Doing the Good Work:

First Americans Decolonizing the Mind with Performance Arts

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Doing the Good Work:

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Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o's theory of decolonizing the Indigenous mind and his decolonial storywork, focused on "fight back, creative culture" through the performing arts genre, parallels the modern North American Indian experience of continued colonization in the United States and illuminates the decolonial power of contemporary First American artistic and literary productions. Assimilation tactics by the European American hegemony, such as the establishment of federal boarding schools for Native children to teach the English language and weaken tribal community relations, perpetuates acculturation to the settler's culture and ensures Indigenous erasure. *Distant Thunder*, an all-Native musical performed in 2022 at the First Americans Museum in Oklahoma City, utilizes the performing arts genre to subvert European American language imposition by spotlighting Indigenous language preservation techniques, emphasizing the American Indian oral tradition, and paying tribute to place-based identity.

Signature of Investigator ______ Jordan Elizabeth Traut ________ Date___8/3/2022__

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in some very small way.

I. Introduction

On December 31st, 1977, Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o was arrested and imprisoned in a maximum-security facility by his government for over a year after writing and producing the play *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (translated into English by the author, himself, as "I Will Marry When I Want") in his Native language of Gikuyu. His official charge was engaging in "unspecified 'activities and utterances...dangerous to the good Government of Kenya'" (Wilkinson 613). In her critical work "A Writer's Prison Diary: Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o's *Detained*," Jane Wilkson, author of *Talking with African Writers*, examines how Wa Thiong'o wrestles with the surviving cultural imperialism in Kenya and across Africa long after the age of physical colonization while in jail. His strategies of challenging and subverting the continued cultural colonization of Africa, included in both his theoretical research and theatrical art offer an established critical lens through which one can examine how North American Indians might articulate the continued colonization of the New World. Wa Thiong'o's notion that the settler culture instills silence, fear, and shame in Native peoples to erase Indigenous culture through mental warfare can be illuminated both in African history and the history of the Americas and modern lived experience[1].

Wa Thiong'o considers how the relentless British settler culture continued its dominance in an independent Kenya through a "'culture of silence and fear,'" which was established and

[1] It is important to highlight that while the insidious effects of African and North American colonization share many similarities, Africa was physically decolonized beginning in the 1950s. North America has never intentionally decolonized in a similar way, and the descendants of European settlers continue to live and hold official power in the countries (Canada, the United States, and Mexico) their ancestors established on Indigenous lands across the continent.

reinforced when the subjugated Native peoples were punished for their traditional ways. A few generations later, Native peoples free of physical colonization, are still carrying the trauma from those cultural bans. They are still taught to be ashamed of those traditional ways of life through remembering the pain they brought their ancestors (Wilkinson 615). The phenomenon of a younger generation recalling the physical and emotional pain of an older generation through the collective cultural memory is called intergenerational or historical trauma.

According to Natalie Avalos Cisneros' article "Indigenous Visions of Self-Determination: Healing and Historical Trauma in Native America," intergenerational trauma is "a form of prolonged or chronic grief resulting from forms of genocide, such as, settler state polices of extermination, removal, and forced assimilation" compounded over many generations (Avalos Cisneros 9). However, Wa Thiong'o declares there is another culture working against the settler's one, which has an "equally long history" and is called 'fight-back, creative culture'" (qtd. in Wilkinson 615). It is a culture of resistance whose original sources according to Wa Thiong'o, "are to be found in the traditional Ituika festivals of music, dance, poetry and theatre that were enacted every twenty-five years" and ultimately banned by the British imperial powers in the region (Wilkinson 615). The festival was a "ceremony transferring power from one generation to the other" and served as both a historical and popular "communal renewal of the struggle of the famous Iregi generation against the dictatorial regime of the legendary King Gikuyu" (Wilkinson 615). By participating in fight-back, creative culture, Native communities can work toward healing from the most violent aspects of colonization and restoring their self-determination through decolonization.

Wa Thiong'o acknowledges how the production and performance of his show, *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (I Will Marry When I Want), threatened the lingering settler culture by empowering the

fight-back, creative culture. Wa Thiong'o's Indigenous storywork marked, in his own words from his prison cell, "'the true beginning of my education" (Wa Thiong'o, *Detained* 76). Utilizing a decolonial approach rooted in the traditional patriotic dance and theater of his Native people, Wa Thiong'o "rediscovered the creative nature and power of the collective work," (*Detained* 76). He incorporated these traditional Gikuyu elements into his work to revolutionize modern performance arts in Kenya and stir inspiration throughout the tribal world.

Across the globe, Indigenous peoples, negotiating between the imposed settler culture and their traditional culture, are calling attention to the fact that their voices are being silenced and excluded from their modern societies at all levels: political, social, economic, scholarly, artistic. In the book, *Decolonizing Research: Indigenous Storywork as Methodology*, published in 2019, Canadian and Australian Native researchers shine a light on the academic structures that relegate their traditional forms of teaching, learning, writing, reading, and identity expression in literature and scholarship to "the realm of myth and legend" (Archibald 1-17). It is this colonial attitude that, in Wa Thiong'o's Kenya, gets writers arrested, and, in the United States, gets writers discredited, ignored, or superficially glorified in ways that lead to no real change in Indigenous life circumstances. The obvious cultural ramification is Indigenous erasure.

There are serious psychological consequences for individuals who find their society is erasing them from the narrative. The cost of poor or no authentic representation for any minority population within any larger society's discourse is identity loss, both within that larger society but also often within the minority community. In 2015, Peter A. Leavitt, Rebecca Covarrubias, Yvonne A. Perez, and Stephanie A. Fryberg published their study on how representation in

American media impacts the self-identity of Indigenous North Americans[2] in the *Journal of Social Issues*. Entitled "Frozen in Time: The Impact of Native American Media Representations on Identity and Self-Understanding," the research asserts the media "plays a substantial role in the way social groups" understand themselves and are understood by others (Leavitt 39). Native Americans are rarely represented in American discourse and often lack the social, economic, or political capital to challenge poor representations when they do appear in the media. According to the study, this invisibility in the media "limits the ways in which Native Americans understand what is possible for themselves and how they see themselves fitting in to contemporary domains…of social life" in the United States (Leavitt 39).

In her analysis of the "Frozen in Time" study's findings, Harvard University's Dr. Farah Qureshi asserts Native Americans experience a psychological phenomenon called "relative invisibility," and are pigeon-holed into stereotyped cultural groups in the eyes of the modern hegemonic American society (Qureshi). She defines "relative invisibility" by explaining how traditional discourse talks about Indigenous American populations in terms related to the past. The felt implication is that Native Americans are extinct, their culture never evolved past "the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries" when some tribal nations were migrating along the midwestern regions, living in teepees, dressing in clothing they manufactured themselves, and hunting buffalo (Qureshi). This portrayal is additionally offensive and limiting because it fails to acknowledge the over five hundred modern, independent, and federally recognized tribes spread

[2] Identifying any Indigenous person or population using English-language terminology (versus using Native languages) is problematic. There are arguments made for and against each identifier. Therefore, I will use a variety: Native, Native American, American Indian, Indigenous, First American. It is always best to identify a person as an individual, using their name and tribal or Native Hawaiian Organization affiliation(s) and/or membership(s) when known.

across the continental United States, Hawaii, and Alaska, a majority of whose ancestry is not reflective of the midwestern Plains Indian iconography.

The real-world impact on First Americans has a high cost and is paid in human life, however. In the western anthropological tradition, “anomie” is the term utilized to describe an individual’s inner social and moral confusion when their culture loses value and erodes (Nanda 12-15). Native Hope, an Indigenous grassroots organization focused on empowering the Native Voice in contemporary social discourse, explains the broader sociopolitical ramifications of anomie in their 2017 article entitled, “The Native American Identity Crisis and the Rise of Suicide.” As the title grimly suggests, the Indigenous community’s struggle to maintain its self-identities has resulted in a spike of “destructive crises for Native Americans” today (“The Native American…”). According to the article, Robert G. McSwain, acting Director of the Indian Health Service, informed Congress in 2017 that the suicide rate for adolescent Indigenous males between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five is “four times higher than the national average” (“The Native American…”). Also mentioned in Native Hope’s article was the 2014 *Report to Congress on the Social and Economic Conditions of Native Americans*. In it, the National Center for Health Statistics reported data which demonstrated that the suicide rate for Native American females “of all ages” jumped by eighty-nine percent from 1999 to 2014. This is the largest increase for any American population ever reported in the history of the country (“Report to Congress…”).

As Qureshi and the original study’s authors emphasize, there are serious psychological consequences for individuals who find that their society has attempted to and often succeeded in erasing their cultural meaning-making structures and is replacing them by force. This erasure strips them of many meaningful tools to construct their own actualized identity and find

belonging both in their own communities and within the larger society. The way European American researchers in institutions of higher education have historically studied and represented non-western cultures to the general American public contribute to this Indigenous identity crisis. This is true in literary studies, where the traditionally oral contributions of First Americans to the literary catalog are either ignored in favor of settler structures and elements or taught without adequate intervention of critical indigenous theory to make visible the settler structures and elements that have mediated these contributions through distorting settler lenses.

Colonization of North America by Europeans touched every aspect of life for Native peoples on the continent. In the earlier years of the United States, violence was overt: genocide, enslavement, removal, rape. When these more brutal methods of control became less publicly acceptable among even the European American settlers (though they still happen), more subtle methods were employed: banning of cultural practices, language eradication efforts, hostage schooling. In their *Introduction to Tribal Legal Studies* textbook, Sarah Deer and Justin Richland speak to the First Americans' struggle to maintain an authentic Indigenous identity in a contemporary American society dominated by the settler culture:

> The effort to strike this balance is being made, in large part, out of a recognition that real tribal sovereignty only comes when tribal peoples realize that the effects that settler colonialism have wrought on tribal peoples mean that they cannot return to an idealized precolonial past when their communities lived harmoniously according to their traditions without the social ills they face today. (Richland 102)

How, then, do contemporary scholar-activists preserve the essence of traditional Indigenous literature in the wake of the settler culture of fear and silence as well as the ongoing colonization of the Native mind and contribute to fight-back, creative culture? Richland and Deer assert First

American "self-determination require[s] their striking a balance between their unique histories and traditions and those acquired during their long (and on-going) experience" with settler colonialism (Richland 103). Some American Indian writers and artists approach the decolonial good work by merging their distinctly Indigenous customs, traditions, and culture with the settler language and institutions to create subversive and original Native research, art, performances, novels, poems, and plays.

Wa Thiong'o's ideas about the continuous encroachment of settler culture's silence, fear, and shame on the Native peoples in Africa offer a language through which we can discuss the historical and contemporary experiences of First Americans in the modern United States. In fact, his theory of the colonization of the collective Indigenous African mind has direct parallels for the United States government's policies toward American Indian populations over the last, roughly, two-hundred-and-fifty years or so. Performance arts, which was Wa Thiong'o's first choice for contributing to the "fight-back, creative" culture of formerly colonized lands, are one type of decolonial approach that modern Indigenous Americans have used and are now utilizing to reconstruct their identities, rooted in their traditional, and pre-settler cultures, and so should be foregrounded in American literary studies. The World Premiere of the all-Native musical, *Distant Thunder*, at the newly opened First Americans Museum in Oklahoma City is a quintessential example of this creative scholarship-activism revolutionizing how Indigenous stories are told in 2022.

II. Applying Wa Thiong'o's Theory of Decolonizing the Mind to North America

Rejecting the post-colonial approach and the premise that colonization is an irreversible brand on Native cultures, decoloniality empowers Native peoples to demand that the settler culture work to understand the Indigenous experience through the Indigenous perspective. The

decolonial approach subverts the historical reality of the colonizer perspective traditionally defining the Indigenous experience. Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o advocates for a more essentialist approach to subverting the settler culture in his books.

In fact, his personal strategy is writing the literature first in his Native Gikuyu tongue, and then translating them into English himself. Wa Thiong'o rejects the postcolonial sentiment that the settler's language – English – can fully bear the weight of the Indigenous experience in any meaningful sense for the people. He disagrees with Chinua Achebe, well known writer and author of Things Fall Apart, who poses the idea of "new English" in his essay, "The African Writer and the English Language" (Achebe 84). Achebe argues that Africans' utilization of the English language, during and following colonization as taught to them by their school systems and by their governments, can serve their authentic identity construction and expression if it is "a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings" (Achebe 84).

Native scholar Simon J. Ortiz (Acqumeh Pueblo) penned a well-known article about the same subject in the Americas, elucidating a First Americans perspective on decolonization in the "New World," which was never physically decolonized like the African continent. In "Towards a National Indian Literature: Cultural Authenticity in Nationalism," Ortiz articulates how a Pueblo Indian ceremony with strong Catholic overtones can still be considered authentically Indigenous. He explains how this particular ceremony, performed by the Acqumeh Pueblo people living in present-day New Mexico, is "Acqumeh and Indian…in the truest and most authentic sense" because the celebration "speaks of the creative ability of Indian people to gather in many forms of the socio-political colonizing force which beset them and to make these forms meaningful in

their own terms" (Ortiz 8). For Ortiz, the same rule can be applied to contemporary Native American literature.

Echoing Achebe's notion that the colonizer's language can be manipulated by the oppressed people to tell their own stories, Ortiz asserts that Native American literature written in English should be considered authentically Indian because of the uniquely Indigenous creative development the Native peoples applied to them over the centuries since colonization (Ortiz 8). He says:

> Present-day Native American or Indian literature is evidence of this in the very same way. And because in every case where European culture was cast upon Indian people of this nation there was a similar creative response and development, it can be observed that this was the primary element of a nationalistic impulse to make use of foreign ritual, ideas, and material in their own – Indian – terms. Today's writing by Indian authors is a continuation of that elemental impulse. (Ortiz 8)

While Wa Thiong'o does not believe the mindset can be separated from the language and therefore disagrees with both Achebe and Ortiz in their feelings that the English language can be harnessed to represent Indigenous culture through their storywork, all three writers find common ground when discussing the creativity of Native peoples in both Africa and the Americas.

Ortiz describes how American Indians cultivated their authentic identities within the European constructs perpetuated by colonization in North America through "creative development." Wa Thiong'o sees this same resiliency in African "fight back, creative culture." Wa Thiong'o can further his decolonial theory by challenging the use of English language at all in African literature, refuting Achebe in the process, because of the intentional removal of Europe's physical domination in Africa. However, Ortiz and many other Native American

scholars and writers are unable to experience a post-colonial society because of the creation of the United States where the descendants of the original European colonizers became generations of European Americans. For First Americans, physical decolonization will probably never occur in the same way it did in Africa. Therefore, unlike in Africa, most of the indigenous languages of North America will have to go through decades-long revitalization projects before creative arts in Native languages speaking to and through the people could be sustained.

For this reason, aspects of Wa Thiong'o's essentialist decolonial theory is beneficial and useful when discussing American Indian decolonization efforts because it strongly rejects the reliance on eurocentric hegemonic cultural constructs. This is, of course, not to say Native American decolonial approaches, such as Ortiz's, are not powerful, effective, and significant. They are. However, Wa Thiong'o's work from the African experience and perspective, which shares many similarities with American Indian experiences and perspectives, can contribute to the current language restoration efforts in the United States and Canada.

Wa Thiong'o's scholarly work provides evidence that the mindset cannot be separated from the language. In his article published in Pacific Coast Philology, John Hawley expands on Wa Thiong'o's ideas about the link between culture and language in relation to "post- and neo-colonial peoples" seeking a voice within the settler's language (Hawley 69). Hawley writes that "English became an enforcement officer" against the Native Kenyan people (71). If Wa Thiong'o wanted to speak or write about himself and his experiences as an African while he was in school, his imagination and expression was limited by the structures of the English language as well as the Christian values imbedded in the vocabulary. The English language and settler culture was, as Wa Thiong'o states in his book, taking the Kenyan school children "further and

further away from ourselves to other selves, from our world to other worlds." (Wa Thiong'o, Decolonizing the Mind 12).

However, due to English being the standardized language of education in Kenya long after colonization, Wa Thiong'o acknowledges that the English language has a wider audience than Native languages do even for Native peoples. For these reasons, especially taking into consideration the unbreakable bond between culture and language, colonization of the mind when compared to physical subjugation is perhaps far more insidious. He says, for colonizers, "the most important area of domination was the mental universe" of the Native African people because the loss of the language results in the loss of the culture. Although they are a continent away, many American Indian writers have approached the English language with a similar mindset as Wa Thiong'o.

In her essay "Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective," author Leslie Marmon Silko asserts that there are many "parallels between the Pueblo experience" in North America and "those of the African and Caribbean peoples" (Silko 57). Silko's decolonial strategy, although it differs from Wa Thiong'o's personal philosophy, is to write in mixed English[3] but maintain the non-linear structure of Pueblo oral literature. In this way, the essence and spirit of the traditional Indigenous storywork is both centered and maintained.

In "Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective," Silko introduces her strategy to readers at the start of the essay. She says:

> Where I come from, the words most highly valued are those spoken from the heart, unpremeditated and unrehearsed. Among the Pueblo people, a written speech or

[3] Mixed English, in this sense, is defined as utilizing English as the primary language of the text or oration while incorporating Indigenous words with special meanings or no English equivalent. This method emphasizes the Indigenous words as they stand out on the page or in the oral story.

> statement is highly suspect because the true feelings of the speaker remain hidden as she reads words that are detached from the occasion and the audience. I have intentionally not written a formal paper because I want you to hear and to experience English in a structure that flows patterns from the oral tradition. For those of you accustomed to being taken from point A to point B to point C, this presentation may be somewhat difficult to follow. Pueblo expression resembles something like a spider's web – with many little threads radiating from the center, crisscrossing one another. As with the web, the structure emerges as it is made, and you must simply listen and trust, as the Pueblo people do, that meaning will be made. (Silko 48-49)

She notes this is a particularly effective method to subvert the settler culture's English mentality present in text-based writing systems and English literature because, for Pueblo people, there were traditionally subtle differences in the Native language spoken and so the oral stories already were expected to vary slightly: "But the particular language being spoken isn't as important as what a speaker is trying to say…" (Silko 49).

However, Silko does note that losing the ability to speak the original language of the traditional teachings, which "construct our identity," results in losing the original "word stories" (Silko 50). Word stories, according to Silko, are the "individual words that have their own stories" within a story already being told by the storyteller (Silko 50). She dips in and out of the informative, linear storyline in the essay by intertwining it with the Pueblo creation teaching, illuminating – in both the Native language and English – how important word stories are to the plotline as well as the history of the people. The proof that Pueblo language "*is* story" is in its self-containing nature and identity-constructing oration (Silko 50). How much identity is already lost, then, with the imposition of the English language on the Pueblo people? Much of her essay

was in English, although, the structure stemmed from a storytelling tradition more familiar to her people. How much stands to be lost as English takes ahold more and more for Native American children?

In a 2019 interview for One Vibe Africa podcast entitled, "Why Africans Hate Their Own Languages," Wa Thiong'o explains how the English language has been weaponized against Indigenous peoples across the globe and how the Native child's mind – their ability to identify and recognize themselves as belonging to themselves – is a kind of ideological battleground for contemporary imperialist powers. In this interview, Wa Thiong'o, himself, explicitly links the Kenyan and Native American experiences. He starts the discussion with stories of his arrest and imprisonment by the Kenyan government in 1977 for producing *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (I Will Marry When I Want) in the Gikuyu language to illustrate how peoples across the world have been made to "feel negative" about their own languages and how they have been taught to see their mother tongues as a source of both shame, and even, division ("Why Africans" 00:03:24-00:03:44). Wa Thiong'o mentions Ireland and the struggles Britain encountered when colonizing the people there, citing the colonizer's decision to implement language eradication efforts as the driving force behind the eventual successful control of the Irish people.

Wa Thiong'o introduces the British poet Edmund Spencer who distributed a pamphlet called "A View of the Present State of Ireland" to catalog the discourse surrounding the colonization of the Irish in 1585. In it he presents two solutions to the issue of how to conquer the Irish completely. The first solution is to do away with the traditional Irish naming systems. Wa Thiong'o highlights Spencer's suggestion of banning Irish titles, so the people do not know what to call themselves or one another. The second way forward is to suppress their Native language all together. "They will soon forget who they are," Wa Thiong'o speaks to the British's

approach ("Why Africans" 00:07:30-00:08:46). The same happened on the African Continent, where the English language's hold is still so powerful that Wa Thiong'o was punished – not necessarily for being critical of the colonial situation in Kenya, for which he often was known in his previous works written in English – but instead because he chose to write in a tribal language, which threatened the modern Kenyan government.

This ideological war on language was effective in earlier colonial American history as well. Slave holders banned captured Africans from using their African languages under the threat of hanging ("Why Africans" 00:07:30-00:08:46). Many American Indian children, up into the twenty-first century, were taken from their families and sent to residential "hostage" schools across the United States and Canada. European American teachers at these institutions punished Indigenous children for speaking anything other than English. The Code of Indian Offenses (1883) in place until the mid-twentieth century made many Indigenous cultural and spiritual practices illegal in the United States to disrupt the traditional Native American way of life. Around the same time as the Code of Indian Offenses the federal government oversaw education for thousands of Indigenous children in English-language reservation day schools and boarding schools across the country (Native Plains Reservation Aid).

Opposing traditional Native values such as "communal ownership, which held that the land was for all people" and the natural acquisition of Indigenous languages, these boarding schools strictly enforced European American militaristic values like "order, discipline and self-restraint" (Native Plains Reservation Aid). Children were not allowed to speak their languages at school and were severely punished if they tried. When the surviving students of the state returned home, they often could not communicate with their mothers, fathers, uncles, aunts, elders in their

natural tongue. Most cultural knowledge contained within those languages was either lost with those generations of stolen children or permanently altered in the form of English translations.

Silko points out how the "stories cannot be separated from their geographic locations, from actual physical places on the land" (Silko 57). For children taken from their homes and sent, strategically, to hostage schools hundreds of miles away for English and Christian education, their sense of identity was stunted, confused. In her essay, she says of the connection between the origin story and identity for Native Pueblo peoples:

> Basically, the origin story constructs our identity – with this story, we know who we are. We are the Lagunas. This is where we come from. We came this way. We came by this place. And so from the time we are very young, we hear these stories, so when we go out into the world, when one asks who we are or where we are from, we immediately know: we are the people who came from the north. We are the people of these stories. (Silko 50-51)

When the children were taken from their homes with their families and brought to a place where speaking their languages and telling their stories was banned, they essentially found their identities illegal as well. Returning home as adults, for the ones who survived, they found that they could not speak to their people. They did not know the stories. "The stories are always bringing us together," Silko says, "keeping this whole together, keeping this family together, keeping this clan together" (Silko 52).

When generations of children are stolen, keeping Native families and communities together is difficult. Much is lost by way of language and then subsequently culture. However, Silko ends her essay with hope. Illuminating the resiliency of First Americans and offering a decolonial way forward, she speaks of her Aunt Susie, a storyteller from the "first generation of

people at Laguna who began experimenting with English" (Silko 54). Aunt Susie "began working to make English speak for us, that is to speak from the heart" because she had been forced to spend six years at the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania as a child (Silko 54).

Unlike most other tribes in the United States, the Laguna Pueblo were never forced off their ancestral homelands. Their children were taken from their homes and families, but those who returned from the hostage schools could return to their land and relearn, or perhaps, remember their stories, who they are. Silko discusses how Aunt Susie's storytelling was impacted by English and the hostage school in Carlisle, Pennsylvania: "You can occasionally hear some English she picked up at Carlisle – words like *precipitous*" in her stories (Silko 57).

Wa Thiong'o reminds us, also, that the imperial tactic of language eradication to corrode the identity of Natives is not exclusive to Europe and European American imperialists.[4] Language erasure is an effective method of colonialism because "if you can colonize the people's language" then you have also colonized their minds, which contain all the cultural knowledge and shared "history carried by [that] language" ("Why Africans" (00:10:00-00:10:50). These two elements are contained within any language and function as the connective tissue for a population of people, making them feel that they are related to one another and that they have a place in their community. When cultural knowledge and shared history are alienated from a people through the imposition of the colonizer's language, "the conqueror's history carried by [that] language, the culture carried, the world outlook carried" replace their traditional ways until only the conqueror's culture and history exist in the people's minds ("Why Africans" 00:10:00-00:10:50). This is imperialism at its most sinister; it is a massacre without explicit

[4] For example, he mentions that in WWII, the Japanese banned the Korean naming system and instituted Japanese language learning.

warning. The world notices and pays attention when blood spills and bodies pile up. When entire cultures are eradicated through the banning of Native languages, it is colonization of the mind.

In his book, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, Wa Thiong'o explains the relentless battle fought by Indigenous peoples, who have had the English language imposed on their society, as "an ever-continuing struggle to seize back their creative initiative in history through a real control of all the means of communal self-definition in time and space" (*Decolonizing* 143). People define themselves in "relation to their natural and social environment." The language systems that organically evolved from culturally specific and shared experiences of generations of ancestors are central to maintaining individual and collective identity. However, the imposition of colonizer languages at the state level and in classrooms erodes this sense of identity and even otherizes the people from each other, their shared history and understanding of their place respective to the entire universe. "In some instances," Wa Thiong'o writes when discussing his experience at the Conference of 'African Writers of English Expression' in 1962, "these European languages were seen as having capacity to unite African peoples against divisive tendencies inherent in the multiplicity of African languages…" (*Decolonizing the Mind* 145).

In the United States we have all been fed this great imperialist lie when discussing Native Americans: the English language is a great uniter "coming to save [Native] languages against themselves" (Wa Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind* 145). While it may not be conveyed so explicitly in contemporary discourse surrounding repatriation and restitution, it is visible when evaluating the widely held belief that American Indians were warring with each other until the

United States made them all equal citizens.[5] This is a more polite way for contemporary European Americans to justify the colonization-by-any-means agenda over the past several centuries, claiming the settlers are responsible for uniting North American Indians under a common language and culture. Prior to the twenty-first century, however, colonizers were more direct and asserted their colonization strategy was to "save the man by killing the savage." The Indigenous mind is the final frontier for the hegemonic European American rule.

Wa Thiong'o asserts for Africa: "Berlin of 1884[6] was effected through the sword and the bullet. But the night of the sword and the bullet was followed by the morning of the chalk and the blackboard. The physical violence of the battlefield was followed by the psychological violence of the classroom" (*Decolonizing the Mind* 147). For North American Indians, when it finally became unpopular to literally murder them outright in the United States and most of their land was already secured for reallocation to settler people, the European American government had to root out Indigenous culture internally, so the "Indian problem" could disappear without it bloodying its hands.

Deer and Richland's *Introduction to Tribal Legal Studies* includes a chapter entitled "Boarding Schools and the Removal of Tribal Children," which posits that "the late nineteenth and early twentieth century saw the enactment of some of the most devastating U.S. policies regarding Native nations" (Richland 230). This is an immense statement considering only 0.001% of Native Americans survived the colonization period, which began in 1492 ("Removal

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[5] John Horgan in his 2010 article discusses how modern European American scientists, as one example, have attempted to "[replace] the myth of the noble savage with the myth of the savage savage," which is replicated in popular media such as HBO's docuseries *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, to justify our history of massacres against the Native population.
[6] Wa Thiong'o is referring to the Berlin West Africa Conference (November 15th, 1884 – February 26th, 1885) where leaders from various European nations met to discuss their colonial control over various African nations.

Stories"). Still, First Americans, like Deer and Richland, point to the assimilation efforts – the "undoing" of "the kinship systems and familial relations that organized much of tribal life" – as the most atrocious attempt at Native American eradication by the settler people and the United States government (Richland 230). The authors outline what life was like at a hostage school, like the one Silko's aunt was taken to in Carlisle, Pennsylvania:

> Indian children from various tribes often remained in these schools for many years, with no contact from parents or other family members. Upon their arrival, the children were given English names, were forced to cut their hair and don school uniforms, and were placed in age groupings away from their siblings and relatives. They were often prohibited from speaking their Native language and punished severely for breaking this rule. Instead of the skills, ethics, and rules they would have learned from kin and tribal members at home, boarding school attendees were taught reading, writing, arithmetic, and trades that were the usual subject matter of Anglo-American education at that time. (Richland 231)

Lewis Meriam, in his 1928 report to Hubert Work, Secretary of the Interior, entitled "The Problem of Indian Administration" preserved by the National Indian Law Library in Boulder Colorado, wrote of the thought process for hostage schools as an assimilation tool: "The theory was that the problem of race could be solved by educating the children, not to return to the reservation, but to be absorbed one by one into the white population" (Meriam). Conditions at these schools were so horrendous that while settler schools for European American children were building sports fields, Indian boarding schools were constructing cemeteries to put the pile up of little bodies.

For the surviving children who made their way home, many years had passed. They were effectively strangers. Deer and Richland write, "Torn from the webs of responsibility and right that continued to order their family and tribal relations back home these children sometimes returned…unsure of themselves" and unsure of their role in their birth tribes (Richland 231). Additionally, relatives who remained on the reservations were equally unsure, perhaps even suspicious, of those returning with settler education and ways of life.

Included in their law studies book is a written account, by Edwin R. Embree, of a Taos Pueblo boy named Talto (Sun Elk) who experienced feeling outcast by his people after returning from the Carlisle Indian School where he stayed for seven years of his childhood (Richland 232). Talto was taught by his teachers at Carlisle that "Indians were bad." This message was reinforced by all the textbooks, which recounted Native American atrocities against European Americans (Richland 232). Eventually, he expressed that the First American children also began "to say Indians were bad," and they were encouraged to reject all the savage ways of the lives they had known: "We laughed at our own people and their blankets and cooking pots and sacred societies and dances" (Richland 233).

After his seven years at the boarding school, Talto struggled to fit in, especially to understand his relatives who were speaking in the Native language he had lost. Vividly he recounts being told by the governor of the pueblo and the war chiefs and priest chiefs that he was not an Indian, he was a stranger. He remembers how they would not talk to or look at him, only to his father, when saying:

> Your son who calls himself Rafael has lived with the white man. He has been far away from the pueblo. He has not lived in a kiva nor learned the things that Indian boys should

> learn. He has no hair. He has no blankets. He cannot even speak our language and he has a strange smell. He is not one of us. (Richland 233)

Talto recalls wishing his father had been angry with these community leaders for insisting he did not belong. However, his father "was only sad" because they were right (Richland 233). These boarding schools stripped children of their identities, robbed their communities of their natural ties to one another, and attempted to erase entire Native cultures.

The final frontier is the Indigenous mind. Wa Thiong'o is all too familiar with this sentiment, saying the mind is "the most important vehicle through which that power fascinated and held the soul prisoner" (*Decolonizing the Mind* 148). The United States took Native American children and emptied them out of their identities and filled the void up with the English language, which comes with the European American mindset – all the history and stories and politics and economical perspectives of the imperial world. Wa Thiong'o says it best in *Decolonizing the Mind*: "The bullet was the means of the physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation" (*Decolonizing the Mind* 149). Neither is reversible, but both are an equally violent and effective means of cultural annihilation.

Ferdinand de Saussure's structuralist theory of language reinforces Wa Thiong'o's claims. Through his work on signs and signifiers, De Saussure rejects claims that translation between languages is merely a scientific one-to-one transaction. Structuralism introduces an exceedingly interesting notion about the importance of language and perception. If an individual never has the life experience – in the case of language and knowledge accumulation, is never given the shared experience passed down through the generations of language speakers – and is also never given the vocabulary to comprehend something, that something will cease to exist in

their mind. English cannot easily replace a Native language without harming its culture (Sardar 11).

If an entire population of people is barred from speaking their Native language, and is therefore never given the teachings, histories, or stories of their culture, their culture will ultimately disappear. Wa Thiong'o summarizes in *Decolonizing the Mind* how language both precedes, contains, and determines culture:

> Language as communication and as culture are then products of each other. Communication creates culture: culture is a means of communication. Language carries culture, and culture carries language, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. How people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture, at their politics and at the social production of wealth, at their entire relationship to nature and to other beings. Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world. So what was the colonist imposition of a foreign language doing to us [Native] children? The real aim of colonialism was to control the people's wealth: what they produced, how they produced it, and how it was distributed: to control, in other words, the entire realm of the language of real life…It's most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonized, the control, through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world. (Wa Thiong'o 153-154)

Wa Thiong'o's African perspective holds true for the Native American experience in the United States and Canada. The breaking-down-and-building-back-up strategy by the United States

government has never ended for Native Americans. It is simply more hidden, so the settler people do not have to think about it and the Indigenous people cannot so easily fight against it.

Colonization is an on-going process with modern consequences of high severity. Wa Thiong'o notes that the continuous colonization of Native peoples is two pronged: first "the destruction or the deliberate undervaluing of a people's culture, their art, dances, religions, history, geography, orature, and literature" and then the "conscious elevation of the language of the colonizer" (*Decolonizing the Mind* 154-155). The result is a colonized people who believe they are inherently inferior because they have little knowledge of another existence and certainly little vocabulary to speak out against their oppression. The hegemonic settler culture can then forcefully dominate and rewrite their histories and stories, feeding their agenda to control and control more. The destruction of fight-back, creative culture – whenever and wherever it is convenient for the settler culture – is then justified in the name of progress, in the name of civilization, or in the name of scientific study and scholasticism. However, "through an appreciation for the boundless capacity of language that, through storytelling, brings us together, despite great distances," decolonialism is possible to subvert the settler culture and the continuing modern colonialism in the United States (Silko 59).

Beatrice Szymkowiak illustrates Silko's notion of how Native Americans can subvert the settler culture through text-based poetry in her 2022 article "Against the Typography of Colonization: Decolonizing Through and of the Printed Text by Contemporary Indigenous Poets" published in *The Writer's Chronicle*. Szymkowiak explores how modern American Indian poets, specifically Craig Santos Perez (Chamorro) and James Thomas Stevens (Akwesasne Mohawk) utilize "the body of printed texts to denounce settler colonialism, to decolonize language, and to rewrite linguistic landscapes" (Stevens 85). She asserts text-based literature is

an extension of initial invasion tactics used by colonizers to separate Native peoples from their land, culture, language, and identity.

Printed text, in a way, legitimized the colonizer's power and domination of the Native presence in North America by emphasizing and cementing the English language and customs, specifically, in documents that could be passed around, referred, referenced, and presented as evidence against Indigenous oral claims. James Thomas Stevens, in one of his poems analyzed in Szymkowiak's article, asserts "nothing/in print is a neutral document" for the First American people in the United States (Szymkowiak 34). Therefore, print literature operates as an agent of continued colonization "by naming, appropriating, ruling, [and] establishing boundaries" unnatural to the existing cultures of the New World (Szymkowiak 32).

Perhaps more insidious, Szymkowiak claims, printed text has all but irradicated the oral tradition and made it illegitimate. She states, "the [w]estern printing press has…forcibly pressed Indigenous languages into [w]estern translation and transcription molds" (Szymkowiak 32).[7] Thus, the printing press has "driven [Native peoples] to near or complete extinction" (Szymkowiak 32). It would be remiss not to address the quote included in Szymkowiak's article by Craig Santos Perez as it articulates so clearly how the introduction of print media interrupted the oral tradition of the New World. Santos Perez says, print culture "displaced the centrality of oral culture, which was of course the vessel of indigenous custom, memory, history, story, and more" (qtd. in Szymkowiak 32). However, as Wa Thiong'o, Silko, and Szymkowiak agree, Indigenous people ultimately "end up mastering" the settler culture's imposed literary and

[7] It is critical to point out that while Szymkowiak's point is both valid and true, numerous Indigenous writers and scholars, such as Gerald Vizenor (Minnesota Chippewa) and Frances Washburn (Lakota/Anishinaabe), have honored and sustained the North American oral tradition through their work.

language systems, turning the structures on its heads, to ultimately "question the colonial authority itself" (Szymkowiak 32). Indigenous literary artists utilize a variety of genres to disrupt and reshape the literary landscape.

One such genre, capitalized on and revolutionized by Native Americans, is the modern performing arts, specifically musicals. At the foundation of First American performing arts in the twentieth century is artist and activist Zitkála-Šá (Yankton Dakota)'s *The Sun Dance Opera*, which was penned and produced in 1913. It featured the titular Dakota Sioux ceremony – the sun dance, which was outlawed by the federal government under the Religious Crimes Code of 1883.

According to Lorin Groesbeck, author of "The Sun Dance Opera: A Call for Survivance," Zitkala-Ša's opera "reveals early expressions of survivance[8] through her use of [Dakota]-specific music, language, regalia, and Native American performers…while also reflecting the works of other artists engaging with similar themes in a variety of mediums" (118). Subverting the molds of western translation and transcription, as described by Szymkowiak, *The Sun Dance Opera* relies on a banned Dakota ceremonial dance to draw both her American Indian and European American audiences into the show.

Groesbeck argues *The Sun Dance Opera* "achieved its success" in the mainstream hegemonic United States because it "[portrayed] survivance in ways otherwise impossible in literature," through the merging of Native American oral and ceremonial tradition and the western literary tradition (Groesbeck 118). This notion supports Wa Thiong'o's assertion that the performing arts genre is the quintessential vehicle for "fight-back, creative culture" and the

[8] Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor coined the term "survivance" in his book, *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance* (1994). According to Groesbeck, it is a "portmanteau of "survival" and "resistance," this term reflects a shift in study of Native American culture" (Groesbeck 117).

transfer of cultural knowledge and resistance power from older generations to younger generations. Without the binds of political literature, Zitkála-Šá was able to preserve and perform the Sun Dance through her opera until the American Indian Religious Freedom Act passed in 1978.

Following the same footpath, a 2022 Native musical entitled *Distant Thunder* entered in the contemporary decolonial discourse. *Distant Thunder* utilizes the performing arts genre to subvert European American language imposition by illuminating Indigenous language preservation techniques, emphasizing the American Indian oral tradition, and paying tribute to place-based identity. In the era of #MeToo, Missing and Murdered Indigenous Woman, and Black Lives Matter, *Distant Thunder* is an encouraging prescription for creatively fighting back against the European American powers controlling the hegemonic and historical narrative in the contemporary United States.

III. Modern Decolonial Approaches: *Distant Thunder's* World Premiere at First Americans Museum

In March 2022, the all-Native musical, *Distant Thunder*, premiered at the newly opened First Americans Museum in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. The show was cowritten by Lynne Taylor-Corbett and Shaun Taylor-Corbett (Blackfeet), a mother-son duo. Starring in the production, Shaun Taylor-Corbett portrayed the musical's protagonist, a young lawyer named Darrell Waters. Darrell, whose father is Blackfeet and mother European American, returns to his reservation as an adult after being taken away by his mother as a child following his parents' complicated divorce. Upon his mother's death, Darrell returns to his childhood reservation in Browning, Montana to broker a deal between an energy company and the tribe. While his

intentions are good albeit misinformed, individuals on the reservation each feel differently about his return and his deal with the energy company.

Struggling to understand the traumas of his childhood, Darrel slowly re-identifies with his Native roots and distant father throughout the course of the musical with the help of his former neighbors and friends. By reuniting with Dorothy Dark Eyes, the language schoolteacher and his former crush, Darrel begins to see how leasing the tribe's land to an outside company will negatively impact the youngest generation of Native Americans on the reservation even if it will promote the local economy. He experiences an identity transition: shifting away from his arrogant pursuit of commerce and reconnecting with his Blackfeet culture. He ultimately answers the call to preserve the Blackfeet language and history on the reservation by proving the energy deal is illegal and remaining in Browning to help Dorothy re-establish her school, illuminating a path forward for the youngest generation of Indigenous youth to celebrate their Native roots and connection to the land.

Distant Thunder is as an all-encompassing event, not only as a work of drama. It functions as a decolonizing performance art, negotiating between Native American and European American values. On the border of the Native oral tradition and western literary tradition, *Distant Thunder* subverts the settler culture of silence and fear for First Americans through the agency of its location, ceremony elements, and storywork.

The choice of the dramatic, musical genre for the decolonizing work of *Distant Thunder* has particular significance because Indigenous performing arts historically encourage all forms of human expression in dimensions far beyond what words on a page or actors on a movie screen can evoke. The power of the physical space of the production, the engagement with cultural traditions, and the performance's storywork as it is situated in the contemporary cultural and

historical discourse of its time accomplishes something undeniably special for First Americans in the modern United States.

Distant Thunder is a quintessential prescription for decolonization in the modern American discourse as it reclaims orality through the hybrid artistic genre of performance arts and appeals to a blended American audience. My analysis of the show's decolonial strategies rely on both my observations of the evening performance on March 25th, 2022, as well as, the unpublished script.[9] The holistic production of the show, as a decolonial event, illustrates the efforts of First Americans to acknowledge and co-exist with the permanent damage of colonization and emphasizes the significance of intentionally creating spaces which restore the essence of diverse Indigenous cultures at all levels of society.

It is important, at this point, to reflect again on Deer and Richland's assertion that settler colonialism means First Nations cannot simply return to "an idealized precolonial past" where their communities lived according only to their self-actualized and organically evolving traditions without the encroachment, influence, and violence of European and Euro-American colonization (Richland 102). This is true; even if all Indigenous peoples, from the hundreds of distinctly different tribal nations spread across the North American continent, agreed on some futuristic way to eradicate the influence of settler culture on every level from their societies and return to a pre-colonial existence, survival in the current economic global society would make sustaining the traditional social and political ways of life impossible. The postcolonial reality of the United States means elements of the settler culture will be integrated into current Indigenous practices.

[9] I would like to thank the Taylor-Corbetts, both Shaun and Lynne, for providing me access to *Distant Thunder's* current script. The version I utilize in this paper is from June 1st, 2022.

The choice of performance location has been in itself a decolonial act. The Native American Cultural and Educational Authority (NACEA), which was established to create the First Americans Museum in Oklahoma City in 1994 and eventually included participation from all thirty-nine tribal communities in the state, dedicated thirteen years to healing the land where the museum stands before any construction commenced. According to a placard in the *Community Gallery's* "Of the Earth: Creating the First Americans Museum" collection at the museum, the land at one time contained fifty-seven oil wells and was polluted with the remnants of the dirty petroleum industry with which many Native Nations have a contentious and traumatic relationship ("Site Remediation"). It is important to note, the state of Oklahoma agreed to return this land to its Indigenous population for the museum, and the land it chose had been laid to waste, barren from the impact of an industry most threatening to First Americans. Nevertheless, after many years of environmental and spiritual restoration efforts, in September 2021, the museum held its grand opening. *Distant Thunder* premiered there, in the outdoor festival space surrounded by the Mound Path and Remembrance Walls just six months later, March 23rd-27th, 2022 ("Museum Map" 2).

This land renewal process, taking the land from a tainted and barren oil plant – where European Americans literally reached into the Earth and removed all its crude materials until the environment was a void – is a metaphor for the Native peoples themselves, having been subjected to brutal assimilation tactics meant to leave the Indigenous body a void to be filled up by the settler's culture. It illuminates the resiliency of empowered Natives communities, to heal their land and to heal their bodies and to heal their minds. Location is to identity what language is to culture.

Keith Basso,[10] a western anthropologist known for studying the relationship between Indigenous languages and the natural environment, asserts how "unfortunate" it is traditional European American scientists "seldom study what people make of places" (Basso 105). His theories are fascinating because he provides a scientific and anthropologic lens for studying how literature and nature unite in Native American storywork to construct and reinforce traditional forms of identity. For First Americans, place can contain deep cultural and historical significance. Basso refers to this phenomenon as "stalking with stories" (Basso 38). Remembering where something happened can often be more important than documenting and maintaining specific details of the event.

Regardless of whether European and European American scientists and anthropologists acknowledge or accept what Indigenous people know and tell them in their institutions, the sacredness of site to Native identity is certain. This why it is excessively cruel to expel Native Americans from their ancestral homelands and why the assimilation tactics of colonization, such as the kidnapping of children to hostage schools across the country, were so violent and successful in their cultural erasure. Identity is heavily influenced by place, reinforced by stories. This is also why *Distant Thunder's* performance space was equally as powerful and intentional, motivated by the decolonial spirit of fight back, creative culture.

In scene eleven, TALL TREE IMMERSION SCHOOL, *Distant Thunder* simultaneously reinforces the significance of place in Native culture and emphasizes the oral tradition. Darrell

[10] I reject Keith Basso's claim, in *Wisdom Sits in Place*, that "little is known of the ways in which culturally diverse peoples are alive to the world around them, of how they comprehend it, of the different models of awareness which they take it in and, in the words of Edmund Husserl, 'discover that it matters'" because these things are certainly known to the Indigenous peoples themselves and they often speak to their understanding of place-based identity in their own forms of literature, history, and science keeping (Basso 106).

Waters and his love interest, Dorothy Dark Eyes, are discussing a rock formation they used to play near and the stories their elders had told them about it. This is a way to highlight a Blackfeet teaching method, storytelling from older generations to younger generations within the musical's linear plotline:

DARRELL

That big rock. Didn't we used to go out there
to play Cowboys and Indians?

DOROTHY

Weird all right. Where the last of the
Blackfeet were gathered by the US Army in 1883
and left to die--

DARRELL

Dorothy, it's time for Native people to get
past "the past".

DOROTHY.

Get past genocide? Has there ever been even an
official apology? There they were, right in
front of us- hundreds of people including Old
Man's grandfather

DARRELL

The Starvation Winter, I know

DOROTHY

Yeah, we know because Old Man told us. But it

isn’t in the history books. “One night a pack

of starving wolves raided the camp to eat the

survivors...”

DARRELL

(imitating Old Man)

“...and out of the terrible darkness, a huge

bear came running to save them and the Great

Spirit turned him into--

Without realizing it, Darrell

continues in flawless Pikunni.

DARRELL (CONT'D)

Kyiyoomahkaaw oh’kitookii --

DOROTHY

(awe-struck)

Running Bear Rock!

DARRELL

Oh my god, I remembered the words.

The sun is beginning to drop

behind the clouds. They stare at

each other for a moment. Dorothy

breaks the spell.

(Taylor-Corbett, Distant Thunder 60)

As both Darrell and Dorothy recount the rather startling story of "Running Bear Rock," where they used to play as children, Darrell recalls everything in both English and the Piikani (Blackfeet) Native language of Siksiká. He does not only recall the story or his childhood, he remembers the language of his people, which he had not heard or spoken in all the years he was raised by his European American mother in Chicago. Contained in the story of the rock is the historical significance of the reservation and his cultural connection to his tribe.

The Running Bear Rock scene utilizes the oral tradition of the Blackfeet Indians as part of the decolonial work of a musical that bases itself in a decidedly western genre. It subverts the traditional western literary structures, which emphasize linear plot and documented historical events. Leslie Marmon Silko writes that a "great deal of the story is believed to be inside the listener; the storyteller's role is to draw the story out of the listener" (Silko 50).

Everyone in the audience of *Distant Thunder*, including myself, reacted to the collective comprehension of how stories remind us of who we are and how important knowing ourselves and our place is for humanity. Thus, the musical transcended cultural barriers, making it an effective decolonial performance enjoyed by all Americans both Native and non-Native. The finale song reinforces the idea that the land contains the history of the people and creates a path forward for Native American identity:

> This is our past scattered around us
>
> In all this land and all of its people
>
> It can reveal a message of wonder
>
> Like distant thunder. (playbillonline 00:00:00-00:00:16)

The idea of location in *Distant Thunder* is intentional. It is decolonial.

Additionally, the decision to host *Distant Thunder* outside in the Festival Plaza can be contextualized through Wa Thiong'o's writings about the significance of the traditional Ituika festivals of music, dance, poetry and theatre in Kenya. He described the space of performance arts as having the capacity to be a form of resistance against the settler culture (Wilkinson 615). The *First Americans Museum* Festival Plaza is surrounded by a 2/3-mile Mound Path, which according to the museum's print map from March 2022, is a walking "experience [that] connects to ancestral Moundbuilder traditions" ("Museum Map" 2). Additionally, the museum's shape is special. The physical building is a circular structure attached to the circular natural earth mound, which are both connected through a straight passage labeled, "symbolic East-to-West Arrival" ("Museum Map" 2).

Passing straight through it, one would go from the front courtyard, walking underneath a stone and metal arch structure with the "Touch to Above" handprint by Cherokee artists Demos Glass and Bill Glass Jr (Brandes). According to an article in *National Geographic* about this piece of art, with photographs courtesy of the *First Americans Museum*, "the open hand represents the universal Native American gesture for 'welcome' (Brandes). It was intentionally placed at the beginning of the East-to-West Arrival as collaborative endeavor to feature Indigenous art, architecture, and history at every level of the building (Brandes). Next, one following the symbolic arrival path would enter the museum's main entrance leading into the "Hall of the People" and finally come to the Festival Plaza ("Museum Map" 2).

Once outside Mound Path, in the shorter portion of the walk that wraps alongside the outside of the building, there are observation points corresponding to the celebration of the astrological phenomenon, called: "Star Terrace," "Sun Terrace," and "Moon Terrace" ("Museum Map" 1). Rising above the entire structure is a giant glass dome reminiscent of the sun which can

be seen sparkling in the light from different parts of the city. Inside, there is a site dedicated to showcasing the preserved ashes from the ceremonial land blessing that the leaders of First Americans Museum performed before its grand opening. It is located in the *Tribal Nations Gallery*. The very shape, dimensions, and presence of the First Americans Museum incorporate, are reflective of, and pay honor to the natural world and the people's place in it.

Ceremony is an important cultural element for various populations of Native Americans across the United States and Canada. It is another form of connecting people and place. *Distant Thunder* incorporates Indigenous ceremony into its costumes and music alongside the western elements of the production. This is an important aspect of the show's decolonization because it reclaims Indigenous identity proudly and without using the settler's language. It is an especially effective decolonial strategy when considering how Native American practices, such as ceremony, have historically been targeted by the federal government's assimilation and enculturation campaigns.

Tommy Orange (Cheyenne and Arapaho) in his novel *There There,* articulates how Indigenous identity has been silenced and shamed. Through Orvil, a young urban Indian whose extended family came to Oakland California sometime prior to 1970, Orange articulates why visibility is so important to the decolonial movement and to Native identity:

> And so what Orvil is, according to himself, standing in front of the mirror with his too-small-for-him stolen regalia, is *dressed up like an Indian*. In hides and ties, ribbons and feathers, boned breastplate, and hunched shoulders, he stands, weak in the knees, a fake, a copy, a boy playing dress-up. And yet there's something there…which is why he keeps looking, keeps standing in front of the mirror. He's waiting for something true to appear before him – about him. It's important that he dress like an Indian, dance like an Indian,

> even if it is an act, even if he feels like a fraud the whole time, because the only way to be an Indian in this world is to look and act like an Indian. To be or not to be Indian depends on it. (Orange 121-122)

"Being Indian" has been outlawed, made illegal, banned, shamed, and even become fatal. Therefore, dressing, singing, and dancing in the traditional ceremonial way is empowering for the community and is a decolonial act. Unlike in the western tradition, where costumes transport an actor into the body of a character, the regalia that characters in *Distant Thunder* don honors who the actor truly is – a relative of the first Americans whose story has been under threat by the settler culture. It is not simply "make believe." *Distant Thunder* is a revealing, a shedding of a mask, which subverts the settler narrative of colonization.

The Grandma character in *Distant Thunder* wears a purple jingle dress as her regalia and carries a fan for the duration of the show, always ready for her dance at the upcoming ceremony festival. Again, emphasizing traditional ceremony over the use of the English language, Grandma almost never speaks in the show. In an interview with Lyric Theatre of Oklahoma, Shaun Taylor-Corbett speaks to the "importance of keeping indigenous culture…alive" on stage (Vanek). The choice to have this character in a jingle dress, as opposed to a different form of regalia, is significant and reflective of the show's decolonial purpose.

Jingle dresses are handmade from tobacco tins, which rattle together when the wearer dances to create a unique musical sound. It is believed that this sacred dance sparks community healing.[11] In this way, Grandma serves a dual purpose. She is both a character, reminding the other characters to proudly remember their roots on stage, and a healer, transcending the stage

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[11] Jingle dresses appeared during the Spanish Influenza outbreak in the early twentieth century. Jingle dress dancers brought healing to their communities, who were recovering from illness.

and offering Natives in the audience a sacred jingle dance. Grandma's character – in the way she looks, moves, and speaks – celebrates her Native identity fearlessly.

In the online space where the interview with Taylor-Corbett was published, there is a photograph of Grandma standing assertively behind a distracted Darrell Waters. Grandma is wearing her regalia and frowning at the audience, as if to warn us about the state of her people who, like Darrell, have lost touch with their Native identities. While the other characters have costume changes, switching between traditional and western clothes, Grandma never removes her jingle dress or leaves her fan.

Darrell stands just in front of her. He is wearing a suit. Distracted by his cellphone, he pays no attention to his elder and fails to see the look of disappointment on her face. When Darrell first appears on stage, visiting Browning from Chicago for the first time since his youth, he is talking on his cellphone in English, as he is pictured alongside Grandma. He is even wearing the same suit. Perhaps she is disappointed he has become more comfortable with the settler's language than with his own, even in the presence of a tribal elder.

In a short documentary about *Distant Thunder*, Darren Kipp the Director of the Cuts Wood Language School in Browning, Montana, discusses a language survey conducted among Blackfeet people in 1985. Kipp says the aim was to determine "how many…First Language speakers, people who grew up with [their Native] language, still existed" (Taylor-Corbett 00:01:30-00:01:42). It concluded that the majority of people who retained language fluency were in their early sixties or older (Taylor-Corbett, "Mini-Documentary" 00:01:44-00:01:52). Kipp explains the cruel reality for the Blackfeet community was that "within a few decades, the language would be gone" (Taylor-Corbett, "Mini-Documentary" 00:01:54-02:01). The Grandma

character, then, would likely be one of the last few First Language speakers on the reservation in *Distant Thunder*.

Grandma serves as a reminder for the other characters, especially Darrell Waters, to remember and embrace their roots. She is the personification of ceremony. Grandma and ceremony can both be defined the same way: a tribal knowledge keeper and the force keeping kinship alive within the community despite a language barrier. Additionally, she serves as a call to the audience, both Native and non-Native, to embrace and celebrate the traditional ancestry of the first Americans who used to freely occupy all the land and speak their original languages uninhibited by the colonizer's English. Kipp finishes his interview in the documentary by asserting that healing in the United States can happen if "people understand and see the magic that exists within the Indian country" (Taylor-Corbett, "Mini-Documentary" 00:02:40-00:02:53). Grandma, in her jingle dress, helps to negotiate the healing and acceptance that needs to happen in the contemporary United States.

Additionally, the costumes in *Distant Thunder* are a negotiation between the traditional Indigenous culture and the colonial settler culture coming together on stage. They reflect the postcolonial reality of Native Americans who wear ceremonial regalia to participate and feel close to their traditional, pre-colonization culture. However, they also wear western clothing, like cowboy boots and jeans. The sets, comprised of houses and tipis, serve an identical purpose. Contemporary Indigenous Americans participate in their modern American culture, and this participation can be viewed as a form of negotiation between worlds, as Orange's Orvil character explains in the previously quoted excerpt from *There There*. Shaun and Lynne state in their "Note from the Authors" that the hope for *Distant Thunder* is for "Indigenous children [to] look up on…stage and recognize themselves in the characters" (Taylor-Corbett, "Note From the

Authors”). Then, those same Indigenous children will go home with a more fulfilling sense of self.

Distant Thunder’s storywork explicitly furthers this goal, subverting the relative invisibility of Native Americans in the modern performing arts discourse in the United States. One of the most powerful musical numbers, which succeeded in illustrating the marriage between traditional Native culture and the imposed settler culture using humor, is in scene two: HOME OF BETTY STILL SMOKING. Betty Still Smoking’s character sings “Loaves and Fishes,” comparing Jesus Christ to the American Indian people. The scene progresses as follows:

DARRELL

You know what, Betty... I did kinda just barge
in here. There's probably not enough to go
around.

BETTY

Baby, you forgot the Indian way!

LOAVES AND FISHES

BETTY

NOW DON’T COME ALL UP IN MY HOUSE

AND THINK YOU’RE GONNA LEAVE

I ALWAYS GOT AN EXTRA PLATE -

A TRICK WAY UP MY SLEEVE

CAUSE THEY TAUGHT ME THINGS IN SUNDAY SCHOOL

THAT YOU JUST WON’T BELIEVE

BETTY (CONT'D)

LIKE JESUS WAS AN INDIAN

THAT'S RIGHT-THAT'S WHAT I SAID

HE HAD REAL DARK SKIN AND JET BLACK HAIR,

HE ROSE UP FROM THE DEAD

HE HEALED THE SICK, HE HELPED THE POOR

BETTY, DOROTHY, SHAREEN

HE-SURE-AS- HELL BLESSED BREAD

BETTY

WHOA-OO-WHOA-HOO, RIPPIN' UP FRY BREAD

WHOA-OO-WHOA-HOO, FOLLOWIN' WHAT JESUS SAID

OHOO-WHOA-HOO - IT'S LIKE THE LOAVES AND FISHES

WHOA-OO-WHOA-HOO, THEN YOU WASH THE DISHES

OLD MAN

(pointing to Darrell)

Jesus had to do em. So do you!

(Taylor-Corbett, Distant Thunder 17-18)

The Biblical elements Betty recalls in her song correspond to themes and symbols present in the oral catalog of traditional Native American stories and teachings. Her ability to negotiate the western values imposed on her Native upbringing to create a hybrid identity is, in fact, decolonial.

Betty's character demonstrates how modern Indigenous Americans have blended practices and roots, often a survival technique manifesting because of the trauma they endured from colonization. This is reminiscent of Leslie Marmon Silko's aunt, Susie. After surviving the

Carlisle Indian School, she blended her traditional oral storywork with the English vocabulary she learned in Pennsylvania. *Distant Thunder* illuminates how the American Indian community copes with the federal government's assimilation attempts by showing the audience how Betty Still Smoking's time in Sunday School had a similar effect on her as Carlisle had on Silko's Aunt Susie.

The musical number also introduces humor as healing, an important feature of modern (and perhaps ancient) Native American culture. In the "Comedy as Resistance" article featured inside the playbill for the troupe 1491's 2022 play *Between Two Knees*,[12] humor in Indigenous work is posited as a "reclamation" for the Native community (Dubiner 9). Quoting Irma, a character from the show, the article asserts that "uncensored humor borne from trauma is actually beneficial to community healing" (Dubiner 8). Larry, another character in *Between Two Knees*, explains to the audience during the opening scene that it's okay to laugh. He says, "We're gonna make this fun. We gonna talk about war and genocide and PTSD and molestation. So it's okay to laugh" (Dubiner 9). His statement implies that the American Indian community could not have survived up to this point in time, carrying the weight of colonization, if they had not often relied on humor to talk about their shared trauma. Betty Still Smoking's musical number about Jesus being an Indian and other Sunday School teachings functions as the familiar comedic relief for Native audience members. She also provides non-Natives a window into one of the light-hearted, decolonial strategies First Americans have historically utilized to overcome their intergenerational trauma.

[12] Shaun Taylor-Corbett, co-writer of *Distant Thunder*, starred in Yale Repertory Theatre's 2022 production of *Between Two Knees* by the all-Native comedy troupe The 1491s. He played multiple roles, including "William" and "Ensemble." His original choreography is featured in the play as well.

Significantly, the act of writing *Distant Thunder*, itself, was a healing and learning experience for Shaun Taylor-Corbett. He says in an interview, “This is the most important story of my life. It has a lot of personal, deep family connection with me” (Taylor-Corbett, “Mini-Documentary”00:00:33-00:00:43). Elements of the show are autobiographical in nature. In fact, *Distant Thunder* in the Blackfeet language of Siksiká is *I’Pyooksisstsiiko’om*, which is also Shaun’s traditional Blackfeet name.

This show has multiple meanings. It is about a man repairing his relationship with his father through family healing. It is about restoring Indigenous culture through language revitalization. However, it is also a tribute to Shaun Taylor-Corbett’s actual journey back to Browning, Montana, to reclaim his identity. He says:

> Throughout his journey back to Browning, back to the Blackfeet Nation – very much like my journey – Darrell is an outsider in a lot of ways. The audience goes along with him, not really knowing about the culture, [but] maybe having a certain idea about what it’s like to be Native in contemporary America. (Taylor-Corbett, “Mini-Documentary” 00:01:03-00:01:28)

Like many Indigenous people in the modern United States, Shaun Taylor-Corbett has a hybrid heritage. He is “proud to be a mixed-raced artist of Amskapi-Pikunni (Blackfeet), Scandinavian, and Black” heritage (Playbill for *Between Two Knees* 14). The hybrid nature of his show, its negotiation between Native oral tradition and western literary tradition reflects, not only its mixed-race writer and star, but the hybridity of the contemporary American society. This notion of being a mixture rather than separate is profoundly decolonial.

Dorothy Dark Eyes' character is the embodiment of the Taylor-Corbetts' commitment to Blackfeet language preservation and restoration. In scene six, the song "Language that Lives" explains role Siksiká – the Blackfeet language – has in modern Native American survivance:

DOROTHY

If we don't teach our language, it will be
gone, don't you understand? It is as important
as food. Without it we die. If we lose our
language and our land, our sovereignty will be
next.

LANGUAGE THAT LIVES

DOROTHY (CONT'D)

OUR SCHOOL CANNOT BE STOLEN!
OUR HERITAGE CAN'T BE BOUGHT!
THE BLACKFEET NATION NEEDS A PLACE
WHERE OUR WORDS CAN BE TAUGHT
HALF OF ALL OTHER TRIBES
HAVE LET THEIR LANGUAGE DIE
BUT I WON'T LET THAT HAPPEN HERE
NO, I WON'T LET US DISAPPEAR!

Overcome with frustration, Dorothy
runs out of the BIA to a clearing
near Tall Tree School accompanied
by a female vocable of raw

emotion.

WE NEED A LANGUAGE THAT LIVES

ON EVERY PIKUNNI TONGUE,

A SACRED SOUND OF OUR PEOPLE

THAT'S PASSED FROM OLD TO YOUNG

WE NEED A LANGUAGE THAT LIVES

AND SOMEWHERE IT HAS A HOME

WHERE ALL OUR CHILDREN LEARN TO SING

AN ANCIENT MUSIC OF OUR OWN.

…

HOW CAN MY STUDENTS ACHIEVE

OR KNOW THAT THEY HAVE WORTH

IF THEIR VOICE IS ALLOWED

TO VANISH FROM THE EARTH?

As she sings, the classroom forms around her.

WE NEED A LANGUAGE THAT LIVES

A ROBE OF FEATHER AND FUR

TO WEAR WHEREVER WE MAY GO

REMINDING US OF WHO WE WERE.

(Taylor-Corbett, *Distant Thunder* 37-39)

Dorothy's determination to continue teaching the Blackfeet language to her students on the reservation echoes Wa Thiong'o's belief in the significance of Indigenous language reclamation.

Dorothy's assertion that the tribe will disappear without its native language challenges and subverts the continued cultural erasure of First Americans in the United States. She fights against the colonizer's mental warfare – the strategy of the European American powers to control the Native American mind – by illustrating how her students, the youngest Blackfeet generation, will suffer if their voices "are allowed to vanish from the Earth" (Taylor-Corbett, *Distant Thunder* 39). Her central message in "Language That Lives" is a call to participate in "fight-back, creative culture." She demands to be taken seriously, warning the mixed American audience of the fatal consequences the tribe faces should the language die: "Without it we die" (Taylor-Corbett, *Distant Thunder* 37). She illuminates a path forward for Native communities, however, by asserting that language restoration work can begin the healing process from the most violent aspects of colonization and begin restoring Indigenous self-determination through decolonization. Dorothy Dark Eyes' character emphasizes *Distant Thunder's* decoloniality in the modern American performing arts genre.

Distant Thunder's hybrid structure and purpose, much like Zitkala-Sa's 1913 *The Sun Dance Opera*, will continue to challenge the way scholar-activists study the significance of performance arts in capturing the essence of all American stories and histories, providing a modern decolonial way forward for the United States to honor its first people and their ever-evolving contributions to American culture through both traditional and experimental methods. The show repeats the phrase: "you have known these people your whole life." When the characters encourage each other to remember who they know from their community, they are working against colonizing the mind, assimilation strategies, and erasure tactics – the lingering

forms of colonization in the modern United States. They are actively calling on themselves to construct their contemporary identity, not by the standards of the European American system, but by their belonging to one another as a people of distinct culture with shared stories and histories.

In a 2018 interview with Indian Country Today, several years before *Distant Thunder* would find a home at the First Americans Museum and introduce itself to the world in their Festival Plaza, Shaun Taylor-Corbett hoped the show would spark the realization that “Native Americans are contemporary people just like anybody else. We’re not mascots, and we’re not historical figures that have been lost in time” (Daffron). Echoing his characters’ purpose and messages, he continues, “we’re real people with an incredible culture to offer the world” (Daffron).

The theater has been a medium for humans to express themselves for thousands of years and a forum where social injustices are communicated to the wider world. Across the globe, communities of Indigenous people have turned to the performing arts to hold fast to their cultural traditions, strengthen their senses of self and ancestral ties, and illuminate the injustices they face at the hands of the settler’s culture of fear and silence. In step with these global practices, *Distant Thunder*, a modern example of doing the decolonial work, of the fight back, creative culture Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o went to jail for, functions as a place of revolution: a stage for social justice activism and reform.

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