

Native American Identity From Past to Present: A *More Perfect Union* Theme

*“We’ve been defined by everyone else and continue to be slandered despite easy-to-look-up-on-the-internet facts about the realities of our histories and current state as a people. . . We have all the logos and mascots. The copy of a copy of the image of an Indian in a textbook. All the way from the top of Canada, the top of Alaska, down to the bottom of South America, Indians were removed, then reduced to a feathered image.”- Tommy Orange, **There There***

Beginning as early as the 1500s, Europeans produced fantastical, exotic images of America’s original inhabitants as a part of the fanciful portrayal of the “New World.” Over the centuries that followed, newspapers, captive narratives, novels, art, photography, movies, and television extended old or even created new stereotypes of Native people. From Columbus’s lumping of the enormous diversity of America’s original inhabitants into the threatening mass label of “Indians,” to the blockbuster Westerns of the 40s and 50s that depicted all Indians as riding horses, living in tipis, wielding bows, arrows, and rifles, and wearing buckskin, fringe, and feathers, Indigenous people have been simplified, animalized, and casted as obstacles to progress. Even as our world becomes more connected and people gradually become more conscious of cultural appropriation, these stereotypes persist, often with harmful consequences for Indigenous people.

This theme challenges the stereotypical and fantastical images and stories of Native people as living in a mythical past or as a pure but vanishing race who are isolated to reservations, far removed from the rest of American society. The books in this theme present Native American identity through the lens of Native writers and Native experiences. These writers speak to the diversity and complexity of Native identity, including: mixed identity; colonial traumas, such as removal and relocation; living in urban spaces; and the way the past informs the present for Native American people, families, and tribal nations.

***Firekeeper’s Daughter* by Angeline Boulley (Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians)**

Firekeeper’s Daughter is a novel about an 18-year-old Ojibwe woman named Daunis Fontaine, a science geek and hockey star, as she grapples with two identities: that of her privileged, white, French-Canadian mother and the Sugar Island Sault tribe of her late father. Daunis is strongly connected to her Ojibwe family, but because she is unenrolled, she does not feel that she belongs anywhere. After the tragic death of her maternal uncle, Daunis is presented with an opportunity to investigate— by becoming a

confidential informant for the FBI—the mystery surrounding his death as well the recent drug overdoses of young people in her community. Daunis moves through different layers of both Ojibwe and white communities of Sault Sainte Marie, Michigan to uncover who is creating and distributing a particular kind of meth wreaking havoc in both communities. As she journeys deeper into these mysteries, Daunis must reconcile her different identities in order to protect her communities, both Native and non-Native.

Firekeeper's Daughter explores how the past impacts the present on micro and macro levels while seamlessly blending traditional Ojibwe stories and language. Personally, Daunis feels the reverberations of her grandparent's racism as they removed her Ojibwe father from her birth certificate, effectively barring her from tribal status. This leaves her floating between two identities, connecting with her Ojibwe heritage on a spiritual level but recognizing the privilege her Fontaine name gives her. On the macro level, *Firekeeper's Daughter* explores how the introduction of per-capita payments on the reservation upsets the balance of privilege maintained by colonial white wealth (exemplified by the wealthy white Fontaine family) while examining how the introduction of meth does not discriminate between the haves and have-nots.

***There There* by Tommy Orange (Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma)**

"But what we are is what our ancestors did. How they survived. We are the memories we don't remember, which live in us, which we feel, which make us sing and dance and pray the way we do, feelings from memories that flare and bloom unexpectedly in our lives like blood through a blanket from a wound made by a bullet fired by a man shooting us in the back for our hair, for our heads, for a bounty, or just to get rid of us." -Tommy Orange, *There There*

Tommy Orange shows the "there" that is still there for Native people who have moved or been relocated to urban places that are filled with popular media's fantastical imaginings of Native identity. *There There* follows a multigenerational cast of twelve characters in and around Oakland, California as they wrestle with the broken alternatives of identity filtered through stereotypical misconceptions but with the power of Cheyenne stories and traditions fragilely held together in the largely colonial world of the urban city. Their lives, identities, and traumas intersect in various ways until they converge at the Big Oakland Powwow.

There There asks what it means to be Native person in a place like Oakland, California, USA. Through the eyes of these twelve, interconnected characters, *There There* grapples with Native identity in a way that acknowledges the confusion and complexities of

understanding oneself as Native in a world of loss, poverty, pain, and disorientation. Each of the characters in this book is “a present-tense” Native person, a mix of absence, loss, pain but with glimmers, shadows, and traces of an ancient heritage that provides a strength and common bond the characters share.

In the prologue, Orange details how Native American identity has been stereotyped into “logos and mascots” in popular culture and “reduced to a feathered image”. The journey of these characters, many of whom have difficulty identifying with their Native heritage, highlights how these stereotypes impact Native people who grow up away from reservations and how their lives contrast with that image.

***The Removed* by Brandon Hobson (Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma)**

Brandon Hobson’s novel *The Removed* finds the Echota family fifteen years after their son, Ray-Ray, was tragically killed at the hands of police. The mother, Maria, struggles to pull her family from their private grief to prepare for a bonfire marking both the anniversary of Ray-Ray’s death and the Cherokee National Holiday, which is the annual celebration of the signing of the Cherokee Nation Constitution in 1839. As she attempts to pull them together, her family struggles silently: her husband Ernest dealing with mental fog caused by the onset of Alzheimer’s; her daughter Sonja romantically fixated on a man with ties to her brother’s death; her youngest Edgar deep in the throes of depression and addiction. The introduction of a foster son, who bears a striking resemblance to Ray-Ray and seems to keep Ernest’s mental fog at bay, shifts the family from their grief in startling ways.

The Removed presents the Echota family as existing in two worlds: one of the Cherokee spiritual world, with all of its meaning, stories, and practices; and the other, a world outside of that culture and tradition. The seamless blending of the Cherokee spiritual world into the story of the Echota family provides a powerful framework to examine the aftershocks of trauma on family and identity, to seek the strength of what once was as well as justice for what has been taken. After a suicide attempt, Edgar finds himself in the Darkening Land, the place between life and death, directly reckoning with his past and its impact on his present by fighting the treacherous character, Jackson Andrews—an evocation of Andrew Jackson who was the originating force behind the trauma of Cherokee removal and the Trail of Tears—the forced removal by the U.S. government (1830 to 1850) of an estimated 100,000 indigenous people from their homes. The story of the Echota family travels between their own recollections of Ray-Ray’s death and the voice of their spiritual ancestor Tsala, who tells his own story of being murdered for refusing removal. The intertwined voices of the living present and spirits who are removed brings the reader into the coming and going of death, tradition, and trauma as

the Echota family seeks connection to those who are gone and justice for what has been taken from them.

***Bad Indians: A Tribal Memoir* by Deborah Miranda (Ohlone Costanoan Esselen Nation)**

“Story is the most powerful force in the world... It is a river where no gallon of water is the same gallon it was one second ago. Yet it is still the same river. It exists as a truth. As a whole. Even if the whole is in constant change. In fact, because of that constant change.” -Deborah Miranda, *Bad Indians*

The only mixed-genre book in the series, Deborah Miranda’s *Bad Indians* tells a story of California missions that is rarely told—a story of massacre, child abuse, stolen land, and shattered cultures. In telling this story, *Bad Indians* critically examines the effects of missionization on Native sovereignty, community, and identity in California. By mixing family memoirs, personal reflection, poetry, newspaper clippings, and other historical sources, Miranda weaves the past and present together into a non-linear story—both personal as well as tribal— that indicts the brutalization and attempted destruction of a Native tribe in California, first, at the hands of the Spanish colonizers and, second, the United States government. *Bad Indians* displays the mutually constitutive relationships of stories, memory, identity, and survival.

Miranda pulls no punches in mapping the bridges between her family’s and tribe’s past and present, including violence in both. Descriptions of violent forms of “disciplining” Native children in order to eradicate their identity and way of life, beliefs, and practices as well as documents from eighteenth and nineteenth century mission friars that demand Native parents employ the harshest discipline on their children are punctuated by stories of the physical abuse Miranda’s father doled out to his son with a belt: “The arc of leather, sharp edges of cured hide, instrument of punishment coming from two hundred years out of the past.”

In the mode of contemporary Native memoirists, Miranda seeks to correct the record, to provide an “antidote to the lies,” “to create a space where voices can speak after long and often violently imposed silences.” *Bad Indians* does more than just tell the truth though as it links memory and historiography to survival and identity in a way that is both personal for the author as well as communal for the Ohlone Costanoan Esselen Nation, providing a hopeful view of the courage to truly challenge and overcome the traumas of the past.

***The Round House* by Louise Erdrich (Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians)**

Louise Erdrich's novel *The Round House* closes out our theme with a different type of coming-of-age story. Told in past perspective, an adult Chippewa man named Joe Coutts narrates his childhood before and after the brutal sexual assault and attempted murder of his mother, which abruptly pushes him into maturity. Joe wrestles with his identity through his search for justice—justice for his mother and his community and an answer to what justice means for Native people and for himself.

Joe's father is a tribal judge, and the law is supposed to protect people from harm and provide justice when wrong is done. For Native people, the law is often the cause of harm and an impediment to justice. Joe's mother was assaulted near the sacred round house, which is on reservation land and under the jurisdiction of tribal courts, but the suspect is white and US courts have decided that tribes cannot prosecute non-Native people. A federal prosecution is possible, but the assault might have occurred on a strip of state park land, which means the state would have to step in. When 13 year old Joe learns that it is unlikely that the accused will be charged at all, he is thrust into his own quest for justice and the meaning of justice for Native people.

The sacred round house is both the scene of the crime as well as the conceptual heart of the novel. The round house is built to model and honor the buffalo who once provided shelter to Nanapush, a hero from traditional Chippewa stories. The round house was built "to keep their people together and to ask for mercy from the Creator, since justice was so sketchily applied on earth," but even this sacred place of protection and justice proves tragically vulnerable.

A more intimate look at the profound effect of trauma on identity, especially Native identity, *The Round House* acknowledges the impact continual injustice, religious persecution, and sexual violence has on tribal communities, but also how these impact an individual's sense of self-worth and meaning. As a tribal judge, Joe's father, Bazil, serves as a model of the possibility of legal protection and justice for Native people. Joe begins the novel idolizing his father, believing him to be a beacon of justice in the community. As Joe matures, he begins to question the system his father works in, unsure if he is fighting for Native rights or simply upholding the system which oppresses them.

For Further Reading

Ford, Kelli Jo. *Crooked Hallelujah*.

Grover, Linda LeGarde. *The Road Back to Sweetgrass*.

Jenson, Toni. *From the Hilltop*.

Jones, Stephen Graham. *The Only Good Indians*.

Van Alst, Theodore C. Jr. *Sacred Smokes*.

Verble, Margaret. *Cherokee America*.

Wagamese, Richard. *Indian Horse*.

Weiden, David Heska Wanbli. *Winter Counts*.

Credits

This program is part of the National Endowment for the Humanities' A More Perfect Union initiative. This initiative encourages projects that explore, reflect on, and tell the stories of our quest for a more just, inclusive, and sustainable society throughout our history.



“Native American Identity From Past to Present” was developed by Dr. Brian Burkhart. Dr. Burkhart is the Interim Director of the Native Nations Center and an Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Oklahoma, where he facilitates tribally-directed and tribally-engaged research, while focusing on Native American environmental philosophy in his own research and writing. He is a citizen of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, a Southern powwow singer, Cherokee hymn singer, and classic country crooner.

