, and the repercussions of banning the traditional and religious ceremonies in reservations will be studied. How the United States government handled this Indian 'issue' politically- like the Termination and Relocation programs, Indian Reorganization Act, Public Law 280, and etc., and socially- with the Meriam Report, the establishment of Indian Claims Commission (ICC), and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), and etc.- throughout the centuries until the 1990s is also another issue that will be discussed within this chapter.

It seems that whether or not in goodwill, the United States government has done a terrible job with Indians. They still suffer from the highest rate of poverty, unemployment, suicide, and newborn deaths among all other ethnic groups in America. They also have the lowest life expectancy. On the other hand, the United States government has broken each and every treaty it signed with the tribes. Today, there are over 500 federally recognized tribes in America and almost all have filed a suit against the US government at some point. At the moment, there are also about 200 tribes waiting for federal recognition to become entitled to federal aid, and to be able to protect their social, religious, and economic rights, along with some other tribes that reject federal recognition.

Providing such pieces of information, this chapter aims to provide a look to the true history of Indian peoples in America. By this way, it will try to form a mutual understanding and terminology with the reader as these social and historical events, no matter how old or recent they are, are represented substantially in contemporary American Indian poetry. The first chapter, in that sense, is crucial to the understanding of the overall Indian cause and the questions the dissertation will later raise concerning identity.

The second chapter “A New Era: Indian Existence in America from the 1960s to the 1990s” will explore the Indian involvement in social, political, and literary arenas in the second half of the 20th century in detail. First, it will discuss Indian social activism and the Red Power movement and its contribution in building up the collective Indian identity. Then it will try to answer the question, ‘who is American Indian?’ While searching for an answer, the chapter will examine how Indians expressed themselves, how whites perceived them, and represented them in literature and how they defined Indians in the political arena as well. After that, with the renaissance movement in Indian literature the chapter will also discuss the identity issue as located by Indian poets collectively within this period.

The period is significant since within the late 1960s Indians became visible to wider public due to the Civil Rights movements in the era and their own activist moves which began to use the tools of dominant social structure such as the media, the law, and non-governmental organizations. The most influential Indian organizations as American Indian Movement (AIM) and National Indian Youth Council (NIYC) were also formed during this period. Such organizations united young Indians especially in

urban areas, and conducted many activist moves like fish-ins, the occupation of Alcatraz (1969), and Wounded Knee takeover (1973). Indians began to be heard by the masses in America for the first time. Scott Momaday's winning the Pulitzer Prize attracted attentions to Indian literature, and the Indian Renaissance began.

This period witnessed the boom in Indian literature and interest in 'anything' Indian, too. It led to a drastic increase in the exploitation of Indian reservation areas, families, and even graves- under the name of scientific study- by many anthropologists. Anthropologists visiting reservation areas usually believed in how 'they' perceived things, as scientific data or analysis, instead of trying to comprehend what they actually see. Along with this internalized superiority complex, their ignorance in the researches they publish contributed to the stereotyping of Indians, rather than providing actual assistance and help to solve the problems of poverty, health services, schooling, and housing on reservations. Vine Deloria Jr. (Standing Rock Sioux) presents a good example of how white anthropologists were far away from what they thought they had achieved through these researches.

Then one day a famous anthropologist advanced the thesis, probably valid at the time and in the manner in which he advanced it, that the Oglala were WARRIORS WITHOUT WEAPONS.

The chase was on.

From every library stack in the nation anthropologists converged on the innocent Oglala Sioux to test this new thesis before the ink dried on the scholarly journals. . . .

Every conceivable difference between the Oglala Sioux and the folks at Hyannisport was attributed to the quaint warrior tradition of the Oglala Sioux. From lack of roads to unshined shoes Sioux problems were generated, so the anthros discovered, by the refusal of the white man to recognize the great desire of the Oglalas to go to war.

...

Real problems and real people become invisible before the great romantic notion that the Sioux yearn for the days of Crazy Horse and Red Cloud and will do nothing until those days return. (Custer Died for Your Sins 90-92)

The 1960s and the following decades were also the times in which collective Indian consciousness and identity were raised by the Indian activists such as Russell Means (Oglala Sioux), Richard Oakes (Mohawk), Hank Adams (Assiniboine and Sioux), and Dennis Banks, (Chippewa), and by writers as N. Scott Momaday, Dee Brown, Gerald Vizenor (Chippewa), and Vine Deloria Jr. Indian authors such as Simon Ortiz (Acoma Pueblo), James Welch (Black Feet and Gros Ventre), Louise Erdrich (Chippewa), and Lance Henson (Cheyenne), on the other hand, turned out to be the modern day storytellers who significantly contributed to Indian activism as well as to the articulation and the location of Indian collective identity. This chapter will try to give voice to these efforts in social and political arenas, and especially in the literary one, poetry. Therefore, works from poets like Simon Ortiz, Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna and Sioux), Louise Erdrich, and Wendy Rose (Hopi and Miwok) will be evaluated.

The last chapter “American Indian Poetry from the 1990s to the Early 2000s” will discuss how Indian identity is re-located by contemporary American Indian poets concentrating on the poetry of Joy Harjo, Kimberly Blaeser, Mark Turcotte, and Sherman Alexie. To be able to do this properly, first it will try to clear out the way to approach Indian poetry so that the reader would be kept away from the common mistake of oversimplifying or perceiving it as that of any other ethnic group in America.

The first section will discuss how Indian poetry offers different themes and issues such as natural kinship with nature, Indian history, and continuance while underlining the communal character of Indian poetry. The second section will discuss the unique style of it mostly inherited- and developed- from the oral narratives such as its constant move between prose and poetry, its clear narrative style, the often employment of repetitions, circular narration, and its performative character- giving the lines sound and action on paper. Keeping in mind these distinct qualities in form and context the third section “Criticism: Indian Food Western Pot” will discuss how different theories of contemporary literary criticism such as ecocriticism, magical realism, dialogism, postmodernism, and post-colonialism- while partially providing a terminology from time to time- one by one become inefficient in unfolding Indian poetry. Another small section will also be devoted to the arguments about an indigenous theory and alternative suggestions of reading contemporary American Indian poetry.

Indian scholars such as Kimberly Blaeser, Craig Womack (Creek and Cherokee), and Robert Allen Warrior (Osage) along with some others think that an indigenous theory is needed for a proper decoding of contemporary Indian poetry (Rader 125-26). Arnold Krupat, a leading scholar in the field, also reminds in his book

Ethnocriticism: Ethnography, History, Literature that “what might be called an ‘indigenous’ criticism for Indian literatures remains to be worked out” (Introduction 44).

I agree, thinking that to be able to ‘get into’ Indian poetry properly, an indigenous theory is to be developed. However, until then we might still read Indian poetry borrowing terminology from various theories ‘where applicable’. In short, existing theories in hand seem to provide a partial decoding for Indian poetry for the moment; and this partial decoding will be applied.

With these ideas in mind, the chapter will explore the poetry of the above-mentioned four poets and how they re-located Indian identity between the 1990s and the early 2000s. While doing this, the basic aspects of building identity such as history, language, religion, devotion to land, tribal affiliation, certain common traditions- like storytelling, powwows, and use of humor-, and rejection of stereotypes of Indians, and self-definition as reflected in their poems will be evaluated by sparing a section for each poet.

While trying to picture the innate Indian character in Indian poetry, the major objectives of this dissertation will be to see how Indians define and re-define themselves- instead of supplying a vision of Indianness from a Western eye-, to understand the significance of these efforts, and especially to refrain from labeling Indian peoples and restricting contemporary Indian poetry under the shadow of Western theories and norms- being aware of the limitations of its writer as a non-Indian who has not been exposed to Indian cultures previously. For this reason, Indian poets and writers

along with a few respected scholars in the field, Indian and non-Indian, will be illuminating the way for this study.

Thus, while writing this dissertation, my personal attitude will be to approach Indian poetry cautiously; never forgetting that the ground I walk on is unfamiliar. Alexie assures me that I have a point:

That's how I do this life sometimes by making the ordinary just like magic and just like a card trick and just like a mirror and just like the disappearing. Every Indian learns how to be a magician and learns how to misdirect attention and the dark hand is always quicker than the white eye and no matter how close you get to my heart you will never find out my secrets and I'll never tell you and I'll never show you the same trick twice. ("Jesus Christ's Half Brother Is Alive and Well on the Spokane Indian Reservation" 125)

2. INDIAN SOCIAL HISTORY TO THE 1960s

Indians have a 'long' history in the Americas. According to Bering Strait theory, formulated by Ales Hrdlika in the early 1900s, between 24 and 12 thousand years ago there appeared a land bridge between Alaska and Siberia during the glacial period, and Indians as well as mega fauna and flora have traveled through this ice bridge and then the corridor was buried into the sea afterwards. Although the theory is not yet proved correct, it has been widely accepted as common knowledge.

However, it is also challenged and questioned by many scientists and scholars today. Vine Deloria Jr.- professor of history, law, religious studies, and political science- refutes the Bering Strait Theory in his Red Earth White Lies: Native Americans and the Myth of Scientific Fact by quoting from various scientists and Indian creation stories, which explain the origins of tribes but never mentioning the ice bridge. He also demonstrates how the forming of the Bering Strait land bridge was in fact almost impossible, let alone the irrationality of people, mega fauna, and the 'flora' choosing to cross the bridge in the blizzard when there were plenty of food and better living climate on their side.

Moreover, Indian tribes have stories that bring explanations to many geological events that took place long before the 12 thousand years when Bering Strait bridge was assumingly formed. One example is Mount Multnomah the largest mountain in the Cascade mountain chain- Three Sister peaks- in Oregon. According to the scientists the volcano erupted on its peak about 25 million years ago. Deloria quotes from Ella Clark the story coming from the Warm Springs Reservation in Oregon describing the event:

Klah Klahnee, the Three Sisters, was once the biggest and highest mountain of all; it could be seen for many miles. One time the earth shook for days, and the mountain boiled inside. It boiled over and hot rocks came out of the top of it. Flames and smoke rose high in the air. Red-hot stones were thrown out in every direction. Many villages and many Indians were buried by the rocks. When the mountain became quiet again, most of it was gone. Only three points were left. (Red Earth White Lies: Native Americans and the Myth of Scientific Fact 181)

Deloria continues,

If the Warm Springs Indians crossed the Bering Strait around 12,000 years ago, they had to have come to the Oregon area *after* Mount Multnomah had exploded and had long since begun to erode. They could not have known that this particular mountain was once the highest of all the Cascade peaks. (181)

Deloria's book offers such numerous examples which make Bering Strait theory improbable and irrational. It also underlines an important point that Indian legends and stories do in fact offer some scientific data to be taken seriously. Although not enough is known about the thousands- maybe millions- of years of pre-Columbian Native existence in the Americas, today we are aware that they have not caused any harm to the planet or the continents they lived in. They also have managed to form equally complex, but superior civilizations with amazing diversity and richness. However, their spiritual and physical well-being was severely and irreversibly destroyed as well as their cultures and civilizations with European intervention of their land and lives in 1492.

2.1. Indians Before the European Encounter

Many Indian creation stories talk about the creation on Turtle Island. The following is an example to the creation story of Iroquois nations- Five Nations:

Long, long ago, one of the Spirits of the Sky World came down and looked at the earth. . . . called the people all together, and spoke his parting words:

“To the Mohawks, I give corn,” he said. To the patient Oneidas, I give the nuts and the fruit of many trees. To the industrious Senecas, I give beans. To the friendly Cayugas, I give the roots of plants to be eaten. To the wise and eloquent Onondagas, I give grapes and squashes to eat and tobacco to smoke at the camp fires.”

Many other things he told the new people. Then he wrapped himself in a bright cloud and went like a swift arrow to the Sun. . . .
(Edmonds and Clark 349)

Whether or not Indian tribes were ‘born’ in the Americas, Native Americans are the first peoples of the continents, and they established magnificent civilizations more or less during the same time with the Europeans before they were ‘discovered’ by them. America was never discovered; it was not a wild empty land waiting to be found. It is estimated that over a 100 million Indians were living in both South and North America by the time Columbus set foot upon the land. Before the arrival of Europeans, Native Americans had built cities and burial places as big as pyramids, advanced in math, did amazing baskets, built irrigation canals, and made cloth out of cotton (Zinn 19).

Before the European invasion there were over a thousand Native tribes in North America alone, and they spoke almost as many different languages, had different religions and traditions, and different lifeways. Some were nomadic tribes whereas others had chosen to settle and establish big villages; some others even established cities with thousands of inhabitants and a complex social structure.

In North America they established civilizations based on gathering, hunting, fishing, and/or agriculture in accordance with the climate and the area they lived in. For instance, Eastern Woodland tribes such as the Muscogee and Iroquois advanced on agriculture as well as hunting and fishing whereas tribes of Great Plains such as the Sioux and Pawnee relied more on hunting. The modes of production were influential in the diversity of their religions as well. Tribes had multiple deities to display gratitude, but all tribes believed in the Great Spirit as the prime mover.

Although Native Americans had diverse tribal, religious, and linguistic structures, they had some common notions in the ways in which they treated nature, divided labor between the two sexes, and shared political power in secular issues. All Native tribes treated nature with great respect and were aware that their well-being was dependent on nature. They had great concern to pursue a life in harmony with the natural environment they lived in. They “practiced a form of reciprocity with nature, giving something back for something taken” (Olson and Wilson 3). They were over a 100 million people living on the two continents with no single destruction or exploitation of natural resources.

The division of labor was not in favor of either sex, nor were women ever seen as inferior to men. Gary B. Nash discusses the same issue with reference to one of the

biggest tribes in the east in his Red, White, and Black: “Thus power was shared between the sexes and the European idea of male dominancy and female subordination in all things was conspicuously absent in Iroquois society” (qtd. in Zinn 20). Indian social, political, and religious structures were never patriarchal. Women held key positions in all three systems in varying degrees just as men did. Moreover, families were matrilineal in many tribes such as the Iroquois, and when a woman wanted to divorce her husband she could simply put his stuff outside the door (Zinn 20). The use of political power in secular issues was again in the hands of the both sexes:

Families were grouped in clans, and a dozen or more clans might make up a village. The senior women named the men who represented the clans at village and tribal councils. They also named the forty-nine chiefs who were the ruling council for the Five Nation confederacy for the Iroquois. The women attended clan meetings, stood behind the circle of men who spoke and voted, and removed the men from office if they strayed too far from the wishes of the women. (Zinn 20)

Similar to their relations with nature, Native Americans were fair and away from exploitation in their relations to children. There were no heavy punishments or expectations of unconditional obedience; instead, they approached them with understanding, and taught their children to be independent and not surrender to any overbearing authority (Zinn 20). The education of the young was an ongoing process in the tribe. Their tribal history, laws, and stories were memorized and all the rituals, ceremonial dances, and songs were also an important part of this education, which at the same time created a strong sense of belonging and tribal identity.

The relations among tribes were also very different and almost ideal concerning the European values and political affairs. There were no written treaties nor were there any concept of land or property owning, but each tribe knew well where their borders of hunting, fishing, and cultivating ended. In case there was a disagreement and a battle between tribes, the final 'oral' agreement between the leaders was to be followed with no exceptions.

In other words, American Indians were like living in different small countries with no borders and with similar political and social systems- just as the European Union today- in one big continent; and none of the countries- tribes- was trying to exploit the other, or impose its own language, religion, and values onto another. Still, they had a very strong sense of who they were, and were very devoted to the land they lived on and their tribe. Thus, tribal identity among American Indians was well established, but they were not in any attempt of disseminating or exporting it to the other tribes.

It can be said that American Indians had established a social and a political system that was almost a utopia compared to today's world: ultimate freedom, no greed for the ownership of anything, no hunger, simple naturalistic lifestyle, feeling of security, no wars or massacres, no exploitation of the weak, respect and encouragement for the individual differences and talents, strong sense of belonging, and no fear for the future of the family or the country. The ideal system the western world has been trying to establish for centuries with wars and written laws and treaties and politics seems to have been achieved long time ago. Unfortunately, it was not let last any longer.

2.2 Indian Life After 1492: Destroying the Utopia

Thomas More's Utopia describes a country in which everyone is happy and well taken care of, and communal ownership is praised where gold and silver have no more value than their metal essence. However, this same utopia uses slaves and prisoners to do hunting and cutting meat, this same utopia requires you to have permission and passport to travel to another city, and this same country forbids you to get married should you have premarital intercourse. Even worse, the patriarchal system is ever present: "Wives are subordinate to their husbands, children to their parents, and younger people generally to their elders" (More 60).

Native Americans seem to have managed to establish a utopia beyond imagination. The destruction of it started on October 12, 1492 with the arrival of Christopher Columbus and his three ships on Bahama Islands. The inhabitants of the islands, Arawaks, greeted them with gifts and great hospitality that surprised the Europeans. Although amazed with their fundamental positive attitude, Columbus noted this in his diary -about the Arawaks- "With fifty men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want" (Zinn 1). The devastation of Indians and the Indian lands had begun.

From the first day of the 'encounter' the whites aimed at dislocating Indians from their homelands and taking from them whatever they had. Columbus wrote: "As soon as I arrived in the Indies, on the first Island which I found, I took some of the natives by force in order that they might learn and might give me information of whatever there is in these parts" (Zinn 2).

Given an impossible task of finding gold, Arawaks were killed and tortured, and when they formed an army to fight back they had to face Spaniards “who had armour, muskets, swords, [and] horses. When the Spaniards took prisoners they hanged them or burned them to death. Among the Arawaks, mass suicides began, with cassava poison [. . .] In two years, through murder, mutilation, or suicide, half of the 250.000 Indians on Haiti were dead” (Zinn 4-5).

The situation was not different elsewhere. One of the early conquistadors Don Juan de Onate arriving Acoma territory on the Southwest of northern America in 1598, announced that Acomas and their land were the subjects of Spanish crown. Acomas resisted and killed 13 soldiers. The Spanish retaliated with a cruel attack that took three days and killed 800 people. The remaining males over 25 were to be amputated and serve 20 years of slavery; the ones under 25 would do the same except losing a foot. (Trafzer 29-30). The Spanish also cut off the hands of two Hopi Indians they found at Acoma and “sent them off to spread the word among Native Americans: Do not resist Spanish rule” (Trafzer 30). Due to this greed that continued for centuries to come, Americas witnessed the biggest holocaust- or genocide as better be called- and exploitation in the world history.

2.2.1. Dislocation and Assimilation Policies

The dislocation of Native tribes, although started from the early days of invasion, took the shape of a ‘policy’ after a formal government was established with

the Declaration of Independence in 1776. By then, Indians of North America had learned the meaning of treaties and how they could take their lands from them, and how they could easily be broken by the whites. As the first settlers began to appear on the shore, the need of land and property reached to a different level and white settlers wanted Indians to leave behind whatever they had and move further west, opening areas for white settlement.

However, Indian cultures and traditions were highly linked to the land, the natural environment, and the climate they were surrounded by. Each tribe had different rituals, ceremonies, and stories due to these variables. For instance, according to a Navajo legend, the Spider Rock at Canyon de Chelly National Park in Arizona today is the home of the Spider Woman who watches over Navajos and who taught them how to weave (Edmonds and Clark 94-96). Apart from the numerous legends and stories that define Indian bonds to the land and tribal history and identity, almost all Indian tribes shared the belief that the land they lived on was sacred and the spirits of their ancestors buried in its heart were watching over to protect them. Evidently, the Native American tribes had developed a lifestyle in complete harmony with and dependence on their geographical location. Leaving their ancestral lands was simply unthinkable.

For this reason, from 1540 to 1890, Indian tribes fought many bloody wars and suffered from brutal attacks and mass murders. All these brought agony and tears to the Indians as a whole. When it came to 1890, the Wounded Knee massacre, Indians had also been fighting against poverty, the various deadly epidemics, and even racism as well. The massacre put an end to the era called Indian Wars and the same year the Bureau of the Census noted, “the internal frontier was closed” (Zinn 297).

2.2.1.1. Indian Holocaust: Sand Creek and Wounded Knee

For over 300 years Indian tribes had been fighting with the invaders on almost every part of northern America: Pequot War (1636-1637) and King Philip's War (1675-1676) -both very bloody- in New England, French and Indian War (1754-1763) in wider areas such as Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Ohio, Seminole Wars (1817-1818, 1835-1842, 1856-1858) in Florida, The Battle of Little Bighorn (1876) in Montana, Modoc War (1872-1873) in California, and Apache Wars (1886) in New Mexico and Arizona.

As the quick dislocation and the total control of Indians seemed impossible, they had to be removed by force, and every action to weaken their dignity was to be carried out. The European colonizers (English, Dutch, Spanish, Swedish and etc.) were determined to take whatever Indian lands has to offer. One of the two major massacres to exemplify white greed and holocaust in America is the one that took place in a small Cheyenne and Arapaho village called Sand Creek in Colorado, in 1864.

Colonel John Chivington who was determined to destroy the whole Sand Creek entered the village at dawn with "700 heavily armed soldiers" in 1864 (Stannard 131). Although the colonel was informed before he attacked Sand Creek that those Indians were considered "to be harmless and disarmed prisoners of war" by the government, he dismissed the news (Stannard 131). Seeing the soldiers, the chief Black Kettle tied a white flag and an American flag- he was given by the Commissioner of Indian Affairs- to a lodge pole, held it high, and kept telling his people "not to be frightened" and "the camp was under protection and there was no danger," but it didn't help (Stannard 131-32). There were about 600 Indians in Sand Creek that day, only about 60 were men, as

most men were away on Buffalo hunt (Stannard 131-32). Over 300 Indians mostly women and children were brutally killed. David Stannard reports the testimony of Robert Bent, the Colonel's guide, on the massacre:

After the firing the warriors put the squaws and children together, and surrounded them to protect them. [. . .] When the troops came up to them they ran out and showed their persons, to let soldiers know that they were squaws and begged for mercy, but the soldiers shot them all. [. . .] Every one I saw dead was scalped. I saw one squaw cut open with an unborn child, as I thought, lying by her side. Captain Soule afterwards told me that such was the fact. [. . .] I saw quite a number of infants in arms killed with their mothers. (132)

Another ruthless attack on Indians was also the last one of these mass killings. The Wounded Knee massacre is a turning point for both Indian and American history. The massacre has a close connection to Ghost Dance religion that appeared out of the devastation of Indian peoples. In 1889 Wovoka prophesized of the times in which there will be a big flood wiping out the whites, then Indians will unite with the dead beloveds, and there will be no hunger or disease or war anymore. The prophecy spread quickly among the neighboring tribes and ceremonies began to be held. Since it took consecutive five days and the dancers were dancing and singing continuously for the prophesized days to come sooner, the performance caused fear among white settlers believing that Indians were getting ready for a war.

Government officials did not lose time and banned the performance of Ghost Dance in November 1890. The order to arrest several leaders in the Lakota- western

Sioux- region followed, and the legendary Sitting Bull was killed in the attempt on December 15, 1890. “Shock and anger swept across the cold Dakota plains” (Trafzer 320). Thinking that the armies are planning to kill them, hundreds of Ghost Dance believers including women and children followed Big Foot, the Miniconjou Sioux leader to Pine Ridge Reservation where they were to visit Red Cloud for protection (Brown 414). Weakened by hunger and sickness on the way, soldiers found them before they reached the reservation and took them to Wounded Knee Creek. Following the order of Big Foot who saw Hotchkiss guns set up above the village, they surrendered.

The next morning Indians were told that they were going to be taken to Pine Ridge- this was a lie-, but before that all men should come to the center for a talk (Brown 416). They made stay in two separate groups: men, and women and children. After the men surrendered their weapons, the soldiers looked for more weapons; and as women and children cried out during the search, the situation got more and more tense. Black Elk, the Oglala Sioux medicine man reports what happened:

An officer came to search them. He took the other man’s gun, and then started to take Yellow Bird’s. But Yellow Bird would not let go. He wrestled with the officer, and while they were wrestling, the gun went off and killed the officer. . . . As soon as the gun went off, Dog Chief told me, an officer shot and killed Big Foot who was lying sick inside the tepee.

Then suddenly nobody knew what was happening, except that the soldiers were all shooting and the wagon-guns began going off right in among the people. (260-61)

The massacre took six hours and cost the lives of 300 Indian people who insisted on hoping that the Indian suffering will end. The soldiers were later awarded medals of honor by the federal government (Iverson 13). Black Elk years later would say:

When I look back now from this high hill of my old age, I can still see the butchered women and children lying heaped and scattered all along the crooked gulch as plain as when I saw them with eyes still young. And I can see that something else died there in the bloody mud, and was buried in the blizzard. A people's dream died there. It was a beautiful dream. (270)

Indian holocaust- bordering on genocide (Kroeber "Native American Resistance and Renewal" 3) or exceeding it (Stannard 269)- also took the shape of biological warfare. Native Americans weren't immune to diseases the Europeans introduced such as small pox, measles, cholera, influenza, pneumonia, and meningitis and died in big numbers. Discovering this biological weakness soon turned to several acts of deliberate infection of them like providing the tribes with blankets infected with small pox under the name of an aid from the US government. As a result, Indian population declined at least by 95% in North America when it came to the 20th century (Stannard 268). Another factor that severely increased the number of Indian losses was the harsh conditions they had to face during their removal from their homeland to further areas.

2.2.1.2 Forced Removal and Resistance

The main reasons for Indian removal were to take all the natural resources Indians held in hand and set up a new country without any ‘savages’ around. For this reason, European colonizers and the US government wanted to get rid of Indians- who stood in the way to “progress” and “civilization” (Trafzer 149). To be able to do this easily, the US government signed numerous treaties with various tribes, with promises like better living conditions and continuous government support for several years. The first treaty signed by George Washington said,

The utmost good faith shall always be observed toward the Indians, their lands and property shall never be taken from them without their consent; and in their property, rights, and liberty, they shall never be invaded or disturbed, unless in just and lawful wars authorized by Congress; but laws founded in justice and humanity shall from time to time be made, for preventing wrongs being done to them, and for preserving peace and friendship with them. (qtd. in Lincoln 19)

The first treaty signed by the US government became the first treaty broken by the same government about 40 years later. The Indian Removal Act in 1830 legalized the forced removal of all Indian tribes should the president approved. President Andrew Jackson was quick to adopt it and “brought a new meaning to the word *removal*” almost encouraging the use of threats, bribes, and lies to make Indian leaders sign and agree upon the removal (Trafzer 149). His well known promise to the Eastern tribes was to be subject to many jokes and become a symbol of white hypocrisy for centuries to come:

Say to them as friends and brothers to listen to their father, and their friend. Where they now are, they and my white children are too near to each other to live in harmony and peace. . . . Beyond the great River Mississippi. . . . their father has provided a country large enough for them all, and he advises them to move to it. There their white brothers will not trouble them, and they will have no claim to the land, and they can live upon it, they and all their children, as long as the grass grows and waters run. (qtd. in Lincoln 19)

The following years brought more agony and pain to Indian tribes which were to receive no support from the President whatsoever. “Native Americans lived under the constant pressure of racism, rumors, threats, and war. Native families worried daily about their security and the lives of their children and grandchildren” (Trafzer 144). Added to the pressures from the government officials, most Indian tribes came to a point where they were either forcefully removed from their ancestral lands, or discussed the possibility of survival and continuance in relation to moving West.

One of the tribes that showed the strongest resistance was the Cherokee. They were mostly merchants and farmers, who prospered, developed a written form of their language and published a newspaper, and adopted Christianity. They maintained peaceful relations with whites and took all the possible formal actions they could take in order to continue living on their homeland. Most of the tribe agreed with Chief Ross and refused to move “until 1838, when federal troops and Georgia militia invaded their homes and rounded up people, imprisoning them in stockades before driving them like cattle to Indian Territory” (Trafzer 155). The journey of the Cherokees, called the Trail

of Tears, was one of the most tragic of all and it is estimated that over 4000 Cherokees died on the way (Trafzer 156). The total number of the losses due to the removal was about 8000 (Stannard 124). They were transferred from wagons to boats, sometimes had to travel on their ponies, and even barefoot when their ponies died on the way.

The removal of almost all Indian tribes are similar tragic events to which the US government contributed not only through forcing them out of their lands, but also by not keeping most of its promises of food, financial support, and safe conditions of journey. The heartbreaking journal of Lieutenant Jefferson Van Horne, who led a small band of Seminole Indians to their destination, reveals how they, too, suffered on the way:

May 15th. It rained heavily. . . . We placed the sick in the waggons . . . and in spite of every effort were obliged to leave a load behind. . . . It rained all day. Roads bad; two of the party died.

May 16th. It continued raining heavily. The Indians begged for the sake of the sick, of whom there are from one hundred and thirty to one hundred and fifty, many very low, that I would not move today.

May 19th. It rained powerfully. An Indian doctor (Hotulgee Yohola), a principal man, dying.

May 24th. It rained heavily last night. Three died in the morning. Black Dirt's wife and daughter and Tustenuggee Harjo's principal warrior; others very low.

May 25th . . . Every soul soaked with rain; . . . the poor Indians suffering intensely. Some of our waggons broke down, the Oxen were exhausted by floundering in the mud. . . . (Foreman 333-36)

The removal process of Eastern, Southeastern, and Old Northwestern tribes took almost 100 years and served as one of the major grounds of Indian holocaust. Indians died in big numbers during the journey, as well as in fights not to leave their lands. The actual number is not known today as no true account was kept, but it is estimated that the removal process and the diseases took as many lives as warfare did- if not more.

The consequences of Indian removal were heavy on the Indian side. It severely shattered their sense of belonging as well as it destroyed their population and lifeways. They constantly longed for their homelands and were worried about the graves of their ancestors and tribal members- of which they were responsible for protection. A part of them was taken away. However, losing a part of their identity and culture was only the beginning of a series of new cultural assimilation policies awaiting them in their new living areas.

2.2.1.3. Cultural Assimilation and Survival

The continuous attempts of destroying Indian lives out of pure ignorance and hate for their difference in conducting their lives turned to conscious assimilation policies beginning from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Another wave of broken treaties followed and finally the US Congress passed the Dawes Severalty Act in 1887 which made tribal lands-and reservation lands- subject to allotment. Allotment meant ending the communal ownership of tribal lands by dividing them among the tribal members individually. The aim here, of course, was to provide land for the white

interest groups by claiming that there is more land than needed in the hands of the tribes. After this act, even the Indian Territory (Oklahoma) was taken from the Five Civilized Tribes- Cherokees, Chickasaws, Choctaws, Muscogees (Creeks), and Seminoles.

The idea behind allotment was not only to take more land from Indian tribes it also meant to serve as a perfect tool to break the strong tribal identity and unity, and to individualize them into hardworking ‘American’ farmers. For this reason, they were given citizenships should they agree on dividing the tribal lands. However, it appeared that dividing the land was not enough to split tribal identity. The government expenses on Indians did not diminish, the new lands were quickly absorbed by the white interest groups, and allotment turned to be another failure in the effort to assimilate Indians.

During the late 19th century the extermination of Native American cultures were the priority of presidents, commissioners, superintendents, and agents who worked with congressmen, governors, and legislators to make sure that Indian cultures gave way to the white, ‘superior’ culture (Trafzer 283). Thus, stuffing them to reservations, and taking care of the Indian issue there was a good way of doing this. However, things were not as ideal on the Indian side.

Life in reservations was extremely difficult for Indians. They suffered a great deal from poverty, various epidemics, and social anomie which gradually led to alcohol abuse. “Surrendering the hunter-warrior ideal, Native American men lost part of their identity and had to deal with the paralyzing realization of economic uselessness” (Olson and Wilson 50). Indian families were dependent on government support for food and clothes instead of finding and making them by themselves. On reservations “No longer

able to hunt and gather, Native Americans were encouraged to give up their traditional forms of food, dress, dance, music, and religion” as well (Trafzer 285).

Religion, for the colonizer, was a vital tool to civilize Indians in reservations. They outlawed the Ghost Dance on the Sioux reservations and the Sun Dance on the Ute and Shoshone reservations” (Olson and Wilson 56). Restraints on reservations were not limited to religion and religious ceremonies. Agents interfered with the Indian lifestyle from the long hair of the Indian men (Trafzer 285) to the use of Native languages, chants, and body painting of Indian children (Olson and Wilson 56). Oppression on children was not limited to interference with their games and body painting, harder conditions were waiting for Indian pupils at boarding schools.

Education was one of the most important segments of acculturation of Indians. As anthropologist Tsianina Lomawaima suggests, the aim was to “detritalize” Indian children and strip them of their culture and identity (208). The first boarding school Carlisle Indian Industrial School (1879) served as a model to many others. The US government opened boarding schools all over the country and took children as young as five years old from their families- by force if necessary- and sent them away to these schools usually far off the reservations (Trafzer 289). Indian families could see their children once a year if they were lucky; if not, they might have had to wait for years or even were sent the either dying or dead bodies of their children who were sick with various diseases like tuberculosis, smallpox, and pneumonia.

What was equally devastating was the strict discipline rules Indian pupils were to face. They had to speak English at all times, wear uniforms- which were sometimes military uniforms- and had to attend flag ceremonies and church ceremonies. In case

they were disobedient, they had to endure heavy punishments including whipping, forced work, and being left without food (Trafzer 285-90).

While all these were happening, Indian existence and resistance depended solely on cultural preservation which “was a conscious survival tactic, one that is still employed” (Trafzer 306). Indian arts and crafts were a form of survival. People from various tribes continued making pottery, bows, basketry, and leather garments. Especially, Native women were successful in preserving their skills in making various types of jewelry, garments, and decorative goods. Some examples would be the famous Navajo blankets and Hopi wooden figurines called kachinas both of which today are still being made (Trafzer 306).

Another form of cultural preservation was a common ceremony among many tribes- especially in Eastern Woodlands and Great Plains- called powwow which offers an excellent time to socialize for people (Trafzer 308). “During powwows, people are supposed to set aside their anger and animosity so that the community at large may enjoy the celebration of being Indian” (Trafzer 308). The ceremony includes dancing- in traditional costumes with feathers-, singing, and drumming.

Another form of survival strategy which fostered tribal identity was the storytelling tradition. The stories were commonly used for educational, religious, and entertainment purposes. They were all remembered and re-told generations after generations and many survive today. Being one of the most powerful elements of Indian culture as a whole, it was more influential than the colonizer could ever imagine.

Carrying out religious rituals was also of utmost importance to Indians not only because they were spiritual people, but also because those rituals constituted a

significant part of their tribal identity. Performing these rituals- which usually included song, dance, prayer, and various other activities- was necessary in the preservation of a religious belief that kept a tribe in unity. Religious ceremonies were used as a form of endurance, survival, and revolt. Ghost Dance and Sun Dance ceremonies are only two of them. Sun Dance ceremony is still being held today.

Some Indian tribes also managed to adopt new ways for the aim of survival and continuance. Peyote religion is a good example to this. It was originated in Mexico hundreds of years ago. However, it did what no other Native religion ever tried or aimed before; it combined both Christian and tribal symbols such as the earth, moon, and sun and “thus representing a syncretic message of accommodation yet persistence of Indianness” (Iverson 28). More importantly, Peyote religion, the Native American Church, brought together many Indians from different tribes; therefore, can be seen as one of the earliest pan-Indian movements that survives even today (Trafzer 316). The Native American Church as a movement also offers “a striking example of the ability of Indians to combine continuity and change in order to build a viable Native future” (Iverson 29).

2.2.2. Indian Relations in the 20th Century America

The beginning of the 20th century was not very promising for American Indians. Progressivism marked the era, and being too much concerned with social and economic growth and development, neither the US government nor the reformists had visible

interest in the Indian issue. The interest in Indian lands, of course, never faded. Therefore, there appeared the need for a united defense against attacks on Indian lands, lives, and cultures. It found shape in the first major pan-Indian organization, The Society of American Indians (SAI), in 1911. Later on, in 1923, John Collier- an eastern social worker- organized the American Indian Defense Association (AIDA). All these efforts stimulated the raising consciousness of the Indian situation in America when a detailed report on American Indians, the Meriam Report, was published in 1928. The report while displaying the terrible living and health conditions of the tribes in numbers, underlined that the allotment system, boarding schools, and acculturation attempts were complete failures (Trafzer 345-46).

The 1930s and 1940s promised better days to Indians. The New Deal of the new president Roosevelt sought ways to take care of the problems pointed out in the Meriam Report. For this reason, the president appointed John Collier as the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, and another supporter of Indian rights Harold Ickes as the Secretary of Interior in 1933. Ickes ordered the end of allotment the same year. The OIA changed its name to Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and reversed its long time active support of acculturation by Collier's clear order. His efforts and aspiration in keeping Indian cultures alive found body in The Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, which for the first time in the US history left the decision of becoming an IRA tribe or not to Indians.

The IRA was a "watershed" in American Indian history (Trafzer 357). For the first time the US government acted to protect what it has been trying to destroy for centuries, the existence of Indian culture and identity. The act encouraged what is commonly called 'self-determination'. The tribes were finally given the authority in the

decisions concerning their tribal welfare and culture. This included adding land to tribal estates, purchasing resources and water rights, forming tribal courts to take care of minor offenses, and electing their own judges (Trafzer 357-58). Collier resigned in 1945 managing to establish the Indian Claims Commission (ICC) after his resignation in 1946 (Trafzer 361-62). The Indian Claims Commission Act “allowed Native Americans in the United States and Alaska to file a claim against the government directly with the Claims Commission” (Trafzer 363).

The postwar era in America was marked by the termination and relocation programs of the government for the Indian. The former program aimed at ending federal support to the tribes so it cut the federal bond to the tribes and made all the treaties ineffective. It transferred the Indian problem completely to the states. Public Law 280, in addition, put many tribes under the “criminal and civil jurisdiction of the states,” and a year later the congress ended tribal governments (Trafzer 391).

The relocation program put a step forward and by providing jobs in urban areas. Adults were encouraged to leave reservations- as the federal support was also cut- and move to urban areas to be able to finance their families. Many young and mixed blood Indians were also drawn to big cities for better living conditions. However, they had to work for little money and they had to cope with racism in urban areas. Soon, depression, various diseases due to malnutrition, and alcoholism surrounded them, and by 1960 “between 30 and 75 %” of Indians returned to their reservations (Trafzer 397).

With the raising social consciousness in the 1960s, previous attempts and organizations to fight back against the government policies gained a new phase. The term ‘Native American self determination’ marked the 1960s in Indian history.

President JFK offered the New Trial, which favored self-determination instead of termination, and president Johnson continued the vision and approved Indian Civil Rights Act in 1968 which left the decision of whether or not applying PL 280 in the hands of a tribe (Trafzer 401).

1970s were a decade in which Indian self-determination was supported by Nixon with the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act (1975). He also ended the termination policy and supported the creation of tribal governments again. His successors Ford and Carter continued his policies, though they could not add much.

1980s and early 1990s did not see any improvements. In contrast, Reagan and Bush cut federal funding to tribes for Indian programs suggesting that they should support themselves (Trafzer 404). Moreover, Reagan once stated that the preservation of Indian cultures and “primitive lifestyle” was a mistake for the United States (Trafzer 404). President Clinton did not contribute much to the betterment of poverty, ill health, and poor education of Indians; but his positive efforts in hearing out the tribes and encouraging higher education for the Indian youth were noteworthy (Trafzer 404). However, the federal funding to tribes was not increased.

As can be seen, Indian struggle and resistance continued in a different form in the 20th century as well. Indians learned to unite under various non-governmental organizations, fought for their political and social rights on legal grounds, and equally importantly, discovered the ways to attract media attention and speak out loud for their rights. Tribal resistance slowly turned to a united Indian resistance within this century and this naturally led the emergence of collective Indian identity, which miraculously did not harm or altered tribal/communal identity at all.

3. A NEW ERA: INDIAN EXISTENCE IN AMERICA FROM THE 1960S TO THE 1990S

Federal policies concerning Indians such as termination and the New Indian Deal during the first half of the 20th century aimed at assimilating Indian tribes into the larger 'white' American culture. Yet, they ironically led to the establishment of "a common language among diverse tribal groups" and finally an increase in the "Indian identification outside reservation and traditional Indian areas" (Nagel 114-15). Starting from especially the late 1960s Indian existence in America took a new shape; maybe for the first time in 'white' American history they became more visible than ever. Indian 'problem' of the past slowly turned to the Indian 'situation' of the present.

Nevertheless, Indian existence in America should not be compared to that of any other ethnic group. Although smaller in number, American Indians have never been a minority group. They have been 'the' owners of the land and their relations with the US government were based on trying to take back whatever they used to have- tribal sovereignty, land, freedom of religion and education, protection of traditional way of life, and etc.- instead of gaining rights for the first time like several minority groups such as Hispanics, African-Americans, and the Chinese. Hence, American Indians have maintained a unique relationship with the government, which used to be on a government to government basis, and although it can be said that Indian Activism of the 1960s fed on the sweeping Civil Rights Movement, it did not start with it. It was nothing new for either of the parties; it only took a different form and name.

3.1. Social Activism: Red Power and Self-Determination

Indian social activism starting from the 1960s, widely known as the Red Power Movement, was actually an amalgamation of a series of actions taken by the various Indian tribes, leaders, and especially non-governmental social organizations aiming self-determination and complete tribal sovereignty. Among the most influential ones were National Indian Youth Council (NIYC) 1961, American Indian Movement (AIM) 1968, and Confederation of American Indian Nations (CAIN) 1969. Thus, 1960s and 1970s witnessed a boom in the number of pan-Indian organizations conducting many protests and activist moves. Some of them in fact managed to make changes in the course of their times and contributed a great deal in the creation and the preservation of collective 'Indian' identity and unity among Indian tribes.

Among the most memorable acts of Red Power was the occupation of Alcatraz Island. Eighty-nine students from different tribes calling themselves the "Indians of All Tribes" landed on the island on November 20, 1969 and claimed the island by right of discovery. Although the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 guaranteed that when an unused land was to be made a living place with a small profit for the term of three years, any Sioux member could claim the land of 160 acres, and the first occupation relied on this treaty, the tradition of broken treaties made the new occupiers pick up another cause for their action. Historian Clifford Trafzer reports the mood of the occupiers:

The "Indians of All Tribes" offered a Proclamation to the Great White Father and All His People, stating that they reclaimed "the land known as Alcatraz Island in the name of all American Indians." With tongue in

cheek, participants in the takeover offered to purchase Alcatraz for \$24 in glass beads and red cloth, the amount paid for Manhattan Island. Young students taking the island offered to hold a portion of the land for whites “in trust by the American Indian Government- for as long as the sun shall rise and rivers go down to the sea.” (425).

The occupation gained wide media coverage and support from some celebrities, many tourists, and numerous activists who visited the island. In a press statement Indians of All Tribes announced that their purpose of claiming the island is to establish a center for Native American Studies, an American Indian Spiritual Center, an Indian Center of Ecology, an Indian training school, and an American Indian Museum. About a year later they issued a declaration:

We are a proud people! We are Indians! We have observed and rejected much of what so-called civilization offers. We are Indians! We will preserve our traditions and ways of life by educating our own children. We are Indians! We will join hands in a unity never before put into practice. We are Indians! Our Earth Mother awaits our voices.

We are Indians Of All Tribes! WE HOLD THE ROCK!
(Zinn 529)

However, negotiations with the government did not reach anywhere, and as time passed the media started losing interest in the occupation. In 1971, “FBI agents and US marshals heavily armed with handguns, shotguns, and rifles removed six men, four women, and five children from Alcatraz Island, ending the occupation” (Trafzer 425). The repercussions of the occupation created almost a bigger impact on Indian ethnic

consciousness and fueled Indian ethnic pride and activism. As Vine Deloria Jr. notes, “Indianness was judged on whether or not one was present at Alcatraz, Fort Lawson, Mt. Rushmore, Detroit, Sheep Mountain, Plymouth Rock, or Pitt River. ... The activists controlled the language, the issues, and the attention” (qtd. in Johnson 249).

The Trail of Broken Treaties caravan and the occupation of the BIA building in Washington D.C. was another major event that turned eyes to the Indian self-determination. The activist leaders such as Hank Adams from fish-ins and Dennis Banks from Alcatraz planned the caravan moving from the west coast to the Washington D.C. stopping at reservations for adjoining new protesters. When the caravan reached Washington D.C. and found out that there were not enough room arrangements, most went to the BIA building to protest. The protests eventually led to the taking of the building. The takeover gained wide media coverage as well; and maybe because of that, the protesters eventually were pardoned and paid some money for their journey back to their tribes- even though the building and many documents were damaged during the occupation.

Then came another major event and takeover in 1973, The Wounded Knee. The traditional Lakota leaders at the reservation had wanted to meet Russell Means and Dennis Banks from the AIM and express the unrest in the reservation because of the new tribal chairman Richard Wilson who, they believed, was corrupt. The final tension broke into the takeover when Dennis Banks and Russell Means returned to the reservation and met harassment from the local police. The occupation took two months and it included both gunfire and negotiations with the federal government. The activists wanted to remove Wilson from the office and form a new government in the reservation

created by the Sioux people themselves, not the BIA officials. Finally, the protesters agreed to end the occupation with the promise that government would investigate the implications of Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 and Wilson's administration (Trafzer 429). The protesters were later sent a letter saying that "treaty making with American Indians ended in 1871, 102 years ago" (Trafzer 430). Even though the takeover turned to be a disappointment on the government side, it sure was one of the stimulating powers in shaping a collective Indian identity. Vine Deloria Jr. agrees:

Years after Wounded Knee, Russell Means was asked what the beneficial results were, considering all the killings and violence that had infested the Pine Ridge reservation during 1973 and for years afterward. He told a little story of watching three little Indian boys playing. The two more aggressive boys chose to be Means and Banks. They pointed at the third boy and said, "You have to be Dickie Wilson." The third boy went home crying. He was ashamed to even pretend to be a traitor to his own people. Somehow, through all of the protests and symbolic gestures, a different sense of Indian identity was born. (God Is Red 20)

All these and many other takeovers, protests, road and bridge blockings were carried out by Indians belonging to different tribes and different organizations, but for a united aim: the return of tribal sovereignty and self-determination; the very essence of national/tribal identity for Indian peoples.

Vine Deloria Jr. as executive director of the National Congress of American Indian in 1966 in his speech at the annual meeting summarizes the aim of the movement: "Red Power means we want power over our own lives ... the political and

economic power, to run our lives in our own way” (qtd. in Trafzer 423). The aim might clearly be called as self-determination which meant tribes governing themselves and holding the decision making power on all issues concerning the tribe and the tribal members. Total and ultimate sovereignty could not be gained, but Indians were determined to take it back even piece by piece.

Education was one of the key issues for many tribes since it directly affected the tribal culture and identity of the new generations. American government passed a series of legislations and acts and finally in 1975 came the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act, which gave Indians a significant power on the education of their children. Through school boards Indian families could change curriculum and hire Indian teachers and staff to work with children (Iverson 161).

Another key issue of self-determination was about the religious freedom in performing and preserving tribal religions and rituals. American Indian Religious Freedom Act (1978), although came very late, provided Indians with the freedom they used to enjoy in the past. Indians could determine change, betterment, and freedom in their religious activities. Tama leader Don Wanatee expresses best how important these issues are: “If you take away our language, you take away our religion. If you take away our religion, you take away our tribe. The three go together” (Olson and Wilson 202).

Indian tribes were also aware that total freedom in decision making was also closely linked to economic freedom. With The Indian Finance Act of 1974- which provided the necessary loans and insurance funds- certain improvement in reservation economies was observed. Each tribe chose a different path for a better economy. For instance, while the Muckleshoot invested in fishing and fishing industry and the

Blackfeet concentrated on banking, the Northern Cheyenne and the Arapho mostly earned money from ranching and farming and resisted mining since it would hurt the air and the earth (Trafzer 452-54). The gaming activities on reservations, bingo halls and casinos, on the other hand, became the biggest source of income for many tribes such as, Seminoles, the Mashantuckt Pequots, Muscogees, Choctaws, and White Mountain Apaches, especially starting from the 1980s and onwards.

The preservation of tribal/national identity and their very existence depended on the preservation of tribal self-determination. This was the only way they knew to survive and last in the way they have been. Then what is this 'way' that they have been? In other words, who is the American Indian? Are they simply an ethnic group or "nation unto a nation"? How do they define themselves and how are they defined, perceived, and represented by white majority?

3.2. Who is American Indian?

In fact there are no such people called American Indian, Amerindian, or Native American. These are all outside definitions and/or classifications. They are the descendants of many civilizations (like the Sioux, Navajo, Shoshone, and etc.) that had been living and flourishing as separate but neighboring nations on Turtle Island long before the European invasion. Until the year 1492, they did not need to be- mistakenly- defined as Indians, and until the 1960s they did not need to define themselves with a common name outside their own national/tribal identities.

The unrest and problems of identity arrived with the arrival of Columbus's ships for the Natives. When Columbus first arrived in the Bahamas with his men, they immediately decided that Arawaks were inferior- because they treated them nicely and had darker skins-, were savages- because they wore fewer or no clothes-, and did not deserve any respect- because they lived differently and did not speak Spanish.

The later centuries were not any better for Native Americans. Since they lived in perfect harmony with nature and could easily travel in and out of forests, Native Americans were 'wild savages'. Vickers notes that 17th century Puritan literature has substantial amount of these stereotypes under the two major ones: the adaptation of Noble Savage imagery of Rousseau, and the new colonial Ignoble Savage image with all the negative connotations and resentments in it (36). The 'red devil' image Alexander Whitaker uses in a pamphlet provides a good example to the latter:

Let the miserable condition of these native savages of the devil move you to compassion towards them. They acknowledge that there is a great God, they know him not, wherefore they serve the devil for fear, after a most base manner. . . . They live naked of body, as if the shame of their sin deserved no covering. . . . They esteem it a virtue to lie, deceive, steal. . . . If this be their life, what thing you shall become of them after death, but to be partakers with the devil and his angels in hell for evermore? (qtd. in Vickers 36)

The Noble Savage imagery, on the other hand, although seems to have positive attributions, in fact diminished the Native American to a singular type of friendly-with-the-environment, living and hiding in the forest, heroic but not too intelligent type of

person. James Fennimore Cooper's popular Leatherstocking Tales was very influential in the creation and the dissemination of this imagery, which quickly turned into a myth.

Within the 18th and 19th centuries whites became aware of Indian devotion to land and freedom and their fearless character in defending these, and labeled them as 'mystic warriors' since they could not understand how fearlessly and easily they sacrificed themselves. The romanticizing of their unknown, sacred traditions also led to another mystified image, the 'dark princess'. In fact, there were never princes or princesses on the Turtle Island, but the white perception wished them to be. The 20th century depictions of Pocahontas were an embodiment of this myth.

The government officials, however, were not as romantic while defining Indians. The Office of Indian Affairs (OIA) set the "official language" with amazingly ignorant commissioners of Indian affairs following one another (Vickers 15). William Medill (from 1845 to 1849), completely unaware of Native American lifestyles, believed that they were "ignorant, degraded, lazy, and [in possession of] no worthwhile cultural traits" (Vickers 16-17). Dennis Nelson Cooley (from 1865 to 1866) referred to Pueblo Indians as "the miserable lizard-eaters of Arizona" (qtd. in Vickers 17).

The 20th century was not any more promising for the American Indian. They were the 'vanishing race' and 'extinct species'. A Yuchi and Seminole scholar Richard A. Grounds reports his experience of 'disappearance' while reading a 110-year-old encyclopedia on the US history: "As a Yuchi tribal member, I was stunned to read the century-old report that my people were 'in fact' extinct" (290). More surprisingly, he finds another book, A Concise Dictionary of Indian Tribes of North America, published in 1979, still declaring the Yuchi tribe as extinct (290-91).

Apart from being extinct, they had to wrestle with newly invented 'modern' stereotypes, too. As the number of urban Indians increased, they met racial assaults on a daily basis. The never-ending jokes about drunken Indians, and calling them- even the little boys- names like 'chief' and 'skin' were practices of everyday discourse in the city. The Indian image in the late 1960s Deloria notes "split and finally divided into modern Indians and the Indians of America- those ghostly figures America loved and cherished" (God Is Red 28). The image of old-type traditional Indians caused severe fallacies on the white side. Deloria tells of his own experiences in his God Is Red:

Sincere but uninformed whites honestly asked Indians during the height of the activist movement if we still lived in tents, if we were allowed to leave the reservations, and other relevant questions. . . . On one memorable evening as a guest of the Bill Barker show in Denver, I was asked by a radio listener how the Indians celebrated Christmas before the coming of the whites. Bill and I broke out laughing and he had to punch in a commercial so I could compose myself before trying to answer this silly question. (25)

The second image, the modern Indians, were not seen as warriors on horses, but they were the inferiors who could not adopt themselves to the city life, and therefore put themselves in ridiculous situations. The embodiment of this image, the "supreme archetype," Tonto gave life to many copies of itself both on the media and in literature (Deloria, Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto 200).

Tonto was everything that the white man had always wanted the Indian to be. He was a little slower, a little dumber, had much less

vocabulary, and rode a darker horse. . . . Tonto never rebelled, never questioned the Lone Ranger's judgment, never longed to go back to the tribe for the annual Sun Dance. Tonto was a cultureless Indian for Indians and an uncultured Indian for whites.

Tonto cemented in the minds of the American public the cherished falsehood that all Indians were basically the same- friendly and stupid.

(Deloria, Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto 200-01)

However, Indians, while being stereotyped and seen somehow inferior, were busy building a united Indian identity to assure continuance. Deloria suggested in the late 1960s that "urban Indians have become the cutting edge of the new Indian nationalism" (Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto 248). However, there was unrest among some tribal chiefs, elders, and reservation full bloods that it might cause a deviation from tribal identity. After all, American Indians, inevitably, had come to a stage where the white politics had been trying to pull them onto: defining all those hundreds of different nations as one. Vine Deloria Jr. challenged this idea in 1969,

Pan-Indianism implies that a man forgets his tribal background and fervently merges with other Indians to form 'Indianism.' Rubbish. Younger Indians are beginning to understand the extent to which the Indian community is being expanded and to many of them it is an affirmation of tribalism over individualism." (Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto 246)

Their efforts in holding onto their national identities was harmed by the issue of 'mixed blood' identity. The 'mixing race' ideal would eventually mean the

disappearance for any ethnic group, but not for Indians. Anybody with a single drop of Indian blood, so to speak, was accepted Indian. However, the federal government was not so eager. In 1990, The Indian Arts and Crafts Act (IACA), required tribal affiliation either by blood quantum or by registered membership from Indian artists for the approval of the authenticity of their works, and to protect those works from possible imitations. Jimmie Durham, a postmodern Cherokee artist has commented on the issue:

I hereby swear to the truth of the following statement: I am a full-blood contemporary artist, of the sub-group (or clan) called sculptors. I am not an American Indian, nor have I ever seen or sworn loyalty to India. I am not a Native 'American,' nor do I feel that 'America' has any right to name me or un-name me. I have previously stated that I should be considered mixed blood: that is, I claim to be a male but in fact only one of my parents was male. (qtd. in Vickers 163)

Nonetheless, Indian stereotypes have met strong opposition. Although recently there is slight betterment in the perception and representation of them by whites, still Indians are often seen as confirmations of white stereotyping. Sherman Alexie agrees,

Most of the world loves the hell out of Indians. The same is true in the United States. An overwhelming percentage of Americans love Indians and Indian culture. But, it's a particular way of being Indian that is admired: the Indian as a religious figure. And when an Indian deviates from that mode of behavior, they tend to loose the affection of strangers.¹

Maybe it is best to look at contemporary Indian literature and how it has become one of the strongest mediums used for self-definition working against such stereotypes.

3.3. Indian Renaissance: Discovering the Roots of American Literature

Indian literature, surely, did not begin with Indian Renaissance. “In the Word was the beginning; *In the beginning was the Word*” says Momaday in his House Made of Dawn (98). Indian cultures treated ‘word’ as an organic entity, just like a being that is sacred and valuable. The great orator Sitting Bull was also called the ‘Word Sender’- not a coincidence. Being able to direct ‘word’ was a source of prestige since the ‘word’ was considered not only as sacred but also as powerful as warriors themselves.

Within the late 1960s it appeared that Native American philosophy on the power of language and word was not far from the truth. While activists on Alcatraz were saying that they were the ‘Indians of all tribes’, and Deloria was questioning the stereotypes and definitions of Indianness, N. Scott Momaday (Kiowa) published his novel House Made of Dawn (1968), winning the Pulitzer Prize a year later, which opened up the door for Indian authors and poets and for a new Indian movement called the ‘Native American Renaissance’- by Kenneth Lincoln. Therefore, it can be said that Indian Activism and Indian Renaissance supported and nurtured each other. In other words, Indian Renaissance was Indian Activism on paper.

It was also a renaissance in American literature, which was enriched, influenced, and renewed by re-discovering its roots. Lincoln provides an insight to how American authors and poets were in fact influenced by Indian literature and the philosophy of accepting word as an organic animate being which is a part of nature and part of us- like the power to move us as Olson discusses in his famous projective verse inspired by Mayan ‘glyphs’ (6). There were also many others who needed to “go native” such as

Thoreau, Melville, Faulkner, Hemingway, Levertov, Creely, and Ginsberg as Pula Gunn Allen also claims (qtd. in Lincoln 8-30). The list continues.

However, this was not a one-way bridge. Just as American authors and poets were influenced by the philosophies, themes, and styles of Indian literatures prior to Indian Renaissance, American Indian writers and poets were influenced by the major Euro-American literary figures and their works, too. Considering the fact that many Indian authors were college educated, it should not be a surprise to hear footsteps of Whitman in the lines of 20th century Indian poetry.

Some of the influential Indian poets and writers of the period was Simon Ortiz (Acoma), Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna), Gerald Vizenor (Chippewa), Lance Henson (Cheyenne), D'Arcy McNickle (Salish-Kootenai), and Vine Deloria Jr. (Standing Rock Sioux), whose influential Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto defined Indian nationalism and common Indian values so well that the book turned to be a distinct media in uplifting ethnic pride:

Some years ago at a Congressional hearing someone asked Alex Chasing Hawk, a council member of the Cheyenne River Sioux for thirty years, "Just what do you Indians want? Alex replied, "A leave-us-alone law!!" . . .

What we need is a cultural leave-us-alone agreement, in spirit and in fact. (Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto 27)

Indian writers and poets had set the agenda for the future Indian authors, no matter which type of writing they chose. James Welch shared his concern about 'writing Indianness' in an interview in 1971:

I have seen poems about Indians written by whites and they are either sentimental or outraged over the condition of the Indian. There are exceptions. . . . but for the most part only Indian knows who he is. . . and hopefully he will have the toughness and fairness to present his material in a way that is not manufactured by conventional stance. (444)

3.4. Reflections of Indian Collective Identity in Poetry: The Location of Indianness

Indian Renaissance also gave way to the emerging American Indian poets who during the 1960s, 1970s, and even the 1980s did not only use poetry to define and locate Indianness in cultural and literary arenas but also used it as a weapon against the long established misconceptions and stereotypes of Indian peoples. Hence, Indian poetry of the above mentioned decades had somewhat a militant nature and was concerned with building of a collective Indian identity more than the tribal or individual one.

This should not mean that poets never wrote poems reflective of their inner world. On the contrary, many of their poems were autobiographical. However, even when they wrote such poems, most of the time there existed themes and allusions revealing their Indianness- such as tribal ceremonies, natural kinship with nature and animals, references to oral stories, and etc.- encoded in the poems. Therefore, it can be said that beginning from the late 1960s onwards American Indian poetry was about everything and anything related to the overall Indian identity. Indian endeavor in literature was for a certain aim, the centralization of Indianness and Indian issues.

First, they made sure that they have survived by telling their own stories, talk about their own aspirations, and clear out what changes they believe should be made. To be able to do these, sometimes they needed to criticize history books and how they were manipulated, sometimes clearly explain and demonstrate how they often face racism in their daily lives in the 20th century America, and sometimes damage the established Indian stereotypes.

While doing all these, Indian authors and poets often presented a militant, propagandist approach during the above-mentioned period. The long underestimated Indians were on stage again, but this time using the same weapons with whites. Simon Ortiz would ask in a poem, “Have you done what you as a person/ of our people is supposed to do?” (“Hunger in New York City” 86), and tell the reader, especially the young reader, what they need to do in “Mama’s and Daddy’s Words”:

You have to fight
by working for the land and the People,
to show them,
to work for the People and the land.
...
to fight for the People and the land.
That’s the only way they’ll learn.
That’s the only way. (329-30)

The suggestions of the poet for the young Indians are obvious, do something useful for your own tribe and hold onto your identity, whatever makes you Indian. “[T]he People” is a metonym for the tribal members, and “the land” is the metonym for

the tribe as well as reservation. Working for these will ensure that Indians will continue to exist and will be more powerful against the colonial domination. Another poet Louise Erdrich (Chippewa) clears out what Euro-Americans should do:

We have come to the edge of the woods,
out of brown grass where we slept, unseen,
out of leaves creaked shut, out of our hiding.
We have come here too long.

It is their turn now,
Their turn to follow us . . . (“Jacklight” 336)

The poem stresses that they have waited too long unnoticed, ignored, and hiding and have no patience left anymore: “We have come to the edge of the woods.” The edge of the woods is a metaphor for two things; one the end of patience for being ignored too long, and two they are about to leave the “woods” going into the white areas of life- an allusion to an Indian stereotype calling them ‘savage’ who inhabit the woods. All in all, the poem gives a sign of and calls for a major change.

Some poems functioned as the reminders of collective Indian identity instead of calling for an action, as Paula Gunn Allen’s (Laguna and Sioux) “Indian Blood”:

you did not forget the charge your grandma laid
on you in fear and rage: “Don’t forget you’re Indian,”
she said, such few words to guard a woman’s life. (39)

The 20th century America and popular culture were more ruthless than ever in wiping out ethnic and cultural differences. Allen, while acknowledging the difficulties

of resisting these, reassures that holding onto Indian identity would “guard” one’s life, would keep one from being lost without a sense of belonging. Ortiz, on the other hand, explains how deeply the collective identity is rooted, and therefore it is not easy to destroy it.

My father, who works with stone,
says, “That’s just the part you see,
the stones which seem to be
just packed in on the outside,”
and with his hands puts the stone and mud
in place. “Underneath what looks like loose stone,
there is stone woven together.”
...
... “That’s what is
holding it together.”

“It is built that carefully,”
he says, ...

(“A Story of How a Wall Stands” 145)

Here, “Wall” is a metaphor for collective Indian identity, as the stones are for various Indian tribes. For whites, Indianness may look like a simple wall from the outside, just like the stones put together. However, these stones are woven together underneath and they are stuck together inseparably although they may seem loose from the outside.

Such poems- along with many others- nourished, encouraged, and appraised collective Indian identity and actions to protect and uplift it with pride. However, to be able to do this properly more needed to be done. First of all, white stereotyping and misconceptions of Indians had to be shattered to be able to enunciate a collective idea of Indianness. Poet Joy Harjo challenges the image of fighting and drinking Indian in her poem “Crossing the Border” in which she reports an incident at the Canadian border where they were stopped and questioned.

. . . We are asked, “Who are you Indians
and which side are you from?”

Barney answers in a broken English.

He talks this way to white people
not to us. “Our kids”

. . .

“Any liquor or firearms?”

He should have asked that years ago
and we can’t help but laugh.

. . .

“Where are you going?”

Indians in an Indian car, trying
to find a Delaware powwow

. . .

Not sure of the place but knowing the name

We ask, “Moravian town?”

The border guard thinks he might have
the evidence. It pleases him.
Past midnight.
Stars out clear into Canada
and he knows only to ask,
“Is it a bar?” (21)

Even in a family car with three children in it, the policeman is looking for the wild drinking and fighting stereotype of Indian. “Any liquor or firearms?” is particularly a funny question for the travelers because it is a ‘historical’ one both on the national and individual levels. It has been over a century since they laid down their arms.

While locating a collective identity, Indian poets did not only reflect the story from their side, they also questioned the western logocentric culture and values that were established as norms. Ortiz in the preface of his poetry collection From Sand Creek discusses how Indian people were efficiently excluded from American history:

Indian people have often felt we have no part in history-
American history in general and U.S. history in particular. Because
Indians were alienated from history. Because Indians didn’t matter. That
was the feeling. We felt pushed away. Purposely. Intentionally.
Deliberately.

We were excluded. It didn’t matter about us. We had been
“discovered.” We had been colonized. We, the Natives of the Western
Hemisphere, had lost two continents. . . .

But we did exist. We knew and felt that deeply. Innately. (6)

Indian poets as well as Indian scholars and activists have had a problem with this amnesia. History had to be retold and their place in history was to be secured and well understood by the majority, too. Building of collective identity also depended on the reclamation of collective history. Jimmie Durham (Cherokee) condemns the written history as taught at schools and “Columbus Day,” celebrations of which still hurts.

In school I was taught the names

Columbus, Cortez, and Pizzaro and

A dozen other filthy murderers.

...

No one mentioned the names

Of even a few of the victims.

But don't you remember Chaske, whose spine

Was crushed so quickly by Mr. Pizzaro's boot?

What words did he cry into the dust?

What was the familiar name

Of that young girl who danced so gracefully

That everyone in the village sang with her-

Before Cortez' sword hacked off her arms

As she protested the burning of her sweetheart?

The young man's name was Many Deeds,

And he had been a leader of a band of fighters

Called the Redstick Hummingbirds, who slowed
The march of Cortez' army with only a few
Spears and stones which now lay still
In the mountains and remember.

. . .

In school I learned of heroic discoveries
Made by liars and crooks. The courage
Of millions of sweet and true people
Was not commemorated. (129-30)

It seems that teaching of history at schools ignores Indians who suffered in the hands of invaders and during many massacres. Their "courage," however, is not being "commemorated". With this poem, early invasion of Southwest is re-written from a different perspective. Allen, on the other hand, has difficulty in understanding the naming of such massacres as battles, holocaust as war, and genocide as victory won.

What mode allows me to understand
ten or sixty million dead (records fail us)
purple blood in rivers
burned villages seven hundred or a thousand in flames who
knows in the particular time the sequence undefined time un-
answered, held in by the stockade wall, the Puritan Army,
the Narragansett allies: no one to escape fire or sword.
How does documentation change genocide
into grace? ("Another Long Walk" 136-37)

Indians in the 20th century America were not only united by their origins, histories, and philosophies but also by common hardships and disappointments in city life. The relocation program did no good to Indians or did not help them survive in the cities. Terrible working and living conditions as well as unemployment led most to go back to their reservations, but the ones who stayed had to endure more than racism and poor paying jobs. Modern life Indians shared common alienation problem in the cities. Even in an academic environment there were times the situation was the same. Wendy Rose recalls a “Literary Luncheon: Iowa City,”

The great ones gather
at the university buffet
like cattle around
alfalfa and barley.
I maintain
without willing it
an Indian invisibility. (37)

“The great ones”- metaphor for the well known writers- uncovers the feeling of certain alienation that the poet is not among them. The simile between them and “cattle” is also revealing of the resentment she feels for them. The complicated city life requires one to prove himself/herself almost on a daily basis. The alienation and solitude it leads many Indians into, causes a common understanding among them. Allen thinks of the same thing: “All I can think about today/ is the ways I’ve been invisiblized,/ passed over, turned away, disappeared” (“Indian Blood” 37).

All these common histories, agonies, stereotypings, misconceptions, racist attacks, efforts of cleansing, and common ideals and hopes- added to the Indian Activism- created a natural bond and contributed to a political and social unity, which found a place in the works of Indian poets from different tribal/national backgrounds, too. Furthermore, Indian poets in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s widely believed that the location of Indian identity and culture, Indianness, should be right at the center on the cultural mosaic of America. As they emerged from the heart of the continent they deserved to be at the center. The Indian poetry of this period should also be seen- but not diminished to- as demonstrations of such efforts, as Indian Activism in literature.

Harjo in one of her poems says, “My house is the red earth; it could be the center of the world” summarizing the centralization efforts (“My House Is the Red Earth” 55). Being marginalized and trivialized was impossible to accept for Indian peoples who have been proud and dignified nations for so long; and who have been living on the land called America for long enough. The dominant culture had to give respect, attention, and space the Indians deserved.

Then the question arises: Were the word fighters successful in making America Indian again? Could they manage to centralize their identity and their issues and made sure that everyone else learned that they exist and will exist? Could they clear out their demands, tell their stories, and their reclamation of official history? The answer is partly yes and partly no.

Although they came a long way, it is difficult to say that American Indian poets- and authors- and activists could manage to centralize Indianness as much as they wished to. But, they did an admirable job. Indian poets brought richness and a unique flavor to

American literature; moreover, they provided the original roots American literature lacked. They put many of their ancient stories in writing, continued to telling new ones, became the voice of the Indian activist moves, introduced and tried new forms, questioned the established system with all its institutions in it, and showed that the great “word sender” spirit in them is still alive. The collective American Indian identity was successfully defined during this journey- by the poets themselves- without harming the Indian diversity.

However, the dominant culture was too strong and well kept to be destroyed easily. With all its cultural wars, media tricks, successfully hidden ethnic otherings in news, ads, films, and text books, corporate culture industries, and the glamorized dominancy of English language in everything, it was not easy to make Indianness a major issue. Although the poets defined Indianness well and received considerable attention from the media and the academia; and although they pushed Indianness from the margin to the center very hard, they could not place it to the center. However, they are on the way. The journey continues. American Indian poets of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s created difference and possibility for the emerging Indian poets then and afterwards. At the moment, Indian poets are recognized and appreciated in the literary arena and Indian poetry is “the most exciting literature being written in America today” (Rader 128).

4. AMERICAN INDIAN POETRY FROM THE 1990S TO THE EARLY 2000S

By the early 1990s Indian poetry started to move from Pan-Indianism and demonstrated new ways of defining and locating Indianness. This shift in Indian poetry- and literature in general- can be thought to appear due to the Returning the Gift festival in Oklahoma in 1992. While America was discussing multiculturalism and including more and more works from the margin to school curriculums, American Indian poets were sharing, celebrating, and discussing their works and ideas and also ideals at this festival/conference. The four-day-conference welcomed over 500 Indian storytellers not only from the United States but also from Canada and South America. In that sense, it was a real 'Indian' festival and "brought more Native writers together in one place than at any other time in history" (Bruchac xix).

What came out from the festival was not only the fact that "there is, without doubt, a great international Native American literature out there" (Hobson xxix) but also the consensus on the idea that "there must be room for MANY 'faces' of Indianness in the Native writing community" as Prof. Robert M. Nelson, a contributor of the festival, argues.² After the festival, Indian writers and poets concentrated on articulating their tribal- communal- identities more. In any case, their existence as Indians was articulated successfully within the previous decades; therefore, it was time to underline their diversity and continuance as different nations.

This new way of self-definition, although it seems like a fragmentation in articulation of Indianness, in fact opened a new phase in the efforts of re-locating the overall Indian identity. Without forcing the center, many Indian tribal/national identities

slipped away from the margin and found their own ways to the center separately. This led a softer but a safer journey to the center away from the margin. The re-location has not been a united giant move of the poets collectively, it was rather a multiple move from separate ways to the same direction; and it placed Indianness farther from the margin. Still, American Indian poets such as Alexie and Turcotte believe that Indian art has not yet been centralized.³

This should not mean that Indian poetry or overall Indian literature is solely concerned with self-proclamation and continuance and lacks literary skills. It is just the opposite. Joseph Bruchac, one of the most noted editors of Indian literature, states, “Native writers are bringing as much literary technique and verbal skill, as much pure imagination to their work as any of their contemporaries” (xix). To be able to witness these efforts, both literary and political, one needs to approach Indian poetry with caution and knowledge not to fall into any mistaken judgments since Indian tribes have had a unique way of producing and internalizing poetry.

4.1. How to Approach Indian Poetry

In western philosophical and literary traditions poetry has been accepted as an art form, sometimes even the highest art form. The ones who could control and play with language and provide a philosophy of life in such small spaces compared to other forms of literary writing have been respected and praised for even generations after their death.

An Indian storyteller would also be given value for his/her ability in performing his/her own story- or repeating the stories of their ancestors- and in directing the power of words. Indian performers of literature were respected not because they were thought to be somehow superior or special, gifted artists. They were respected; because, for almost all Indian tribes 'word' was a special entity. Margot Astrov in her famous collection of oral narratives The Winged Serpent: American Indian Prose and Poetry spares a chapter on the importance and the use of word in Native lives. She simply states, "The word, indeed, is power" (19). Most Native tribes- if not all- believed that in the beginning there was only word, even before the Great Spirit. Therefore, it was also sacred as it was powerful; and the ones who could use it properly received equal- or more- respect as warriors did in a Native community for their ability to handle such sacred and powerful entity.

When word is so vital and central to Indian lives, one cannot talk about 'art' and 'artist' in the way we understand today, within the original Native communities. This, of course, should not mean that their art works were of any lesser value or they did not make art. It just did not function in the same way as it does in a western society. Indian tribes, although within many different ways, used word- the essence of poetry- in chants, rituals, danced to it, prayed with it to the Great Spirit, welcomed the spring and the harvest and hunting seasons with it through special songs, as they welcomed their newlyborn members and said good-bye to the ones passing away. Indian tribal members used stories in teaching lessons to children as part of an education process and also in politics as a means of self-expression and social control. They also used poem-songs at powwows for the purpose of pure social entertainment. Hence, Native American poetry

was not/could not be an art form for the educated 'elite'; on the contrary, it was art shared and enjoyed by each member on varying levels and occasions.

Thus, when we talk about Native poetry, we also talk about Native religion, tradition, joy and sorrow, and politics as well as art. This could very well mean that Native poetry was reflective of communal life and consciousness as much as- if not more than- personal emotions and revelations. This makes art, in this case poetry, a communal substance shared by all the members of a tribe; just as the communal sharing of the land, the goods, the harvest, and the hunted animals- in fact practically everything. Therefore, Native art functioned differently than that of the western world in which art has been personal, privately owned, sold, highly praised, and envied.

In spite of this major difference, within both cultures art- poetry in particular- still fulfils its primary function as we believe today: it leaves the reader/audience with aesthetic taste and 'uplifts' the nation and/or individual to a richer cultural level. Indian poetry, although privately owned and sold just as the poetry of any other ethnic group today, is still deeply rooted in the tribal histories and oral traditions of storytelling, song, and ritual. This gives Indian poetry its unique form in subject matter, in the ways it deals with various issues, and in its style which is almost alive- constantly moving and changing shape, nearly impossible to track down.

In that sense, although it can still be appreciated aesthetically and technically to a certain extent, contemporary Indian poetry cannot be easily unfolded with the same theories the mainstream poetry or- in fact- any other form of ethnic poetry being written in America today can be analyzed. Therefore, it should be approached with the awareness that both text and context may require an adoption of an alternative look.

4.1.1. Themes and Issues: Poetry As a Way of Resistance, Endurance, and Continuance

As Ortiz says in his essay “Song/Poetry and Language- Expression and Perception” that poetic expressions are not only mere expressions they are also the perceptions of experience themselves (243). This expression and experience of life accompanies the 20th and the 21st century Indian experience in America as it did in the earlier centuries. Almost all aspects of it is confirmed and affirmed through poetry. Among the ones will be discussed here are common issues such as birth, death, nature, natural kinship with nature, resistance, endurance, continuance through reclaiming history, use of traditional characters- such as the Coyote figure-, the continuing storytelling tradition, use of humor and irony, and writing against stereotypes.

The communal character of contemporary American Indian poetry will also be exemplified as it has been a tool of survivance- survival, endurance, and resistance- in Vizenor’s term. The following pages provide only some examples to the above mentioned themes and issues:

A birth in the family –Simon Ortiz’s and Joy Harjo’s daughter Rainy Dawn- was celebrated through Ortiz’s poem “To Insure Survival”:

You come out, child,
naked as that cliff at sunrise,
shorn of anything
...
In five more days,

they will come,
singing, dancing,
bringing gifts,
the stones with voices,
the plants with bells. (48-49)

The insurance of survival for the poet is both the birth of his baby and the celebration of this birth by the natural environment. The hopeful and joyful tone of the poem- just like a birth in a family- is achieved through the personification of stones and plants as dancers “singing, dancing/ bringing gifts”. The mother, Joy Harjo, welcomes her baby with a poem as well:

. . . And when you were born I held you wet and unfolding, like a butterfly newly born from the chrysalis of my body. And breathed with you as you breathed your first breath. Then was your promise to take it on like the rest of us, this immense journey, for love, for rain. (32)

The moment of birth is celebrated with this poem. The simile between a “butterfly newly born” and the baby, and the description of taking on the first breath and “this immense journey”- a metaphor for life itself- reveals the preciousness of a birth, a new life for the family. Here, again, the use of nature and birth accompanying it can be seen as an Indian element of poetry.

Another important event in the family, as much as birth, death is also acknowledged through poetry. Sherman Alexie (Spokane and Coeur d’Alene) mourns for and remembers her sister who was burned to death with her husband in their sleep because of a burning cigarette one night.

am I seeing the shadow that survived her
conflagration? Because of my obsession
have I become an accomplished liar,

who strikes a match, then creates a choir
of burning matches, with the intention
of seeing my sister in every fire?

("Sister Fire, Brother Smoke" 60)

Poetry becomes a tool of acknowledging, remembering, and soothing the pain in the family, especially in the poet. The "choir of burning matches" is an allusion to the fire started by the poet, who is in deep agony due to the loss. Death for Indians also comes in big numbers. Wendy Rose reminds the Wounded Knee massacre and the brutal mass burial of the dead being thrown in a pit 'like stones' on a "December" day:

do you see
it was that way
we became the stones
that bruised your feet
on the prairie
so that every twisted ankle
would remind you
of the babies in the snow,
of the blood and wind,

...

We have learned
to barricade the village
and have our weapons
closer at hand. (82-83)

The Wounded Knee massacre, the last mass killing of Indians is embedded in the collective memory of Indians and has become one of the signifiers of Indian holocaust in America. The association between stones and the Indians “we became the stones/ that bruised your feet” is a metaphor for how though Indians have become after facing mass murders: “We have learned/ to barricade the village/ and have our weapons/ closer at hand.” Thus, remembering death through poetry strengthens the collective consciousness. The narrator addressing the reader in the first person plural is also a sign of this collective identity: “we became the stones,” “we have learned.”

Another common theme has been nature in Indian poetry. Gratitude for what nature and animals give humans, the unbreakable bond between human lives and that of animals and plants and trees, the acknowledgement of power of nature as well as love of it can all be widely observed in the 20th and the 21st century Indian poetry. Duane Big Eagle (Osage) also reflects a certain responsibility towards nature in her poem “New York Times in the Supermarket”:

The way our fate is connected
to the birds, animals, and fish.
The way the exhaust pipes of our cars
are connected to the air
going into our great-granddaughters’ mouths.

It makes you think
about what you do
and how you do it. (33)

The unbreakable bond and the fundamental dependency between nature and human kind is the concern of this poem. Therefore, the natural environment deserves certain consideration of “. . . what you do/ and how you do it.” Joy Harjo (Muscogee) shares a similar respect for nature, thinking, “humans aren’t the only makers of poetry”:

The young banana tree is making poetry; I see how it translates the wind.
The need to make songs is inherent in all life.

I’ve watched plants hungrily drink rainwater. They are grateful and are more likely to sing if it is rainwater they are receiving. If it’s water from a hose, they will drink it with gratitude but as they drink they keep looking toward the sky.

And will eventually sing to bring the rain if they suffer from drought.

It’s not just humans who sing for rain, make poetry as commentary on the meaning of life.

We aren’t the only creatures, or the most likely to succeed. (112)

The banana tree and the plants are personified to exemplify the bond between life and art, and to express the awareness that humans are not necessarily any better or more important than other creatures: “We aren’t the only creatures, or the most likely

to succeed.” Just as human beings “make poetry as commentary on/ the meaning of life,” plants and trees make their own sounds and moves and connect to life.

Natural kinship with nature with all the animals in it has also been a common theme in Indian poetry as it is the case with oral narratives. For instance, the spider that is the grandmother storyteller and the corn sister are often used in Indian poetry. Here, Carol Lee Sanchez (Laguna) talks about her wind brothers in her “wind song”:

my four wind brothers
tease me;
chase me through
nearby cities and
laugh when they
frighten me. (253)

The personification of wind- coming from four different directions- as family members is one of the many examples of natural kinship with nature as observed in Indian poetry. Nature or natural phenomena are not used as a background revealing the mood of the poem- or the poet-. On the contrary, they are the subject matter in Indian poetry. Joy Harjo acknowledges her relatives in her “Reconciliation, a Prayer,” too:

Oh, sun, moon, stars, our other relatives peering at us from the inside
of god’s house walk with us as we climb into the next century
naked but for the stories we have of each other. . . . (89)

The personification of sun, moon, and the stars looking at people as brothers and sisters reveals the Indian philosophy of how human kind is so inherently part of the natural environment. They are the “other relatives” who have a place in Indian poetry.

Resistance –to various forms of injustices- is also another common theme used in Indian poetry. Ray Young Bear (Muscogee) describes an elder of Black Eagle Child Nation, Bumblebee, and his wisdom and ability to resist despite his old age:

“Ever since the Stabs Back clan
made the decision to accept education
for the tribal reserve in the late 1800s
there has always been an economic
depression. And now, when the very land
we stand on could reverse this congenital
inequity, the force which placed us here
seeks to take back this land with force
disguised as sympathy.”

From communal weatherization
to peyote songs, regional and world
affairs, his bilingual eloquence
made topical events old news.
Every other topic a prophecy came true.

(“A Drive to Lone Ranger” 32-33)

The “force” which re-located Indians to the reservations is an allusion to the colonial power, which is now “disguised as sympathy.” The resistance against this force is one of the basic themes and functions of contemporary Indian poetry. Connie Fife (Cree) describes the meaning of the same word from an Indian woman’s perspective in her poem called “Resistance”:

resistance is a woman
whose land is all on fire
perseverance and determination
are her daughters
she is a Palestinian mother who
hands her children a legacy of
war together with the
weapons to fight in it
...
resistance is the absent native woman
who died at the hands of
a white artist (98)

The allegorical depiction of resistance as a woman, not only an Indian woman but also a “Palestinian mother,” is reflective of how Indian poetry inherently functions as a tool of resistance with certain consciousness of it in other parts of the world as well. The poem is also a good example for the resistance of Indian women against their stereotypical depictions by white artists: “resistance is the absent native woman/ who died at the hands of/ a white artist.”

Endurance is also another widely used theme in Indian poetry. American Indians could survive to day, not only because they were strong and fought back to preserve their lives but also because they could hold onto their stories and kept producing new ones. Carter Revard (Osage) in his well-known poem “Close Encounters” describes how they endured as a tribe by singing poetry:

1.

We of the Osage Nation have come,
as the Naming Ceremony says,
down from the stars.

. . .

And so of course, we sang:
Nothing's lighter than leaves, we
sang,
ghost-dancing on the oak tree as
the spirit moves,

. . .

It will not end, we sang,
in time our leaves of paper will
be dancing lightly, making a
nation of
the sun and other stars. (382)

Endurance is achieved through performing poetry and song “It will not end, we sang” and holding onto the traditions “ghost-dancing on the oak tree as/ the spirit moves.” The visual imagery of “leaves of paper” “dancing lightly” and making another nation from “sun and other stars” make the atmosphere a positive, bearable, and a hopeful one. Jack D. Forbes’ (Renape and Lenape) “The Book of Deeds” is also a fine example to the issue of endurance in Indian poetry.

And it shall come, yes,
the day
when those who still
believe in the Creator,
the Indians,
the day,
it shall come
surely
when the Native People
the Middle Continent People
will no longer know Hell (110)

The tone of this poem is more determined this time, “And it shall come, yes,/ the day,” and the poem functions as the very tool of endurance against the colonial power:

it shall come
surely
when the Native People
the Middle Continent People
will no longer know Hell

The determination for continuance is observable in Indian poetry maybe more than any other issue. It is being underlined constantly due to the notion that affirmation of tribal continuance is at the same time affirmation of identity for a poet. The following exemplify this concern through holding onto history, as Indian poets are well aware that without the confirmation of past there cannot be any mentioning of future.

Q: Name several American Holocausts, the nations involved, and the places where these were accomplished.

A: Missouri, Illinois, Miami, New England, Virginia, and most place names in the United States. For more advanced students, the answer can extend to North and South America.

Q: What kind of un-American creep would give that answer?

A: A Native American. Of course, a truly patriotic American might have known better than to ask the question. In such cases, silence is the only effective way to avoid acknowledging the guilt. There have been no American Holocausts, and we should all realize this truth. It is self-evident, since we believe all men are created equal, that we would not do what those nasty Europeans did. . . .

(Revard, "A Brief Guide to American History Teachers" 237-38)

The adoption of a classroom language in questions and answers with cynical and sometimes sarcastic allusions to history books and western philosophies such as "all men are created equal" give the poem its dynamic structure both in form and language: "There have/ been no American Holocausts, and we should all realize this truth." The ignorance of "American Holocausts" on Indians in history books and lessons is criticized as for continuation having a strong sense of history is crucial. Luci Tapahonso (Navajo), on the other hand, re-tells history as never reflected in the history books. Indian Removal had been hard for the Navajos "In 1864."

Kit Carson and his army had burned all the fields,
and they killed our sheep right in front of us.

We couldn't believe it. I covered my face and cried.

All my life, we had sheep. They were like our family.

. . .

stopping only when the soldiers wanted to eat or rest.

We talked among ourselves and cried quietly.

We didn't know how far it was or even where we were going.

. . .

Two women were near the time of the births of their babies,

and they had a hard time keeping up with the rest.

Some army men pulled them behind a huge rock, and we screamed out
loud

when we heard the gunshots. The women didn't make a sound,

but we cried out loud for them and their babies. (8-9)

The reporting of history from the peoples' views instead of the official reporting of it in dates and numbers has substantial contribution to strengthening the sense of belonging, and therefore assuring continuance. Moreover, official history is being altered here. Indian removal apparently was not composed of numbers and dates. Annette Arkeketa (Otoe and Creek), on the other hand, celebrates this continuance with a "Quincentennial Ghostdance Song":

indigenous nations

daughters and sons

dance

the web of words

. . .

we have always been here

we have always been here

thank God and Mother Earth

we are here

we are here

so strong! (5-6)

As discussed above, continuance as “indigenous nations” is assured with a sense of history and past, “we have always been here,” and presence at present: “we are here/ we are here/ so strong!”

Another character trait common with the Indian oral narratives is the use of trickster-Coyote figure who is sometimes a wise man/animal giving lessons, sometimes a joker making fun of human weaknesses, sometimes a savor of a tribe, or sometimes a totally different character. With such characters and several attributions to tribal legends and stories contemporary poets also make sure that the storytelling tradition still continues. In Lorenzo Baca’s (Isleta Pueblo and Mescalero Apache) poem Coyote is an ordinary Indian traveler with a suitcase.

she had picked coyote up

just west of flagstaff

as he held

his right hand out hitchhiking

and gripped with his left
his old suitcase
filled with fresh love letters
said he was headed out
to second mesa
("she had picked coyote up" 15)

Here Coyote is personified and made an ordinary Indian man with a ". . . suitcase/ filled with fresh love letters." Thus, he is either looking for his beloved or trying to leave her as a man. The story of leaving, and parting from the loved one is told through a traditional Indian character. E. K. Caldwell's (Tsalagi Cherokee and Creek and Shawnee) Coyote is a lost Indian in the city:

coyote wears designer clothes
and struts around
surrounding himself with fancy words
knows all the catch phrases
sounds radical enough
in word
...
coyote only prays in public
in private the spirits are too close
still fears what might be real.
("You Know Who You Are" 73)

The story of a city Indian losing his identity is told through the personification of Coyote, “coyote wears designer clothes/ and struts around/ surrounding himself with fancy words,” still fulfilling the primary goal of storytelling tradition in a modern way, to give lessons.

Another traditional element in oral narratives as well as in other aspects of life—such as celebrations, powwows, and even politics—is the extensive use of humor and irony. Deloria spares a chapter in his book Custer Died for Your Sins for “Indian Humor” in which he says, “The Indian people are exactly opposite of the popular stereotype. I sometimes wonder how anything is accomplished by Indians because of the apparent overemphasis on humor within the Indian world” (146-47). It has been a traditional way of communication and a significant part of oral narratives, but today it also functions as a resistance strategy for contemporary Indian poets. Ray Young Bear reports the dramatic situation of the males in his tribe at a dance in a rather humorous way in his “Always is He Criticized”:

There was this dance procession
I was a part of, and we were all males
following one another, demonstrating
our place in Black Eagle Child society
with flexed chest muscles and clenched fists.
(I later thought this image a cultural
paradox when some of us were supported
on income made by women. We were still
warlike but perennially unemployed.)

We were singing an energetic, non-
religious song, but we gave it
reverence as if it were one,
...

The leader started the loud
repetitive verse and we quickly
joined in with voices amplified
by mountainous terrain. "Always
is he criticized, always is he
criticized- in the manner of a pig
I dance." (81)

The song being performed by the poet and his fellow men is humorous enough compared to their attitude in performing it. Their being supported by their wives and still being engaged in such a manly activity is also ironical as well. Alexie's "Elegies" which blends humor, irony, and pain is another good example to this traditional element observed in contemporary Indian poetry.

This is a poem for people who died in stupid ways.

This is a poem for Napoleon's great-grandson who snapped his neck
when his ridiculously long scarf caught in the rear wheels of
the convertible he was driving.

This is a poem for General George Armstrong Custer.

...

This is a poem for the music student who died after being caught in

a flash fire while trying to relieve a bad case of hemorrhoids
with gasoline. Don't ask me about the details.

...

This is a poem for my oldest sister and her husband, who died in a
trailer fire in Montana when a curtain drifted on wind and
touched a hot plate left burning. My sister and her husband
were passed out in the back bedroom, too drunk to wake, even
when the flames and smoke danced through their bedroom.

...

This is a poem for my tribe, who continue to live in the shadow of
the abandoned uranium mine on our reservation, where the
night sky glows in a way that would have invoked songs and
stories a few generations earlier, but now simply allows us to see,
better as we drive down the highway toward a different kind of
moon. (49-51)

The poem serves as elegies to all the people mentioned and have died in unreasonable and even unimaginable ways, but at the same time it is a device for enduring the pain of losing a sister and a brother in law. Such pain maybe, can only be bearable in a poem like this where the hilarious tragic-comic stories of people such as Napoleon's son and the music student is combined with that of the poet's sister. The same story also serves as a tool for endurance and resistance against the uranium activities on the reservation land and the side effects of them on the Spokane people. The "different kind of/ moon" is also a symbol of a different kind of life for Spokane

people now. The personal and communal pain are combined and presented together as they are probably inseparable anyway.

Writing against the stereotypes is another widely performed issue in American Indian poetry. Since these stereotypes are strongly embedded in the minds of the many, and are still used in media and literature, Indian poets show a natural reaction to it, and provide alterations or simply make fun of these acts of white ignorance to destroy these stereotypes. While doing this, humor, again is a tool often used. Chris Fleet (Akwesasne Mohawk) drives “A White Friend” to his reservation on a Thanksgiving Day and describes white ignorance in a bitter and a humorous way.

Where’s all the Indians? he asks with a piss grin.

I thought you were showing me INDIANS.

Well, sitting at home waiting

for the phone to ring

or dreaming of thank you notes in the mail

since some still go cordless

What? I don’t get it, he said. What do you mean?

I know, I tell him with tears of pain and laughter.

...

Wow, said my friend with a laugh,

Even you wahoos have an Elvis.

Friend. Friend, I said,

listen.

When will they ever discover white isn’t a color?

It's a mental disease.

And I sent him walking up the dirt road

back to his wilderness.

You'll always be a fucking wahoo, he yelled.

Watch out for the attack buffalo, I yelled back. (100-01)

The capitalization of "INDIANS" and calling them "you wahoos" signify the stereotyping of Indians as a strange uncivilized specimen. The poet's reaction to this, after making fun of it, is to send the friend "back to his wilderness." The "wilderness" is a metaphor for both the off road area as perceived by whites- that's why it is "his" wilderness- and the wilderness of his ideas and stereotypes about Indians. Whichever the way, the white man is alone in it. nila northSun (Shoshone and Chippewa) writes against the similar wilderness of stereotyping of Indians in the form of "stupid questions."

after a lifetime of stupid questions

you'd think I'd have grown

more tolerant

more patient

or at least come up with

snappy comebacks

to

are you really indian?

(no, i just say that so you can ask me

stupid questions)

you don't look indian

(you mean i don't look like the guy on

the nickel)

...

you know, my great-grandmother was a cherokee

princess

(you know, she must have been one helluva whore

cause everybody has that same great-grandmother)

...

do you know when i was a kid

i used to pretend i was indian

(and for halloween i dressed as a yuppie

and nobody thought i was in costume)

...

fuck it

don't waste my breath

put your money where your mouth is

send books, donations, your time and involvement

to the reservation nearest you

call it

'in memory of my cherokee princess grandma' (217-18)

The poem has a strong voice reacting against the stereotyping of Indians “after a lifetime of stupid questions.” It also shows the way out from the ignorant position of many whites: “put your money where your mouth is/ send books, donations, your time and involvement/ to the reservation nearest you.”

Along with these common themes in contemporary American Indian poetry, maybe the most distinctive side of it is its ‘naturally’ communal character. Although poetry is known as a highly personal form of writing, Indian poets carrying their tribal/communal identities as an innate part of their being make their art naturally communal. In the Preface to her poetry collection Trailing You, Kimberly Blaeser (Anishinabe) claims that there cannot be any other way, “No voice arises from one person”(1).

Duane Niatum (Klallam) talks about a friend, a storyteller calling him a “Muskogee Carrier of the Stories” describing a tribal tradition of storytelling as lived in him as well:

Louis will always be there at Koweta Town,
sitting before the fire of those
who come from stars to tell
the ancient stories. He learned
from the Old Ones that Yahola, first
teacher of the Creeks, came to offer
the story of the ball of fire and the red seed (203)

The poem shows that the tradition of storytelling lives in a human as it does in a tribe confirming the communal character of Indian poetry as well as the tribal

continuation. The protagonist, Louis, “sitting before the fire of those/ who come from stars to tell/ the ancient stories. . . .” is an example to the connection between a member and his/her tribe. The “Old Ones”- a metonym for the lost Indian elders who come back as ghosts and give wisdom to the remaining ones in the tribe- are also a confirmation of tribal identity and continuation.

In short, “tribal man is hardly a personal ‘self’ in our modern sense of the word. He does not so much live in a tribe; the tribe lives in him. He is the tribe’s subjective expression,” says Harvey Cox (qtd. in Deloria, God Is Red 195). This can be one of the reasons why American Indian poetry has an inherent communal character.

The unique character of American Indian poetry does not only lie in its ability to blend personal and communal, past and present, and agony and humor altogether, it is also noteworthy in changing the function of poetry and making it a critical tool of survivance. Moreover, Indian poetry brings innovative forms to contemporary American poetry while blending the traditional oral forms with the new written forms of the present. Contemporary American Indian poetry is indeed very exciting both in the issues it deals with and in the diversity of styles it constantly re-invents.

4.1.2. Style: Wild Horse

Native forms of poetic expression were, in fact, oral performances that were neither poetry nor prose. They were translated into English for the most part in the form of poetry by the first translators because they were ‘poetic’; not because they were

‘poetry’. In whichever the way we try to classify them today, poetic prose or prose poetry, we heavily depend on the English translations of various songs, prayers, and stories of which we actually do not know where and how the lines could be cut, or if they could be cut at all. When they were divided into chunks of expression in lines, and silenced, no matter how carefully it was done, they have lost their spirit and influence to a greater extent.

Contemporary American Indian poetry is a reflection of this tradition as well. The wholeness and unity in its narrative comes from the tradition of accepting ‘word’ as a complete entity. Ortiz talks about the wholeness of a spoken word and song while reporting his talks with his father.

For example when my father has said a word- in speech or in a song- I ask him, “What does that word break down to? I mean breaking it down to the syllables of sound or phrases of sound, what do each of these parts mean?” And he has looked at me with an exasperated- slightly pained- expression on his face, wondering what I mean. And he tells me, “It doesn’t break down into anything.”

. . . as my father has said, a word does not break down into separate elements. A word is complete.

In the same way, a song really does not break down into separate elements. . . . (“Song/Poetry and Language- Expression and Perception” 236-37)

Therefore, one should be aware that when we talk about Native poetry, we actually talk about some Native oral performances put into lines and made fit into forms

of poetry by non-Native translators. Robert Dale Parker provides a striking example to how this classification was in fact totally out of Indian control, consent, and even awareness.

Poetry magazine, the vanguard journal of the new modernist poetry, came out with two issues devoted mostly to Indian “poetry” (February 1917, January 1920), some of it translated and some made up from scratch by romanticizing white poets, but none of it written by Indians, let alone written by Indians as poetry. (82-83)

The most noted translators and scholars in the field were Hymes and Tedlock who produced work primarily within and after the 1970s. Observing some tribal ceremonies and hearing some presumably breaks Hymes argued that Native American oral story should be written as “verse,” and Tedlock decided that it should be written as “poetry” (Parker 81). Parker also discusses that “Oral story can be *like* poetry or *like* prose, but it cannot *be* poetry or prose, nor can poetry be in its secret essence, only waiting for the explorer-anthropologist to come along and discover it” (99).

The poetic style of oral performance and the repetitions in song and storytelling tradition were somehow enough for the Euro-American scholars to label such vast literatures as mainly poetry. This resulted in the acceptance of early oral narratives as poetry like a scientific truth in the literary world until the late 20th century in which the proliferation of Indian poetry gained recognizable interest. It turned out that contemporary American Indian poets were devoted to the ever-changing, vibrant, and liquid forms of oral literature as well as their tribal stories and histories, and their works could not be easily called as poetry, either.

American Indian poetry today is as innovative as traditional and vice versa. To be able to characterize it even partially, one needs to look at the influence of oral narratives to discover some of the distinct qualities that differentiate it from the rest of the poetry being written in America today.

First of all, American Indian poetry shifts between prose and poetry often making the two inseparable, as is the case with oral narratives. Oral narrations were neither prose nor poetry, but at the same time they were both. The first example is Luci Tapahonso's "Starlore" shifting between prose and poetry:

. . . It is almost midnight when we park outside this hooghan, the round ceremonial house. We enter slowly, clockwise, then sit on the smooth, cool ground. . . . The family has filled the hooghan. We whisper among ourselves until he arrives- the one who knows the precise songs, the long, rhythmic prayers that will restore the world for us.

*Later we follow him outside where the stars
glimmer in the black sky.*

Then a single star shatters; sparkling streams of light

Trail downward and disappear.

The star remains whole and glowing.

"This happened for all of you," he says.

. . .

Because of this, I understand that I am valued.

Because of the years I have lived, I am valued. (15-16)

The whole poem tells the same story but with different tones. When it is in the form of a prose, the tribal elder or medicine man is being awaited: “We whisper among/ ourselves until he arrives- the one who knows the precise songs, the/ long, rhythmic prayers that will restore the world for us.” After the ceremony, the world is restored, and the form shifts from prose to poetry: “*The star remains whole and glowing./ ‘This happened for all of you,’ he says./ . . . / Because of this, I understand that I am valued.*” Another example to prose poetry or poetic prose is “Notes” from Joy Harjo. The poem is actually placed at the end of the book A Map to the Next World.

Anishnabe- a North American tribe, also known as Ojibway and Chippewa.

. . .

Crow- a North American Plains tribe.

hogan- a traditional Dineh home.

Ingrid Washinawatok- a Menominee activist who sacrificed her life while part of a humanitarian delegation to the U’wa people in South America. She and two others were killed for helping the U’wa people establish a cultural education system for their children to support the continuation of their traditional way of life. The U’wa people live in the Arauca Province of Columbia. The U.S. multinational oil corporations had been carrying out oil exploration in their home. The U’wa people had threatened to commit mass suicide if these oil companies were successful in the exploitative endeavors.

. . .

smallpox blankets- blankets infected with smallpox issued by the government to Indian peoples as part of a genocidal policy.

sofkey- a traditional Mvskoke food of flint corn and lye.

tribal grounds- Mvskoke Nation is divided up traditionally into tribal towns. The tribal grounds are the ceremonial grounds belonging to each town. (137-38)

The explanations provided for the terms, names, and everyday vocabulary being explained here both give the poem its innovative style and its prose-poem character. Although it is expressive of a certain stance against the colonization of Indians within and out of America, the tone is as neutral as it can be in the notes section of a book.

Second, there is certain purity and clarity in the narration style of contemporary American Indian poetry. Indian poets do not perceive writing difficult and complicated poems as an artistic achievement. Clarity is a characteristic inherited from the oral narratives. Elizabeth Woody's (Navaho, Yakima, and Wasco) "Hawk Man" can be an example:

You pluck at strings.
In a rocking chair, bird skull,
you move your head side to side.
I have seen you at the beach picking up basalt spheres.
In time, strumming at resonance, Hawk Man.
You have a pocket of rocks
as good as the feathered hand for sounds. (39)

The poem is a simple but a significant story of a solitary man- “Hawk Man”- as reflected by the poet: “I have seen you at the beach picking up basalt spheres.” “[T]he feathered hand for sounds” is a metaphor for a traditional dance in which they carry feathers while dancing and they make certain sounds moving in the air. Thus, even though the man does not dance in a tribal ceremony, the tradition lives with him: “You have a pocket of rocks/ as good as the feathered hand for sounds.” Another example to clarity in speech is Simon Ortiz’s dog “Bony” who comes home with his father one day:

My father brought that dog home
in a gunny sack.

The reason we called it Bony
was because it was skin and bones.

It was a congenital problem
or something that went way back
in its dog history.

We loved it without question,
its history and ours. (134)

The clarity of the poem is easily observable: “The reason we called it Bony/ was because it was skin and bones.” It is, however, still deep in meaning discussing how history is a crucial part of belonging for Indians in America: “We loved it without question,/ its history and ours.”

Third, contemporary American Indian poetry often uses repetitions- another common quality of oral narratives- for different purposes. The repeating lines are sometimes used greeting the four quarters of the world, therefore repeated four times; sometimes used randomly to form a balance, and sometimes employed to add sound to the poem. At some other times they are used by the poet solely to stress a meaning. In the following poem the poet used repetitions to stress the act although, however, it is repeated four times:

I sit in your
crowded classrooms
& learn how to
read about dick,
jane & spot
but

I remember
how to get a deer

I remember
how to do beadwork

I remember
how to fish

I remember

The stories told by the old

but

spot keeps

showing up

&

my report card

is bad

(Edmo, “Indian Education Blues” 95)

The line “I remember” is repeated four times both stressing the act of remembrance- a function of Indian poetry and “The stories told by the old”- and also giving a certain rhythm to the poem as the title suggests. Another example to the repetitive character of American Indian poetry can be the “Six Nations Museum” of Wendy Rose. This time repetitions are used to form a balance and to greet the four directions, the four quarters of the world.

Is this your special light

salmon blushing west to sky

and these your white pines,

you tangled twigs, the brush

of your fingers

through everything

tobacco to north
tobacco to east
is this what you mean
by the Eastern Door,
...

tobacco to south
tobacco to west (70)

The repeated lines such as “tobacco to north/ tobacco to east” do not only greet the four directions and the whole world around the museum, they also send peace to these directions, as tobacco is a metonym for peace pipe.

Fourth, American Indian poetry has a circular narration style; meaning, it is usually not open ended, does not leave the reader with unanswered questions, and it is unified- a whole, a complete entity. This unity is often achieved by the random repeated lines or words opening and closing the poem just as in “Round Women”:

Round women
taught to hate our bodies
Bodies that don't fit
the ideal
of sticks and lines
and angles
with a few curves
thrown in
...

Round women

Told always

Look like a line.

Think in a line.

Stand in a line.

. . .

You are woman

earth

water

knowing

Roundness of grandmother

bringing healing to the hearts

and strength to the souls

of Round Women. (Caldwell 74-75)

The periodical repeating of the line “Round women” in the beginning, middle, and end of the poem make the narration cyclical, round as well just like the women mentioned in the poem. The poem is also a criticism of patriarchal norms of beauty:

Round women

taught to hate our bodies

Bodies that don't fit

the ideal

of sticks and lines

Moreover, the emphasis on the roundness of women appears as an allusion to the cyclical worldview of Indians and the linearity in the thinking ways of whites:

Round women
Told always
Look like a line.
Think in a line.
Stand in a line.

Fifth, contemporary American Indian poetry usually has a performative character just like the oral narratives. One distinct side of it is the rhythm and sound that are almost hearable within the lines of many contemporary poems. These rhythms and sounds are, for the most part, achieved through the repetitions of lines and words in certain order and/or disorder. The following poem is an example:

Darkness,
You are forever.
Aho.
You are before the light.
Aho.
...
You are the smoke of silence burning.
Aho.
Above, below, beyond, among the glittering things,
you are.
Aho.

The days descend in you,

yesterday,

today,

the day to die.

Aho.

Aho.

Aho.

Aho.

(Momaday, "Prayer" 130)

The line "Aho" being repeated in certain periods gives the poem a series of breaks and makes the poem a song-like performance. It also adds certain rhythm to the song-poem, and improves the tempo with the last four lines making the poem a performance on paper.

Another quality of performative nature of Indian poetry is its moving form on the paper. Therefore, lines are in constant motion from left to right and up and down moving freely on paper. They are designed according to the performance and its nature. For instance, Momaday's "Prayer" as quoted above is not only an oral performance that can almost be heard it is also a performance on paper reflective of the mood of the prayer. The following poem, Carter Revard's "When Earth Brings," is a celebration of the birth of a baby (Rainy Dawn), and the designation of the lines resemble a baby girl lying peacefully on her bed:

When earth brings the sun
into deep translucent
morning around us, when stars go quietly into
blue air behind him, we know
they are telling us:
Grandchildren, here is one of us,
we have arranged for you to see
the world you have been given on this day
by the clear brilliance of
our brother only, at this time,
but we are here, we have not gone away,
the earth will bring us back to you,
return us to each other and you will see
with our little sister's light, and all of ours,
how you move always among our many worlds,
the light and darkness we are given that
we give to you.

Dawn
is a good word to tell you (48)

The visual imagery of a baby girl opening her arms to the morning light "When earth brings the sun" is achieved with the design of the lines in the poem. Within these lines stars are personified and made speak to the tribe calling them "grandchildren" giving the name to the baby, "Dawn/ is a good word to tell you."

Yet another quality of performance on paper is the dialogic nature of contemporary American Indian poetry. Just as oral performances, it has the tendency to include the reader into the act of poetry/performance. It often speaks to the reader, and commonly borrows language from other speakers. The following one is a fine example.

Seattle waterfront, three Indians sharing a bottle of wine and a can of Spam as I walk by. Me, the Indian tourist with half-braids and a wallet full of money.

“Hey, cousin,” one of the Indians ask me. “Do you want a drink?”

“No thanks, cousin,” I say and walk over to them.

“What tribe you are?” one of the Indians asks me. He’s young, maybe twenty, but his nose is bright red with broken veins.

“Spokane,” I say. “What tribe are you guys from?”

“I’m Lakota Sioux,” the one with the red nose says, “And these two old farts are Yakima.”

The two old Yakima look alike, almost twins.

“You guys are brothers, enit?” I ask.

They laugh hard.

“Shit, this is my son,” the older Yakima says and he looks around two hundred years old. His son looks like he must be near one hundred and ninety-nine. Indian years are longer and harder even than dog years.

“Hey,” I ask. “You guys need any change?”

“Yeah,” red nose says. “A change of clothes, a change of underwear.”

And we all laugh. (Alexie, “Freaks” 49)

The poem employs four different speakers and daily languages of some Indians such as “Hey cousin” and “enit,” almost turning it into a street drama. The pun on the word “change” is also an attribution to the need of change in the Indian situation in America, which requires more than money.

Although accepted and called as ‘poetry’, Indian poetry today is still yet to be studied more properly as it constantly and in numerous ways spoils the borders of the genre. Prose as well as poetry, lines, couplets, and stanzas, just as blocks of words, and sounds, are all invariably included in what we call American Indian poetry today. The style of it is like a wild horse, does not want to fit into a white bit.

Dean Rader calls this wild horse “epic lyric” acknowledging James E. Miller Jr.’s theory of lyric epic. He says, “unlike Whitman who lyricizes the epic, recent American Indian poets turn this formula on its head- they epicize the lyric” (127-28). Pointing at its communal character he claims that contemporary American Indian poetry carries the characteristics of epic such as transmitting cultural traditions, valorizing deeds, forming national identities, and preserving linguistic patterns. He concludes that therefore, it is both lyric and epic, written with concerns of both personal and communal- calling it the epic lyric (128). He also sees this nature of Indian poetry- combining the personal and the communal and using the techniques of oral narrative and Anglo-American poetry- as the distinguishing character of it (128).

Rader has a strong agreeable point in discussing that contemporary American Indian poetry is different from the rest of poetry being written in America today due to its unique character in combining personal and communal, traditional and non-traditional. However, calling it epic lyric, inevitably limits it to the borders of epic and lyric- no matter how varied its form can be-, where the wild horse would be at unrest. Indian poetry could hardly be called as lyric anyway, let alone being called as epic lyric.

In short, contemporary Indian poetry is not only distinguishable from the mainstream poetry easily due to its style and subject matter but it is also multi-formed as it is multi-faced. When we talk about contemporary American Indian poetry, in fact we talk about many wild horses. Surrounding them even by a fence is too difficult. Today it is produced by many different faces and representatives of Indians whose works constantly shift between genres and can only be called as using 'free' style in the literal sense. Hence, while approaching Indian poetry one should keep in mind that no single style or form could be referred to generalize what is 'Indian' today.

Even a more intriguing area is the criticism of contemporary American Indian poetry. When it constantly blurs the borders of poetry in themes and issues- having a communal voice inherent in even the most personal expressions and at the same time having a bi-cultural recognition-, and in form and style- making it difficult to call it poetry by shifting through genres of prose and poetry, epic and lyric, and song and prayer-, how it is to be studied and criticized is a more complicated and a heavily debated issue.

4.1.3. Criticism: Indian Food, Western Pot

The issue of criticism for American Indian poetry has not yet been resolved. Although some critics have applied post-colonial theory to study it, most others claim that for a proper reading of it an indigenous theory needs to be developed. Some others even argue that it should be read without a theory. Due to its distinct character in themes, issues, and forms it offers, as discussed in the previous sections, I believe that American Indian poetry is very difficult to be unfolded properly by any single one of the existing literary, cultural, and linguistic theories in hand at the moment.

Another reason why western theories would be inadequate is due to the function of literature in Indian tribes and the western world. Paula Gunn Allen in her well known essay “The Sacred Hoop: A Contemporary Perspective” divides traditional Indian literature “into two basic genres: ceremonial and popular, as opposed to the Western prose and poetry distinction” (258). Ceremonial literature includes songs for many occasions such as harvesting, healing, blessing new houses, journeys, and wars whereas popular literature is composed of tribal tales and songs, jokes, “little” stories, and lullabies among many others (258-60). As discussed by Allen, Indian literature can only be classified- should it has to be- due to its function rather than its form.

Arnold Krupat discusses the same issue in his book Ethnocriticism: Ethnography, History, Literature, and points out to the idea that to be able to reach a proper western criticism of Native American literatures “one needs an understanding of that people’s cultural assumptions” among other things- such as the acceptance of “indigenous” literatures and the lessening the control on language during translation

(178-80). Apart from being well informed of Indian history and common traditions, one should also be careful enough not to be caught up with the fallacy of romanticizing contemporary Indian poetry while accepting the general discourse of difference that should serve to the diversity of Indian cultures, not to the alienation of them.

However, this should not suggest that there is no way to get closer to Indian poetry or we as non-Indians are not equipped to demonstrate any reasonable understanding of it. Contemporary Indian poets mostly live in urban areas; therefore, are very much in contact with the dominant culture and economic systems- as they are connected to their tribes and greater families and friends living in reservations. They have college education, they vote, go to rock concerts, drink morning coffee, and most importantly they write mainly in the English language. Thus, they share similar experiences with the majority. This makes their works approachable- even to a certain extent- with the help of some of the theories we have today.

In other words, even though I believe that existing theories are somehow inadequate in unfolding Indian poetry so far, we can still use some of the ones we already have in hand for at least a partial decoding of it, and to shed some light on it to reach a common ground of understanding for now. For this purpose, some of the 20th and the 21st century literary and cultural theories will be employed interchangeably borrowing terminology from each of them- where applicable. While doing this, their insufficiencies will also be pointed out. The theories to be considered in the following sections will be Ecocriticism, Magical Realism, Dialogism, Postmodernism, and Post-Colonialism.

4.1.3.1. Ecocriticism

“Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationships between literature and the physical environment,” says Cheryll Glotfelty in the introduction of the book that set the framework for ecocriticism in 1996, The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology (xviii). The term ecocriticism was first used by William Rueckert in his essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” in the late 1970s, but ecocriticism, environmental studies, or green studies became the concern of a few literary scholars, such as Frederick O. Waage and Alicia Nitecki, for the first time in the mid-1980s. Still, it was in the 1990s when it gained considerable recognition from the academia.

In a way, ecocriticism can be seen as the first considerable attempt of western literary criticism to acknowledge the ‘outside’ world and become aware of the fact that nature merely does not exist as a cultural phenomenon or as a background in a literary work. Ecocriticism pays attention to symbiosis, the concept that mankind and nature ‘live together’; therefore, certain mutuality should be observed. From the use of energy sources to the concept of wilderness, and from the question of whether man and woman treat nature differently to the connection between popular culture and environmental issues are all in the areas of interest of ecocriticism (Glotfelty xix).

Ecocriticism, on the other hand, rejects the common notion that everything socially, culturally, and/or linguistically constructed. Thus, nature is not a construct. It is an entity on which we heavily depend on and interconnect with. Peter Barry also thinks that it exists “beyond our ourselves, not needing to be ironised as a concept” (252).

Ecocriticism appears to be the outcome of this western realization of the idea that nature itself is an existence and should be a concern for literary criticism as well. One of the leading figures of the theory, Karl Kroeber says that such criticism was needed especially in the last decade of the 20th century since “For too long literary critics have isolated themselves from scientific concerns and limited their thinking to an unnecessarily narrow range of metaphysical and ideological issues” (Ecological Literary Criticism: Romantic Imagining and the Biology of Mind 140). Glotfelty agrees with Kroeber in her introduction:

If your knowledge of the outside world were limited to what you could infer from the major publications of the literary profession, you would quickly discern that race, class, and gender were hot topics of the late twentieth century, but you would never suspect that the earth’s life support systems were under stress. Indeed, you might never know that there was an earth at all. (xvi)

She continues to explain that the headlines for the news, on the contrary, were intensively talking about environmental issues during the same time period (xvi). The development of ecocriticism was timely, considering the growing public awareness and concern of environmental issues such as global warming, nuclear wastes, the increase in the number of natural disasters, and the extinction of animals. It was also the right time for literary theoreticians and critics to turn eyes to nature and its issues, too.

Although it seems like a new step for the western world of literary theory, in the Indian world it is very familiar. Traditional Indian literary performances have always been inseparable from the nature itself. Harvesting and hunting ceremonies were carried

out on nature's time, song and dance were used for better crops, the stories of famine and drought enlightened the way for a tribe, and war songs seeking help from animals provided the necessary strength for warriors as well as the animals themselves. The following Navajo song used for better corn before harvesting time can be an example to this idea:

The corn grows up.

The waters of the dark clouds drop, drop.

. . .

The rain descends.

The water from the plants drop, drop.

The corn grows up.

The waters of the dark mist drop, drop.

("The corn grows up" 13)

Not only the human dependency on food, in this case corn, but also the unity among rain, land, corn, therefore between nature and humans is also observable here. A Papago "War Song" also relies on this unity:

And I asked power.

The hawk favorable to me he felt

And did bring forth his blue stone.

Our enemy's waters he made white with moonlight,

And around them I went striding. (194)

The hawk becomes a symbol of the unity and support between nature and humans and the support they can get from it when it is personified "The hawk favorable

to me he felt.” The certain awareness of and dependency on nature has been a distinguishable matter of identity formation and location for Indian poets. Ray Young Bear’s poem “The Significance of a Water Animal” is a fine example to how nature and animals are intrinsically a part of Indian existence and identity:

A certain voice of *Reassurance*
tells me a story of water animal
diving to make land available.
Next, from the Creator’s
own heart and flesh
O ki ma was made:
the progeny of divine
leaders. And then
from the Red Earth
came the rest of us.

“To believe otherwise,”
as my grandmother tells me,
“or to be simply ignorant,
Belief and what we were given
to take care of,
is on the verge
of ending . . .” (3-4)

The “certain voice of *Reassurance*” is an allusion to storytellers, old and new, who also help strengthen the bond between nature and Indian peoples. The Muscogees, for instance, owe their existence to the “water animal” diving to get some earth for the people as well as to the creator who made the Muscogees from that red earth. Simon Ortiz also acknowledges the interdependency between that red earth and Indian people.

The land. The People.

They are in relation to each other.

We are in a family with each other.

The land has worked with us.

And the people have worked with it.

...

We are not alone in our life;

we cannot expect to be.

The land has given us our life,

and we must give life back to it.

(“We Have Been Told Many Things but We Know This to Be True”

324-25)

The symbiotic approach to nature and the human kind is observable in this poem. Ortiz also reflects the Indian philosophy of reciprocity, giving something back for something taken from the nature and animals, with the lines “The land has given us our life,/ and we must give life back to it.”

While locating and re-locating Indian identity, Indian poets carried the Indian philosophy of natural kinship with nature and animals to their poems as well. Long

before the theory was invented by the westerners, Native Americans produced literature conscious of the natural environment that surrounded them. Moreover, American Indians have established, and for thousands of years have preserved, a metaphysical/spiritual connection- as well as a material one- to their environment. This inalienable bond has been shaped with certain respect and appreciation. Ecocriticism, being concerned with the relationship and connection between humans and nature- although only on the physical level-, can still provide valuable insight to such poems. One example would be the Tewa “Song of the Sky Loom”:

O our Mother the Earth, O our Father the Sky,
Your children are we, and with tired backs
We bring you the gifts you love.
Then weave for us a garment of brightness; (221)

This time, the Tewas are asking for something in return, “a garment of brightness,” as part of the mutual respectful relationship with nature. The personification of earth and the sky as mother and father, “O our Mother the Earth, O our Father the Sky,/ Your children are we,” is also revealing of the family like ties between nature and the tribe. The same mother earth, however, is made cried:

And he’s so young.
Mother Earth cries
with each stab
as her children
are brought back to her
(Benson, “Coming Back I Heard Mother Earth” 30)

The personification of earth as a mother crying for her dead children, “And he’s so young./ Mother Earth cries,” is used to raise a consciousness for the mining and oiling activities stabbing the breast of earth, the mother of human kind and the inevitable dependency of human and nature to each other.

Although the number of such poems from both the oral tradition and today’s Indian poetry can easily be increased, contemporary American Indian poetry cannot be fully unfolded by ecocritical approach. Even though Indian poets often display a unique connection to nature and their tribal land, their poetry has a lot more to offer. The issues of genocide, boarding schools, poor or no health services on reservations, red power movement, Indian veterans, stereotyping of Indians, loss of tribal languages, broken treaties, and many more can be found in Indian poetry; and, ecocriticism becomes helpless in providing appropriate tools for studying them. For instance, in the following poem Sherman Alexie passes on the story of one of the Indian war “Heroes”:

Anyway, there was this old Skin named Silas Something-or-Other, always dressed up traditionally, braids and all. He never talked [. . .] so I walk up to him one day in the yard and ask him what the hell he did. Well, he says to me, during the war a few of us captures 20 Germans but we needed help, so the others left me to guard the prisoners . . . After a few more days of staying awake, watching the Germans watch me, [. . .] I slapped in a full clip and killed all those fucking Nazi bastards. I supposed I was crazy being so tired and scared because I kept shooting them, unloaded ten or twenty banana clips on them. When they found me, I was cutting all kinds of body parts. (70)

The poem does not offer anything related to the nature and human bond and relation, still it is very much an Indian poem discussing an important issue of Indian veterans used in the World War II, and re-claiming history. As can be seen, ecocritical approach cannot be applied to it. Another example can be Paula Gunn Allen's "Laguna Ladies Luncheon":

Gramma says it's so depressing-
all those Indian women,
their children never to be born
and they didn't know
they'd been sterilized.
See, the docs didn't want them
bothered, being so poor and all,
at least that's what is said.
...
My mother says it's the same
as Nazi Germany.
A medical holocaust. (30)

Again, ecocriticism does not have much to offer to unfold a poem like this. The Indian "medical holocaust" has nothing to do with environmental issues, or at least cannot be explained through them. To sum up, although Indian poets do place themselves 'in' the nature as a philosophy and write about their tribal and personal symbiotic relations to nature; yet, this relationship is not efficient by itself in explaining their art. Therefore, ecocriticism will be partially employed within this study.

4.1.3.2. Magical Realism

Magical Realism as a term was first used by a German art critic Franz Roh in his article “Magischer Realismus” (Magic Realism) for a series of painting in the 1920s Germany. It was Arturo Uslar Pietri, a Venezuelan writer and critic, who adopted the term to define and maybe differentiate Latin American literature in the 1960s. He used it to define the Latino/a literature which blurs the border between real and fantasy. Although the term was first rejected by some critics, as it does not provide certain terminology and a clear technique to follow, it was then quickly adopted by both the academia and the readers in Latin America.

Magical realism lives on the basic assumption that to be able to call a literary work as a magical realist, there needs to be certain shifts from real to unreal conceived as perfectly real by the characters in the work. Besides, these quick but mild shifts are never explained. With magical realism possible becomes probable (Danow 68). For instance, the gypsies selling flying carpets along with ice cubes and some other materials in Marquez’s Hundred Years of Solitude, and its being perceived as an ordinary matter by the characters in the novel can be an example to this.

In that sense, magical realism as a literary theory best fits the works depicting the world with a different gaze than that of the western/European. The works of Latino/a writers such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Alejo Carpentier, Jorge Luis Borges, and Isabel Allende fall into this category. The simplicity of the definition and the freedom it provides for its writer made it also popular among writers from the rest of the world such as Salman Rushdie, Milan Kundera, and Onat Kutlar.

Among the common aspects of the magical realist works are fantastic elements that are never explained, sensory details, the distortion of the linearity of time, incorporation of legends and folk tales to contemporary stories, and the feeling of uncertainty. A magical realist text offers deviations from realism, but at the same time puts these deviations into an otherwise totally realistic context. Therefore, it is not surrealism trying to discover a hyper reality above what is conceived as real, nor it is a form of fantasy creating an alter reality with a different set of rules.

Magical realism, commonly used to describe Latin American texts, may also provide some insight to Indian oral and/or written texts, especially the old ones. In such texts mythologies or legendary characters are found inseparably embedded in the stories that take place in a contemporary environment, and such occurrences are never found improbable. In that sense, Sitting Bull's prophecies and Black Elk's visions are not magic or supernatural, they are presented as perfectly real. Black Elk's first vision is told by him as follows:

A thunder storm was coming from where the sun goes down, and just as I was riding into the woods along a creek, there was a kingbird sitting on a limb. This was not a dream, it happened. And I was going to shoot at the kingbird with the bow my Grandfather made, when the bird spoke and said: "The clouds all over are one-sided." Perhaps it meant that all the clouds were looking at me. And then it said: "Listen! A voice is calling you!" Then I looked up at the clouds, and two men were coming there, headfirst like arrows slanting down; and as they came, they sang a sacred song and the thunder was like drumming. . . . But when they were

very close to me, they wheeled about toward where the sun goes down,
and suddenly they were geese. Then they were gone, and the rain came
with a big wind and a roaring. (18-19)

Black Elk reports this vision as part of a natural phase of his spiritual growth as a future medicine man of his tribe. Except the talking with a bird incident and the two men coming from the clouds, everything else reported here is totally realistic. A more recent example to this feature of magical realism may be Alexie's poem in which the legendary Sioux warrior Crazy Horse interferes with the flow of history within the 20th century.

Hydrogen

Crazy Horse
never died.

Don't you know
he was the one

who climbed on top
of the Hindenburg
and lit
a match? (39)

The fire on the Hindenburg- German zeppelin- in 1937 caused the death of over 30 people including passengers and the crew and the controversies on how the fire started has not yet been resolved. Crazy Horse is depicted as the one to start that fire on

the zeppelin and to destroy a symbol of Nazi power- Hindenburg. “*Hydrogen*” is an allusion to the US helium embargo- to Germany-, which caused them to use hydrogen, a flammable substance instead. Except the Crazy Horse himself everything told in the poem are real; in other words, the setting is as realistic as it can be.

Another characteristic of magical realism, the destruction of the linearity of time can also open a way to observe and grasp the issue of time for Indians and in Indian literatures. The circular notion of time, that is “What occurs on one occasion is destined to take place again on another” resulting in “eternal recurrence” is not far from the cyclical nature of time for the Indians in America (Danow 68). That’s why the ghost dancers sang “We shall live again/ We shall live again” (“A Sequence of Songs of the Ghost Dance Religion” 144).

According to magical realism time can be bent, stopped, and rewound. For Native philosophy since time is circular, there must be an end for the (re-)occurrence of a beginning. Therefore, there is no difference between distant past and yesterday. Time cannot separate you from what happened, cannot ease the pain, or cannot sooth the joy. That’s why Indian oral narratives usually mention of the time as only ‘one day’ or ‘a long time ago’ or do not mention of it at all, and maybe that’s why Wounded Knee and Sand Creek massacres still hurt American Indian poets today. Sam Peters, a Fox Indian, repeats an old story of his tribe:

Now this is an old story of what the people a long while ago, a
very long while ago, did, some time before the white man came here on
this island [earth].

Now it seems there was a man, a young man, who married. He was a fine fellow. After he married, soon he had a child. Well, soon when it had grown large, their little son began to be ill. He became sicker, and sure enough their little son died. Soon after their son died his wife likewise began to be ill. It was for a short time, and then she also died. . . . (“The Man Who Reproached the Manitous” 149)

Time goes only as far as “a very long while ago.” The purpose of telling the story, however, does not change; to share tribal wisdom and to teach a lesson to the listener(s) on how to cope with overwhelming personal agony. Time has no significance in Scott Momaday’s prose poem “Walking Bear’s Shield,” either:

There were many berries that summer. . . .

. . .

In those days bears were all about. A bear came walking among the camps. . . .

It walked through the circles of tepees, and it paused before the tepee of Otters Going On. Everyone watched; everyone was amazed.

When the wife of Otters Going On gave birth to a male child, Otters Going On made a shield for him, a very powerful bear Shield. Setmaunt, Walking Bear, the son of Otters Going On, carried the shield far and wide. (95)

Here again, the event is important, not the time of it. Therefore, even though the poem was written in the 1990s, it still carries the same attitude with the Fox tale quoted above. Time is mentioned only as “that summer” since it doesn’t matter when or which

summer. Similarly, it does not make any difference whether it was over a century ago; Wounded Knee massacre is still fresh in the Indian memory. Wendy Rose feels the pain of Indian women who helplessly tried to protect and hide their babies during the massacre:

I expected my skin and my blood
to ripen, not be ripped from my bones;
...
It was my own baby
whose cradleboard I held-
would've put her in my mouth like a snake
if I could, would've turned her into a bush
or rock if there'd been magic enough
to work such changes. Not enough magic
to stop the bullets, not enough magic
to stop the scientists, not enough magic
to stop the money.

("I Expected My Skin and My Blood to Ripen" 18-19)

Rose gives voice to the women killed in the massacre, trying to save the lives of their babies. She also underlines the idea that the massacre happened due to the insufficiency of Indian magic "to stop the bullets"- an allusion to bullet proof ghost dance shirts-, to stop the scientists working on weapons and Indian issues, and of course to stop "the money"- metaphor for the white interest on Indian lands and goods. Indian magic could solve these problems, if it was only "enough" in the amount.

Although the basic philosophy of rejecting the western notion of reality and duration fits well to the Indian literature, magical realism would not be fully efficient in explaining the ‘real’ Indian issues such as poor education services, the major cut in the federal aids to tribes within the 1980s, political issues raised in the poems, autobiographical implications, or the rhythms, sounds, and the plays between the genres these poems display. None of these go near the border of fantasy, nor can be illuminated by magical realism. For instance, Joy Harjo’s prose poem “when we were born we remembered everything” criticizes a political and a cultural system of the 20th century America. Magical realism cannot provide any insight to neither the form nor the content of it:

We were living in a system in which human worth is determined by money, material wealth, color of skin, religion and other capricious factors that do not tell the true value of a soul. This is an insane system. Those who profit from this system have also determined, by rationale and plundering, that the earth also has no soul, neither do the creatures, plants or other life forms matter. I call this system the overculture. There is no culture rooted here from the heart, or the need to sing. It is a system of buying and selling. (17)

The tone of the poem is very realistic and neutral. The clear style of it also contributes to the seriousness of the issue being discussed. Moreover, there are no magical realist elements in the poem, no single deviation from the bitter reality of our time. Another example can be Luci Tapahonso’s notes of her family visit when “The Weekend Is Over”:

The weekend is over and we have to leave.

...

“Well, I guess we’ll go now,” I say.

Everyone has gathered around. My mother and sisters

hold the girls, saying, “Do good in school, baby,

don’t forget to pray, be good to yourself, shiyazhi.”

My father tells them, “Take care of your mother.”

My brother says, “Tell Bob to come next time.

All us Navajos won’t hurt him.” We laugh. (3)

As demonstrated here, such autobiographical references in a poem make it impossible for magical realism as a literary theory to provide an insight to it. Therefore, it can only be applied to Indian poetry when mythological characters appear in real life situations and when mythologies and legends are repeated in the poems. However, even then- especially with contemporary American Indian poetry-, a reader must be cautious with the possibility that those occurrences may have metaphorical connotations rather than the actual reference.

To clarify, a reader cannot be sure whether Alexie truly placed Crazy Horse on the Hindenburg or was he simply using the warrior spirit and character of Crazy Horse as a metaphor. Even more importantly, it should also not be forgotten that magical realism is a white look trying to unfold Latino/a realities. In other words, it is a western theory in essence, and calls ‘magical’ what is real in another culture, as Mark Turcotte also argues.⁴

4.1.3.3. Dialogism

Dialogism was introduced by the Russian philosopher Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin with his book The Dialogic Imagination published in the mid-1930s in Russia. The book is a collection of four essays on the theory. "Discourse in the Novel," among the ones that stand out, identifies his idea of heteroglossia and dialogic nature of a text- two axis of his theory of dialogism. Bakhtin defines heteroglossia as multi layers of socio-ideological language and meaning in a written text. He believes that only the prose form- especially the novel genre- can offer these multi-languages and multi-layers of meaning and there is no heteroglossia in poetry because,

Even when speaking of alien things, the poet speaks his own language. To shed light on an alien world, he never resorts to an alien language, even though it might in fact be more adequate to that world. Whereas the writer of prose, by contrast [. . .] attempts to talk about even his *own* world in an alien language (for example, the nonliterary language of the teller of tales, or the representative of a specific socio-ideological group); he often measures his own world by alien linguistic standards. (287)

Bakhtin's claim is that poetry has no choice but to be personal since the language of a poem is not in interaction with the language of other texts or the outer world- as a voice coming from the inside-, and therefore poet defines everything in his/her own terms. However, prose, although it may try to be personal, is open to interaction with other languages; and its writer borrows language from other texts even unintentionally as s/he has to adopt different forms and ways of narration for the

interaction among the characters in the novel. Bakhtin offers storytellers' language and language of a specific socio ideological group that can be found in the discourse of novel as examples to his idea. Ironically, both can easily be found in Indian poetry, too.

Contemporary American Indian poetry often borrows from the language and the stories of the Indian storytellers, and it usually speaks from the whole tribe or Indians in America. For instance, in "Shaa Ako Dahjinileh Remember the Things They Told Us" Luci Tapahonso repeats a Navajo creation story and uses the Navajo language.

1

Before this world existed, the holy people made themselves visible
by becoming the clouds, sun, moon, trees, bodies of water, thunder,
rain, snow, and other aspects of this world we live in. That way,
they said, we would never be alone. So it is possible to talk to them
and pray, no matter where we are and how we feel. Biyazhi daniidli,
we are their little ones. (19)

Tapahonso adopts the discourse of the Navajo storytellers and the Navajo language, and mentioning the Navajo belief and connection to environment she implicitly speaks for her tribe. American Indian poetry has heteroglossia not only because it shifts between prose and poetry, but also because it inherits different languages and meanings through repeated oral stories in the poems written in English language- as demonstrated above. An even clearer example to heteroglossia can be "A Designated National Park":

Montezuma Castle in the Verde Valley, Arizona.

DESIGNATED FEDERAL RECREATION FEE AREA

ENTREE FEES

\$ 1. 00 FOR ONE DAY PERMIT

. . .

This morning,

I have to buy a permit to get back home. (Ortiz 235)

Ortiz's poem makes use of the language of the sign posted there- a non-literary language- while, at the same time, referring to land rights, broken treaties, the commercializing of Indian cultures for the sake of white profit, and the clash between Indian and white perception displayed through how whites see a piece of land called "home" by Indians.

Another backbone of the theory, dialogism, is the existence of communication among these multi-languages and multi-layers of meaning within a text, and the text's interaction with outer texts as well as with the reader himself/herself. The interaction of a text with the outer texts would later be called intertextuality in postmodern thinking. Bakhtin thinks while prose- especially the novel genre- is in communication with other forms of writing, literary or non-literary, poetry genre cannot be dialogic as it is extremely internal carrying the inner voice of the poet. Besides, it is an old genre, and has a "dead" language. In his essay "Epic and Novel: Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel" he claims that all other genres are completed and studying them is studying "dead languages," therefore novel is the only "young" genre that can provide the reader with a fresh, dynamic language that can communicate with him/her (3-9).

American Indian poetry shares almost the same qualities with Bakhtin's idea of novel. It has a fresh voice- although makes use of oral narratives in its form and context,

it is highly innovative and up to date-, it is multi-layered in language and meaning, and although carries the elements of epic, it is not in the “epic distance” stuck in the language and reality of the past (“Epic and Novel: Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel” 13-17). Mark Turcotte’s “Now We Sleep” can be an example to how Indian poetry is in fact, innovative, up to date, and not trapped in the epic distance:

INCA MAIDEN DEBUTS

- headline, *USA Today*, 22 May 1996

Now that you have found
our little southern sister
(she was not lost),
at twenty thousand feet
upon a steep Peruvian slope,
frozen and crouching
to her knees, now
we sleep.

. . .

Now that you have counted
all of her beautiful teeth
(you did not hear her whisper),
caressed her slender fingers,
measured the nails,
carved samples of tissue

from skin, bone, and breast, now
we sleep.
...
Now we curl up, so civilized,
to join her
in the terrible dream
she has been given by you. (57-58)

Turcotte uses repetitions of certain phrases and words, which give the poem its cyclical character just like that of the Indian oral narratives. However, it is written in free style and does not imitate or repeat a standardized form of writing poetry. It is also up to date, talks about a contemporary issue taken from a newspaper headline, and it is not stuck in the “epic distance.”

The poem addresses to both the ones who found her body in a bitter ironic tone and reveals the poet’s inner thoughts in parenthesis showing disapproval to what has been done: “(you did not hear her whisper).” Hence, it displays the political stance of the poet about the excavation, while at the same time articulating a collective epic voice using a common language, calling a Peruvian woman “sister” just because she was Indian. Therefore, the poem has heteroglossia. Moreover, poet’s use of a newspaper headline- a dynamic and even a non-literary language- and also replying to it as well as revealing his inner feelings to the reader show that these multi-layers of meaning and multi-languages are also in communication with each other and with the reader as well, giving the poem its dialogic character.

Robin Riley Fast also argues that American Indian poetry is naturally dialogic:

Native writers use numerous means to create dialogic poetry. Evoking traditional stories or modes, drawing on traditional convictions (for example, beliefs about the efficacy of language), and cultivating the stylistic traits most common to traditional songs- brevity, repetition, allusiveness, minimally elaborated images- make heteroglossia and dialogism implicit subjects of many poems. (14)

She continues to mention the elements of Indian poetry that may explain its dialogic character. The use of Native languages and English together, “using traditional figures in contemporary contexts”- as it is the case with Coyote-, and the existence of multiple speakers in one poem are only some of them (14). The following poem “The Fox Paw and Coyote Blessing” uses the Coyote figure in a contemporary setting, and has multiple speakers- even dialogues among those speakers:

Well
Fox and Coyote
led the dance
hopping and twirling around
like fancy dancers
...
all my family and friends
behind me
dancing around the drum
in the wrong direction

Gramma I said later
Gramma how could you
Let me go the wrong direction?
...
Never forget
Coyote helped to form the world
For all his trickster ways
Coyote helped to form the world
The world was made with Fox Paw
and all the seeming backward things
that make the world go forward (Valoyce-Sanchez 304-05)

First, the poet addresses the reader, “Well/ Fox and Coyote/ led the dance,” then the poet speaks to her grandmother “Gramma I said later/ Gramma how could you/ Let me go the wrong direction?” and receives a reply, “Never forget/ Coyote helped to form the world.” The Coyote figure here is also a metaphor for life’s being tricky and misleading humans into the wrong direction. However, even then, there is a purpose, a balance established in life: “For all his trickster ways/ Coyote helped to form the world.”

Indian poetry is much more flexible and richer than what Bakhtin believed the poetry genre was. This is surely not due to the inefficiency of Bakhtin’s perception of poetry; on the contrary, it is because Indian poetry is very different from the usual poetry genre both in content and in form as previously discussed within this study. The reason why Bakhtin insisted that only prose, especially the novel genre, could have

dialogic nature should be because that apparently he had “no knowledge of Native American cultures or literatures,” especially considering the possible inconveniencies in reaching Indian literatures in the beginning of the 20th century in Russia, when Indian literatures were subject to anthropological studies alone in America (Fast 9).

Hence, the question arises; can dialogism be the theory of reading American Indian poetry? Maybe the question can be answered by other questions. Although dialogism can explain that the oral narrative techniques- such as repetition, shift between prose and poetry, having a communal voice, and etc.- in Indian poetry are heteroglossic elements, and call Indian poetry dialogic- since poets employ a certain connection to the language of oral literatures-, however, can dialogism explain the reason for the use of Native languages and the techniques of oral narratives? Can it explain that it is not only an artistic concern that these poets still use these techniques and their tribal languages in their poems, but it is a personal and a political choice? Can it also explain why Indian poetry is re-claiming Indian history in America continuously?

Poetry is a part of Indians’ efforts of assuring their existence and survival throughout centuries. It is a political act as well as an artistic. That’s why, for instance, the purpose for the use of humor which is an “abuse” for Bakhtin who claims that “One ridicules in order to forget,” is not applicable to Indian literature, which uses humor to remember and to endure and survive (“Epic and Novel: Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel” 23). When it comes to Indian poetry, dialogism seems feeble in providing insight to the context even though it can approach to text maybe more than any other literary theory being discussed here. Therefore, it will be employed where applicable in this study.

4.1.3.4. Postmodernism

Postmodernism appears to be not only a literary theory but more of a philosophical one that has influenced art, architecture, design, psychology, culture, critical theories, and history as a social science. Since the theory is vast and borders of it cannot be drawn easily, the discussion here will be basically limited to postmodernism as a theory of literary criticism.

Although the first signs of postmodernism are believed to be seen within the early years of second half of the 20th century, postmodern thinking flourished with the writings of French scholars such as Jean-François Lyotard, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, and Roland Barthes in the late 1970s. Lyotard's The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge (1979) was particularly influential among the publications of these writers, and regarded as the founding work of the postmodern philosophy. Within the 1980s and onwards with the rapid developments and changes in media, popular culture, economy, technology, and computers human lives have changed, and the beliefs in objectivity, science, historical 'facts', aesthetics, and even religion have been severely damaged, challenged, and altered.

This era of immense changes and developments let Lyotard call for the 'disappearance of the real', and Baudrillard for the 'loss of real'- in his Simulations (1981). Baudrillard called it a culture of hyperreality. He believed that the images created in films, advertisements, and on TV led to a loss in the distinction between reality and illusion for people. This socio-cultural era had its repercussions on literary thinking and criticism as well.

Lyotard thinks that since the idea of reality and objectivity is under question, and the distinction between highbrow and lowbrow art is lost, within the postmodern era we can only have mininarratives instead of the grand narratives of the past decades. The basic characteristics of postmodern literature follow these assumptions, too.

A postmodern text has fragmentary narration and no clear beginning or end, therefore leaving the reader with uncertainty. The play with the notion of time is also another postmodern element. Reader is often confused and loses the track of time, as the text does not follow linearity in time. Postmodern narration also often borrows from or has attributions to other texts and narrations either from the past or from its contemporaries. This is called intertextuality. While doing this, the author may bring in different pieces from different works making a pastiche, his/her own bricolage. This bricolage usually carries allusions- references- and/or parodies of other works- especially if they are among the classical grand narratives. Reaching the past, a postmodern text may also carry some nostalgia as well.

This interaction between texts usually ends up in genre blurring- another main characteristic of postmodern literature. The borders of a specific genre is altered and bent through intertextuality and, of course, due to the rejection of the strict rules of aesthetics.

American Indian poetry, although it comes from a totally different source and from societies established on totally different sets of rules, carries some postmodern elements. For instance, intertextuality is almost an inherent character of contemporary American Indian poetry since it often borrows stories and/or characters from the oral narratives. Joy Harjo's "Deer Dancer" can be an example to this.

The woman inside the woman who was to dance naked in the bar of misfits blew deer magic. Henry Jack, who could not survive a sober day, thought she was Buffalo Calf Woman come back, passed out, his head by the toilet. All night he dreamed a dream he could not say. The next day he borrowed money, went home, and sent back the money I lent. Now that's a miracle. Some people see vision in a burned tortilla, some in the face of a woman. (67)

The Buffalo Calf Woman, who appeared to the Lakota both in the form of a beautiful woman and a buffalo giving wisdom and showing them how to live their lives after the creation of the tribe, is a symbol of freedom and well being. She appears to the man in this poem as well: "Henry Jack, who could not survive a sober day,/ thought she was Buffalo Calf Woman come back . . ." in the form of a naked dancer, at a bar one night. She is a character borrowed from a Muscogee legend- an intertextual element. The title is also an allusion to a special dance ceremony.

Another distinct postmodern element, genre blurring can often be observed in Indian poetry as well. American Indian poetry has constant shifts between prose and poetry and poetry and song. The following poem is a good example to this:

and took all the room
and left me, the Indian
with just a small space
in the northwest corner

. . . Because of you, I sometimes believe the Ghost Dancers were only
half right. It's true we need the buffalo back but we need the whites, too.

At least, I need you

to cover me

like a good blanket

with warmth and faith,

I need you to cover me

like a smallpox blanket

with anger and pain.

(Alexie, "Blankets" 68)

The poem freely and smoothly moves between prose and poetry making the two almost inseparable in a single body of work- just as in the oral narratives. The beloved one leaves the poet, the Indian "with just a small space/ in the northwest corner" of the room. The northwest corner is also a metaphor for the location of the poet's tribal land on the US map. The poet's wanting to be covered with both "a good blanket" and a "smallpox blanket" is a paradox he suffers from in his love affair with a white lady- as through smallpox blankets whites killed many Indians, but this particular lady seems to act like a soft blanket instead covering "with warmth and faith." Maybe due to this paradox the poem shifts between prose and poetry.

The distorted notion of time in postmodernism, however, is not observable in Indian poetry. Western literature usually has a tendency to reveal some information on time- and/or location- so that the reader can locate the event(s) and comfortably read the literary work. But, Indian poetry often does not build its narration on the sense of time.

Just there another house, Poor Buffalo's house.
The paint it gone from the wood, and the people are
gone from the house. Once upon a time I saw the people
there, in the windows and the yard. An old woman
lived there, one of whose girlhood I have often dreamed.
She was Milly Durgan of Texas, and a Kiowa captive.
(Momaday, "Plainview: 4" 13)

Just as in the oral narratives, the concept of time is stated simply with "Once upon a time." Here again, the story of Milly is more important than the time of it. Although contemporary American Indian poetry sometimes gives detailed information of a specific date for a specific purpose, there is no concern of or a usual trend to inform the reader on date and time. The trivializing of time comes from the notion of cyclical time as opposed to the linear time notion in western thinking. According to Indian philosophy, time continuously moves in a circle with no beginning or end, therefore there is no need to pinpoint it; however, this cannot be called as a distortion of it.

Just as the notion and distortion of time in postmodern literature does not fit into Indian poetry, the fragmentary narration of it cannot be found in American Indian poetry, either. American Indian poetry uses oral narratives and shifts between prose and poetry, but the narration is not fragmentary; on the contrary, it is circular, a whole. The following poem, or song, can be a good example to this circular narrative:

This wing feather
I give you
not for love

not for memory
not for the hidden bone
beneath the smooth blue feather

...

No, this wing feather

I give you

you who know

I can't fly

you who know

I will. ("Song for Oshawanung Manitoequay" 147-48)

The poem starts with the lines "This wing feather/ I give you" and finishes with the same idea "No, this wing feather/I give you" reminding the reader the beginning and the purpose of the story being told throughout the poem; and completing the circle, circular narrative.

Indian poetry does not try to leave the reader with ambiguity and unanswered questions in the end, nor it tries to confuse him/her with various symbols. Kimberly Blaeser's poem can be a good example to this since she clearly expresses herself when she simply says "Don't Send Me Any Surveys":

If you asked me what color is the sunset

I could not answer you

Because the sunset is alive and changing

As I am too

...

And it tells me something new each day

Don't send me any surveys

...

If you asked a butterfly its age

would she be as old as the larvae from which she came?

the age of the caterpillar that crawls about?

...

Until you learn to understand the questions

Don't send me any surveys (10-11)

The line "Don't send me any surveys" is repeated a couple of times during the poem- with certain precision- giving the poem its cyclical character and leaving no room for confusion for the simple message of the poem, that the poet does not wish to answer many irrelevant questions in surveys and be an insignificant number in statistics.

Although postmodernism provides some valuable guidelines to evaluate the multiple and moving forms of the poems, it is not as effective when it comes to the context and function of Indian poetry. The following poem, for instance, reveals a lot about the tradition of Indian literatures as can be found in contemporary poems like storytelling, the dialogic character of it, the use of humor, respect to nature and animals, and etc. However, postmodernism would not provide much insight to it.

I walked about a mile

and met three goats, two sheep and a lamb

by the side of the road.

. . .

I said, “Yaahteh, my friends.

I’m from Acoma, just passing through.”

The goat with the bell jingled it

in a greeting a couple of times.

I could almost hear the elder sheep

telling the younger, “You don’t see many

Acoma poets passing through here.”

(Ortiz, “Many Farms Notes” 67-68)

Poet’s greeting the animal while passing by is not a simplistic story made subject matter as a reaction to the grand narratives of the past decades, or an effort looking for alternative forms of expression, nor it is an alter reality created by the poet. It is a demonstration of Indian respect and appreciation of nature and animals as part of life and art as well. The humoristic style of it is also a characteristic of oral narratives.

As to the function of American Indian poetry, it is naturally intertextual because of the tradition of contemporary literatures carrying the older ones to the future generations, and of course, because of the poets’ concerns of survivance and continuance as Indian people. Indian poetry is destroying the borders of poetry genre because it does not feel any obligation to be limited by it, and its artistic value does not depend on it. In other words, even though what Indian poetry does in form can be called intertextual and genre blurring, it does not share the same purpose or function.

Postmodernism speaks for the accelerated city life and metropolitan cultures which consist of isolated individuals looking for a means of identification and a new

form, or forms, that will generate new meanings to fill the emptiness of modern life in general. Indian poetry, as close as it can get to this, would speak for the discomfort of American Indians in such cities and cultures. Means of identification and looking for a meaning to fill in life are not issues of concern for the Indian poet. S/he usually enjoys the comfort of being a part of the tribe, which embraces him/her and his/her art.

Thus, although postmodernism introduces useful terminology to evaluate the form, it's ineffectiveness in exposing the reader to the content and concerns of Indian poetry will be considered while applying it in this study.

4.1.3.5. Post-Colonialism

Post-colonialism was first introduced within the late 1960s and in the 1970s with Frantz Fanon's Black Skin White Masks (1967) and Edward Said's Orientalism (1978). However, it took another decade for it to gain considerable attention from the academia. The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature (1989) by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin set the agenda for post-colonial criticism in the late 1980s. Although the definition of the term, the question of whose literature and which period should be accepted as post-colonial, continues to be controversial even today, it is an influential literary theory which opened up the way to the welcoming of literatures of the colonized nations to the western canon. The domination of English literature in the western world is broken with these immensely diversified and rich cultures being represented and studied widely in world literature.

Post-colonial theory is concerned with the literature of these diverse cultures and peoples, the colonized, the subaltern, or the “Other”- in Spivak’s term- after the colonization process has ended (24). In other words, it deals with how the colonized respond to the colonial legacy in their literatures. While doing this, post-colonialism pays attention to the issues of identity- self and the other, and re-building of national identities-, re-claiming of history, hybridity, domination and subordination, and language, all of which play a significant role in the expression of the colonial experience. The theory was originally developed and used to meet the need to evaluate the literatures of the once British colonies such as India, Pakistan, and the Caribbean.

The issue of identity sits at the center of post-colonial literatures as the colonization process has severely damaged and altered self-definition on both individual and national levels. Being exposed to western lifeways, norms, and philosophies for long enough, the colonized were left with children whose native tongue is English, people who adopted the philosophy of individualism instead of communitism, and people who have new tastes and preferences in fashion, food, and music. The placement of colonizer’s set of values and culture as the norm, at the center, left the remaining cultures and languages at the periphery as “variants” (Ashcroft et al., “Introduction” 7).

The literatures of the colonized nations were also heavily influenced by this process in adopting new genres and forms of expression from the colonizer as well as its language. However, literature has also become a tool for resisting the colonizing power(s). At this point, post-colonial theory tries to shed light on the efforts of re-building national identities and the newly formed individual identities through writing.

Re-building of national identities is primarily achieved through re-claiming the past according to Fanon; therefore, re-writing and re-valuing their own histories have become basic elements of post-colonial writing (Barry 193). Another element of nation building process has been the emphasis on and celebration of difference, diversity, and hybridity (Barry 197 and Ashcroft et al., “Introduction” 2). Hybridization of colonized cultures and languages has been accepted as a natural outcome of colonization itself.

Hybrid identities are also created on the individual level by the colonization process through dislocation- migration or enslavement- or “cultural denigration”- “the conscious or unconscious oppression of the indigenous personality” by a supposedly superior “cultural model” (Ashcroft et al., “Introduction” 9). Since purity is seen as an impossible goal to achieve on either the cultural or the individual level of re-claiming identity after a colonizing process, these hybrid identities have been internalized, and became observable in post-colonial writing, too.

However, the negative character traits attributed to the colonized, such as laziness, inability in comprehending complex things, being emotional, and having no proper contribution to the world ‘civilization’ have met rejection and alteration from post-colonial writers. Aimé Césaire in his Discourse on Colonialism thinks that there is a reason for such attributions, and it is not the colonized individual. Césaire claims that “the chief culprit in this domain is Christian pedantry, which laid down the dishonest equations *Christianity = civilization, paganism = savagery*, from which there could not but ensue abominable colonialist and racist consequences” (11).

The idea that European philosophies and theories bear the ‘universal’ truth, and European civilization is the embodiment of ‘actual’ civilization are common

approaches- in the western world-, which may very well be grounded in the interpretation of Christianity. Therefore, the rejection of the western universality by post-colonial writing is in a way the rejection of imposed Christian ideals and rules on the colonized.

Another aspect of the theory, the domination and subordination experienced by the colonized is also a subject matter in post-colonial writing. Although Spivak raises the question whether the subaltern can really speak for themselves or not, implying that the colonized is facing the “persistent constitution of Other as the Self’s shadow,” the colonized somehow have managed to write against the hegemony of the colonizer (24).

The issue of language, on the other hand, is also one of the central concerns of post-colonial theory. As Frantz Fanon argues, language adoption is adoption of culture; and therefore, by adopting English, the colonized adopts the culture of the colonizer (38). Ashcroft et al. claim that this is altered in post-colonial writing:

Language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of ‘truth’, ‘order’, and ‘reality’ become established. Such power is rejected in the emergence of an effective post-colonial voice (“Introduction” 7).

Although the imperialistic power of language in the lives and the literatures of the colonized has been rejected by post-colonial writing, the hybridization of native languages became inevitable- as Bhabha also argues in his Location of Culture.

Coming to the situation of Indians in America, it is “tempting” to think of American Indian literatures as part of the post-colonial literatures in the world since they have also been colonized by the European invaders/settlers (Krupat, The Turn to

the Native: Studies in Criticism and Culture 30). Although, for this reason, some critics thought that American Indian literature could be read as a post-colonial literature, many argue against it claiming that Indian situation cannot be compared to that of the other colonized nations in Africa, Asia, and Australia. In fact, many of them cannot be compared to each other, either. Ann McClintock discusses the same issue in her essay “The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term ‘Post-Colonialism’” asserting that post-colonialism as a theory cannot speak for the colonial or post-colonial processes experienced in different parts of the world in different times:

Argentina, formally independent of imperial Spain for over a century and a half, is not “post-colonial” in the same way as Hong Kong. Nor is Brazil “post-colonial” in the same way as Zimbabwe. Can most of the world’s countries be said, in any meaningful or theoretically rigorous sense, to share a single “common past,” or a single common “condition,” called “the post-colonial condition,” or “post-coloniality”? . . . Can these countries now best be understood as shaped exclusively around the “common” experience of European colonization? (87)

It seems that the term is already problematic. When it comes to the Indian situation it is even more contradictory. I think, as the efforts of colonization and cultural erasure have not yet ended, there cannot be any mentioning of ‘post’ for Indians’ colonial condition in America. Krupat agrees: “Call it domestic imperialism or internal colonialism; in either case, a considerable number of Native people exist in conditions of politically sustained subalternity” (The Turn to the Native: Studies in Criticism and Culture 30). He continues, materializing the idea in numbers:

Indians experience twelve times the U.S. national rate of malnutrition, nine times the rate of alcoholism, and seven times the rate of infant mortality; as of the early 1990s, the life expectancy of reservation-based men was just over forty-four years, with reservation-based women, enjoying, on average, a life-expectancy of just under forty-seven years. (30-31)

Krupat also argues that living in a post-colonial world does not necessarily make American Indian writers post-colonial writers; nevertheless, they write “from within a colonial context” in post-colonial times (The Turn to the Native: Studies in Criticism and Culture 54). Therefore, Indian literature today should not be accepted as post-colonial.

On the other hand, Ashcroft et al. claim in their book The Empire Writes Back, that the US literature as a whole could be post-colonial in the sense that it is once colonized by Britain. However, it is also argued by many critics that the US itself is an imperial power and its literature cannot be evaluated as a post-colonial one. Although its colonizer status is agreed upon, still, this should not suggest that the colonization of Indians has ended and their literature is post-colonial. If it has to be related to the colonization process in some way, it can be seen as colonial rather than post-colonial.

Karen Piper, acknowledging this argument in her essay “Post Colonialism in the United States: Diversity or Hybridity?”, re-defines the term declaring that post-colonial writing starts from the day colonial process has begun and “‘Colonialism’ in this sense is the agent; ‘post-colonialism’ is the result” (19). I do not agree with Piper’s views. I believe that the term speaks for itself, it is ‘post’-colonial; therefore, it may not be

suitable to explain American Indian poetry today. Thus, instead of twisting the term for our own use, I will try to demonstrate where the theory can be- at least- partially applicable.

The issue of identity is at the core of Indian poetry as well as in post-colonial writing. In terms of re-building national identities, Indian literature may carry similarities with post-colonial writing. The colonized literatures, while ‘writing back’ at the center, re-claim their histories as a part of their nation building process. With Indian nations, the situation is slightly different. Indian tribes/nations do not need to re-build their tribal/national identities, as they were never lost; however, they have been re-writing and re-claiming their histories as part of their efforts of survival and continuance after a holocaust. Thus, although the act is the same, the reasons and the purposes these acts serve to are different. Joy Harjo’s poem “Returning from the Enemy” reminds an instance from Indian holocaust, and re-claims history.

1.

It’s time to begin. I know it and have dreaded the knot of memory as it unwinds in my gut.

Behind me the river is steady and laps the jetty. Winds purr through the grass.

The wake of history is a dragline behind me. I am linked to my father, my son, my daughter. We are relatives of deep water.

...

And the enemy who pressed guns to our heads to force us to Oklahoma
still walks in the minds of the people. (69)

Tribal and American history is being re-written here. The poet remembers the 300 Muscogees who were put in old boats in big numbers and let drown in the Mississippi River when the boats sank during their forced removal to Oklahoma; a part of history that is not mentioned in history books. This is the claiming of tribal identity through re-writing of history; and therefore, re-assuring continuance. The word “enemy” here is a metonym for the white oppressor/colonizer.

The colonization process has also put the colonized in the position of the ‘Other’ and caused the emergence of individual hybrid identities, too. However, the case is different on the Indian side. Indians usually define themselves mostly as ‘Indians’ whether or not they are full bloods. Moreover, Indian poetry does not celebrate hybridity. On the contrary, it even ridicules the idea of mixed-blood- or hybrid- identity. For Kimberly Blaeser, it is pure madness:

I think my hands have stepped out of Linda Hogan’s poem:

One wears silver and turquoise, a Zuni bracelet and a Navajo ring.

One wears gold and diamonds, an Elgin watch and Simonson’s

half-carat;

The madman’s classic mixedblood, a cliché.

Together, laughing out loud at the madness. Going to a

pow-wow. (“On the Way to the Chicago Pow-Wow” 12)

The idea of defining oneself as a mixed-blood for an Indian is just incomprehensible, can only be a matter of joke for the poet even though she carries symbols of authenticity

“... silver and turquoise, a Zuni bracelet and a Navajo ring” and dominant trends “... gold and diamonds, an Elgin watch and Simonson’s/ half-carat” on both her hands. For Sherman Alexie, it is even a matter of loss of identity providing one with invisibility, but such invisibility may put one in a dangerous situation:

I am curious about the writers who identify themselves as mixed-blood Indians. Is it difficult for them to decide which container they should put their nouns and verbs into? Invisibility, after all, can be useful, as a blonde, Aryan-featured Jew in Germany might have found during World War II. Then again, I think of the horror stories that such a pale undetected Jew could tell about life during the Holocaust. (“The Unauthorized Autobiography of Me” 18)

The invisibility provided with a claim of mixed-blood identity is criticized by the poet who uses the word “container”- almost a visual image- for their mouths and brains, the tools used during self-definition. Then again, the verbs and nouns coming out of those containers would only reveal “horror stories” as a natural repercussion of loss or denial of identity for an Indian.

The negative character traits attributed to the colonized, such as laziness, having mental incompetence when compared to the white man, being too emotional, and being a savage are attributed to the Indian in America, too. This negative stereotyping met strong rejection in contemporary American Indian poetry as well. Simon Ortiz writes against this stereotyping tradition among whites, ridiculing the white ignorance.

The usual question, of course,

“You are Indian, aren’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I’m Indian alright.

Wild, ignorant, savage!

And she wants me to dance.

Well, okay, been drinking beer

all the way from Hollywood.

We dance something.

(“I Told You I Like Indians”¹⁰⁷)

The poet shows that the “Wild, ignorant, savage!” stereotyping of Indians is as ridiculous as it sounds in the late 20th century. On the other hand, “I like Indians!” is a common cliché, which Ortiz deconstructs in this poem. How can one think of almost two million people as having a single type of character and being likable? Furthermore, Indians are not like little puppies that will do a trick once a while. The insult, when drunk, is only funny for the poet.

Writing against domination and subordination of the colonizer is also another post-colonial element. American Indian poetry does the same, writes against the cruel domination; no matter which type, either military or cultural. Césaire thinks that American domination is the worst among the colonizers’: “American domination- [is] the only domination from which one never recovers. I mean from which one never recovers unscarred” (60). The following poem demonstrates how American Indian poets ‘write back’ against American domination:

Heard it said that the white man took all our poems and songs
and buried them in the drawers of their dark museums, gasping
for air, green grass and summer rain- the broken Hoop.

“See that tree over the road,” old Kiowa chief Satank spoke,
“I shall not go beyond it (in slavery).” And he didn’t.

Heard it said that poems live where you least expect them,
the Hoop of the People is not broken but waits in the eyes
of our children and the graying braids of our elders.

(Garza, José L., “There Must Be a Poem Here Somewhere” 116)

The old chief articulates the poem’s stance against the white domination: “‘See that tree over the road,’ old Kiowa chief Satank spoke,/ ‘I shall not go beyond it (in slavery).’ And he didn’t.” The hope for continuance is fed with the idea that sacred hoop is not yet broken as long as the connection between the past- elders- and future- children- is not lost: “the Hoop of the People is not broken but waits in the eyes/ of our children and the graying braids of our elders.” Sacred hoop is a Lakota philosophy requiring complete harmony with the universe and the surrounding environment claiming that when the ways of nature and the world moving in circles are not followed, nothing or nobody can survive properly. The poem refers to it as a symbol of resistance.

Another aspect of post-colonial writing is the issue of language. Since the colonized nations- mainly through education and cultural domination- adopt the colonizer’s language, in this case English, their placement of identity as nations and authors are severely limited by the rules and regulations of this language. Therefore, the colonized usually distorts and changes English to recover from these limitations and as a reaction to its domination. This leads to the creolization Bhabha mentions in his The Location of Culture. According to him, due to the interaction between the colonizer and

the colonized, the language of each party changes. This is what has happened with the languages- usually a combination of native languages and English- being spoken in the Caribbean and in India. Considering the similarities and the differences in pronunciation, vocabulary, and syntax between these ‘English’ languages and that of the colonizer, it can be said that English as being spoken not only in those countries but also in Britain has gone through a considerable change, and became hybrid.

The same thing, however, cannot be told for Native American languages or American English. Although many Indian people speak English only and cannot speak their tribal languages, the living Native languages today are not ‘changed’ by English at all. On the contrary, I seriously doubt that English is influenced by those languages in more than adopting few words such as ‘kayak’, ‘canoe’, and ‘tobacco’. American Indian authors today are seriously challenging the way English is used in literature, not only through inventing new words such as ‘survivance’ and ‘communitism’ to meet their needs in writing but also- being aware that it is ‘the enemy’s language’- by using their tribal languages in their poems. The following poem can be an example to the use of English and tribal languages in contemporary Indian poetry.

That’s the way things continue.

Emeh eh eh ka aitetah.

That’s the way things become.

Emeh eh eh naitra guh.

...

Nyow skhetsashru.

Endure.

Nyuu skhetsashru.

Be enduring.

BE ENDURING.

(Ortiz, "A Birthday Kid Poem" 213)

The poem is almost a language lesson teaching Keresan to the speakers of English: "Nyow skhetsashru./ Endure./ Nyuu skhetsashru./ Be enduring." It can also be seen here that Native languages do not adopt English words or are affected by them.

As can be observed, post-colonial theory can provide valuable but partial help to unfold Indian poetry today. American Indian authors write against the colonizer and the experience of colonization 'before' the process is over. Moreover, it is not their only concern of writing literature. As similar to the function of oral poetic performances within the previous centuries, American Indian poets also write to celebrate life, ease personal pain, acknowledge tribal belonging, and to simply express awareness and gratitude to natural environment among many other things.

Therefore, although post-colonialism may provide valuable insights to the understanding of the use of Native languages in Indian poetry, writing against the domination and subordination experienced by them, and the othering of Indians in America, it may not lead the reader to the real purpose of re-claiming history, and the rejection of mixed-blood identity by most poets today; as it seems feeble in explaining the use of oral narrative techniques, the constant genre blurring, the communal character of Indian poetry, and etc., either. Thus, post-colonial theory will be employed where applicable in this study, just like the previously discussed theories.

4.1.3.6. A Further Analysis

Then what is a reader supposed to do? How can s/he read American Indian poetry? I believe we should first realize that western theories function best with western literary works. It seems that it is very difficult to cook a proper Indian meal in a western pot. Indian literature does not only come from a different dimension, so to speak, but also from contrasting sets of values and philosophies. Consequently, while many theories of cultural, literary, and linguistic criticism- as discussed above- may be useful in evaluating the culture and literature of the western(ized) societies, they are often feeble in displaying the complete picture of this vibrant genre. Robin Riley Fast thinks the same way. She warns the reader to be aware that,

Reading Native American Literature critically requires openness to the ways in which it does not comply with the expectations of the dominant culture- and recognition of the ways in which theory invented to illuminate the literature of the dominant culture may be inapplicable, intrusive, or inclined to appropriate other literatures. (9)

The following story-poem by Scott Momaday can be an example to how western theories can be inadequate to provide full insight to contemporary Indian poetry:

Bote-talee found the Spider Woman. In the early morning he went swimming. When he reached the bank he looked directly up into the sun. There, just before his eyes, was a spider's web. It was a luminous, glistening shield. Bote-talee looked at it for a long time. It was so beautiful that he wanted to cry. He wondered if it were strong as well as

beautiful. He flung water upon it, heavy water, again and again, but it remained whole and glistened all the more.

Then a sun spider entered upon the web. "Spider Woman," Bote-talee said, "Will you give me this perfect shield?"

"Bote-talee," said Spider Woman, "This is your shield." ("Bote-talee's Shield" 83)

I believe that no single contemporary literary or cultural theory can fully explain the purpose of using an Indian name, if it (Bote-talee) were a legendary character or not, the significance of Spider Woman, the spider web, the sun and, and the shield, the personification of Spider Woman, the implication of the story itself and the storytelling tradition, the notion of time- "In the early morning"- used in the poem, or the prose/poem structure of the 'story'- as it is called by its writer. Moreover, no single theory would let us understand if it is a re-writing of an oral story- if so why- or if it is pointing to a recent event in an old setting- or vice versa. Thus, it is very difficult to see the Indian word and world with western produced eyeglasses. Dean Rader agrees, and offers a way to read American Indian poetry:

Native poetry is its own theory for reading. If we think of theory as a set of principles or assumptions used in specific situations to unpack or make sense of a text or idea, then one finds really no better theory for understanding Native poetry than Native poetry. That is, the belief in and the practice of enacting performative language to make things happen are, by default, theoretical stances on how language works in the world. Thus, perhaps the best or at least the most welcoming theory for

experiencing American Indian poetry is the theory of the poem itself.

(141)

Rader has a point. Since there is no consensus on a single theory to properly “unpack” Indian poetry, maybe one can let the poetry speak for itself, and just experience how “performative language” functions in the world. This would also prevent the reader from building fences around a wild horse, and save him/her from mistakenly labeling Indian poetry with unsuitable ideas and theories, and missing the big picture.

On the other hand, a similar way to what Rader suggests would be to ‘try to’ characterize contemporary Indian poetry- at least partially- by looking at its roots and the common traits the poems may have. By roots, I mean not only the oral narratives and the tradition of storytelling but also the impact of popular culture, college education, and the canon itself on contemporary poets.

Let us, for instance, take one of the common traits that give its distinct character to contemporary American Indian poetry as an example, its communal character. Contemporary American Indian poetry is a communal act or an act bearing communal concerns and identifications as much as- if not more- personal reasons and aspirations. While “Fishing” on the Illinois River, Joy Harjo remembers her old friend acknowledging his connection to the fish:

They smell me as I walk the banks with fishing pole, night crawlers and
a promise I made to that old friend Louis to fish with him this summer.
This is the only place I can keep that promise, inside a poem as familiar
to him as the banks of his favorite fishing place. I try not to let the fish

see me see them as they look for his tracks on the soft earth made of
fossils and ashes. I hear the burble of fish talk: *When is that old Creek
coming back? He was the one we loved to tease most, we liked his songs
and once in a while he gave us a good run.* (60)

The definition of an old friend as a Creek is not a coincidence here. Although the poem is about a fishing experience on the river and remembering an old friend, the tribal identity and the communal definition of the self are present, and cannot be separated from the person or the poem. The poem starts with the poet's inner thoughts and feelings about fishing and the day she goes fishing, and moves to the old lost friend and his fondness of it. Then the friend is defined not only by his name and relation to the poet but also his being a member of the Creek (Muscogee) tribe just like the poet herself, "*When is that old Creek/ coming back? . . .*" The tribal bond would also explain the connection between two friends as they belong to the same tribe.

Another example to the communal character of Indian poetry would be Luci Tapahonso's poem "It Has Always Been This Way":

Being born is not the beginning.

Life begins months before the time of birth.

Inside the mother, the baby floats in warm fluid,

and she is careful not to go near noisy or evil places.

She will not cut meat or take part in the killing of food.

Navajo babies were always protected in these ways.

. . .

The belly button dries and falls off.
It is buried near the house so the child
will always return home and help the mother.
It has been this way for centuries among us. (17)

Here again, a supposedly personal issue, having and taking care of babies, becomes a part of tribal experience- or an experience shared by the whole tribe- giving the poem its communal character: “She will not cut meat or take part in the killing of food./ Navajo babies were always protected in these ways.” The repetition of the line “It has been this way for centuries among us” throughout the poem also shows how deeply rooted this communal connection is.

Yet another example would be Duane Big Eagle’s (Osage) “Washashe Airlines” in which the communal and collective identity accompanies the personal:

I have two sons-
Both almost as old as I am.
All my first three wives
left me on the same night.
Big Eagle clan, I dream of fancydancing-
I’ve got the legs for it
from chasing the girls across the prairie-
but my memory of the old songs
is drowned out by a century
of gunshots and car horns. (36)

The Eagle clan Osage, or Washashe- as called by the tribe- is what the poet is, as much as a father and a husband who still remembers the tribal stories and songs but feels the pain of destruction of them through Indian holocaust and the effects of 'progress'.

As can be observed, American Indian poetry has a communal voice even when the issues are highly personal- like remembering a friend, taking care of babies, and talking about family. However, this should not suggest that 'all' the poems written by contemporary American Indian poets carry the same characteristic. Some common characteristics- like having a communal voice- as it is demonstrated here, may help us unpack Indian poetry more properly; and therefore they can be taken into consideration while studying Indian poetry without a theory. Hence, reading American Indian poetry without a theory can be a choice to be considered seriously.

However, more and more critics and academics today such as Kimberly Blaeser, Craig Womack (Creek and Cherokee), and Robert Allen Warrior (Osage) are discussing the need and the possibility of developing an indigenous theory to study Indian literature should we need to gain a considerable insight to it as non-Indian readers (Rader 125-26). Then what are we to do now? Instead of waiting for such a theory to be developed, maybe as readers of American Indian poetry we can at least contribute to the idea of how an indigenous theory should be. To my understanding, an indigenous theory should have- at least- the following qualifications to open up the doors to further criticism in the literary arena.

First of all, it should be able to welcome 'all' poetry written by Indian poets today. In other words, both traditional and non-traditional Indian poems should find a

place within this reading. For instance, both of the following poems talk about a personal experience of parenthood; but they are distinctively different from each other in atmosphere and setting. The first poem is by Simon Ortiz:

Grandmother Spider speaks

laughter and growing

and weaving things

. . .

You come out, child,

naked as that cliff at sunrise,

shorn of anything

except spots of your mother's blood.

. . .

In five more days,

they will come,

singing, dancing,

bringing gifts,

the stones with voices,

the plants with bells.

They will come.

Child, they will come. ("To Insure Survival" 48-49)

The second one is from Louise Erdrich:

When I walk into their bedroom at night
their cries fill my own mouth
so full of accurate misery,
...
I drag the older one up into my arms
and talk until she opens her eyes.
the other
With her punishing beauty
...
I wash her. ("Sunflowers" 64)

As can be observed, the first one talks about the experience in a rather traditional way, with Grandmother Spider bringing stories along with her, and stones and plants- the nature- celebrating the arrival of the baby; and of course the repetition of certain words: "they will come." However, the second poem does the same thing in a non-traditional way, locating the motherhood in a bedroom, mentioning the late night waking ups and the cries of babies; not to mention the non-existing repetitions or shifts between prose and poem. Both poems are written by well-established contemporary American Indian poets; and I believe that an indigenous theory should be able to equip us with proper tools to analyze them equally well.

Second, an indigenous theory should be comprehensive enough to cover all Indian literatures in general; both the oral narratives and the contemporary works of Indian poets and writers should find a place in this theory. In other words, both the

traditional and modern Indian literary works/performances should be evaluated with this theory. For instance, it should be able to expose the reader to the following Zuni prayer and also a short story by a contemporary writer efficiently.

From where you stay quietly,
Your little wind-blown clouds,
...

My fathers,
Add to your hearts.
Your waters,
Your seeds,
Your long life

("Prayer to the Ancients After Harvesting" 238)

The following is an excerpt from a short story by Sherman Alexie:

"Goddamn it, Thomas," Junior yelled. "How come your fridge is always fucking empty?"

Thomas walked over to the refrigerator, saw it was empty, and then sat down inside.

"There," Thomas said. "It ain't empty no more."

Everybody in the kitchen laughed their asses off. It was the second largest party in reservation history and Thomas Builds-the-Fire was the host. He was the host because he was the one buying all the beer. And he was buying all the beer because he had just got a ton of money from Washington Water Power. And he just got a ton of money from

Washington Water Power because they had to pay for the lease to have ten power poles running across some land that Thomas has inherited. (“A Drug Called Tradition” 12-13)

Third, to be able to welcome both traditional and modern, this theory should provide some insight to traditional Indian cultures- although they are too diverse- and lifeways, as well as bringing clear explanations to some common Indian philosophies related to the notion of time, spirituality, human connection to environment, the concept of unity and wholeness, and the communitism. This theory should also be revealing of the traditional approaches to the issues of religion, politics, and social structure.

Fourth, maybe more than anything, an indigenous theory should definitely be flexible. Since the literature(s) being subject to criticism is diverse, the theory should also be open to various adjustments, changes, and developments. Therefore, introducing and applying new terminology within the theory should not be a problem. Moreover, the language of it should be clear and adoptable just like the literary works themselves.

Lastly, and most importantly, I think an indigenous theory should not do any of these: It should not separate, discriminate, or exclude Indian poetry- or literature- from the rest of the literature being written in America today. It should not cause any more classifications of Indian poetry in the sections of anthropology or minority literatures in bookstores. On the contrary, it should draw more sound and critical attentions to these poems, helping a western reader drop western mindsets as much as possible when reading such poetry.

So far, there have been only three critical books published on contemporary American Indian poetry. They are Robin Riley Fast’s The Heart as a Drum:

Continuance and Resistance in American Indian Poetry (1999), Norma C. Wilson's The Nature of Native American Poetry (2001), and Speak to Me Words: Essays on Contemporary American Indian Poetry (2003) edited by Dean Rader and Janice Gould (Maidu). This is not because American Indian poetry is not worthy of attention or not canonized. The main reason for this according to Rader is that "Anglo critics shy away from writing about Native poetry because they can't characterize it" (125). As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the ground has been too slippery in the criticism of Indian poetry. I believe non-Indian readers and the critics of American Indian poetry will take a deep breath in comfort when an indigenous theory is developed.

Then what are we to do until then? Instead of waiting for an indigenous theory to be developed, I believe that we should borrow terminology as much as possible from some of the theories available to be able to reach a common ground of understanding and discuss American Indian literature today. We should, however, also take into account the limitations of these theories when facing American Indian poetry. When those theories are not applicable, by following some common characteristics of Indian poetry- as discussed in the previous sections- we may let the poems speak for themselves and point out the common characteristics.

This study will follow this path while evaluating contemporary American Indian poetry. Throughout this process, the function of Indian poetry that goes beyond its artistic concerns will also be remembered. In addition, it will not be forgotten that Indian literary expressions either in the written or oral form are 'much older' than the criticism efforts we try to carry on them.

4.2. Word Senders from the 1990s to the Early 2000s Re-Locating Indian Identity

Indian identity, or the definition of Indianness has been a matter of dispute for too long. After centuries of misconceptions and false representations by whites, within the late 1960s Indians- rightfully- asserted that only ‘they’ could provide this definition properly. The first widespread attempt of articulating Indianness by Indians, molded with ethnic pride, depicted Indians as one body of indigenous nations of America, and therefore concentrated on the difference between being Indian and being white. This naturally put collective Indian identity in front of tribal identity when facing the dominant white world.

Beginning from the 1990s, things have begun to change on the Indian side. The increasing number of Indian population living in urban areas, the federal recognition of hundreds of Indian tribes with few hundred waiting in the line, and the sameness/oneness discourse- still- stuck on Indians all contributed to the need of re-definition and re-location of Indianness. It had to be underlined that Indians were in fact composed of many different nations and although shared some cultural, philosophical, and spiritual common notions, they are immensely diversified. Furthermore, modern day Indians were also diversified in their lifeways and in their mixed-blood identities within the late 20th century. For instance, a Sioux living in Pine Ridge reservation could differ in self-definition from a college educated Mohawk living in New York City.

In other words, the changing times and living conditions made it necessary to recognize the array of individual Indians and tribal diversity. The 1992 Returning the Gift Festival did exactly this. It appeared that there could not be a single definition of

Indianness and there was no one type of 'Indian' in today's America. This led to a new phase in the location of Indianness. The re-location efforts have also followed diversified paths in Indian literature and poetry.

However, this should not mean that Indians are totally hybridized or melted into the dominant culture. On the contrary, Indians are the first group to come to mind when discussing cultural authenticity. They neither melted into the dominant white culture nor did they melt into the culture of the bigger tribes before the European contact. Multiplicity has been an Indian character from the very beginning, and moves well with the idea of multicultural America today.

Hence, 'Indian identity' is still a fact and a moving power in almost all Indian writers. Although there can be no single side of it, I believe that one can still make correlations in his/her efforts of evaluating contemporary Indian literature and understanding the re-location process of Indianness. After all, Indian authors possessing Indian identity all share a common ground in the ethnic pride they carry and the destination they are headed: to move Indian identity far from the margin and to provide its rightful place in American culture and ethnic mosaic.

Indian writers in literature and in the academy have come a long way in doing this, and proved their sophistication, artistic value, and original spirit in sending words. The poets chosen for this study are no different. Joy Harjo is a major Indian poet whose works will carry the reader from the 1970s Indian poetry to the early 2000s. Kimberly Blaeser is a younger but a powerful poet whose studies on the criticism of Indian literatures have gained recognition as well as her poetry. Mark Turcotte is another young and a promising poet who has brought a new articulation of art and identity to

contemporary Indian poetry. Sherman Alexie is also a young but already a well-established mainstream American Indian poet, who is also a storyteller, novelist, and a scriptwriter.

All of these poets have been acknowledged- in varying degrees- by the academia and they are all winners of various honors and prizes. In addition, each has published at least one poetry collection in the 1990s and one in the 2000s. It was also a conscious act to choose two male and two female poets for this study. None of the sexes thought to be the representative of contemporary Indian poetry. Moreover, these poets although carry some common characteristics in their art, all write in their own unique ways, and articulate Indianness in similar but different ways bringing in this study an extraordinary taste of literature for the reader, let alone representing the variety in contemporary American Indian poetry.

They are also chosen specifically for their outstanding and successful achievements in re-locating Indian identity in the present-day ethnic mosaic of America- without the fallacy of ethnocentrism-, and for their exciting authority in sending words- just like Sitting Bull, the 'Word Sender'.

While trying to examine how these poets re-located Indian identity, their approaches to issues of history, language, religion, land, tribal affiliation and traditions, stereotyping of Indians, and self-definition as major determiners of identity will be the main topics of concentration. These points seem to cover a considerable length in contemporary American Indian poetry; and I believe that by looking into them a reader will find out not only about the location of Indian identity today but also the remarkable Indian cultures and philosophies that have survived.

4.2.1. Joy Harjo

Joy Harjo (Muscogee) is a widely acclaimed, well-established poet whose words were born into the 1970s and have continued to the 2000s so far. She is the recipient of many honors including the Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Endowment for the Arts. She is different from the other poets whose works will be evaluated here in the sense that her poetry provides a bridge for this study between the earlier periods of modern Indian poetry and today's contemporary Indian poetry.

Harjo is a Muscogee on her father's side and Cherokee and French on her mother's. This mixed-blood identity first gave her a hard time when much younger, but later she began to see the advantages of it as providing access to both worlds. Her words carry the voice of herself as well as her tribal and family elders as she notes in her autobiography written when she was 34:

We are descended from a long line of tribal speakers and leaders from my father's side. Menawa, who led the Red Stick War against Andrew Jackson, is our great-great (and possibly another great) grandfather. I don't know much about the family on the mother's side except there were many rebels and other characters. They are all part of who I am, the root from which I write, even though I may not always name them. ("Ordinary Spirit" 265)

Harjo's poetry is as communal as it is personal. She articulates her Indian identity in various ways, and instead of just announcing and underlining it, she places Indianness right at the center of attraction in different ways. While doing this, her voice

and her poetry is still very personal, autobiographical, and intimate. Especially after the 1990s, her voice is less militant and more expressive of herself and her tribe and who they actually were/are; therefore re-locating Indian identity somewhere closer to the center without any forceful efforts. While doing this, she follows her own path that is sometimes spiritual and mysterious, and sometimes rather bushy and rocky.

Integral to articulation of identity, she holds onto her tribal history and re-writes it with the details overlooked or could never be mentioned in history books. Here, wandering in the streets of New Orleans, Harjo looks for and sees the Indian remarks in and out of stores as she remembers the history, the people. Her gaze provides the reader with visions, modern and old, transparently placed on one another.

This is the south. I look for evidence
of other Creeks, for remnants of voices,
or for tobacco brown bones to come wandering
down Conti Street, Royale, or Decatur.

Near the French Market I see a blue horse
caught frozen in stone in the middle of
a square. Brought in by the Spanish on
an endless ocean voyage he became mad
and crazy. They caught him in blue
rock, said

don't talk

I know it wasn't just a horse

that went crazy.

Nearby is a shop with ivory and knives.
There are red rocks. The man behind the
counter has no idea that he is inside
magic stones. He should find out before
they destroy him. These things
have memory,
you know.

. . .

There are voices buried in the Mississippi
mud. There are ancestors and future children
buried beneath the currents stirred up by
pleasure boats going up and down.
There are stories here made of memory.

I remember DeSoto. He is buried somewhere in
this river, his bones sunk like the golden
treasure he traveled half the earth to find,
came looking for gold cities, for shining streets
of beaten gold to dance on with silk ladies.

He should have stayed home.

(Creeks knew of him for miles

before he came into town.

Dreamed of silver blades

and crosses.)

And knew he was one of the ones who yearned

for something his heart wasn't big enough

to handle.

(And DeSoto thought it was gold.)

The Creeks lived in earth towns,

not gold,

spun children, not gold.

That's not what DeSoto thought he wanted to see.

The Creeks knew it, and drowned him in

the Mississippi River

so he wouldn't have to drown himself.

("New Orleans" 42-43)

The home of the Muscogee nation, southeast, now a city with strange shops and streets with strange names is almost foreign to a person native to this land. However, the stones, rocks, and the river have memories and they remember and reveal the past to the speaker who has a memory, too. The Creek's connection to natural environment is one of the things that have survived here. ". . . The man behind the/ counter. . ." is not aware that he is surrounded by red rocks- a metaphor for Indian color red and Indian connection to nature-, rocks that were brothers and sisters to the Creeks once lived there, rocks that

witnessed their agony, and more importantly rocks that remember. Through the personification of them, we learn that these rocks also have the capability to “destroy” the white man behind the counter, taking their brothers’ and sisters’ revenge. The human bond to natural environment is so strong here is that, even centuries later the rocks, the stones, and the river remember them.

After greeting Crazy Horse, a legendary warrior of the Lakota, through an allusion in the lines “I know it wasn’t just a horse/ that went crazy,” the poem continues with the river’s memories, re-writing history. About 300 members of the Muscogee nation were put into old rotten boats and let drown in the same river during their forced removal within the 1830s (Trafzer 163). The poet- with the river, the rocks, and the stones- remembers and reminds this fact which usually does not find any place for itself in the history books: “There are ancestors and future children/ buried beneath the currents stirred up by/ pleasure boats going up and down.” One of the biggest massacres of American history took place on this river and there are no memorial services paid to the loss of Creek nation- nor is there any mentioning of it today.

Furthermore, “pleasure boats” today hang out on the river over the bones of three hundred innocent men, women, and children as if nothing happened- an almost unbearable fact for a Muscogee and for anyone who is informed of it. While reporting her visit to New Orleans, Harjo re-claims her tribal history by remembering what happened to her ancestors hundreds of years ago.

However, the Creeks were not the only ones who drowned in the river as the simile between the bones of DeSoto and the gold he was looking for reveals in the lines “I remember DeSoto. He is buried somewhere in/ this river, his bones sunk like the

golden/ treasure he traveled half the earth to find.” DeSoto, the Spanish invader who “should have stayed home,” got his share. He was unaware of the Muscogee determination in protecting their lives and land, and arrived in their country with dreams of gold and how he would take it from them. “Creeks knew of him for miles/ before he came into town,” so drowned him in the same river. The resistance against the colonizer has apparently been an old habit with the Creeks. The poet, resists the same colonizing power with her poem today.

The lines written in brackets, seemingly the inner voice of the poet, and her address to the reader with lines such as “. . . These things/ have memory,/ you know” imply the dialogic character of the poem. The disorderly lines, especially when talking of DeSoto’s tyranny are also revealing of the unrest and maybe panic caused by the bitter memory, giving the poem its vibrant character on paper.

The re-claiming of history for the poet is not limited to remembering of DeSoto’s invasion or the drowning Muscogees on the river. The Muscogee tribe also got its share from the smallpox infected blankets purposely given to various Indian tribes as a gift, as an aid.

We climb and keep climbing, our children
wrapped in smallpox blankets to keep
them warm. Spider shows us how to weave
a sticky pattern from the muddy curses of our enemy
to get us safely to the Milky Way.
 (“Returning from the Enemy” 71)

Spider is a metonym for Grandmother Spider, a sacred storyteller giving wisdom when needed. Here it/she will show the way to the Milky Way, which is- according to a Muscogee legend- where each member goes and becomes a star after death. Meaning, the tribe will lead a safe and a happy life and reach the Milky Way in the end with the help of the stories of Grandmother Spider. It “shows us [them] how to weave/ a sticky pattern from the muddy curses of our [their] enemy.” The “muddy curses” are metaphor for the language of the “enemy”- another metaphor for whites and white colonizers. Survival for a tribe, then, is to weave new stories using this language.

Within a couple of lines quoted above, are buried tribal history, tradition of storytelling living in contemporary poems, and the expression of resentment and resistance against the colonizer. This part of the long poem while embracing and underlining tribal identity through re-writing history, displays a personal stance against the government politics as well: “. . . our children/ wrapped in smallpox blankets to keep/ them warm. . .” Therefore, it is about both history and today, and is both communal and personal.

For another important determiner of identity, language, Harjo does not feel herself as much successful in protecting it. She writes in English. She cannot write in her own tribal language like some other Indian poets who are either bilingual or at least partially can speak their tribal languages. For this she is sorry.

4.

Before speech I took language into the soft parts of my body. This was before I could fully digest meaning. It turned into bones, other hard parts:

I have held before me the god of fear. My heart is my house. A whirlwind is blowing it down.

I have bowed my head to those who would disrespect me. My neck appears to be broken in half by shame. I have lost my country.

I have handed my power over to my enemies. My shoulders bear each act of forgetfulness.

I have abandoned my children to the laws of dictators who called themselves priests, preachers, and the purveyors of law. My feet are scarred from the steps taken in the direction of freedom.

I have forgotten the reason, forgive me. I have forgotten my name in the language I was born to, forgive me. ("Returning from the Enemy" 75)

Just as Fanon put it, Harjo thinks she has adopted white culture by adopting its language. Therefore, agreeing to speak in English because of fear of alienation or maybe punishment when younger- "*I have held before me the god of fear*"-, has caused a loss of some part of her identity for the poet. Language, especially for the Indians, is a means of power as discussed earlier in this study, and losing it means handing in that special power to the whites-enemies: "*I have handed my power over to my enemies*". The same thing goes on the tribal level according to the poet. Loss of language means loss of tribal identity and is as destructive as loss of tribal land, the whole country; and without a country there cannot be any mentioning of its people. This is shameful for the

poet: “*I have bowed my head to those who would disrespect me./ My neck appears to be broken in half by shame. I have lost my country.*”

What is worse, the poet has surrendered her children, the future generations of her tribe, to the same enemies, “*dictators who called themselves priests, preachers, and the purveyors of law.*” This is too dangerous a situation for Indian tribes, which carry the concern for continuance more than any other ethnic group in America. Language is attached to identity as our names are attached to us; for the poet they are both the same thing, and loss of one causes the loss of the other: “. . . I have forgotten my name in the language I was born to, forgive me.” Name here is a metaphor for tribal identity.

Even though Harjo thinks she has lost a lot by losing her native tongue, she is also aware that the language she speaks, and functions in as a writer, is the enemy’s language. Writing in English is like fighting against the enemy with its own weapon. It is such a difficult struggle. However, American Indian poets are determined. The use of tribal languages in their poems, playing with the language and constantly blurring the poetry genre, defining English as “the enemy’s language”- first, in a book title co-authored by Harjo, Reinventing the Enemy’s Language-, and making up new vocabulary such as ‘survivance’ and ‘communitism’- as discussed in the previous sections, are all within these efforts of resisting and rejecting the colonizer’s strongest weapon, and trying to make it as much feeble as possible on Indians.

Hence, language is an important issue for Indian poets today, and they feel certain responsibility towards it. That’s why they are consciously writing against this perilous assimilation tool as discussed above. Harjo’s poem at this point is the expression of the realization of how powerful a weapon the language is in enemy’s

hands, and how easily it may acculturate a people. The discussion and awareness raised about the loss of language is also a way of raising consciousness for the poet. Hence, while acknowledging her loss, Harjo points to a serious communal problem.

While doing this, the poet uses a dialogic language employing two voices within the speaker and the poem, revealing of the contradictions she faced during this process of 'handing in power'. Moreover, the form- being written in seemingly stanzas, but almost in prose- is genre blurring and also another way of rejecting and challenging the western style of writing poetry.

Even though English is the only language in which Harjo can write poetry and function well, in "The Flood" she defines it as the second language for her: ". . . how did he know my/ absolute secrets, those created at the brink of acquired language?" (102). What we have here is significant in the sense that although colonialism has managed to erase many native tongues in America, the hybridization of the native language- the post-colonial idea- is apparently not the situation with Indian languages.

Indian languages did not adopt English words. When needed, Indians made up a new one to meet the new meaning. Even for personal names they followed the same route. For instance, instead of calling Custer with his name, the Sioux named him Red Shirt. Here, even though the poet has totally forgotten her mother tongue, she describes English as a foreign language; therefore, rejects the dominant white identity that has been forced onto them by the colonizers through language.

Another determiner of identity, religion, is also discussed in Harjo's poetry. Harjo often does not directly write about religion, but most of the time there is a certain spiritual existence and power in her poetry. In "The Woman Who Fell From the Sky"

Harjo tells a story of a young Indian boy, victim of missionary activities and boarding schools as well as a young Indian girl suffering in the city life. The name of the poem is derived from the Iroquois creation story in which a pregnant woman falls through a hole of the Great Tree and later starts life on the back of the Sea Turtle by planting seeds and growing roots.

Johnny was named Johnny by the priests because his Indian name was foreign to their European tongues. He named himself Saint Coincidence many years later after he lost himself in drink in a city he'd been sent to learn a trade. Maybe you needed English to know how to pray in the city. He could speak fractured English. His own language had become a baby language to him, made of the comforting voice of his grandmother as she taught him to be a human.

Johnny had been praying for years and had finally given up on a god who appeared to give up on him. Then one night as he tossed pennies on the sidewalk with his cousin and another lost traveler, he prayed to Coincidence and won. The event demanded a new name. He gave himself the name Saint Coincidence.

His ragged life gleamed with possibility until a ghost-priest brushed by him as he walked the sidewalk looking for a job to add to his stack of new luck. The priest appeared to look through to the boy in him. He despaired. He would always be a boy on his knees,

the burden of shame rooting him.

Saint Coincidence went back to wandering without a home in the
maze of asphalt. Asphalt could be a pathway toward God, he reasoned,
though he'd always imagined the road he took with his
brothers when they raised sheep as children. Asphalt had led him
here to the Safeway where a woman was falling from the sky. (94-95)

Johnny's assimilation by another colonizing power, the erasure of native religions through missionary activities, started from the early days of his childhood with the priests' changing his Indian name "because his Indian name/ was foreign to their European tongues." After boarding school, another place of assimilation, going to a city to study and work, and praying and drinking out of despair there, Johnny goes through similar experiences with many young Indians searching for better living conditions in urban areas- losing "himself in drink in a city"- and wounding some part of his identity by the way.

The visits of the dead tribal leaders have been a common experience in most Indian religions. Johnny was visited by a ghost-priest as he converted to Christianity, still an Indian element though, but he felt miserable since he was reminded that he had 'lost the way'. ". . . The priest appeared to look through to the/ boy in him. . . ." First, ". . . His own/ language had become a baby language to him," then after praying for years, he "had finally given up on a/ god who appeared to give up on him." A deviation from Indian identity- changing his own religion and forgetting his own language- made Johnny a 'loser' in an urban life. The survival, however, still comes from the woman

coming from the sky, from an Iroquois story, (re-) starting life for Johnny this time. Here, Harjo accentuates that the survival and well being of a human spirit depends on holding onto his/her identity, in this case his own language and religion.

The appearance of the ghost-priest can be seen as a magical realist element for the western reader, then again, it may perfectly be acceptable and probable for an Indian. The poem, being a contemporary example to the storytelling tradition, has some postmodern elements as well. The woman falling from the sky is allusion to an Iroquois creation story; and using prose like narrative in sentences, but putting those sentences in stanzas is genre blurring.

The poet's emphasis on religion as a vital apparatus of self-definition appears in another poem called "there are as many ways to poetry as there are to God" in which she criticizes the relations between church and business world, and insists on the idea that religion as a belief system is a crucial part of personal and communal identity and should not be altered.

In most world conflicts in the news both church and business interests have been and continue to be major instigators of war. The church is fueled by a righteous zeal and the need to acquire and control souls, business interests by greed. . . . Missionaries and Bible translators work to convert, then attempt to destroy cultures and languages to supplant a system and language as a superior alternative construct.

I don't agree with the need to proselytize and force convention. Mvskokes who practice a belief system that was given to us at the

beginning of time do not feel a need to go out and convert non-Mvskokes to Mvskoke beliefs and rituals. What is the source of this need to devour peoples, cultures, and resources throughout the so-called third world? This is the same force that drove our people out of lands in what is now known as Georgia and Alabama, followed us to Indian Territory and took our land there. We still struggle with those same interests in court because they still wish to annihilate us, want us to bow down to their gods of commerce and time.

There are many roads to knowledge in this world. I reminded a student once who tried to force his narrow religious opinion on me and the class that there are many ways to God as there are to poetry. (61-62)

According to the poet, the destruction of people and communities start with the destructions of language and religion; and economy plays a leading role in this as both “church and business interests [. . .] continue to be the major instigators of war.” Therefore, while describing the colonizing efforts still being carried out on her tribe today, Harjo emphasizes that survival of a culture and people depends heavily on the preservation of their land as well: “Multinational corporations destroy the/ land, and ultimately people and the ways of a people.” The poem combines the three major determiners of identity for Indians- language, religion, and land-, and discusses how they have been attacked by the colonizer.

The issue of land is as fundamental to tribal identity as language and religion, if not more. It is the assurance of well-being and belonging, and it is seen sacred to all

tribes as well as to Muscogeans. The poet re-claims history while reminding that it is the same colonizing force “that drove our [their] people out of lands in what is now/ known as Georgia and Alabama, followed us [them] to Indian Territory and/ took our [their] land there. . . .”

The poem is also a fine example to writing against the colonizer’s domination. Harjo says that there is actually no “need to proselytize and force conversion,” and this has never been a part of history in America before the arrival of Europeans. American Indians as reminded by the poet “still struggle with those same interests in court” today. No matter what has been tried to impose on Indians, language, religion, mindset, or a lifeway met rejection by Indians as it hurts the essence of Indian diversity. Therefore, resisting any source of domination and subordination from the colonizing power or mindset whether in literature, in court, or in a classroom has been a part of Indian life and essential to the re-location of Indian identity in present times.

The issues of religion and land are also discussed in Harjo’s “Returning from the Enemy”; this time it is not the tribal land at stake, it is America itself. The stolen land as a whole can simply be called America today as each and every part of it was taken from different Indian nations through warfare, missionary activities, and fraud. Harjo reminds the process while re-claiming the land for not only her tribe but for all Indians.

5.

The enemy immigrated to a land he claimed for his God.

He named himself as the arbitrator of deity in any form.

He beat his Indian children.

The law of gods I claim state:

When entering another country do not claim ownership.

It's important to address the souls there kindly, with respect.

And ask permission.

. . .

6.

When the enemy went after my father he spared no weapon because he wanted, he said, my father's soul.

But it was the land he was after- this beautiful land of harbor and sweet grass, of palm tree and oak, of black earth, of red-

And we know that this earth cannot be owned by dictator or church, by corporation or maker or signer of paper.

He took the land and moved all his relatives in. And when other immigrants arrived from other lands he denied them what he had wanted for himself.

Though he wanted them for his customers.

The enemy made a circle of piss to claim us.

He cut everything down to make his cities and factories and burned

the forest to plant his fields. The wound so deep

it can be seen far above this blue green planet, far above us.

You cannot destroy a soul though you can destroy a planet.

You cannot destroy a song though you can make a people forgetful.

(“Returning from the Enemy” 77-79)

The stealing of Indian lands started with missionary activities; even in the first three ships arrived on the shores of the Bahamas there were priests. In other words, a tool of colonization- religion- was used for the justification of another destructive purpose of it- exploitation-: “The enemy immigrated to a land he claimed for his God.” The common metonym for whites the “enemy” is again used here referring to Europeans who were quick to colonize and torture Indians in the name of God and religion upon their arrival. However, Harjo thinks the law of gods would, in fact, not agree with them: *“When entering another country do not claim ownership./ It’s important to address the souls there kindly, with respect./ And ask permission.”*

The theft of Indian land was hurtful as much as a theft of soul. The poet defines her land as a “beautiful land of harbor and sweet/ grass, of palm tree and oak, of black earth, of red-,” signifying a certain love and connection to the natural environment. Red earth, here, is not only a symbol for Indian land but also the love of their land and earth- as they define it with their own color. Therefore, the land is not a piece of soil to live on and claim borders upon, it has been a source of life and well being for Indians. The land stolen from Indians was almost immediately harmed through mining, timbering, building cities, and thoughtlessly destroying the ecological balance of everything living on it. The colonizer surrounded this land “with a circle of piss”- a metaphor for borders around reservations and Indian territory- and has made Indians’ lives miserable as they are depended on it. “The wound” poet says is so deep that “it can be seen far above this blue green planet”. The visual imagery here is very strong illustrating the pain the poet suffers from the maltreatment of natural environment. In short, the symbiosis between the land and the people is broken because of the colonizer’s greed.

Writing against the colonizing power, Harjo realizes that, the taking away of the land and the destruction of it, in fact, also severely harm a people since they cause a cultural destruction as well. The poet also suggests a way out: People can be “forgetful” of who they are, but there is word, there is story, and there is “song”- a metaphor for Indian word and spirit-, to remind them their identity- as those cannot be destroyed. Poetry, here, or word in general, becomes a resistance tool against colonization as a separate entity by itself. The continuation of many indigenous tribes to the 21st century may in fact be depended on their determination to protect ‘word’ and tribal traditions all of which also contribute to the preservation of identity.

Tribal affiliation nurtured by traditions is a major determiner of identity for Harjo, too. To her, there cannot be any distinction between who she is and which tribe she is from.

War is a struggle played out since time immemorial. For North American tribes war wasn't a game for the sport of killing, rather a test for bravery and skill. To touch the enemy without being harmed proved bravery. To walk through a fire of enemy arrows meant that you were standing firm inside your own power with help garnered from the not-so-ordinary world. My name, Harjo, which is an Anglicized version of *Hadjo*, meaning "so brave you're crazy," is a title of war for those who were fearless. It is quite a name to live up to, and why, I say, there are so many Harjos in our tribe, because we are known for our bravery.

("there are as many ways to poetry as there are to God" 61)

The name of a person is one of the very 'personal' apparatus of self-definition. Even such a distinct determiner becomes a means of articulation of the tribal affiliation for the poet as she feels that she needs to "live up to" it being a member of her tribe. As can be seen, tribal- communal- identification is inseparable from the personal one. In a way, they are the same for Harjo.

Tribal traditions such as powwows, dance, and storytelling that have managed to survive through the modern times are also means of strengthening tribal affiliation, therefore communal identity, and they can again be found in Harjo's poetry. Dance, one of the primary traditions of all Indian tribes in America, is a tool used for expression of different feelings, in religious and harvesting ceremonies, in mourning, and simply

expressing joy and happiness. Thus, dance serves as an instrument for continuance and survival on both individual and communal levels. However, it was not appreciated much on the white side.

We kept on dancing last summer though the dancing had been called
subversive.

We weren't alone at the end of this particular world and knew
it wouldn't be the last world, though wars
had broken out on all sides. ("In Praise of Earth" 175)

Here, dance functions as also a resistance strategy against the colonizer who called it "subversive." Harjo, while writing against this subordination, expresses her devotion and connection to her tribal affiliation. The use of "we" as a narrative voice also gives the hint that, the poet does not think of herself out of her tribe.

Another tradition that has been an inalienable part of Indian life, storytelling, also has its place in Harjo's poetry. As a modern storyteller she re-tells oral stories in her own way, tells stories from her own life, and sometimes from the life of other Indians and indigenous peoples in the world. "The Flood", for instance, is a good example of re-telling of old stories in a modernized way with a perfect implantation of a new one inside.

It had been years since I'd seen the watermonster, the snake who
lived at the bottom of the lake. He had disappeared in the age of
reason, as a mystery that never happened.

. . .

The stories of the battles of the watersnake are forever ongoing,

and those stories soaked into my blood since infancy like deer
gravy, so how could I resist the watersnake, who appeared as the
most handsome man in the tribe, or any band whose visits I'd been
witness to since childhood?

This had been going on for centuries: the first time he appeared I
carried my baby sister on my back as I went to get water. She
laughed at a woodpecker flitting like a small sun above us and
before I could deter the symbol we were in it. (100-02)

The blue watersnake called “estakwvnayv” in Muscogee story represents the power of Lower World and has the ability to transform himself into any form or person he wishes (Harjo, Notes 223). In this story-poem Harjo, while retelling or reminding a tribal story or legend, tells her own and what happened to her when the watermonster had first appeared when she was sixteen. She was carrying her baby sister on her back as she “went to get water.” Being distracted by the baby sister and the woodpecker she probably slipped into the water with her sister on her back; however, she thinks it was the watermonster and suddenly they were “in it.”

Watermonster can also be a metaphor for the poet's close encounters with water throughout her life. Even if it is, it is still significant that the poet chooses the blue watersnake- a tribal story character- to express her life experiences. Thus, either this is accepted as a magical realist story or not, it is an example of tribal continuance through stories. The blue snake with this poem is now embedded in the memory of the new generations and continues to live as long as its story is re-told.

The symbiosis formed with the natural environment is also observable here—having the watermonster the protagonist of the story and living together with it. The reference to the oral narratives is also an intertextual element. Again here, the borders between poetry and prose are blurred, and western form of poetry is challenged.

Harjo's stories are not limited to oral narratives, she also makes new stories as a modern day storyteller. Another story told by her is "For Anna Mae Pictou Aquash, Whose Spirit is Present Here and in the Dappled Stars (For We Remember the Story and Must Tell It Again So We May All Live)". Anna Mae (Micmac) an active member of AIM was murdered in 1976; but her body was unidentified; so her hands were cut off and sent to Washington for fingerprinting. When she was found missing, her grave was re-opened and with the second autopsy she was identified, and it turned out that she did not die from alcohol abuse but a gun shot on the back of her head. The murderer(s) are not found. Harjo re-tells her story and reminds it to us. Anna Mae's story also becomes the poet's own story as she reports herself hearing about and reacting to the murder.

Anna Mae,

everything and nothing changes.

You are the shimmering young woman

who found her voice,

when you were warned to be silent, or have your body cut away

from you like an elegant weed.

. . .

I heard about it in Oklahoma, or New Mexico,

how the wind howled and pulled everything down
in a righteous anger.
(It was the women who told me) and we understood wordlessly
the ripe meaning of your murder.
As I understand ten years later after the slow changing
of the seasons
that we have just begun to touch
the dazzling whirlwind of our anger,
we have just begun to perceive the amazed world the ghost dancers
entered
crazily, beautifully. (7-8)

As discussed in the previous chapters, storytelling has been a vital part of Indian life and an important way of survivance for the tribes as well as for the Indian people no matter which tribe. American Indian poetry is full of innovative forms and combinations and re-tellings of this tradition. This poem is an example to Harjo's commitment to a tribal tradition of storytelling and writing new stories making sure that people in these stories continue to live. Writing itself is a form of resistance to colonization which made the colonized numb for centuries by overlooking their literatures. Harjo writes against this subordination, and at the same time re-claims history. Anna Mae's murder is to be remembered and reminded.

Harjo's lines are frantic and in disorder just as her psyche was upon hearing about the murder. Here, apart from her Indian identity her gender identity is also emphasized when she says, "(It was the women who told me) and we understood/

wordlessly.” The female activists that were murdered like Anna Mae, Ingrid Washinawatok, and Jacqueline Peters also survive in Harjo’s poems. Being an activist herself, here Harjo fulfills a role more than a poet for the Indian struggle in America. Apparently, art can serve people.

Joy Harjo’s art serves to the articulation of her identity, too. Harjo’s self-definition in her poems touches her gender identity as well but does not centralize it. She is a Muscogee Indian, a part of the sky and earth, a warrior, a words sender, and a woman.

look at me
i am not a separate woman
i am the continuance
of blue sky
i am the throat
of the mountains
a night wind
who burns
with every breath
she takes (“Fire” 25)

This poem was written when she was in her mid-twenties, as a young activist in the 1970s. An Indian philosophy of natural kinship with environment is presented here. The symbiotic relationship Indians have formed with the nature is carried to the level of being physically a part of the nature: “I am the throat/ of the mountains.” It is also a metaphor for poet’s voice that has a burning power like a volcano. She defines herself

as a woman and an extension of the nature and at the same time as powerful and maybe as destructive as a volcano. In other words, she is an innate part of America just as Indians are, but still is hurt each day “with every breath/ she takes” just like many Indians are. The struggle to articulate themselves and to move themselves away from the margin is embedded in her lines: “look at me/ i am not a separate woman.”

Moreover, she is the affirmation of the continuance of her tribe, not only the earth and the sky. The Indian existence is also being confirmed with the line “i am the continuance.” Her not using capitals in the poem also signifies that she is not separate from or any more special than the sky, mountains, and wind. She is one of the many that continue to survive together with the nature.

Being the throat of mountains is also an attribution to her speaking for her tribe as a writer, and an activist. The same burning breath hasn’t calmed yet as in her other poem “Javelina,” which was written in her late thirties, she expresses her “forage” for “lava.” Harjo still inhales and exhales volcanoes, still a perilous voice writing against the colonizer.

. . . I was born of a blood
who wrestled the whites for freedom, and I have since lived dangerously
in a diminished system. I, too, still forage as the sun goes down: for lava
sustenance. . . . (31)

Her life as an activist and a poet hasn’t been an easy one, yet her devotion to her cause, to Indian cause is not lost. Resistance to any form of subordination and oppression through writing and/or activism has almost become a habit: “I [. . .] still

forage as the sun goes down: for lava.” Lava here is a metaphor for burning breath, for voice that is as effective as lava itself.

Years later, in her late forties, Harjo would describe herself in a relatively different way. It is the 21st century and self-articulation is connected with her art and gender as well as her tribal background: “. . . I was born Indian, female and artist in the Creek Nation. . . ” (“The Psychology of Earth and Sky” 14). However, her Indian and Musogee identity is still the determiner of who she is. Her self-definition is also informative of her re-location of Indianness within the dominant culture.

Harjo re-writes her tribal and Indian history, underlines the essential value of language and religion to Indians, describes what land and earth means to Indians in general, re-tells her tribal stories and legends and also tells new stories of her own- and especially other indigenous people, and expresses what Indian traditions such as dance and song and various ceremonies mean to herself and her tribe. Harjo’s re-location of Indian identity is more tribal and personal than it is collective. This, of course, should not suggest that her poetry is ethnocentric, and does nothing but works for the preservation and representation of Indianness.

On the contrary, Harjo, as a major word sender in the late 20th and early 21st centuries in America, does more than what a poet can. She writes about her political views concerning all American Indians and other indigenous peoples in the world, gender issues in contemporary America, her own life and children, her emotions, and her philosophy in approaching life among many other things. She also uses diverse forms of poetic expression, as can also be observed in the poems quoted above, and successfully plants her Indian identity on varying levels in almost everything she writes.

Hence, Harjo makes sure that her poetry is of interest to anyone Indian or non-Indian. At the same time the Muscogee nation and Indianness continue with and after her in her poems that are unique as she is like a performer in every one of them, changing style and tempo as well as subject matter. Harjo's poetry cannot be imitated even by herself, I believe. Her contribution to contemporary American poetry is as much as- if not more- to her contribution in the re-location of Indian identity away from the margin. A major character in American Indian literature, Harjo's voice is sometimes loud and bitter and mostly wise and mature in the re-location efforts of Indianness in the 21st century, and surely a distinct and an effective one.

4.2.2. Kimberly Blaeser

Kimberly Blaeser (Anishinabe) is a notable word sender of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. She is the recipient of many awards among which she was named as the Wordcrafter of the Year in 2002 by the Word Craft Circle of Native Writers and Storytellers. She also received the Diane Decorah First Book Award in Poetry from the Native Writers' Circle of the Americas for Trailing You. Blaeser's poetry attracted literary attentions with the first collection she published. Her poetry is determined, powerful, and yet full of irony in the ways it brings back the ignored Indian issues to the table. She is also a leading critic in American Indian literatures.

She was born to an Anishinabe- or as more popularly called Chippewa- mother and a German father. Although Blaeser has a mixed blood ancestry, her poetry is not

marked by it. On the contrary, she is one of the poets who place their Indian identity on the surface of their poetry and make it the essence of their art. She believes that her poetry has a communal character.

Her first book of poetry Trailing You was published in 1994, following the Returning the Gift festival and its inspiration. In the preface of the book she says that her poems function as “celebration of influence” –of her ancestral background- as opposed to Harold Bloom’s “anxiety of influence,” and claims that the idea of “individual voice” is a delusion. Then she states how her poetry in fact is communal and deeply rooted in her tribal identity, and how it functions.

Much of my life and my writing searches out the connections of self, family, community, place and history. Like many Indian people, I write partly to remember, because remembering, we recover; remembering we survive. I think the best poems might be nothing more than a list of names of people, animals, places, plants, sounds, seasons, because poetry is connections and these are the connections- the poetry- we all carry in our soul, the poetry that writers try to bring to the surface.

(1)

Blaeser articulates herself as well as her Indian identity and her approach to Indian issues clearly and openly in her poetry. The sound of her words both in rhythm and in content is loud and fearless. While celebrating the influence of her tribal and ancestral background and land in her poetry and in her bones, she centralizes Indianness with a certain awareness of the times we live in without being haunted by the past. She

acknowledges that remembering is crucial for survival and continuance. Hence, to be able to exist in the future, one needs to connect to the past.

Blaeser connects to both tribal and Indian history of America through her poetry. In her “Downwinders” she beautifully blends personal and tribal and intertribal Indian history, and displays how they are connected to each other and how deeply they are a part of an individual’s identity.

I heard you say “We all live down wind and downstream”

...

it reminded me of that other profound saying

about how in this land of equal rights and equal justice

“Some of us are more equal than others”

I remember being called from classes in high school

going to the little trailer in the parking lot-

the dentist office for all the Indian kids

I remember one year they used a kind of prong

an electrical shock instead of novocain for numbing

which turned out to be somebody’s experiment

I go for my annual visit (a real dentist office now)

my palms sweat with a memory, a terror

that only fellow guinea pigs can know

I think of the Bikini natives

whose home was destroyed by somebody's experiment
of the prisoners and the elders
who became ill from exposure to radioactive materials
in somebody's experiment
of this earth whose insides have been ruptured and contaminated
this earth become like some leper
from somebody's experiment

I think of all the Indian people whose land was first taken,
who live on remnants,
remnants later drained dry of water and oil,
ripped open in searches for its gold heart,
its copper bosom,
its coal black eyes,
remnants chosen for test sites, weapons plants, nuclear burial

I think of my homeland
my family and my people
whose lives are not fashioned in concrete or plastic
We eat together the rice that is gathered from the lakes
we drink tea sweetened with the sap of the maple tree
and I wonder if the poisoning of our foods is
somebody's experiment (54-55)

Here Blaeser performs a dialogic approach to the issue when quoting from a friend “I heard you say ‘We all live down wind and downstream’,” and when also quoting a well-known sentence from George Orwell’s Animal Farm, “‘Some of us are more equal than others’.” She provides answers and comments to these two quotations throughout the poem, and sometimes even talking to the reader giving the poem its dialogic character. Blaeser in the poem argues that American history itself, when examined closely, would reveal that Indians were not the ones that were more equal.

Indian history is full of those ‘experiments’ on Indian people provided under the name of health service. Causing blindness to approximately 20,000 Indians due to an experimental and careless treatment of a disease called trachoma within the early 20th century, the sterilization of Indian women without their knowledge or consent and without informing them of the operation later on, and the purposeful maltreatment or non-treatment of diseases such as tuberculosis and pneumonia on reservations are scenes from American history that have not been often reported or repeated.

The poet’s personal experience of one of such incidents on a dentist chair is mentioned: “I remember one year they used a kind of prong/ an electrical shock instead of novocain for numbing/ which turned out to be somebody’s experiment,” and is paralleled with the radioactive experiments carried on Bikini islands lives of the natives of which- apparently- were expendable, too for the colonizer: “I think of the Bikini natives/ of the prisoners and the elders/ who became ill from exposure to radioactive materials.”

The colonizer’s experiments for ‘progress’ were not limited to Indians; Indian lands were also destroyed by similar exploitations. Indian lands were “drained dry of

water and oil,” and were chosen “for test sites, weapon plants, nuclear burial” all of which make the land useless and dangerous for people forever. The personification of land with the lines “ripped open in searches for its gold heart,/ its copper bosom,/ its coal black eyes,” also reveals that human kind has been cruel and thoughtless in its treatment of the natural environment. The symbiosis between human kind and the earth is broken since “this earth become like some leper/ from somebody’s experiment.” The simile between the world’s latest state and the case of a sick person infected with leprosy raises the question, how can people be happy and healthy living on a world like that?

This is practically the history for almost all Indian tribes and peoples who were first pushed to reservations and then were forced to let the exploitation of those lands no matter at what cost of natural disasters, human lives, and their psychology. Blaeser, while resisting this subordination, re-claims the land and collective history of Indians, including the Bikini natives’.

The recent insecurity concerning the safety of foods shared by everyone now, is also shared by the poet and her tribe and family members in the sense that their memory is still alive of the experiments they went through: “and I wonder if the poisoning of our foods is/ somebody’s experiment.” A part of Indian and American history is being evoked and reminded and questioned here. As long as it is remembered, it will continue to form one of the indispensable parts of Indian identity.

Another important element of identity, language, is also a subject matter in Blaeser’s poetry. She uses her native tongue (Ojibwe) in words and phrases and lets them continue to live in writing as well. In her “Passing Time” Blaeser uses Ojibwe

words and phrases and often provides the translations of them either within the same or the next line, but sometimes leaves them as they are and gives the translations of them later. Through this process she teaches the reader certain words.

We are kitchen sentries on duty
and call out when company comes.

Biindigen.

Visitors kept coming in
the screen door revolving
like seasons of the moon.

Ode'mini-giizis

strawberry moon,

waatebagaa-giizis

leaves changing color moon.

Voices speak into half empty cups.

Biindigen. "Come on in." (19-20)

The meaning of "*Biindigen*" is left to reader's presumption when first used. Only when it is used for the second time we may be sure that it means, "Come on in." Blaeser here does not only teach the reader words and phrases from her native tongue, she also informs him/her of the definitions of the seasons of moon- the months-; hence transmits a part of her culture: "*Ode'mini-giizis*/ strawberry moon,/ *waatebagaa-giizis*/ leaves changing color moon." The lines in italics here are heteroglossic as they are adopted from a different language and since they are in communication with the English

versions or translations, and since there is communication with the reader as in this line, “‘Come on in’,” the poem is also dialogic.

The use of Ojibwe, Blaeser’s native tongue, is a conscious act in her poetry. Although Blaeser needs to write and publish poetry in English to be able to continue writing and to be able to take part in the literary canon, she does not refrain from writing- at least- partially in her tribal language. In other words, to function in the dominant white culture, she is aware that she needs the same weapon, English. Blaeser’s way of adopting this apparatus to her own use is to use her native language along with it and turn it into a tool of disseminating her own language. This is how she writes against the colonizing assimilation of Indian languages, fight against it with the help of its own language, English.

This should not suggest that the poet rejects the English language; but still, her tribal language, the language she was born to has to be preserved. Because, the preservation of a tribal language as much as possible is crucial for the continuation of a tribe, just like remembering the tribal history. That’s why it is important to present both the language and the culture of the Anishinabe in her poetry.

Another crucial element of identity, land, also finds its place in Blaeser’s poetry. She grew up in the White Earth Reservation of her tribe. In her well known poem “Absentee Indians” she illustrates how leaving the tribal land makes one lose his/her identity and turn him/her into an ‘absentee’ Indian. The poet herself feels like she is becoming one just because she lives away from her reservation.

Now it’s me returning
going to visit

making the rez sounds
like all other absentee Indians.
A week to see my whole family.
...

“Twice a year I come
to see the folks,” he said.
A city Indian
some relative from California
“Summers I bring the kids.
Want them to learn about their heritage.”
We used to laugh
when he said heritage
like every book on Indians
instead of people or tribe or life.
Ain’t hardly laughing now. (3-4)

Land is a major affirmative of identity for the poet. When out of it, one easily may become assimilated and inherit the language of the white man without knowing—othering his/her own people: “‘Summers I bring the kids./ Want them to learn about their heritage’.” The man defines his own reservation and relatives as some artifacts in a museum and his visit to the relatives as sightseeing. Giving the poem its dialogic quality, the poet speaks defining him as “A city Indian” and making him a subject to a joke among his own relatives living on the reservation: “We used to laugh/ when he said

heritage.” When one defines her own background as “heritage,” it means that s/he has already adopted the gaze of the dominant culture, a colonial discourse in America.

According to the poet, without the land, there is a similar danger for every Indian. She has the same concern for herself, “A week to see my whole family/ . . . / Ain’t hardly laughing now.” The poem functions as the awareness of and reaction to this situation by Blaeser. Hence, to her, Indian identity is literally rooted in the ground.

In another poem “Y2K Indian” Blaeser again underlines that Indians do not belong to the cities- the colonial construction of living areas. That’s why losing some major part of Indian identity in cities for Indians is not a coincidence.

the old man said
*Indian people were not
meant to live in
cities, and none do.
Some reside there
but none live there. (129)*

Cities are essentially areas where European lifestyles are practiced. Indians, who have been pursuing lives with and in nature for thousands of years, according to the old man, cannot “live” there. When such a valuable part of life is taken away from Indians, they may easily lose their identity. Thus, Blaeser again underlines that the farther an Indian goes away from his/her reservation and nature, the farther s/he gets away from his/her self and tribe. No matter how modern are the times we live in, ancestral lands and reservations are sacred and inseparable parts of Indian identity.

The traditions being carried out on tribal land also function as the affirmations of identity in various ways and the bonds that tie people to their tribe. One of the traditions common in all tribes without exception is storytelling that reaches out to the present day from thousands of years of history. Blaeser is no foreign to this tradition. In “Where I Was That Day” she remembers and re-tells the story about Geronimo- Goyathlay as his tribe call him-, the legendary chief and warrior of the Apache nation, while telling her own story.

That's where I was that day
I watched you from the arbor
never blinking
while you looked all about for me
and then turned back home
thinking to find me in another place
when I was there everywhere you looked
I knew then the stories about Geronimo were true
and that he did turn to stone
while the cavalries passed him by
mistook him for just a part of the mountain
when he had really become the whole mountain
and all the air they breathed
and even the dust beneath their horse's hooves (20)

Blaeser draws a certain correlation between Geronimo's story and what happened to her “that day.” Both have become the whole nature, the whole

environment, not just a part of it: “when I was there everywhere you looked.” The idea is beyond symbiosis, it is fusing into the nature to a degree that makes one invisible: “when he had really become the whole mountain/ and all the air they breathed/ and even the dust beneath their horse’s hooves.”

The resistance story of Geronimo, who led his tribe in the final war against the US troops, is re-told- an intertextual element-, and made an inspiration for the future resistance stories and actions with this poem. While writing against the colonial domination, Blaeser also re-claims Apache history. She also gives the hint that “the stories about Geronimo” may actually be true, destroying the magical realist element in it, claiming that the same thing happened to her. Therefore, while repeating the old story about a legendary war hero and chief, she forms a cycle with her story, and by using no implication of time except “that day,” saves the story from its epic distance, making it probable, a part of life.

Stories also give meaning to life being experienced today as well as forming a strong tie between an individual and the tribe. Therefore, they are not only a tribal tradition ensuring survivance but they also perform like cement holding a bridge between a member and the tribe- no matter if they were separated by time and/or location- strengthening communal identity. Blaeser also uses stories new and old making them a part of Indian identity as articulated by her today.

Indian traditions living in Blaeser’s poetry are not limited to the stories. She makes use of various tribal ceremonies that give strength and function as the affirmations of tribal continuance. One of the common tribal and intertribal traditions being performed today is the powwow, which also can be found in Blaeser’s poetry. In

the following poem, rather than telling the details of a powwow experience and its contribution to the preservation of communal identity, Blaeser questions how and where powwows are performed today. Trying to see the big picture, it is ironic. “On the Way to the Chicago Pow-Wow” she thinks of the Indian dilemma of being torn in between the city life and capitalism, and the articulation of Indianness.

On the way to the Chicago pow-wow,
Weaving through four-lanes of traffic,
going into the heart of Carl Sandburg’s hog-butcher to the world,
ironic, I think, landing at Navy Pier for a pow-wow.

I think of what Roberta said: “Indian people across the country
are working on a puzzle, trying to figure out what I call
-the abyss.”

Driving into the abyss. Going to a pow-wow. (12)

Chicago, being defined as “. . . Carl Sandburg’s hog-butcher to the world”- both an intertextual element and an allusion to Sandburg’s famous poem “Chicago”- is one of the cities Indians in America travel to for different powwows- as tribes conduct and gather for big powwow festivals and events. Hence, powwows foster not only communal but also collective Indian identity.

The powwow in this poem is in Chicago and being carried out at Navy Pier- one of the biggest high-tech entertainment complexes in America and a big tourist attraction for the city. Navy Pier, being also one of the brightest faces of capitalism, hosts one of the most spiritual and humanistic events of the same country. There is a certain irony here. Maybe the contemporary Indian poets re-locate Indianness right at the center of

capitalism where it is not supposed to survive- but somehow manages to stay alive-, as they place their traditions at the heart of one of the most industrialized cities in the country.

Blaeser, while writing about the big picture she thinks of, re-locates Indian identity right at the center of her art. Quoting from Roberta Hill Whiteman (Oneida), another Indian poet saying, ““Indian people across the country/ are working on a puzzle, trying to figure out what I call/ -the abyss””- giving the poem its dialogic character- Blaeser points to the issue of identity turned into a puzzle even among Indians themselves. Whiteman calls it “abyss,” probably referring to the emptiness of the discussion or to the emptiness of life in America; the life that is becoming more and more meaningless for Indians.

Then how are they supposed to place themselves into the life in big cities without being part of the abyss? In other words, how will they resist the colonization process while living right at the center of it? An Indian way of survival is rather simple: As long as they hold onto their traditions they preserve their tribal/communal identity, and as long as they preserve their identity they do not get lost in the abyss but manage to continue. This is also a resistance strategy against the heavy impact of colonization. Thus, traditions attaching one to his/her tribe are vital- and observable- in Blaeser’s poetry as they partake a considerable amount in the lives of many Indians today.

Some of the other common traditions, singing and dancing have also been vital to the well being of Indians. They are valuable tools for endurance and coping with the hardships of life, as well as being the reminiscent of identity. Blaeser performs a special

chant in the memory of all the suicided Indians in her poem “Recite the Names of All the Suicided Indians.”

I

Do it under your breath he said,

this guy back home.

Telling me something

about chanting.

Until the little bones

behind each ear

pound.

IV

Gashkendam.

He is lonesome.

So many gone silent

like the songs.

Go deaf if you must he said

but keep singing your name

your life

keep singing

your name

your life.

Nagamon.

Sing.

V

So let me

chant

for you

each one

the names

of all

the suicided

Indians. (7-9)

The poem starts with the poet reporting a dialogue with a man: “Do it under your breath he said,/ Telling me something/ about chanting.” While doing this, the poet speaks to the reader, but in the end she addresses to “the suicided/ Indians”: “So let me/ chant/ for you,” making the poem dialogic. Moreover, while mentioning of chanting, the poem turns to be a modern day chant itself with the rhythm it offers like pounding.

but keep singing your name

your life

keep singing

your name

your life.

Nagamon.

Sing.

Singing and dancing keep one in connection with life. As reported in the poem “So many gone silent/ like the songs,” so many Indians stopped singing, stopped being what they were, and became “suicided Indians.” When they give up on their traditions, on the things that make them who they are, they lose the power to endure, and end up losing their identity. Suicide here is a metaphor for the loss of Indian identity, and also an allusion to the danger of it as destructive as death.

Resisting such kind of cultural erasure is possible through performing the traditions and keeping them as suggested in the poem: “Go deaf if you must he said/ but keep singing your name/ your life.” Fighting against such subordination is possible through preserving communal identity, which is a life-giving source to an individual. “Singing your name” refers to celebrating one’s tribal identity as individual names are also given through a ceremony in a tribe and connected to a tribe in some way.

Blaeser, while pointing at the necessity of the preservation of tribal traditions like singing and dancing, writes a chant-like poem herself; almost performing the communal tradition in her art, again blurring the borders of poetry genre.

In Blaeser’s poetry the re-location of Indian identity is not only achieved through re-claiming history and language, or writing about religion, connection to land, and traditions, therefore articulating communal identity in a contemporary context but also through writing against the colonial discourse, that keeps othering Indians, the stereotypes. In other words, American Indian poets do not only re-define Indianness in their own terms but also alter the false assumptions about who Indians are. Blaeser’s “‘Native Americans’ vs. ‘The Poets’ (some thoughts I had while reading Poetry East)”

discusses the same issue from ironical, humorous, and cynical perspectives also making fun of the white ignorance in the 21st century America:

You know that solitary Indian
sitting in his fringed leathers
on his horse at the rise of the hill
face painted, holding a lance
there just at the horizon?
That guy's got a Ph.D.
He's *the* Indian for Mankato State or Carroll College

Indian professors at universities throughout the country
Exhibit A,
No B, no C, just solitary romanticized A
Not much of a threat that way
Real trouble is
America
still doesn't know what to do with Indians

Looked for your books lately in Powell's
or 57th St. Books?
Check first in folklore or anthropology
Found Louis' *Wolfsong* in black literature
Hell no wonder we all got an identity crisis

You a poet?

No, I just write Indian stuff. (53)

Apparently the 19th century frozen image of the Great Plains Indian in moccasins on his horse thinking and facing the sunset somehow is still alive in the American mind as Blaeser claims here. The colonial discourse of othering Indians with such stereotypes and making them seem like savages with inferior mind activities and abilities is being severely altered:

You know that solitary Indian
sitting in his fringed leathers
on his horse at the rise of the hill
face painted, holding a lance
there just at the horizon?
That guy's got a Ph.D.

It has been over a century and Indians have already gone too far despite the burden of colonization on them. What is worse than the general public surrounded by the misconceptions of Indians even today, is the colleges and professors who still believe in those images and teach them as the representatives of real living Indians of our time. "He's *the* Indian" for them, because through romanticizing Indians, they become no more threat to the colonizing system. Blaeser while writing against this stereotyping, also demonstrates that it was in fact the colonizers who were ignorant. While they were taking the solitary thinking Indian for granted as a harmless rider in authentic clothes, American Indians became college professors.

The “Real trouble is/ America” as it seems, “still doesn’t know what to do with Indians.” Placing Indian literature in the anthropology section or placing a novel from American Indian literature- Louis Owens’ well known *Wolfsong*- in the Black literature section are nothing but again mere demonstrations of white ignorance and indifference. She wittily satirizes it by saying, “Hell no wonder we all got an identity crisis”. Blaeser writes against these colonial subordinations using the traditional Indian way of coping with the hardships of life, irony and humor. Thus, when asked, “You a poet?” she would reply, “No, I just write Indian stuff.”

The dialogues in the poem as just quoted above also make the poem dialogic, a nature of oral narratives. Therefore, while writing against stereotyping, Blaeser also uses traditional tools of making a story, deviating from the usual form of a poem.

Identity is articulated through self-image and belonging, not through the images imposed from outside. Blaeser, within this process presents a firm and witty style in both content and form. Her poetry is like a determined song filled with rhythm and stories, and laughter and anger. She re-locates collective Indian identity at the very center of her poetry and the center of the American multiculturalism without rejecting it. For her, Indian contribution to America cannot be denied. In her lesson like letter-poem to the famous well-established media figure of the 60 Minutes, Andy Rooney, Blaeser again writes against the common stereotypes and white ignorance reminding what Indians have meant to America, and what he has missed.

You said there are no great Indian novels,
no poetry, no music, no art,
and I wondered, Mr. Rooney,

do you read? can you hear? can you see?

. . .

and I thought they may explain to me why

you never heard of N. Scott Momaday

the Kiowa Indian who won the pulitzer prize

for his novel in 1969

and why you have not heard of any of the other

great Native American writers and artists and musicians

like Simon Ortiz and Leslie Silko and James Welch and Louise

Erdrich

and Buffy St. Marie and Allan Houser and David Bradley and

R. C. Gorman

and I thought that maybe something has kept you

from realizing how great an influence all the Indian arts

have had on those of the greater America

and how they are even more honored in Europe

where the people don't get the art mixed up

with guilt and land claims.

You say that the Indian genius was for

“living. . . without damaging the ozone layer.”

Now it seems to me that such a way of living

is not now, particularly not now out of its proper time,

and continue to live that it is an anachronism.

. . .

You say that “there have been many efforts
to assimilate the Indian to our society”
but do you know the stories of those efforts, Mr. Rooney
and the price that was paid in human lives and human dignity?
Do you know anything at all about the reservation system,
relocation, allotment, and BIA boarding schools?
If you did, Mr. Rooney, then you would understand
why it is true as you have said,
the one true statement I found in what you wrote,
that “Indians don’t want any part of it.”
 (“Dear Mr. Andy Rooney” 59-61)

The poem starts with Blaeser’s reply to Rooney’s misconceptions of and prejudices on Indian arts claiming that “. . . there are no great Indian novels,/ no poetry, no music, no art.” The imaginary dialogue with Rooney starts with these lines and Blaeser’s reaction in contempt “I wondered, Mr. Rooney,/ do you read? can you hear? can you see?” which give the poem a dialogic character and a vibrant, living style.

In the persona of a massive media figure who has been respected for decades now, Blaeser writes against the stereotyping and many ignorant remarks of colonial discourse, and underlines the fact that America could not survive to date without Indians, and her culture would be so absent without the contribution of Indian arts,

music, and literature: “and I thought that maybe something has kept you/ from realizing how great an influence all the Indian arts/ have had on those of the greater America.” Should anyone think the opposite, she provides the reader with names such as Ortiz, Momaday, St. Marie, and Gorman.

The discussion continues with the criticism of stereotyping Indians as savages pursuing a primitive lifestyle: “You say that the Indian genius was for/ ‘living . . . without damaging the ozone layer.’/ Now it seems to me that such a way of living/ is not now, particularly not now out of its proper time.” Stereotyping Indians as primitive savages whose best capability is hiding in the forests is an old but a still living colonial discourse. Such discourse justified the destruction of Indian cultures. Such discourse justified Rooney’s other remark: “. . . there have been many efforts/ to assimilate the Indian to our society’.” The description of American Indians as “the Indian” diminishing them to a singular type of people is another common colonial discourse, again. His calling American society as “our society” and pointing at Indians as some misfits to that society is also an example of colonial othering of American Indians.

While telling him what those “efforts” were, Blaeser re-claims history: “Do you know anything at all about the reservation system,/ relocation, allotment, and BIA boarding schools?” History is partially made of these for Indians, but an ordinary American is apparently totally unaware of such facts and their impact on Indians. Again the white ignorance is criticized.

At the end of the poem Blaeser finds a single common point with her discussion with Rooney: “the one true statement I found in what you wrote,/ that ‘Indians don’t want any part of it’.” The resistance of colonial subordination and disastrous effects of it

can be observed here. Blaeser's response to white ignorance stereotyping and trivializing Indians in America is almost visible in the tone of the poem. The mockery of Rooney's remarks is her reaction to these continuing acts of ignorance and stereotyping, which need to be destroyed for a proper re-location of Indianness.

Blaeser's poetry is not only alive and moving but also stands firm on its ground. It is not ethnocentric, but at the same time it is confrontational for the status quo. Her style is also as moving and powerful just as the issues raised with the words she sends. When writing about a butterfly her lines move in a hurry and small moves.

Seek not to

win release.

Held fast

by butterfly feet.

From this cocoon

t

h

g

i

l

take f

("This Cocoon" 35)

When writing about the "Twelve Steps to Ward Off Homesickness," she uses a divided prose poem style.

IV.

Look in the mirror and say “Damn Indian” until you get it right. Stop only when you remember the voice of every law officer that ever chanted those words.

V.

Light cigarettes and place them in ashtrays throughout your house.

Inhale. (5)

The first section of her book Absentee Indians is called the same, and all the poems are related to each other with a line picked up from the previous poem, and handing in another one to the next poem. By this way, the organic unity among the poems and a circular narrative style- adopted from the oral tradition- are also established within the book.

Kimberly Blaeser is a poet and her voice is mixed with all the other voices she has heard and was born to; and still is a unique one. Her poetry introduces, celebrates, and articulates her bond to her tribal culture- including language, religion, and traditions- as well as to Indian history and cause in contemporary America. While doing these, she also defeats stereotypes about Indians and re-defines Indianness without being ethnocentric.

She centralizes Indianness without ignoring or rejecting the multicultural nature of America, with the certain awareness of the white dominancy in culture. Being a university professor and a literary critic, she is also well aware of the times she lives in, the classifications, and the questioning of the authenticity of Indianness. Her poem

“American Indian Voices: I Wonder If This Is an Indian Poem” talks about the differences between writing about Indian issues and writing Indian- Indian identity placement in poetry. The poem is like a critical essay by itself.

So anyway, you say you want to write Indian poems,
Some folks- lots of folks who should know, too,
will tell you they should talk about things like Indian ceremonies,
animals and the land,
the reservation,
the old time Indian folks.

And maybe about the bad things that have happened to Indian people
like boarding schools and
 removal relocation.

And now days about Indian drinking,
and poverty
and fetal alcohol syndrome.

. . .

I bet a lot of folks- lots of Indians, too,
would like the poems pretty much
and publish them
and read them
and talk about them in Minority Literature Classes.

So that’s one thing you can do I guess.

But I think a better thing would be to just write about
the things you know deep down
and think about a lot
like the memories and sounds and smells and people and places
that never leave you even when you sleep
Cuz those are the poems life has written in your soul.
...
Yeah, Indian voices do talk about a lot of Indian stuff
like ricing and fry bread and bingo,
But they talk about computers and car pooling, too.
Indian experts might write a lot about Indians;
Indian voices just write Indian. (56-57)

Thus, Blaeser's re-location of identity is more collective and personal than it is communal. The militant character that can be observed in her poetry from time to time resembles the poetry of the previous decades before the 1990s. Thus, her poetry serves to a unified aim of Indians being appreciated as the major contributors of life and culture of America without forgetting that they are not historical romantic imaginations, but real people with real issues. The acknowledgement of their existence and continuance is one of the major concerns of her poetry. Blaeser's poetry fulfills its aesthetic and humanistic functions very well. It serves to the interest of many Indians in their efforts of re-locating their identities in today's America; at the same time, its artistic achievement is distinguished.

4.2.3. Mark Turcotte

Mark Turcotte (Chippewa) is one of the most promising voices of contemporary American Indian poetry. His poetry has won several honors so far. He was the Literary Fellow in 1999 as chosen by the Wisconsin Art Board. He has published four collections of poetry, including a chapbook, and is well on his way to be one of the most prominent poets of American Indian literature. As Ray Gonzales notes in the introduction to The Feathered Heart, Turcotte's first book of poetry, the collection "is a revelation and a bridge to the next century" (ix). It is as if Turcotte is writing the poetry of the future generations from today. Very few poets carry the power of capturing the reader's heart and mind with a single poem, Turcotte is one of them.

He is Chippewa (also known as Anishinabe, Ojibwe, Ojibwey, or Ojibway) on his father's side and Irish-American on her mother's. Just as the other poets studied here previously, his mixed blood ancestry has not been a disadvantage or the major concern of his art. He is American Indian, and his poetry carries certain characteristics of Indian oral narratives. If he had lived few centuries ago, his words/poems would have been the healing songs of his tribe. There is certain refreshing peace, clarity, and spiritual power mingled into each other in the words he sends; and maybe because of this, his poems are effective and can easily be remembered.

Hence, it can be said that Turcotte's poetry is both traditional and non-traditional, both communal and personal, and comes from both the past and the future. Although they are not ethnocentric at all, the representation and the replacement of Indian identity are at the core of his writing and can be observed in the form and content

of his poems as well. Turcotte's poetry implies the same thing with that of all the other poets being studied here; that is, personal is communal and communal is personal.

The major determiner of identity, crucial for the Indian writers and poets, the re-affirmation of their roots and re-writing and re-claiming of history finds its place in Turcotte's poetry as well. Crazy Horse and the Ghost Dancers are remembered in his poem "Horse Dance." The Battle of Little Bighorn and the death of Custer are retold from the Indian point of view.

We dream
the pony of Crazy Horse
dancing in a field
of greasy grass,
polishing its anxious hooves
upon the buttons
of Custer's coat,
stomp
step step
stomp.

We dream
the pony of Crazy Horse
leaping
in a field
of horses grazing,

riderless,
deaf to the distant wail of a widow
crying,
why my Georgie, why my Georgie why,
stomp.

We dream
the pony of Crazy Horse
rising
in a field
of bloodied flowers,
where the horn
of her husband's empty saddle
is still decorated
with the flesh of Lakota women,
that is *why my Georgie why,*

stomp
step step
step step . . . (20-21)

George Custer is well known by the Indians for his boastful and mean attitude towards the Sioux and for his brutal attacks and killings of Indian men, women, and children with his seventh cavalry. The Battle of Little Bighorn, in which he was killed,

was led and won by underestimated Crazy Horse and his warriors. While reminding this battle, the poet writes about the possible collective Indian dream of Crazy Horse's pony dancing on the dead body of Custer: "polishing its anxious hooves/ upon the buttons/ of Custer's coat." This is the re-writing of history by the poet.

The brutality of Custer is so deeply embedded in the memories of Indians that, the pony would not carry the slightest guilt about the dance: "deaf to the distant wail of a widow/ crying,/ *why my Georgie, why my Georgie why.*" The anger and pain for the vicious killings of the innocent Lakota women is felt, remembered, and reminded; but the cry of the Custer's widow is not forgotten, an explanation for her is provided:

where the horn
of her husband's empty saddle
is still decorated
with the flesh of Lakota women,
that is *why my Georgie why,*

The title of the poem is also an allusion to the religious- and political- move, Ghost Dance, whose dancers and believers were killed by the soldiers of the remaining seventh cavalry among others at Wounded Knee Creek. The fact is, Crazy Horse's pony probably did not dance on the Custer's dead body, but the poet feels the need to dream about it and remember the Battle of Little Bighorn at least to ease the pain of the murders of Custer. Here, the collective Indian history and identity are re-claimed and an alternative picture is provided to a neglected part of American history.

Crazy Horse can be every Indian's hero, and every Indian might feel the relief for Custer's death. This is a way to resist colonial subordination, by making new stories

and songs about Indian ancestors, they are remembered, and the remaining ones continue through them. Turcotte is aware that by resisting the domination of Sioux Indians as a Chippewa he contributes to the collective consciousness of Indianness.

The repetition of certain lines such as “We dream/ the pony of Crazy Horse” and the sound of the pony’s hooves “stomp/ step step/ stomp” do not only provide a circular narrative style- which is typical of storytelling tradition- to the poem, they are also the lines that make the poem almost a hearable song, a chant performed in the memory of murdered Lakota people. Moreover, there is also an allusion to a traditional dance, stomp dance, with the moves and the sounds of the horse’s hooves.

The sudden but periodical shifts from poem to song as in “of Custer’s coat,/ stomp/ step step/ stomp” as well as the short lines organized not to ruin the rhythm of the poem make it a modern day healing song- or chant- to be performed, and of course blurring the poetry genre. Turcotte’s repeating the presumed cry of Ms. Custer “*why my Georgie, why my Georgie why,*” is heteroglossia, and him answering to her cry “that is *why my Georgie why*” makes the poem dialogic.

Recent history is also the subject matter together with personal history in a series of poems reporting the election day 1992 and the funeral of Turcotte’s father on the same day. The three election day poems start with the same line: “As America was stirring from its usual slumber”, referring to the time- early in the morning-, the feeling of loss, and the political history of America being written. The first one introduces the beginning of the church ceremony for the burial and the morning of the first time election of Bill Clinton. The second one describes the poet’s moving closer to his

father's coffin with all the childhood memories; and the third one tells of the poet's feelings by the coffin.

In the introduction to the collection of these poems in Exploding Chippewas, Turcotte notes: "It's a story not about sadness, but about power" (29). Thus, it can be said that these three poems reflect the power relations in American politics and in the poet's own family. While America elects her new president, Turcotte elects to face his feelings for his father. Following is from the first one of the three election day poems:

As America was stirring from its usual slumber,
I stood on the ice-encrusted steps
of the church at St. Ann's Mission.

It was Election Day 1992,
a stark and stormy North Dakota morning.

As the heavy doors closed behind me,
there was a sudden burden of breath upon my neck,
...

The trees in the yard began to shake,
the brittle branches clacking together, clicking together, clicking
click click, click click, click click. ("Election Day I" 31)

As America was waking up from its long time "slumber" of Republican presidents and electing a democrat, Bill Clinton, for the first time since 1980, the poet was waking up the long time snooze of his own life without a father, realizing that even from a distance, his father holds the power of influencing and changing his life. History,

for American Indians, does not mean European invasion and colonization of Indian land alone, it is also yesterday. History is what happened in America 500 years ago, or five months ago. Therefore, the elections matter just as the Battle of Little Bighorn does. Here, Turcotte re-writes American history, or even makes history, blending it with his own and giving it an Indian character. At the same time, he makes- ancient or recent- American history a part of Indian identity, and by remembering and re-claiming it confirms Indian existence and participation in America and her history, too.

The despair and/or helplessness the poet feels facing his father's coffin is/are reflected in the restless sound of the tree outside: "*click click, click click, click click.*" The nature accompanies his feelings. The day is too heavy to carry. Maybe the re-claiming of history and identity comes with a price on both personal and tribal/communal levels.

Turcotte is also concerned with the issue of language and is aware that it is an important tool in the preservation of Indian identity, even though he does not speak his tribal language Ojibwe. Still, he carries the power of it.

The voice of centuries
murmurs old tongues,
forgotten in our ears,
familiar
to the feather in our hearts,
remembered
in the frenzy of our blood. ("Tiny Warriors" 3)

Due to the effects of colonization, just like many young Indians today, Turcotte does not remember his tribal language “. . . old tongues,/ forgotten in our ears,” however, he believes that even if it is not spoken, language is an innate part of identity and it is existent in the “feather”- a symbol of Indianness- in their hearts and the raging blood in their veins: “remembered/ in the frenzy of our blood.” Because, it carries the “voice of centuries,” it is the confirmation of their history and their ancestral bonds to their past.

The Ojibwe language is also one of the dreams of a homeless Indian in his “Last Drink”:

lived on the side
of a hill,
picked juneberries
as the soft brush
of Ojibway tongues
painted the sky,
he thinks,

he thinks,
the women cooing
over baskets,
over beadwork,
over babies,
the music of them

rising higher
than mission bells,

now wakes
on the street
with a chill
and the sun in his eyes,
he thinks. (57-58)

The perfect life for an Indian is 'in' the nature where he "lived on the side/ of a hill,/ picked juneberries" and hears the natural sound of women doing daily work in peace: "the women cooing/ over baskets,/ over beadwork." The simile between a soft brush and an Ojibwe tongue "painting the sky"- moving softly in the air- within the lines "as the soft brush/ of Ojibway tongues/ painted the sky" are reflective of the nostalgia for the happy days in which the old man lived freely together with his tribal people and spoke his own language.

However, the peaceful mood of the poem as well as his dream is to be interrupted by mission bells, but he thinks of the women's voices, "the music of them/ rising higher/ than mission bells." The perfect life for Indians, thus, can be achieved when people's voices, speaking tribal languages are louder than the mission bells- a symbol of colonizing power and domination. In other words, when Indian lifeways and traditions could not be altered or destroyed by colonization. Turcotte resists the imposition of English through churches on reservations as it is a source of loss of identity for Indians.

Another determiner of identity, religion, is also an issue discussed in Turcotte's poetry. He asserts that Christianity, in fact, does not fit into the Indian heart, mind, or life. His poem "True Sign" tells of a story of an Indian child being stuck in Christianity, but somehow feels that he does not belong to it.

He was
the first of all of them
in his Sunday school class
to memorize the "Lord's Prayer,"
the first to mumble,
go to Hell,
as he slumped in a pew
beside his mother.

He knew
it wasn't right, all of this
combing his hair, tucking
in his shirt tail,
saving his dimes
for the collection plate,
getting down
upon his knees
to pray.

So he
would lie on his back
in the summer grass
of late Sunday morning
and he
would watch
the sky
for a true sign,

a hawk
arching toward the Sun,
loosing a feather,
floating falling,
to land upon his bare brown chest. (7)

The poem displays how the domination of colonization tries to erase Indian identity in young generations through religion, and how they develop survival tactics against it. The boy in the poem, presumably the poet himself as a child, becomes “the first of all of them/ in his Sunday school class/ to memorize the ‘Lord’s Prayer’,” but again “the first to mumble,/ *go to Hell*,” in the church. Even though he seems to adopt white ways of life, he does not internalize them; moreover he resents them. Therefore, he “would lie on his back/ in the summer grass/ of late Sunday morning” after going to church, and “would watch/ the sky/ for a true sign.”

The sign he would watch for is “a hawk/ arching toward the Sun,/ loosing a feather.” The metaphor of the falling feather from the hawk is not foreign to Indian religions as it means that the person is special, and that would be a true sign for the poet since those feathers were used by the medicine men and even by the warriors themselves as they hold power and not everyone was supposed to possess or carry feathers freely in a tribe. In addition, the harmony and unity between Indians and nature, and nature and religion and how they are inseparable from each other is also revealed. Indian lives have been established on the idea of wholeness, not only between the natural environment and humans but also among tribal members, language, ancestors, traditions, and land, too. Turcotte’s claim here is that even a child would know that Christianity and the ways it is practiced such as,

combing his hair, tucking
in his shirt tail,
saving his dimes
for the collection plate,
getting down
upon his knees
to pray

are not right, that there is a problem. Rules and regulations of Christianity do not fit into Indian lifestyle and the philosophy which do not require any dress codes for children, or anything against their nature or comfort. The poet demonstrates how religion, in fact, is an inseparable part of Indian being, and how trying to separate it from them causes too much stress and confusion.

In another poem “Road Noise III” Turcotte mentions how Christianity brought unhappiness to his father along with many others, too.

Because the story of your skin was written in the wind of wounded horses,

and the world never wanted to hear that noise.

The noise of men like you.

No, America doesn’t want to hear that noise.

They just want to make it,

and louder.

Their chugging engines to muffle the sound of their cannons.

Their clanking factories to drown the sound of Chippewa children
falling in the snow.

The hiss of machines to bury the sound of bad medicine hidden
in the weave of blankets.

The boiling pots of rancid meat,
the maggots twisting in a plate of beans,

I mean,
they don’t want to hear.

the noise of men like you,
pacing in your cells rocking

...

always holding your hands over your ears,
tearing at your hair, saying,
stop it stop it stop it
it hurts oh God God God it hurts
you hurt me
God you hurt me,
you let them hurt me with their God,
with all that noise. (39-40)

The story told here is the story of the poet's father's "skin" a synecdoche for his Indian identity, and it is ". . . written in the wind of wounded/ horses". "[W]ounded horses" is a metaphor used for the past generations of Indians whose stories became wind, and who were wounded. The reservation system brought poverty, dependence on federal aid, unemployment, poor or no health services, and the highest early death rate to Indians. And all these are done in the name of God and Christianity. Indian 'savages' were to be saved, so they were pushed into reservations and boarding schools where they were expected to forget their language, religion, and traditions that made them who they were. As "America doesn't want to hear that noise," the rejection and fury and the call for help from the Indian side, from the 'other' side, were simply ignored.

The Indian land, however, were constantly exploited and Indians were expected to believe that they were actually getting help when their resources were being ripped off from their land. As Turcotte puts it, the so-called civilization brought into the reservations were only there to silence the 'noise' Indians were making.

Their chugging engines to muffle the sound of their cannons.

Their clanking factories to drown the sound of Chippewa children
falling in the snow.

The hiss of machines to bury the sound of bad medicine hidden
in the weave of blankets.

The reason for all these, on the surface, was to ‘help’ Indians due to the civilization claims of the colonizer- of the European Americans- rooted in Christianity. Thus, Christianity and the notion of God and good citizen according to Christian ideals become the tools of torture on the Indian. The poet’s father suffers from the very same thing, talking to his god and giving the poem its dialogic quality,: “*you hurt me/ God you hurt me,/ you let them hurt me with their God.*” Hence, religion is not only a necessary means of preserving identity but also a colonizing tool for destroying the cultures of the ‘others’.

The progress symbolized by “machines” somehow made the mass killings of Indians forgotten: “The hiss of machines to bury the sound of bad medicine hidden/ in the weave of blankets.” The “bad medicine” here becomes a metonym for the smallpox virus and “blankets” a synecdoche for the smallpox infected blankets purposely given to many Indian tribes.

For Turcotte, tribal identity, the bonds to tribal traditions and ancestors should also be well kept to continue as one and as altogether. Writing is a good way of doing this as through it one remembers, and by remembering the bonds are kept strong. One of the things he remembers from his childhood is the “Hands” of his father reminding him of who he is.

I remembered,
suddenly, a fair summer day
beside big water,
when you laughed
and lifted me
higher than the trees,

and I felt
like a big boy,
like a big boy,
in your hands
I felt
like a good boy,
and you said,

hey Chee-pwa,

do you see any angels up there, do you see any angels? (35)

Poet's tribal identity becomes part of himself when he was a child. He is called a "Chee-pwa" as a little boy by his father; and it is embedded in his being as long as he remembers. Father's talking to son, "*hey Chee-pwa,/ do you see any angels up there, do you see any angels?*" and him talking back years later

and I felt
like a big boy,

like a big boy,

in your hands

make the poem also a dialogic experience. Moreover, the picturing of a happy moment from childhood “. . . a fair summer day/ beside big water,” also reveals that personal fulfillment and belonging cannot be thought out of the natural environment as they cannot be thought out of tribal unity.

In “Chippewa Hitch Hike” this time he defines himself as a Chippewa:

Hitch-hiking last night (and

in between

the shine

of headlights) I fell

in love with

the moon

again. (44)

Anyone could be impressed by the beauty of the moon, but the poet prefers to define this event as “Chippewa Hitch Hike,” most likely not only due to self-awareness but also to stress the bond and harmony between nature and his tribe. It is clear that the poet is deeply impressed by the moon not as an ordinary person, but as a Chippewa would be, feeling the connection to it.

Tribal identity is also apparent in the poems related to tribal traditions that are also determiners of identity for the poet. Dance, being one of them, although is a commonly shared traditional element among Indian tribes, and although it is still popular among Indians who perform it for different occasions, when facing a white audience, it may not always be as fun and as meaningful.

Back when I used to be Indian
I am crushing the dance floor,
jump-boots thumping Johnny Rotten
Johnny Rotten. Red lights blue bang
at my eyes. The white girl watching
does not know why and it doesn't matter.
I spin spin, eat I don't care for breakfast,
so what for lunch. She moves to me,
dark gaze, tongue hot to lips. The music
is hard, lights louder. She slides low
against my hip to hiss, *go go Geronimo*.
I stop. ("Burn"15)

The first line of the poem signifies Turcotte's certain alienation to his own identity. "Back when I used to be Indian" may both refer to the times he defined himself as nothing but an Indian, or to his recent sense of loss or deviation from that identity. Since he is still an Indian and will always be, it is ironical to call for a time when he "was" an Indian. In the poem, even though he defined himself as an Indian, he was dancing to punk music, not practicing a traditional Indian dance at all. However, since

he was an 'Indian' to a white woman, all she saw was an authentic man on the dance floor. She probably means to flatter the dancer, but her words "*go go Geronimo*" reflect her being infected by the colonial discourse of stereotyping Indians as good dancers and othering them as foreigners in their own country. Even though the intention may be otherwise, the words suddenly become an insult for him.

The colonial tradition of stereotyping and racial discrimination turns to be a daily event, even on a dance floor. Turcotte resists this subordination not only by stopping to dance, "I stop," but also by writing against it, making it a subject matter in his poetry.

Indian traditional elements reflected in Turcotte's poems are not limited to the song and dance. Coyote wanders around in his poetry as well.

I send to you
the wild compass coyote,
who wanders beside you,
leads you to water leads you to water,
("Leads You to Water" 30)

This time he is not a storyteller or a trickster, but a guide to help, to lead the one in need to the right direction. Although this can be seen as a magical realist element by the western eye, as one sending the coyote- the traditional story character- to someone else to help, it is for sure that coyote is a smart animal who never loses his way. Therefore, there is certain attribution to its character here. Maybe it is not an animal or an imaginary character, but a ghost appearing on rare occasions and this time assisting

the character in the poem. Again, we are not informed on time and location, typical of oral narrations, the important thing is to be able to reach water.

Storytelling, a tradition Turcotte shares with the other poets here, is a significant characteristic of his poetry as well. However, unlike most poets today, he does not re-tell old stories and/or legends very often, he usually makes new ones. A story from his childhood is a good example to this reporting an incident in which he and his mother went out to buy some pie, and were told that there was “No Pie”:

. . . A chilly day. We were going
off the rez, all the way to Bottineau, just to have
a piece of pie.

The waitress ignored us until my mother said,
as sweetly as she could, *we'd like a piece of apple and
a piece of pumpkin, please*. The woman glared at us
from beneath the pile of her tilted hairdo, filterless
Pall Mall hanging from her cherried lips. *We are all
out of pie today*, she coughed. I glanced over at the
pie case, the fat pies lined up neatly behind the glass.
The woman hacked again, *we don't sell those pies by
the piece. Do you want to buy a whole pie?* My eye
twitched as my mother's pearl-white hand dipped
deep into the pocket of her oat, counting the
silvery coins.

And I remember my mother's pearl-white knuckles
trembling on the steering wheel as we crossed back
over the border. I knocked together the dangling
toes of my sneakers, staring at my small brown fists.
Her gaze was fixed hard on the road, while I turned
to watch the world speed by, both of our mouths
filled with tears. (51)

This, of course, is not only a story about the poet's childhood but also a story about urban colonial subordination of Indians. As mentioned above, racial- or ethnic-discrimination may come at odd places like dance floor and pastry shop as well. This may be a small, an ordinary incident considering the racial assaults American Indians have to face; however, by writing it, making it a story to be told Turcotte makes sure that it is not forgotten and therefore functions as a reminder of identity for him.

The dialogue between the poet's mother and the waitress does not selling the pie, "*. . . we'd like a piece of apple and/ a piece of pumpkin, please*" and "*. . . we don't sell those pies by/ the piece. Do you want to buy a whole pie?*" do not only make the poem a dialogic expression but also a story which includes the reader into the story, making him/her the witness. By this way, Turcotte performs a traditional quality of oral narratives, and also blurs the borders of poetry genre.

In yet another poem, Turcotte tells of a different story from his childhood discussing how stereotypes affect Indian lives, and how he was discriminated as a little boy by both whites and Indians while he was trying to fit in. "Meanwhile in America" is reflective of how a mixed blood identity may cause problems when growing up.

Big Tooth, the bottle prophet, once said to me,
very seriously, *you are lucky to be both Indian and white.*
That is, if it don't make you crazy.

Meanwhile, I'm eleven years old, fistfighting
my way back and forth to school each day. The
freckle-faced kids holler, *hey Chinese hey Chinese boy.*

Mother says it takes a bigger man to walk away.
I think about this as I erase where someone
has scribbled TONTO on my desk at school.

My friend Willie is the only one allowed to call me Chief.
I am the only one allowed to call him Cocoa. He says
to me, *at least you don't have to be black.*

I think about this as I erase where someone
has scribbled NIGGER LOVER on my desk at school.

My teacher speaks of history, so I ask, *why did the*
Europeans take away the Indians' land, anyway?
She pats me on my head, says, *well they didn't know*
How to take care of it, now did they?

Later, I was taught that we didn't know how to take care
of our tongues, our minds, our ghosts, our children, anything
that we loved.

That summer back on the rez my cousins ask what happened
to my hair, and they say they're joking when they call me
white boy white boy. (52-53)

The poem starts with a sentence offered to the poet by "the bottle prophet" a metaphor for probably a too-much-drinking Indian called Big Tooth: ". . . *you are lucky to be both Indian and white./ That is, if it don't make you crazy.*" The dialogic character of the poem continues with the future remarks from other boys from school ". . . *hey Chinese hey Chinese boy*" and from his cousins in the rez "*white boy white boy.*" Although the first one was meant to be an insult and the second one to be a joke, they both turn to be insults for the poet.

The feeling of being othered by the white students from school continues throughout the poem letting Turcotte question the common stereotype of "TONTTO," and name calling of "Chief"- and "Cocoa" for African-Americans. While being racially harassed by his schoolmates calling him Tonto- a TV character supposed to be an Indian, a cliché-, he would almost be blamed later at the rez in the summer for changing his hair and making it look like that of the white kids. The poem also questions history and the colonization of Indian lands as well as Indians themselves:

My teacher speaks of history, so I ask, *why did the
Europeans take away the Indians' land, anyway?*

She pats me on my head, says, *well they didn't know*

How to take care of it, now did they?

The colonial discourse of 'uncivilized' Indians not being able to progress and use the land effectively is rejected with reference to subordination Indian pupils had to go through at schools. Turcotte continues to disregard the same discourse which seem to claim that whatever has been taken from Indians was due to their inefficiency in protecting it: "Later, I was taught that we didn't know how to take care/ of our tongues, our minds, our ghosts, our children, anything/ that we loved." Therefore, it is not only the history and the roots that are being lost here, the future of Indian nations, children, and their identity is at stake.

Thus, the poem is also about today and future, as well as it is about past and memories. With this poem, Turcotte re-claims Indian history, questions the mixed blood identity definitions, and writes against the colonization which naturalizes the discourse that whatever happens to Indians is due to their inabilities, and the stereotypes that serve to this discourse.

Re-defining and re-locating Indianness are connected to fierce alterations of many stereotypes; however, Indianness is an issue among Indians themselves, too. The following poem is revealing of the problem of ways of centralizing Indianness among Indians themselves. The question of authenticity, apparently, has plagued many, and it is a concern in Turcotte's identity articulation, too. He discusses the issue in a rather ironical and humorous way in "My Blood Is Better Than Your Blood":

One says,

you are not Indian unless you grew up on a reservation, can speak your

language, know the Traditional Ceremonies.

Two says,

you are not Indian if you have never hungered and happily eaten

Government

cheese, driven a one-eyed, rust-bucket car, been so drunk that you heard

Geronimo singing on the radio.

Three says,

always remember that my bones are better than your bones.

Four says,

you are not Indian unless you grew up on a reservation before 1970, can

name

your clan, recite the Old Stories.

Five says,

you are not Indian if you have never thirsted and happily drank

Government

powdered milk, had at least two hundred white people tell you about

their

Cherokee grandmother, been offered sex because you might be Indian.

Six says,

always remember that my skin is better than your skin.

Seven says,

*you are not Indian unless you grew up on a reservation before 1940, you
are*

a full-blood, your hair is jet black, thick, and straight.

Eight says,

*you are not Indian if you have never wished that you weren't, been asked
if you could make it rain, held your tongue when you wanted to explode.*

Nine says,

always remember that my blood is better than your blood.

Ten says,

*you are not Indian unless you grew up before reservations, you dreamed
with*

Sitting Bull at Greasy Grass, you fell to your knees on the Trail of Tears.

Eleven says,

*you are not Indian if you have never had your Indianness questioned by
another Indian, being told to deny your white mother's blood, been lost*

and found and lost again.

Twelve says,

always remember that you will be never as Indian as me. (62-63)

As can be seen, each time a new voice added to the discussion, the prerequisites of being Indian is becoming more and more inapplicable, improbable, and impossible. As “*you are not Indian unless you grew up before reservations, you dreamed with/ Sitting Bull at Greasy Grass, you fell to your knees on the Trail of Tears.*” Cultural denigration seems to work the opposite way here.

The poem also cynically challenges the authenticity concerns in relation to Indians, both among themselves and as defined by the colonization process. Indians were expected to demonstrate authenticity for the whites for ages now. Being “*a full-blood, your hair is jet black, thick, and straight,*” or being “*asked if you could make it rain*” are only few of the criteria imposed on them. The poem is full of such symbols that became clichés of Indianness and Indian lives. Being “*so drunk*” and having hundreds of people talking about their “*Cherokee grandmother*” are among the many.

The poet adds one for himself, too, making the dialogic nature of the poem more interesting: “*you are not Indian if you have never had your Indianness questioned by/ another Indian, being told to deny your white mother’s blood, been lost and found/ and lost again.*” What Indianness is is an issue yet to be resolved among Indians, too. For the poet, he knows who he is, the words he sends come from his roots.

The Endless Others

guide my days,

medicine the scars
that fill my throat,
give me voice and give me voice,
chant and chant
within my feathered heart.

("Song for the Endless Others" 61)

"The Endless Others," is a common metonym for Indian ancestors who would watch over the ones who are alive and need guidance. According to the poet, they still do the same thing today, and guide him when he needs their help. Moreover, they "medicine the scars/ that fill my [his] throat." The scars can be a metaphor for the language used by the poet, English, which hurts him. But, his poetry presents a clear voice out of a throat cured by them; without which it would not be as powerful. The "feathered heart" is also a metaphor for his emotions and endurance that were strengthened by the ancestors as feathers were believed to hold special power. Hence, the power of Turcotte's poetry comes from his Indian ancestors, land, and people.

Turcotte's re-location of Indianness is rather communal and personal more than it is collective. To articulate Indianness may not be the purpose of writing poetry for Turcotte, but still it seems like a natural outcome of the works he produces. Meaning, he does not write 'about' Indianness, he writes Indian. This helps the re-location of Indianness on a different place than that of the previous poets whose works have been studied here. Turcotte's location of Indianness relates it to the future as well as to the center. In other words, Turcotte's poetry connects Indian identity to time as well as to space.

4.2.4. Sherman Alexie

Sherman Alexie (Spokane and Coeur d'Alene) has established himself as one of the most outstanding poets of American Indian literature in spite of his young age. In fact, he is one of the most exceptional authors of his time in America. His honors include awards from National Endowment for the Arts and the Washington State Arts Commission. He was also cited as "One of 20 Best American Novelists Under Age of 40" by *Granta* magazine in 1996.

Sherman Alexie grew up in Spokane reservation in Washington State and later went to off reservation schools and colleges. His poetry is highly autobiographical and full of his childhood and adolescence memories of reservation and friends and family as well as his recent life. Yet, just as it is the case with other poets studied here, his poems are as communal as they are personal. The forms of these poems are also as traditional as they are innovative. Alexie feels no obligation to follow the basic routes of oral tradition, as he does not try to follow western poetic principles, either. His poems are naturally shaped by their content.

As a reply to a question about why he writes, and the function of poetry in his life he says, "I write to get even. I am constantly in competition with myself, others, and the world. I write so that people will never forget that I think I'm important."⁵ This accumulated passion for life and for writing can easily be observed in his poems, which have an amazing power to survive, endure, continue, and enjoy life. They are almost incredible combinations of anger, pain, humor, wit, irony, sophistication, childhood innocence, and lust for life.

For him the formulation is simple: "Poetry = Anger x Imagination" ("The Unauthorized Autobiography of Me" 20). The power of the words he sends may come from this unique blend. He says, "I sing with everything I have inside of me: pain, happiness, anger, depression, heart, soul, small intestine" ("The Unauthorized Autobiography of Me" 20). All these make him one of the most exciting voices of contemporary American literature today. It seems that his works will be read and studied within the next centuries, too.

Alexie's constantly evolving and fresh narrative style is an instrument to re-locate Indian identity for him as it is an essential way of self-articulation and survival. A major determiner of identity, sense of history, is not only limited to the re-claiming of history and the re-writing of it. History is something that is alive on his skin, history is the living ancestors, and history is what happened to him yesterday.

Alexie is moved by Crazy Horse and Ghost Dancers as he is by the Oscar ceremony where Marlon Brando sent a young Indian woman- Sasheen Littlefeather- to decline his prize. Again, whatever happened is more important than when, and the concept of history does not depend on time. While "Giving Blood," Alexie remembers the blood history, Crazy Horse, and how much blood he himself ends up losing within the 20th century while donating blood even for a taxi ride home to the reservation.

across from the white nurse holding a pen and paper and she
asks me
my name and I tell her
Crazy Horse and she asks my birthdate and I tell her it was
probably

June 25 in 1876 and then she asks my ethnic origin and I tell
her I'm an
Indian or Native American
depending on your view of historical accuracy and she asks me
my religious preference and I tell her I prefer to keep my
religion entirely independent
of my economic activities
...
and we wait together for the results until the computer prints
a sheet of statistics
and the white nurse reads it over a few times and tells me I'm
sorry Mr. Crazy Horse
but we have already taken too much of your blood
and you won't be eligible
to donate for another generation or two. (78)

The poem first concentrates on the dialogic communication between the nurse and the speaker-poet: "asks me/ my name and I tell her." The name he tells to the nurse, however, is an unusual one. Alexie identifies himself with Crazy Horse as both have lost too much of their blood.

Crazy Horse and she asks my birthdate and I tell her it was
probably
June 25 in 1876 and then she asks my ethnic origin and I tell
her . . .

Appearance of a legendary warrior in a 20th century setting in the poet's persona and claiming that his birthday was in 1876, in which The Battle of Little Bighorn took place, are magical realist elements and the poet's play with time. Alexie is also almost making fun of the debate with the definitions of "Indian" and "Native American". Later in the poem there is also an allusion to the Christian church functioning like a business enterprise: ". . . and I tell her I prefer to keep my/ religion entirely independent/ of my economic activities." Therefore, this is not only a poem about history, it is also about religion, and colonial economic structure that can make an Indian sell his blood for a taxi ride home.

Indians have lost a lot during their 500 years of history shared with Euro-Americans, but they have survived. This poem reveals the notion of history for the poet: pain, blood, remembering, and respect for the Indian warriors and ancestors. Alexie while re-claiming history, copes with this agony and anger in an Indian way, with irony and humor. His ironical approach to all these is also apparent in the lines "sorry Mr. Crazy Horse/ but we have already taken too much of your blood." The use of irony is very common in Alexie's poetry; it is also a resistance strategy for him. At a radio interview he says he considers irony as "one of the primary modes of tradition of communication" among Indians and claims that it is "the best defense against colonization."⁶

As Alexie stated in one of his poems, nothing is forgiven and forgotten on Indian land ("Sonnet: Tattoo Tears"). Crazy Horse is one warrior not to be forgotten, the many times broken promise of Andrew Jackson is also remembered and reminded over and over again:

15.

Baby, come make me promises, tell me

you'll love me as long as

the winds blow

the grasses grow

the rivers flow.

("The Native American Broadcasting System" 87)

The irony and sarcasm starting from the first line covers the whole poem. It is obvious that the speaker is sure of the lies that will come from a lover, but still asks for it. The confirmation of his disbelief is the biggest lie told Indians by president Andrew Jackson, that Indian land beyond Mississippi River was not to be touched as long as "*the winds blow/ the grasses grow/ the rivers flow.*" By using these phrases which became a symbol of government lies, Alexie makes sure that they are not forgotten. The reclaiming of collective identity is mostly achieved through these acts of remembrance, no matter how old. Re-writing and re-claiming of history is surely not the only way of re-locating identity.

Language is another important issue in the preservation of identity and it has a place in Alexie's poetry, too. Alexie can only speak a little Salish- his tribal language-, but is aware that it is a crucial part of being Indian. Although he could not manage to learn or remember his native tongue completely, the amount he can speak is still useful when needed:

I do not speak my native tongue. Except that is, for the dirty words.

I can tell you what I think of you in two languages. ("Distances" 18)

The resistance and anger against the use of a colonial weapon, language, is observable here. Alexie, however, can still survive with his own language. Moreover, he can use both the weapons, “I can tell you what I think of you in two languages.” Whichever the way, he expresses a certain consciousness that language loss is identity loss. However, once he was not that ‘aware’ of the importance of preserving his native language- as he reports in his story-poem or poetic story “Translated from the American”:

Agnes drove the senior citizens’ van from powwow to powwow,
watching all of her grandmothers sift into the even motion of earth,
until she came to sit beside me, holding my son, her grandchild,
as we drove west for The Spokane Tribal Celebration.

. . .

“That’s nothing,” she said. “I remember everything.”

“Really?” I asked her. “What’s my son’s name?”

She called him by a word in Salish.

“That’s not his name,” I said.

“It’s the one I gave him.”

“It’s useless,” I said, only half-believing it. Years ago, when Agnes tried to teach me the language, she told me to hold a smooth stone in my mouth, under the tongue. She would say the words for salt, pepper, mother, son, and I would try to repeat the Salish exactly, until my tongue blistered around the stone. Ashamed of my voice when I could not say the words, I would hide for days in the trees,

stealing food from the kitchen in the middle of the night.

“His name is Joseph,” I said.

“White name,” she said.

“He’s half white,” I said. “I thought you remembered everything.”

“I remember you leaving us to be with the Catholics. I remember you coming to visit us with your books of lies, when you told me you could speak German. I remember you were so proud you knew a foreign language. I remember I told you English was your foreign language and you left again.”

“It was college,” I said . . . (20-21)

Alexie’s story or poem as we might also call it, is dialogic in character, filled with interesting moving dialogues with his mother: “‘That’s nothing,’ she said. ‘I remember everything.’/ ‘Really?’ I asked her. ‘What’s my son’s name?’” While telling the reader about the journey to a tribal celebration, Alexie discusses the issues of language, identity, and naming.

When she calls the poet’s son with a Salish name, he reacts, “‘That’s not his name,’ I said,” and gets his answer, “‘It’s the one I gave him’.” As a grandmother, she is trying to give him a Salish name, a Spokane identity just as she tried to give her language to her son when very young: “. . . Years ago, when Agnes/ tried to teach me the language, she told me to hold a smooth stone/ in my mouth, under the tongue.” Alexie, through his mother’s words, presents the awareness that language is a major determiner of identity.

The last couple of lines project certain regret that he gave up on learning his native tongue properly and internalized English as his native language. Alexie gave up on a major weapon against colonization. The poem also discusses how education system through destroying native languages, damages Indian identity severely:

you could speak German. I remember you were so proud you knew
a foreign language. I remember I told you English was your foreign
language and you left again.”

“It was college,” I said . . .

This process of being assimilated by the dominant culture through education could end up his rejection and/or dismissal of his own language and identity forever. Nevertheless, he recovered; but still left partially assimilated by the culture losing his native tongue while being ‘educated’. His debate with his mother is the result of this identity problem, as language is one of the most primary ways of confirmation of it.

Hence, in Alexie’s poetry language is accepted as one of the determiners of Indian identity and as a tool to connect to one’s roots just like the acknowledgement of history. Another vital determiner of identity, religion, is also a subject matter in his poetry. He thinks that Indians do not fit into Christianity, and Christian ideals do not speak for Indians at all. He questions these and the notion of God according to Christianity in yet another poem called “Drum as Love, Fear, and Prayer”:

1.
Drums
make everyone feel
like an Indian.

Drums make
everyone feel
like an Indian.

Drums make everyone
feel
like an Indian.

Drums make everyone feel
like an Indian.

Drums make everyone feel like
an Indian.

Drums make everyone feel like an Indian.

2.

I have more faith
in drums

than I have in the people
who play them

I told her

as she said God

is a drum.

I have more faith

in a small drum

because I can carry it

everywhere I go

I told her

and she said God

is the smallest drum.

...

6.

I have broken

bread with her.

We have prayed together in silent places

where we could hear each other breathe

and in airports and lunchtime restaurants

where nothing wanted to rise above it all

...

These prayers have not been easy, how
do we say Indian prayers in English
and which God will answer? Is God red
or white? Do these confused prayers mean

we'll live on another reservation
in that country called Heaven? (68-71)

The first part of the poem is like an entrance to a ceremonial song-chant. The rhythm through the lines can almost be heard; it is as if a drum is accompanying the poem, blurring its borders and turning it to a chant:

Drums
make everyone feel
like an Indian.

Drums make
everyone feel
like an Indian.

Drums make everyone
feel
like an Indian.

The division of lines changing with each stanza, and the minimal use of words in each line give the poem its rhythm, song-like character. The second part is also in a

song form reporting the discussion the poet had with his partner about drums, God, and Christianity, and his confusion as a practitioner of Christianity but being Indian. "I have more faith/ in drums" he says, and she replies ". . . God/ is the smallest drum." However, the confusion continues considering the opposition between the two religions: "We have prayed together in silent places/ where we could hear each other breathe."

Indian religion is part of the everyday culture of Indian tribes and Christian ideals and prayers do not fit into this life, let alone the language issue that alienates an Indian: "do we say Indian prayers in English/ and which God will answer? . . ." Christians pray in silence and in silent places where Indians pray along with drums and song-prayers.

All in all, missionary activities in reservation areas caused more confusion and debate among Indians than nothing more: "Do these confused prayers mean/ we'll live on another reservation/ in that country called Heaven?" Alexie, by asking the right questions points to the idea that Christianity is another source of colonial destruction for Indian lives and aspirations; and giving up on tribal religions bring nothing but confusion and unrest to the Indian soul. Christianity will not/does not bring spiritual comfort to Indians. On the contrary, it brings resentment in the end while considering the "Things (for an Indian) to Do in New York (City)":

I want to kill a busload of children

because of their parents' religion

and I want to build a hate machine

in the middle of Times Square

and call it a piano. I want
to start a circus in Manhattan

and call it a church. I want to hail
a mounted policeman and call him God. (125-26)

The poem is not only a criticism of the ways of institutionalizing Christianity but also of its' becoming the institution of colonial domination, therefore deviating from being the center for religion and becoming a circus: “. . . I want/ to start a circus in Manhattan/ and call it a church.” Christianity lets the church become its ultimate power holder and narrowing the paths of human spirit. Indian souls would never fit such an institutionalized religion and religious practice accompanied by a hate machine called “piano” which is played along the prayers that disseminate hate and intolerance in churches: “and I want to build a hate machine/ in the middle of Times Square/ and call it a piano . . .”

All these create a certain degree of aversion in an Indian: “I want to kill a busload of children/ because of their parents' religion.” Another institutionalized way of domination on the colonized is the police department for Alexie who resists this colonial oppression through writing against it.

As for the land issue, Alexie has a simple solution to offer:

Let's begin with this: America.
I want it all back
now, acre by acre, tonight. I want
some Indian to finally learn

to dance the Ghost Dance right
so that all of the salmon and buffalo return
and the white men are sent back home
to wake up in their favorite European cities.
("Bob's Coney Island" 138)

While greeting the Ghost Dancers and the Ghost Dance religion after a century, he claims that the pain that has been felt by many Indian tribes and many Indians for centuries now can only be healed by giving back what has been taken from them by force and treachery- their land. Salmon and buffalo are used as symbols of Indian lifeways here, and their return means the return of tribal lifeways and cultures. He is aware that it is impossible to send all the whites back and make them ". . . wake up in their favorite European cities," but maybe, if "some Indian to finally learn/ to dance the Ghost Dance right," things might change. Buffalo and salmon may return, whites may disappear, and the good days may come back.

White invasion of Indian lands brought nothing but disaster to Indian tribes; and it seems that after centuries not much have changed. Here, Alexie writes against this colonial invasion and domination and underlines that the loss of land caused much of the destruction of Indian lifeways and identity.

Another major determiner of Indian identity, tribal affiliation is also very visible in Alexie's poetry. His tribal bond is not like the expression of his devotion to his roots. His tribal identity, his Indian identity is what he is, and in his poetry he seems to enjoy it, cherish it, and embrace it without the concern of losing it. He is a Spokane and C'oeur d'Alene Indian, grew up on the Spokane reservation, and his poetry is full of his

memories and stories of his life on the rez and later in the city. The following poem is a story told unfolding his reservation memories and also revealing of his frequent use of humor and irony, a part of Indian traditional way of communication just like the stories themselves.

at the Spokane Tribal Centennial Celebration but Seymour is a
goddamned genius
and our native hero so he walks in first with an empty bottle
right past the guards
and then I take a big drink from a fifth in our car
outside the gate
but I don't swallow and I walk past the guards smiling a tight-lipped
smile holding the whiskey in
and then I spit it into Seymour's empty bottle and Lester follows me
doing the same thing
and after quite a few trips we have a complete fifth and I guess
you could say
we won again but it was only Indians versus Indians and no one
is developing a movie script
for that and it's too bad because I think Seymour looks exactly
like Charles Bronson
when he was younger and still multi-ethnic instead of a little man
with a big gun
but Seymour hates everything white so I don't tell him what I think

and we're too busy selling
drinks from our bottle for a dollar a shot which is good money
which is the kind
Seymour calls Crazy Horse Money and it means we can do
whatever we want
and twenty dollar bills and hips
and stick game all mean the same thing
until we begin to sober up
and go broke which is exactly when Seymour decides to fight every
white man
at the powwow
("No Drugs or Alcohol Allowed" 67)

The story is about a formal celebration of the Spokane tribe. Alexie, by using the character "native hero" Seymour and a humorous and ironical attitude towards it- "I think Seymour looks exactly/ like Charles Bronson/ . . . / but Seymour hates everything white so I don't tell him what I think"-, writes against the colonial subordination putting them into poverty: "and go broke which is exactly when Seymour decides to fight every/ white man/ at the powwow."

The "Crazy Horse Money" made and spent in the event can be an allusion to the bravery of Crazy Horse and may also refer to a gift by Crazy Horse as it is not made through hard work. The term is also heteroglossic, being borrowed from the language of Spokane youngsters and Seymour himself.

One of the most powerful and frequently performed traditions for Indian authors is storytelling. Alexie, in that sense, is not only a modern day storyteller he is a master of Indian storytelling tradition as it lives today. His stories are full of energy, vibration, humor, anger, and surprise. He does not reproduce the old ways, but does not totally free himself away from them, either. Most of his poems are like stories to be told, to be performed in the form of both prose and poetry. The following is also another story told by him, which is not so funny this time.

January

New Year's Eve, out with my girlfriend and ten other friends,
everybody white except me. We were all in the pizza place in
Reardan, just off the reservation, when the door opened and this
Indian stranger walked in, just blasted, and sat at the counter. He
gave me a nod and smiled, one Indian to another.

Then my girlfriend leaned into the middle of the table and we
all leaned into the middle of the table to hear what she had to say.

"I hate Indians," she said.

*

Oh, my first brief love. ("Year of the Indian" 11)

The racial discrimination and hatred even coming from an ignorant friend is hurtful and makes it a disturbing story to tell, but the poet chooses to re-tell it as each time it is read stories heal, and hurt less when they are let out from our chests. While criticizing and picturing racial discrimination on Indians, the poem/story at the same time provides a certain degree of healing for its teller. Alexie articulates the white

hatred as blatantly as possible in his friend's words "I hate Indians"; the feeling those words would leave an Indian with on a New Year's Eve is left to the imagination of the reader. The colonial discourse of othering, 'us' and 'them' is displayed and criticized openly.

The same sentence is also heteroglossic. The slight disorder of the lines, and the gap between the friend's comment on Indians and the poet's reaction also show the unrest, the feeling of unfitting among white friends and the white environment for the poet. The daily discriminations and racial harassments in urban areas are presented through a story, the tradition that can hardly survive in such an environment.

Tribal ceremonies and traditions that continue to live today also have their places in Alexie's poetry just like the stories, and they are an essential part of re-defining Indian identity today. Powwows- social gatherings where different dances are performed through music- are occasions of uniting tribal members and even members from other tribes and white visitors on reservations today. It is a commonly shared tradition by almost all Indian tribes. Today, powwow festivals are being held on different areas in America and Canada, and Indians from all sorts of different tribes and white visitors gather in them throughout the year. Alexie reports many powwow stories and memories in different poems. "Spokane Tribal Celebration, September 1987" is an example to this as well as to the storytelling tradition. Seymour, again, is in the leading role.

This is the first powwow I
've been to in five years, night
falling like an old blanket

on shoulders of turquoise women
selling sawdust jewelry and dreams.
...
... "My dreams,"
Seymour says, "are just like fry bread. I
heat them up and they rise." He wraps his blanket
close to his body, dancing around the campfire.
Someone says, "Seymour is sure drunk tonight.

He thinks he's a goddamn Indian." ... (74)

The symbiosis between the nature and Indians can be observed in the simile between the ". . . night/ falling like an old blanket/ on shoulders of turquoise women." The night softly covers the women providing them comfort and security during the powwow. Seymour searches for the same comfort and security in his dreams and blanket: "Seymour says, his dreams 'are just like fry bread. I/ heat them up and they rise.' He wraps his blanket/ close to his body, dancing around the campfire." Alexie resists the colonial subordination with these lines underlining that there is always hope and belief in Indians, they hold onto life with their dreams and traditions.

However, others are not that positive. There is certain agony and feeling of loss in terms of being Indian as reservation men are aware that their lives have changed and they have been losing their identities along with them. Even though they live on a reservation and still carry on most of their traditional ceremonies as much as possible, the dreams are lost. Today, an Indian dancing around a powwow fire surrounded by his

dreams and a blanket can only be drunk acting 'like' an Indian for them. Hence, Alexie displays a certain sorrow and awareness for the feeling of loss in the preservation of identity; although there is hope, as Seymour becomes an allegory for it. One of the ways is holding onto the blankets, dreams, and powwows. Blanket is a metaphor for Indian lifeways, "dreams" for Indian spiritual power, and "powwow" is a symbol of Indian traditions. Through holding onto these, there is a chance of survival. Seymour's dialogues and the reply from an Indian man are also dialogic, just like the poet's addressing the reader saying, "This is the first powwow I/ 've been to in five years . . ."

Just like the powwows, dance is a significant part of Indian cultures, and is a part of Indian identity. It is used to express different feelings like grief and mourning, and may also be used as a means of prayer, expression of gratitude in harvesting ceremonies, or on special occasions. Owl dance is one of the dances performed during powwows. Alexie informs us on this tradition and tells a story of it in his poem "Owl Dancing with Fred Astaire."

During a traditional Native American owl dance, the woman asks the man to dance. He is not supposed to refuse. However, if he does refuse, he must pay the woman whatever she wants and then tell the entire crowd at the powwow exactly why he refused.

1.

I met the Indian woman who asked Fred Astaire to dance.

He had politely refused her offer.

"He was so charming," she said, "even when he rejected me.

But I kept wishing it was an owl dance."

2.

An owl dance is simple: two steps with your left foot forward,
one step with your right foot back, all to the beat of a drum

There are Indian men who have never been asked to owl dance.

Alone in the powwow crowd, these men tap their feet lightly

along with the drums. They sing softly under their breath.

Perhaps they secretly wish they were Fred Astaire. (78-79)

An element of Indian culture is perfectly mixed with the same element in the dominant one in this poem. Owl dancing is liberating for women and gives both women and men a chance to exchange sides in such social relationships while at the same time providing an entertainment for everyone. The dance is one of the confirmations of continuance for a tribe.

This time Alexie imagines Fred Astaire, a white figure, in an owl dance, in Indian culture, instead of the usual opposite case. The telling of an owl dance story by relating it to Fred Astaire, a well-known popular dancer, shows that Alexie, while re-locating Indian identity, does not exclude the dominant culture with everything in it. Therefore, the preservation of Indianness is possible while living 'in' the colonizer's culture through practicing traditions.

Humor is a part of Alexie's poetry as well. The idea of Fred Astaire waiting to be asked to dance in an owl dance is humorous enough, however, there is more for other men: "There are Indian men who have never been asked to owl dance./ Alone in the

powwow crowd, these men tap their feet lightly/ along with the drums. They sing softly under their breath.” The style of the poem in couplets also remind the two steps of owl dance, which at the same time is an example to genre blurring with its prose like narrative and dialogues in it.

Alexie is aware that just as making the language, traditions, and history a part of Indian identity, it is also necessary to write against the stereotyping of Indians for a proper location of Indianness within the 21st century. The following poem “Scalp Dance by Spokane Indians” criticizes the white stereotypes imposed upon Indians, and also displays an example to the white exploitation of Indian cultures instead of showing respect for and appreciation of them.

Before leaving Spokane Falls, Paul Kane dropped down to the nearby village of Kettle Falls to paint his now-famous “Scalp Dance by Spokane Indians” in oils on canvas. Its central figure, a woman who had lost her husband to the Blackfeet, whirled around a fire swashing and kicking in revenge a Blackfoot scalp on a stick. Behind her, eight painted women danced and chanted, as did the rest of the tribe to the beat of drums.

-from **The Spokane Indians: Children of the Sun** by

Robert H. Ruby and John A. Brown

Always trying to steal a bit of soul, you know? Whether it be poetry or oils on canvas. They call themselves artists but they are really archeologists.

Really, that's all any kind of art is.

And who am I, you ask? I'm the woman in the painting.

. . .

. . . the artist, Paul Kane, painted me

from memory. He saw me at Fort Spokane, even touched his hand to my face as if I were some caged and tame animal in a zoo.

"I need to memorize that curve," he said.

In fact, I have never shared tipi and blanket with any man.

When Paul Kane touched me I struck him down and only the hurried negotiations of a passing missionary saved me from Kane's anger. But, far from that, I am also a healer, a woman who reserves her touch for larger things.

. . .

You must also understand that we treated Paul Kane well even as he conspired to steal. Some sat still for his portraits and didn't smile because Kane insisted they remain stoic. That was his greatest mistake. Our smiles were everything; our laughter created portraits in the air, more colorful and exact than any in Kane's work.

I have seen all his paintings and Kane never let us smile. When you see me now in that painting, dancing with the scalp, you must realize that I didn't have a husband, that I never danced without a smile, that I never sat still for Kane.

That is the truth. All of it. (15)

The first line of the poem summarizes the colonial interference with Indian lives, “Always trying to steal a bit of soul, you know? . . .” White Americans visiting Indian villages and reservations are solely after ‘taking’ something from them. With everything they take, they move away some of the sacred Indian souls along with it. The quotation from a book on Spokane Indians in the beginning of the poem, and the painting described in the book are intertextual elements composing the reason for Alexie’s poem-story-reply. The quotation is also revealing of a typical white gaze and stereotyping of Indians as savages with strange habits. The woman whose husband was reportedly killed is pictured as: “*whirled around a fire swashing and kicking in revenge a Blackfoot scalp on a stick.*”

However, it turns out that it was not the story. Alexie uses the first person narrative making the poem dialogic, in a dialogue with the artist, Paul Kane, and the reader as well: “And who am I, you ask? I’m the woman in the painting.” Moreover, by giving voice to the woman, Alexie does not only alters the stereotype severely but also lets the subaltern speak for itself: “must realize that I didn’t have a husband, that I never danced/ without a smile, that I never sat still for Kane./ That is the truth. All of it.”

Apparently, the artist constructed his paintings according to the image of ‘savage’ Indians, the image he already had in his mind. The misconceptions and misrepresentation of Indians is an old issue in Indian affairs. Thus, although seemingly it claims the opposite, art in the poem does not reflect; it classifies, works as another tool to strengthen the stereotypes about Indians. Alexie writes against it, as destruction of such stereotypes is crucial for the articulation of Indianness.

Alexie's self-definition is also a reaction to the white gaze. He defines himself as nothing else but an Indian as can also be observed in some of the above quoted poems. But still, he is also a part of the popular culture in America, and the idea of blood quantum to him, just as to many American Indians today, is purely ridiculous. That's why he describes himself with irony and a little sarcasm in his poem "13/16":

2.

It is done by blood, reservation mathematics, fractions:

father (full-blood) + mother (5/8) = son (13/16)

It is done by enrollment number, last name first, first name last:

Spokane Tribal Enrollment Number 1569; Victor, Chief.

It is done by identification card, photograph, lamination:

IF FOUND, PLEASE RETURN TO SPOKANE TRIBE OF INDIANS,
WELLPINIT, WA. (16)

The poem is a cynical reaction to the definition of Indianness by non-Indians. Paradoxically, identity depends on self-definition, not outside description. Alexie writes against the colonizer's definition of Indianness, which is limited to mathematics, numbers, blood quantum, and lamination cards exemplifying the inappropriateness of it: "It is done by identification card, photograph, lamination." The cold, meaningless writing presumably on the back of the card- "IF FOUND PLEASE RETURN . . ." is heteroglossic and also an alienation effect to the issue. For Indians, the definition of Indianness takes a little more than the criteria above. It is a whole different story; it is powwows, fry bread, fancydancing, and dreams for Alexie. In another poem, "The Native American Broadcasting System," Alexie describes himself:

9.

I am the essence of powwow, I am
toilets without paper, I am fry bread
in sawdust, I am bull dung
on rodeo grounds at the All-Indian
Rodeo and Horse Show, I am

the essence of powwow, I am
video games with braids, I am spit
from toothless mouths, I am turquoise
and bootleg whiskey, both selling
for twenty bucks a swallow, I am

the essence of powwow, I am
fancydancers in flannel, I am host drum
amplified, I am *Fuck you*

don't come back and *Leave me*

the last hard drink. I am

the essence of powwow, I am the dream
you lace your shoes with, I am
the lust between your toes, I am
the memory you feel across the bottom
of your feet whenever you walk too close. (85)

Alexie, apparently, is not only fry bread, fancydancing, and dreams but also videogames, bootleg whiskey, and Horse Show. What does he mean then? The single repeated line throughout the poem says, "I am the essence of powwow." Whatever he is or he does, he is Indian in essence as he is the essence of the most 'visible' Indian performance, powwow. Other than this, he is as dirty as "toilets without paper" and as fresh and loved as "fry bread/ in sawdust." He is part of the popular culture as video games but "with braids"- as an Indian-, and at the same time he speaks for the anger of the old Indians "I am spit/ from toothless mouths." He also speaks for the personal dilemmas and tragedies "I am *Fuck you/ don't come back* and *Leave me*" as he does for the human weaknesses and/or primary human drives "I am/ the lust between your toes."

In short, he is a poet speaking for us all, his Indian identity is not an obstacle for him to reach us all. He says, "I am an Indian who is equally at home watching Sponge Bob Square Pants on television and going to Shakespeare plays. I can hang out with a room full of Indian teenagers or around a dinner table with white guy writers. Above all else, I am adaptable. I'm like a platypus – I've developed odd tools for survival."⁷

Although Alexie intensively writes about Indian life on the rez, Indians in the city among white friends, and his immediate and tribal family, his poems are still very much of interest to the white reader. In other words, he is one of the very few Indian poets who could be accepted as mainstream. Thus, while writing on personal issues and articulating communal identity, he manages to develop a unique voice making it an interest to us all. The words he sends speak for all Americans and of us humans.

The re-location of identity is placed near the center of his poetry, and the doors to white popular culture are open- cautiously. Alexie is critical of the dominant culture

as it is critical of his work. His articulation of identity is collective, tribal, and highly personal at the same time. He does not deny his Indian identity, but at the same time is not obsessed with it at all. Being Indian does not prevent him from functioning well in urban America. He says,

I think my whole approach is by and large that people are good, and that each and every person and culture has something valuable to offer. Conversely, I think each person and culture is also full of evil. In the end, I'm a cynical optimist, and it's other cynical optimists in the world who appeal to me. I don't care where they are from.⁸

In other words, he takes advantages of the dominant culture with everything it has to offer, but at the same time holds onto Indian identity as his reason for being alive. In his unauthorized autobiography he says, "Our hope: to give birth to and raise Indian children who love/ themselves. That is the most revolutionary act" ("The Unauthorized Autobiography of Me" 17).

5. CONCLUSION

The issue of identity still continues to be a subject to heavy debates within the beginning of 21st century. The Indian peoples in America offer one of the most outstanding and admirable models of how even after going through the biggest genocide and devastation in world history, still so much dignity and a strong sense of belonging can be preserved. Literature, being one of the major tools of articulating and disseminating this communal- and sometimes collective- identity deserves a closer look should the issue has to be evaluated properly.

American Indian poetry, in that sense, has been a valuable source for this study, which has naturally become a cultural study as well as a literary one since Indian literatures have been an unalienable part of Indian everyday life and culture for centuries. From the early days of European contact to our day, two periods stand out among others in the articulation of Indianness. The first one is from the late 1960s to the 1990s, and the second one is from the 1990s onwards.

Within the first period Indians made a giant move against the acculturation efforts of the government, and made clear that they in fact exist, they have survived, and they are there to continue. Through many activist moves- such as the occupation of Alcatraz in 1969- Indians attracted public attention and developed a common, unified definition of Indianness. They were the 'Indians Of All Nations' as was declared on the Alcatraz Island. In other words, they were the descendants of many nations born and continue to live on the Turtle Island. They were not the same with each other, but they were all completely different from the whites and they did not wish to be alike.

Maybe even more importantly, they were not heathens, wild savages, moccasin wearers, feather carriers, mystic warriors, dark princesses, or ignorant and lazy drunkards. They did not spend all their time dancing in circles or looking mysteriously at the horizon on a horse during the sunset.

The literary movement accompanying Red Power, the Indian Renaissance contributed a great deal to the articulation and location of Indianness for the first time by Indians themselves. Indian poets, writers, and novelists put on paper what hundreds and thousands were trying to articulate in the riots- that they had survived and their time had come. Simon Ortiz in his poem “Time to Kill in Gallup” would say, “It will happen again, cleansing./ The People will rise” (250) referring to the Ghost Dancers- the previous Indian activists-, while Linda Hogan (Chickasaw) would announce the changing times, “but be warned, the moon grows full again/ and roofs of this town are all red” (“The New Apartment, Minneapolis” 263).

Poets of this period wrote from the overall Indian perspective. Therefore, it can be said that Indian poetry after the 1960s spoke for the collective Indian identity, rather than the tribal- or individual. After all, it was time for them to unite; only by this way they could be powerful and be heard.

When it came to the 1990s, the Indian existence in America had been somewhat secured, and there was no need to unite as one to ensure continuance. Indian multiplicity was re-discovered and Indian authors re-defined and re-located Indianness within the grater picture of multicultural America. The Returning the Gift Festival in 1992 was a major contribution to this awareness. This time Indian writers and poets as well as Indian activists did not have to fight their way out to the center and make themselves

visible, but they needed to re-locate Indianness and make clear that Indians are not ‘a people’, they are ‘peoples’. It also became clear that Indian identity could not have a single definition and a single location. Each author had a somewhat different way of expressing his/her tribal and personal identity and this multiplicity.

Many young poets emerged during the 1990s such as Sherman Alexie (Spokane and Coeur d’Alene), Marilou Awiakta (Cherokee), Gloria Bird (Spokane), Kimberly Blaeser (Anishinabe), Mark Turcotte (Chippewa), Daniel David Moses (Delaware), Elizabeth Woody (Navaho, Yakima, and Wasco), and Ray Young Bear (Muscogee). Among them, Sherman Alexie stood out as a leading figure in attracting wider attentions to Indian poetry and Indian literature. These poets were coming from thousands of years of tradition of making and using poetry as an integral part of life as ‘word’ was believed to “carry the power to make things happen” (Lincoln 43).

Hence, poetry- or poetic oral narratives and performances to be more exact- had a different function for Indian tribes. Kenneth Lincoln quotes from A. Grove Day explaining the function of poetry for the Indian:

The Indians made poems for many reasons: to praise their gods and ask their help in life; to speak to the gods through dramatic performance at seasonal celebrations or initiations or other rites; to work magical cures or enlist supernatural aid in hunting, plant-growing, or horsebreeding; to hymn the praises of the gods or pray to them; to chronicle tribal history; to explain the origins of the world; to teach right conduct; to mourn the dead; to arouse warlike feelings; to compel love; to arouse laughter; to ridicule a rival or bewitch an enemy; to praise famous men; to

communicate the poet's private experience; to mark the beauties of nature; to boast of one's personal greatness; to record a vision scene; to characterize the actors in a folk tale; to quiet children; to lighten the burdens of work; to brighten up tribal games; and sometimes, to express simply joy and spirit of fun. (43)

Thus, as demonstrated in the previous chapters, even though most of the poets of the 1990s and 2000s are college educated, they still carry this heritage. Added to the tribal identity so inherent in them, it would not be too far fetched to say that American Indian poetry has been a communal act, as it has been a personal one.

This was not the only distinct quality it offered. American Indian poetry has also been a combination of oral narratives as well as contemporary, personal, and tribal issues. Each poet offered a different combination in different proportions and brought invaluable richness to contemporary American literature.

American Indian poetry does not only offer outstanding qualities in its function and content but also in form; partly because of the influence of oral narratives and mostly because of the talent of the poets constantly trying new forms and questioning and shattering the old ones. In that sense, contemporary American Indian poetry may truly be "the most exciting literature being written in America today" as Dean Rader also thinks (128). Most of the time it seems like it is written to be performed, to be read aloud, rather than to sit quietly on the paper. Sometimes it wants to be heard, danced to, or healed by; and sometimes it tells stories shifting between prose and poetry and surprising the 'audience' once too often. Therefore, it should be seen as not a body of written material but a performance written on paper.

That's why this study demonstrates the idea that offering sound criticisms in this field because of the reasons reminded above is very difficult, and because the ordinary reader- even the academia- is usually foreign to Indian cultures, it is hard especially for us non-Indians to develop a safe route of analysis when it comes to Indian poetry. Consequently, although Western theories from time to time may be helpful in providing terminology for mutual understanding, each might have specific falls and gaps when facing Indian poetry. I find this acceptable and natural as theories developed by a group of civilizations carrying certain common characteristics may not provide a full-scale understanding in evaluating works from totally different civilizations.

To be able to approach contemporary American Indian poetry, until an indigenous theory is developed, we can borrow terminology from the existing theories "cautiously" as Robert M. Nelson also argues.⁹ Otherwise, we cannot refrain from the fallacies of the previous criticism attempts labeling Indians and Indian literatures with a Western gaze instead of hearing what they have to say. When so many cultural and literary differences exist between the two ends, it is easy for any Western minded theory to be inefficient in unfolding such body of work.

However, Sherman Alexie thinks the opposite. He asks "How can you argue that Native American literature needs a new theory when all of its practitioners learned how to write by and have been trained in the very theories you think don't work?"¹⁰ My answer to this is that the inherent communal identity and the storytelling tradition of sending words in each and every Indian author naturally bring up a distinct character that cannot be observed in western literature. Alexie is rightfully concerned that "An indigenous theory would assure that our [their] influences are primarily indigenous. But

as writers and educated people we [they] are influenced by the same people as everyone else— our [their] college professors.”¹¹

The fact that they are college educated, and the contemporary Indian poetry differs from the oral narratives- as it does from the mainstream poetry very often- has been acknowledged many times during this study. To my understanding, an indigenous theory would- and must- welcome these influences and the contemporary nature of Indian literature as well as its indigenous roots, as also discussed in the section called “A Further Analysis.” As can be seen, studying Indian poetry is a challenging task. But, it is equally rewarding considering the immense and refined body of literary work on which there has yet been very little critical work.

The four poets chosen for this study are some of the finest and most innovative and at the same time- even partially- traditional creators of such literature. To be able to see how contemporary American Indian poets re-locate Indianness and articulate Indian identity the poetry of Joy Harjo, Kimberly Blaeser, Mark Turcotte, and Sherman Alexie have been evaluated in detail in this study. While doing this to be able to form a common ground and see their identity locations, their views of history, language, religion, land, tribal affiliation, traditions, their reactions to the stereotyping of Indians, and the ways in which they define themselves have also been examined.

Joy Harjo re-writes and reminds her tribal history and creates a communal consciousness by this way. The issues of language, religion, and re-claiming land are also the concerns of her poetry. They all are essential parts of Indian identity, as without them they cannot continue. The traditions such as dance, powwows, and storytelling

also live in her poetry. Harjo does not only re-tell the old stories she makes new ones as well, continuing the tradition.

As to her self-definition, it is strongly connected to her tribal identity. In other words, her communal identity and personal identity are one. She says, “. . . I was born Indian, female and artist in the Creek Nation. . . ” (“The Psychology of Earth and Sky” 14). Therefore, her re-location of identity is personal, and highly communal more than it is collective. This attitude does not exclude collective Indian identity, which was at the core of her identity placements until the 1990s, but acknowledges the further tribal and personal contribution to it.

For Kimberly Blaeser, the situation is similar but not the same. Blaeser also re-writes her tribal and collective history, and also acknowledges the place of Indian ancestors. She says, “Remembrance wakens./ *I smell the wind for my ancestors.*/ They have not gone” (“Y2K Indian” 130). Just as her ancestors are a part of her life and who she is, her native tongue- Ojibwe- and tribal land- White Earth Reservation- are also the assurances of her Indianness. She uses Ojibwe in her poems and calls Indians- including herself- living off reservation areas as “Absentee Indians.” Just as the land, the language, the ancestors, and traditions that come from thousands of years also have their place in Blaeser’s poetry. Storytelling, powwows, and dance are part of the Indian identity for her. The stereotyping of Indians is strongly altered in her poetry with the use of irony, humor, and even sarcasm.

Blaeser describes herself as Indian, not a mixed blood in identity crisis, or not essentially an Anishinabe alone- although she embraces her tribal identity. Her re-location of identity is more collective than tribal, and still very personal. She defines

and re-locates Indianness in her own way ridiculing the idea of dividing Indians among themselves and according to blood quantum. It is a “madman” who does this (“On the Way to the Chicago Pow-Wow” 12). In that sense, Blaeser’s re-location of identity is closer to that of the identity locations before the 1990s.

As for Mark Turcotte, he has a different stance than that of Blaeser’s and Harjo’s. Turcotte writes about Indian history and American history of the recent times as well, the times we do not see as ‘history’- combining them with his personal and tribal history, and continuing the tradition of noting the important events of present and the past. Just as his tribal past is also his personal history and American history is part of his life, he believes that he carries the power of his tribal language in his blood. Language is a major determiner of identity for him, too.

For Turcotte, religion is also one of the basic components of Indian identity. According to him, even as a child Indians are aware that they do not belong to white religions, or white religions do not belong to them. He knew that there was something wrong with “getting down/ upon his knees/ to pray” (“True Sign” 7). As to the issue of land, he is uneasy about the exploitation of his home reservation area, and reminds that it severely destroys not only the land itself but also the lifeways of people living on it. Tribal affiliation, on the other hand, is how he describes himself and how he is described by his father as a little boy: “*hey Chee-pwa,/ do you see any angels up there, do you see any angels?*” (“Hands” 35).

Some of the Chippewa traditions such as dance, storytelling, the famous trickster Coyote are also part of his poetry and determiners of his communal and personal

identity. Turcotte is a storyteller of his tribe and his life; he usually does not repeat old stories and legends, but makes new ones that mostly appear as self-revelations.

Turcotte's self-definition is both communal- tribal- and personal recognizing the white part of his ancestry. Therefore, his identity re-location is in a manner that centralizes Indianness without ignoring the white existence, both in him and in America. He says, "I also write in a way that expresses who I am, and ultimately I am a product of America as much as my home reservation."¹²

Sherman Alexie, on the other hand, as one of the most acclaimed poets, novelist, and storytellers of his time also has his own way(s) of articulating and re-locating Indianness. For him, history matters, but time does not. He is also aware that language is crucial for the preservation of identity, but he is almost too late to realize this as he has forgotten most of his native tongue- Salish. As to the issue of religion, he is uneasy as well like Turcotte about the incompetence of white religions in Indian lives. For land, he is not only concerned about the exploitation of his reservation land but also all the lands taken from Indians.

Alexie has an inseparable bond to his tribe just as the other poets here- although he says he is "in direct conflict" with his tribe at the moment.¹³ Since his poetry is highly autobiographical, his life in reservation and among tribal friends and relatives constitute a large sum of his poetry. He is aware that words carry special powers, they can make things real; therefore, stories matter: "The best weapons are the stories and every time the story is/ told, something changes. Every time the story is retold, something/ changes . . ." ("Captivity" 99-100).

Humor and irony is also an essential part of Alexie's poetry as it has been a typical Indian way of communication and making art. Here is an example:

My father is an alcoholic. He used to leave us for weeks at a time to drink with his friends and cousins. I missed him so much I'd cry myself sick.

Every time he left, I ended up in the emergency room. But I always got well and he always came back. He'd walk in the door without warning. We'd forgive him.

Years later, I am giving a reading at a bookstore in Spokane, Washington. There is a large crowd. I read a story about an Indian father who leaves his family for good. He moves to a city a thousand miles away. Then he dies. It is a sad story. When I finish, a woman in the front row breaks into tears.

"What's wrong?" I ask her.

"I'm sorry about your father," she says.

"Thank you," I say, "But that's my father sitting right next to you."

("The Unauthorized Autobiography of Me" 24-25)

While writing against the stereotyping of Indians he also uses the same humor and irony accompanied with cynicism.

Alexie's re-location of identity is communal, collective, and yet highly personal. He is not caught up in ethnocentrism; however, every personal expression he has is full of implications of his tribal/communal identity. His self-awareness is also partially a result of the reflection of his awareness of the white society he is also a part of. Alexie re-locates Indian identity to the center within a multicultural environment, and welcomes the white influence on it as well.

Under the illumination of above analysis, it can be said that contemporary American Indian poetry has as much communal voice as it has personal, it carries certain characteristics and function of thousands of years of sending words as well as modern techniques of writing poetry, it also serves as a confirmation of tribal/national survivance and continuance, it is art but still serves to the communal purposes very much so, it is both traditional and non-traditional, and it is the poetry of past, present, and future in form and in content.

When the ethnic map of America is examined from a certain distance, Indian identity seems like possessing a singular color and shape as the usual classification suggests: 'Indians'. However, as we get closer to it, we can see that it is multi-colored, composed of hundreds of different colors, and moving towards the center from the margin- although still slowly.

How come Indian cultures have managed to survive and also flourish onto various directions- especially under strong cultural interventions- is a wonder. Mark Turcotte offers an answer. He thinks Indians have managed to "circle the wagons," they have found ways to adopt white customs to their lives, instead of adopting themselves to the dominant culture and melting in:

As America has invaded “Indian country” (reservations, etc) with things like TV and popular music, I think we are losing much. Still, in reaction to that sense of loss, tribal entities are making a focused effort to counter that “invasion” by creating their own colleges and cultural institutions. In a strange way, Indians have “circled the wagons.” It's also as if Native people have decided to use the tools of the dominant culture (TV, movies, literature, art, commerce like casinos) as a means to express themselves. It is more acceptable now for a young Indian to leave their reservation and move about in America without so much worry of losing their Indian-ness. There is less of the feeling that you have to “turn White” to function in America.¹⁴

It can also be observed that while this identity location is multiplied, it has also changed shape and turned from collective identity articulation to a communal-personal one over the years. Alexie thinks that Indians write about themselves because they need to, as their identity location has not yet been centralized. “No one pays much attention to us as a people, so I think our autobiographical obsessions are a result of that negligence.”¹⁵

American Indian poets as well as the four particular ones chosen here shatter and remake and shatter again the borders of contemporary poetry each day. Art becomes a tool for re-defining identity, re-writing history, re-claiming land, and re-making Indian lives more meaningful as well as serving to individual purpose of the artist. At the same time, Indian art possesses advanced aesthetic competency along with it. Thousands of years of tradition of sending words, believing in the certain power of words, and

showing appreciation and respect for words find their reflections on today's American Indian poetry. It appears to be as one of the major apparatus of multiple re-location of Indian identity within the multicultural America today.

To summarize, today we can talk about tribal/national identities which seem to have replaced the unified articulation of Indianness of the previous decades. Thus, despite of all the relocation, allotment, boarding schools, and acculturation efforts, it can be said that diversity continues.

This dissertation has aimed to see and hear what has been said on the Indian side; not re-define Indianness instead of Indians themselves. Hence, with the hope of opening new horizons to its reader, as it did to its writer, maybe it is best to leave the final words to the true owners of this discussion:

Hank Williams was an Indian,
John Kennedy was not.

Chuck Berry is an Indian,
Michael Jackson ain't.

Street people are Indians,
presidents ain't.

Pancho Villa was an Indian,
Che Guevera was not.

Los Angeles is an Indian,
New York City ain't.

Africa is an Indian,
Europe ain't.

Baseball is an Indian,
football ain't.

Crazy Horse was an Indian,
Custer was not.

Sitting Bull was an Indian,
so were the Indian policemen who killed him.

Poetry is an Indian
journalism ain't and
proper punctuation ain't.

Circles are Indians,
and random lines are Indians.
Straight lines ain't.

Red meat is an Indian,

corn is an Indian,

potatoes are Indians,

fry bread is Indian.

Health food stores try

hard to be Indian.

Living is Indian,

expecting to live forever ain't.

(Roxy Gordon, "Indians" 127-28)

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Notes

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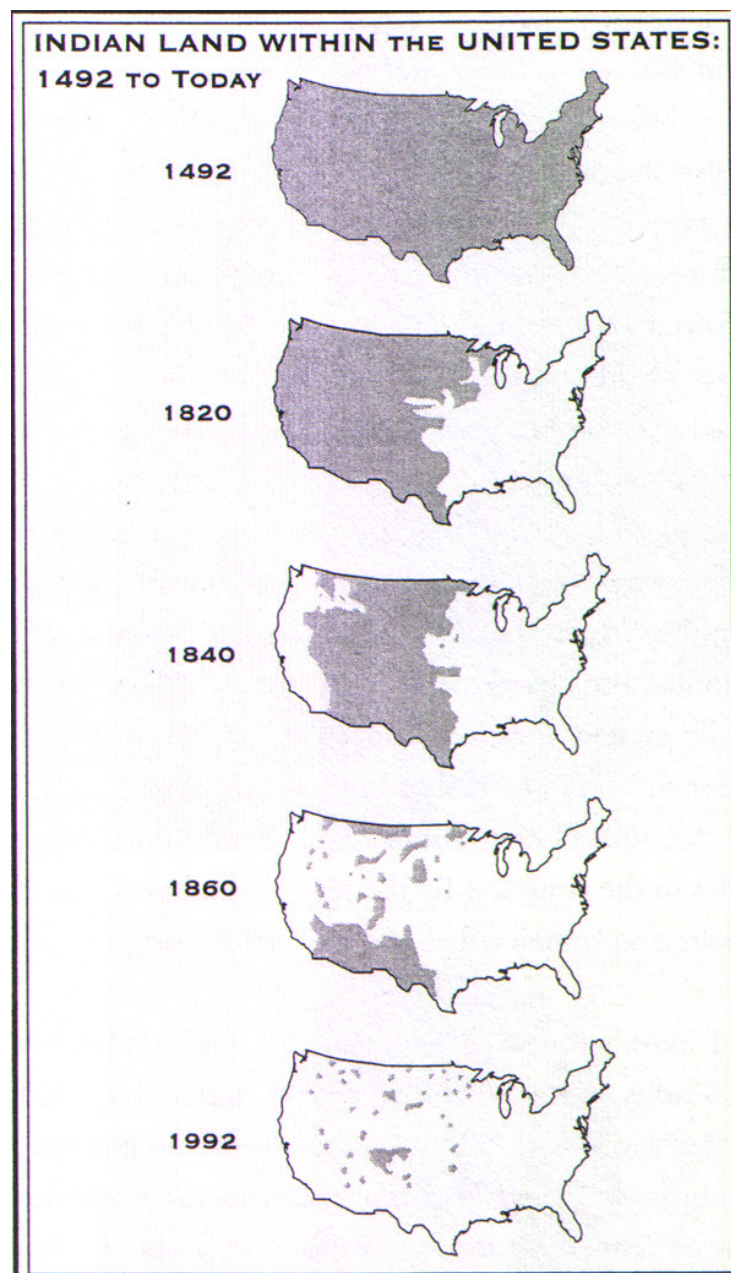
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7. APPENDIX

Figure 1: “The dramatic diminishment of Indian lands.” Map. 19 June 2006. (qtd. in) Vickers, Scott B. Native American Identities: From Stereotype to Archetype in Art and Literature. Albuquerque: University of Mexico Press, 1998. 24.

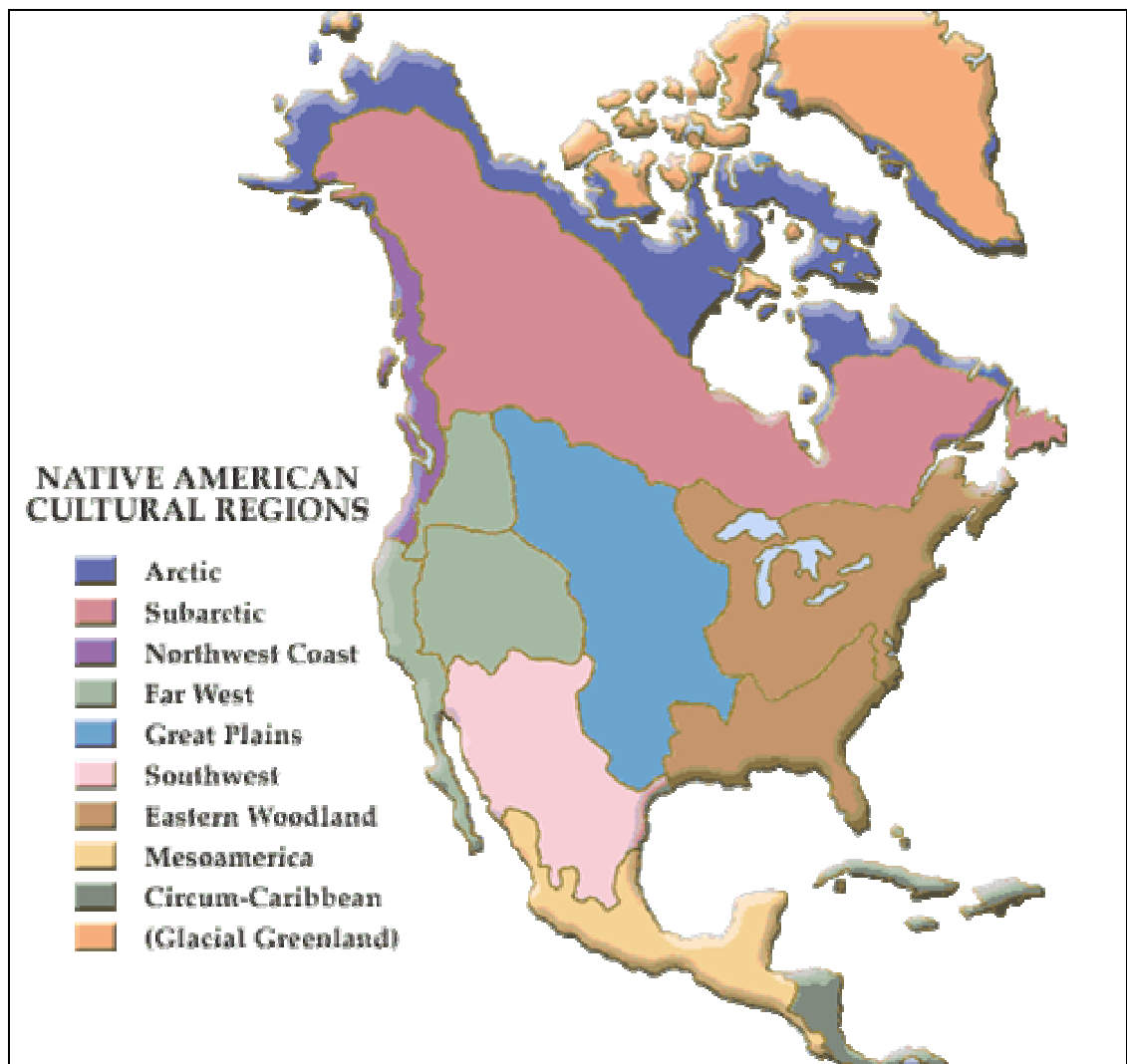


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Figure 3: “Native American Cultural Regions.” Map. 16 June 2006.

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2003, “Placing Race on Canvas: The Representation of African Americans in 19th Century Genre Painting and 20th Century Harlem Renaissance” (with Aycan Çetin). Boğaziçi University American Studies Conference. İstanbul.

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ÖZET

Avrupalıların Amerikayı işgali Kızılderililerin hayatları ve kültürleri üzerinde tamir edilemez zararlar vermiştir. Amerikan hükümeti yüzyıllar boyu Kızılderilileri atalarının topraklarından zorla rezervasyon alanlarına sürerek, çocuklarını yatılı okullara alıp kültürlerini silmeye çalışarak, dini ve geleneksel törenlerini yasaklayarak, ve kızılderili kabile/devletlerle imzaladığı tüm anlaşmaları tek tek ihlal ederek Kızılderililere yönelik başarısız bir politika yürütmüştür. 1960'lı yılların sonunda bu adaletsizliklere karşı Kızıl Güç (Red Power) hareketi doğmuş ve Kızılderililer ilk kez kendi kollektif kimliklerini tanımlamış ve bu kimliği çok kültürlü Amerikan toplumunda konumlandırmışlardır. Yine bu dönemde Kızılderili Rönesansı denilen edebi akımla modern Kızılderili edebiyet ve şiiri gelişmeye başlamıştır.

1990'lı yılların başlarından itibaren Kızılderili edebiyatında yeni bir eğilim gözlenmiş ve kimlik tanımlamaları kollektiften kabile- yani komün- kimliğiyle bireysel kimliğin bir karışımına dönüşmüştür. Ancak bu kimlik tanımlamaları da çeşitlilik göstermekte, bu çalışma için seçilen şairler Harjo, Blaeser, Turcotte ve Alexie kendi yaklaşımlarını ortaya koymaktadırlar. Bu şairler binlerce yıllık sözlü edebiyat geleneğiyle günümüz şiir akımlarını olağanüstü bir karışımla birleştirmişler ve böylece batı kaynaklı teorilerin incelemede kısmen eksik kalacağı hem şekil hem de içerik açısından benzersiz bir tür oluşturmuşlardır.

Sonuç olarak, çağdaş Kızılderili şairler birbirlerinden farklı kimlik konumlandırmalarına sahiptirler; bu yüzden bugünün Amerikasında Kızılderililer için tek bir kimlik tanımından veya konumlandırmasından bahsedilemez. Çeşitlilik hem edebiyatlarında hem de kültürlerinde hala devam etmektedir.

ABSTRACT

The European invasion of America severely destroyed Indian lives and cultures. The United States government led a series of unsuccessful relations with American Indians, forcing them out of their ancestral homelands into reservations, trying to erase their culture in boarding schools, banning their religious and traditional ceremonies, and breaking every single treaty it signed with Indian tribes. These injustices finally led to a more organized movement called Red Power within the late 1960s. The definition and location of Indian collective identity was for the first time done by Indians themselves. The literary movement, Native American Renaissance also appeared during the same period accompanying the riots and giving them a voice.

Within the 1990s American Indian authors celebrated their multiplicity, and articulated a different sense of identity which is more tribal and personal rather than collective. The four poets chosen for this study are Harjo, Blaeser, Turcotte, and Alexie. They adopted the techniques from the oral narratives that were thousands of years old, and at the same time as being mostly college educated urban Indians they used various forms of western poetry. Since this created a unique blend both in form and in content, western theories do not seem completely efficient in providing a full scale understanding for the criticism of Indian poetry today.

In short, contemporary American Indian poets have a multiple way of re-locating Indian identity; therefore, one cannot talk about a single definition of identity for the Indians in today's America. Diversity continues both in Indian literature and in Indian cultures.