

**Univerzita Karlova v Praze – Filozofická fakulta**

Ústav anglofonních literatur a kultur

**Bakalářská práce**

**The Image of Death in Selected Works of Contemporary American Indian Literature**

Obraz smrti ve vybraných dílech současné literatury Severoamerických indiánů

Vedoucí bakalářské práce:

Mgr. Pavla Veselá, Ph.D.

Zpracovala:

Zuzana Glatzová

Studijní obor:

Praha, srpen 2018

Anglistika a amerikanistika

## **Prohlášení**

Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto bakalářskou práci vypracovala samostatně, že jsem řádně citovala všechny použité prameny a literaturu a že práce nebyla využita v rámci jiného vysokoškolského studia či k získání jiného či stejného titulu.

## **Declaration**

I declare that the following BA thesis is my own work for which I used only the sources and literature mentioned, and that this thesis has not been used in the course of other university studies or in order to acquire the same or another type of diploma.

V Praze, dne 1. 8. 2018

.....

Zuzana Glatzová

## **Acknowledgements**

Above all, I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor Mgr. Pavla Veselá, Ph.D., for her help during the formation of this work and for her valuable advice.

## **Abstract**

The subject of this BA thesis is contemporary American Indian literature. My aim is to explore how selected representatives of this minority literature portray death in their works. To be able to understand the native population's approach to death, it is important to consider their traditional spirituality and how it stands on the question of death. The spirituality began to transform with the arrival of the European settlers. The traditional way of life of American Indians was disrupted and they became the object of exploitation. Not only were they subjected to physical elimination but their culture was also purposefully repressed. All this contributed to a transformation of the understanding of death which is reflected in the contemporary American Indian literature. The works which will be discussed are Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* and N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*.

The thesis is divided into theoretical and practical part. The purpose of the theoretical part is to offer a basic introduction to traditional native spirituality before the colonization of North America, describing its main features. It also presents the cultural conflict between the Indians and the white settlers and how the spirituality evolved under the pressure of Christianity and assimilating practices of the newly formed United States. The practical part consists of three chapters, with each focusing on one of the selected novels, analysing the author's specific approaches to the portrayal of death.

## **Key words:**

death, spirituality, alienation, survivor guilt, American Indians, Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich, N. Scott Momaday

## **Abstrakt**

Tématem této bakalářské práce je současná literatura severoamerických indiánů. Cílem práce je zkoumat, jakým způsobem vybraní zástupci této minoritní literatury zobrazují smrt. Ke kompletnímu pochopení postoje původních obyvatel Ameriky ke smrti je taktéž nutno zauvažovat nad jejich tradiční spiritualitou a jak ta se staví k otázce smrti. Tradiční spiritualita se začala proměňovat s příchodem evropských osadníků. Tradiční způsob indiánů byl narušen a z nich se stali oběti vykořisťování. Nejen, že byli likvidováni fyzicky, taktéž jejich kultura byla cíleně potlačována. Tyto události přispěly ke změně v chápání smrti, což se odráží v současné literatuře amerických indiánů. Zkoumána budou následující díla: *Obřad* od Leslie Marmon Silko, *Stopy*<sup>1</sup> od Louise Erdrich a *Dům z úsvitu* od N. Scotta Momadaye.

Práce je rozdělena na teoretickou a praktickou část. Cílem teoretické části je nastínit rysy tradiční spirituality severoamerických indiánů před kolonizací Ameriky. Taktéž má za úkol představit kulturní střet mezi indiány a bílými osadníky, a jak se tradiční spiritualita vyvíjela pod tlakem křesťanství a asimilačních snah vedených nově formovanými Spojenými státy. Praktická část se skládá ze tří kapitol, z nich každá se soustředí na jeden z vybraných románů, ve kterých analyzuje způsoby, za pomoci kterých jednotliví autoři zobrazují smrt.

## **Klíčová slova:**

smrt, spiritualita, odcizení, vina přeživších, američtí indiáni, Leslie Marmon Silko, N. Scott Momaday, Louise Erdrich

---

<sup>1</sup> Vlastní překlad.

## Table of Contents

1	Introduction.....	7
1.1	Cultural Genocide.....	8
1.2	American Indian Literature .....	10
1.3	Terminology .....	11
1.4	Methodology.....	12
2	Traditional Spirituality.....	13
2.1	Harmony and Unity .....	14
2.2	Cyclical Understanding of Time.....	15
2.3	Visionary Experiences and Vision Quests.....	16
2.4	Death in Traditional Thinking .....	17
2.5	The Tradition vs Christianity – A Cultural Conflict.....	18
2.6	The Outcome of the Conflict .....	20
2.7	The Sheltering of Spirituality .....	20
2.8	New Religious Movements .....	21
2.8.1	Peyotism .....	22
2.8.2	The Ghost Dance Movement.....	23
3	Leslie Marmon Silko’s <i>Ceremony</i> .....	25
3.1	Interconnection with Nature .....	26
3.2	Tayo’s Feelings of Guilt .....	27
3.3	The Importance of Story-telling .....	30
3.4	The Rebirth of the Tradition.....	31
4	Louise Erdrich’s <i>Tracks</i> .....	33
4.1	Living vs Dead.....	34
4.2	Power over Death .....	36
4.3	Fleur vs Pauline .....	37
4.4	Pauline as Christianity .....	38
4.5	Lulu as the New Nation .....	40
5	N. Scott Momaday’s <i>House Made Of Dawn</i> .....	42
5.1	Blending Christianity and the Tradition .....	42
5.2	Abel’s Return to His Heritage .....	46
6	Conclusion .....	48
7	Bibliography.....	51

# 1 Introduction

In November 1969, eighty American Indians seized Alcatraz. One year later, an occupation of Ellis Island was planned by another group of Indians, although it was never executed. All this was performed under nearly a century-old treaty “allowing Indians squatter rights on unused federal land.”<sup>2</sup> This story appears as a proof that American Indians, after over 500 treaties broken by the United States government,<sup>3</sup> finally learned and accepted the game which this government initiated. Sometimes it seems that the history of the United States tends to be stripped off its pre-colonial era. Even the seemingly innocent statement that Christopher Columbus discovered America suggests that the two continents of America were vacant and he was the first person to set foot on it, yet the fact remains that the land was inhabited already for a long period of time. The US administration’s reluctance to deal with its colonial guilt is, although not acceptable, to a certain degree understandable. As Gabriel Horn points out in his essay “The Genocide of a Generation’s Identity,” “a history wrought with genocide and a democracy riddled with evil must be denied or the foundation of the United States would crumble.”<sup>4</sup> Another instance of the United States’ denial is the fact that it did not sign the definition of genocide at the United Nations’s *Convention of the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* in 1948, as it would mean acknowledging the genocide of Indians and therefore the obligation to pay retributions towards the people.<sup>5</sup> (The US eventually did ratify the convention in 1986, with a great number of reservations.<sup>6</sup>) Yet no

---

<sup>2</sup> Mifaunwy Shunatona Hines, “Raising the American Indian Community House,” *Genocide of the Mind: New Native American Writing*, ed. MariJo Moore (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2003) 284.

<sup>3</sup> Kimberley Roppolo, “Symbolic Racism, History and Reality: The Real Problem with Indian Mascots,” *Genocide of the Mind: New Native American Writing*, ed. MariJo Moore (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2003) 191-192.

<sup>4</sup> Gabriel Horn, “The Genocide of a Generation’s Identity,” *Genocide of the Mind: New Native American Writing*, ed. MariJo Moore (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2003) 69.

<sup>5</sup> Roppolo 190.

<sup>6</sup> Eric Markusen, Review of *The United States and the Genocide Convention*, by Lawrence J. Leblanc, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 530 (Nov 1993): 203, JSTOR <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1047686>>, 25 Jun 2018.

matter how much of the history is suppressed, all this remains part of the US history and the voices calling for the US admitting its colonial guilt grow louder and louder.

## 1.1 Cultural Genocide

Besides the physical genocide and the seizure of the Indians' land, more inconspicuous process was under way which was sadly also far more effective in terms of the devastation of the native communities. It is the cultural genocide which has affected all the areas of life, ranging from language to spirituality. The residential system of schooling discouraged, under the threat of physical punishment, the use of native languages among young Indian students, leading to "an entire generation not passing on language skills."<sup>7</sup> This eventually resulted in many indigenous languages being forgotten. Those languages which survived until the present day are often actively used only by a few, which has far reaching consequences. The traditional way of life is connected to the use of a particular language – it provides a sense of community and contributes to establishing the rules of behaviour. These rules become prone to be broken with the loss of this language.<sup>8</sup> Now the native communities are determined to revive Native languages,<sup>9</sup> and although language classes are being taught, the task is very problematic. James Aronhiotas Stevens points out that "the main element lacking in language preservation is a base of Native speakers large enough to support daily conversation."<sup>10</sup>

Beside language, traditional spirituality and consequently the whole understanding of the world was also affected. Many Indians recognize the religion which colonists brought with themselves as one of the main tools for destroying the culture of their tribes – quoting Geary Hobson: "Christianity as the one element brought by the newcomers that caused the

---

<sup>7</sup> MariJo Moore, "Native Languages: Where Will They Go From Here?," *Genocide of the Mind: New Native American Writing*, ed. Moore (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2003) 103.

<sup>8</sup> Neil McKay, "The Spirit of Language," *Genocide of the Mind: New Native American Writing*, ed. MariJo Moore (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2003) 163.

<sup>9</sup> Moore 103.

<sup>10</sup> James Aronhiotas Stevens, "Iah Enionkwatewennahton'se': We Will Not Lose Our Words," *Genocide of the Mind: New Native American Writing*, ed. MariJo Moore (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2003) 157.

most effective and irrevocable devastation to the lifeways of Indians.”<sup>11</sup> A new worldview was imposed on the indigenous population and their own understanding of the world was pronounced as invalid. Horn elaborates on this in the following way:

[C]ultural genocide begins when one people robs the religious views of another people through indoctrination and fear, and how the practitioners of Christianity made every effort imaginable to impose their anthropomorphic God on Indian children, stealing our future of the most precious and vital view of life and of the world and of the universe.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, the images of the Indians themselves that were created by the non-Indians in the colonial era, were often misshapen or completely false to justify the exploitation of these people. Two contrasting stereotypes can be identified. Firstly, it is the image of the red devil, a dangerous blood-thirsty savage who must be destroyed to protect the communities of the colonists.<sup>13</sup> The second image is the noble savage, who is perceived as pure and innocent and whose spirituality is to a certain extent appreciated. Nevertheless, the noble savage is still destined to die out.<sup>14</sup> The appreciation of Indian spirituality and tradition by the outsiders which appeared in connection with the noble savage stereotype persists into the present. It often leads as far as to the cultural appropriation of the spirituality, which is understood by many representatives of the first nations as an exploitation of it.<sup>15</sup> However, it again only leads to the dismissal of the actual human beings – “the dominant society has admired the mythological Indian but rarely the genuine person.”<sup>16</sup> These biased depictions can

---

<sup>11</sup> Geary Hobson, Introduction, *The Remembered Earth: An Anthology of Contemporary Native American Literature*, ed. Hobson (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1981) 3.

<sup>12</sup> Horn 66.

<sup>13</sup> Hobson 10

<sup>14</sup> Sandra Kumamoto Stanley, “Claiming a Native American Identity: Zitkala-Sa and Autobiographical Strategies,” *Pacific Coast Philology* 29.1 (1994): 66, JSTOR <[www.jstor.org/stable/1316348](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1316348)>, 2 Feb 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Véronique Champion-Vincent, “Native Americans as a Source of Wisdom. History and Analysis of a Contemporary Mythology,” *Studia Ethnologica Pragense* 2 (Jul 2017): 25, EBSCOhost, <[search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?authtype=shib&custid=s1240919&profile=eds](http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?authtype=shib&custid=s1240919&profile=eds)>, 14 Apr 2018.

<sup>16</sup> MariJo Moore, “Indians as Mascots: An Issue to Be Resolved,” *Genocide of the Mind: New Native American Writing*, ed. Moore (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2003) 185.

severely affect the self-identity of an individual. The degrading images and names infiltrate the minds of the Indians and can seriously hurt their self-image, which Horn recognizes as “an effect of cultural genocide.”<sup>17</sup> Especially the youths are prone to “the temptation of defining themselves in relation to stereotypes and misjudgements,”<sup>18</sup> which leads to them acting as immorally as the society expects them to.

Even nowadays, American Indians face many difficulties. Besides the ongoing threat of losing the land and the spirituality,<sup>19</sup> racism is still a common issue. Old stereotypes are simply transformed to function in the modern times – the barbaric red devil is now even worse, it is a drunk on welfare, parasitizing on the hard-working white society.<sup>20</sup> The display of racism is not always open or acknowledged. More importantly, American Indians now face the problem of how to adapt to modern life but at the same time maintain their tribal traditions.<sup>21</sup>

## 1.2 American Indian Literature

From the above discussed misrepresentation arises an acute need for Indians’ own cultural representation – literary included, as literature also served as a tool for stereotyping Indians.<sup>22</sup> Therefore it is necessary for the Indian authors to create a new image of the native communities in their literary works. The breakthrough in recognition of Indian literature by both the academics and the mainstream was the year 1969 in which N. Scott Momaday was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his novel *House Made of Dawn*, becoming the first Indian author winning this literary prize with a novel whose primary subject is the community of

---

<sup>17</sup> Horn 68.

<sup>18</sup> MariJo Moore, “Young American Indians: The Need to Reclaim Identity,” *Genocide of the Mind: New Native American Writing*, ed. Moore (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2003) 63.

<sup>19</sup> Hobson 3.

<sup>20</sup> Dave Stephenson, “America’s Urban Youth and the Importance of Remembering,” *Genocide of the Mind: New Native American Writing*, ed. MariJo Moore (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2003) 95-96.

<sup>21</sup> Kathryn Lucci-Cooper, “To Carry the Fire Home,” *Genocide of the Mind: New Native American Writing*, ed. MariJo Moore (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2003) 8.

<sup>22</sup> Hobson 5.

Indians.<sup>23</sup> In the same year, Vine Deloria, Jr. published his book *Custer Died for Your Sins*, which is subtitled “An Indian Manifesto” and serves to enlighten the white population about the position of an Indian in the dominant culture and hardships relating to it.<sup>24</sup> Through the upcoming years, the literature produced by American Indian authors gained mainstream popularity.<sup>25</sup> Yet it must be noted that at the same time, there is a dichotomy arising when an Indian author aims to join the literary canon. The canon is established by the nonmarginalized majority, which is the source of oppressive power, as Joseph Dandurand points out.<sup>26</sup>

### 1.3 Terminology

I feel obliged to comment on my choice of the terminology for the native population. I am aware that the term “American Indian” might be perceived as problematic. For instance, the author Paula Gunn Allen strictly refuses the term:

As for the first word in my title, “Indian,” it speaks to the fact that the indigenous peoples of this continent are not perceived as human beings or national communities by the dominating world-view. We like to joke that we’re glad Columbus wasn’t looking for Turkey! He thought he was in India; consequently the people he met on the Caribbean Island had to be Indians. But he wasn’t, and they weren’t, and we aren’t “Indians” except in Anglo-European discourse that ranges from history, psychology, literature, to every kind of popular culture.<sup>27</sup>

On the other hand, the term “Native American” can include everyone born on the American continent, not necessarily belonging to the indigenous population. Many leading authors from

---

<sup>23</sup> Hobson 1.

<sup>24</sup> “Overview: *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*,” *Gale Online Encyclopedia*, Gale, 2018. *Literature Resource Center*, <<http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/H1430003582/LitRC?u=karlova&sid=LitRC&xid=ce5177>>, 3 Apr 2018.

<sup>25</sup> Hobson 1.

<sup>26</sup> Joseph Dandurand, “X. Alatssep (Written Down),” *Genocide of the Mind: New Native American Writing*, ed. MariJo Moore (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2003) 122.

<sup>27</sup> Paula Gunn Allen, “Indians, Solipsisms, And Archetypal Holocausts,” *Genocide of the Mind: New Native American Writing*, ed. MariJo Moore (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2003) 314.

the native community, including Vine Deloria Jr., use the term “American Indian” therefore I choose to follow their example, not using it in a disrespectful manner. When possible, I will employ the tribal names as I perceive them as the most accurate and politically correct.

#### **1.4 Methodology**

It is possible to assume that the colonial period must have affected the literary production of the American Indians although the theory of post-colonialism is being rejected by some members of the indigenous writing community, for instance by the Canadian author Thomas King. Yet I believe that the religious beliefs of the colonists, completely new to the natives, to an extent influenced the traditional spiritual thinking and the spirituality’s transformation will be analysed in this thesis. More specifically, I plan to focus on how the approach towards has death evolved. My thesis will be divided into two parts, a theoretical one and a practical one. In the theoretical part, consisting of Chapter 2, I describe major aspects of the traditional Indian culture and spirituality, primarily in regard to the notion of death, pointing out its differences and similarities with the European thinking of the colonists who arrived in North America. Next, I will try to characterize the cultural conflict arising and trace how it affected the native population. In the practical part, consisting of Chapters 3 and 4, I analyse the selected literary works – Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*, Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks* and N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn*. The aim is to consider the specific approaches to the portrayal of death and identify them in these texts.

## 2 Traditional Spirituality

The thinking of the indigenous people of America, both Southern and Northern, widely differed from the European thinking of the same time. The values of the American Indian communities varied so immensely that the Indians were thought of as not civilized, in the European sense of the word, and therefore were treated as inferior. The inability of both parts to overcome the differences between their worldviews led to a cultural gap which caused centuries of disputes. The aim of this chapter is to describe the traditional spirituality in its pre-colonial stage. Notwithstanding, it must be kept in mind that the indigenous languages were enormously diverse and so were the religions.<sup>28</sup> Therefore this this chapter does not aspire to be a description of one single set of religious beliefs and ceremonies which would be applicable to every American Indian tribe. Rather, it is to serve as a guide of religious and cultural characteristics which the individual tribes shared. In the context of North America's indigenous population, it is preferable to discuss the form of thinking as spirituality rather than as religion, as spirituality is inseparable from various areas of human life<sup>29</sup> and it is more far-reaching than any forms of organized religion.<sup>30</sup> Native spirituality offers not only the feeling of connectedness in the life of an individual, it also connects the individual to a larger world order, as James Olson points out: "Native American religious ceremonies also revolved around the relationship between the individual, the community, and the cosmos; mystical rituals were performed to reveal universal truth."<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> James S. Olson and Raymond Wilson, *Native Americans in the Twentieth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984) 11.

<sup>29</sup> Lee Irwin, *Native American Spirituality: A Critical Reader* [Electronic Resource], (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000) 3, EBSCOhost  
<[search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?authtype=shib&custid=s1240919&profile=eds](http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?authtype=shib&custid=s1240919&profile=eds)>.

<sup>30</sup> Timothy Freke, *Spiritualita severoamerických indiánů*, trans. Helena Hartlová (Praha: Aurora, 2000) 9. All translations from this book are mine.

<sup>31</sup> Olson and Wilson 12.

## 2.1 Harmony and Unity

American Indians believe in an overall spirit, which has different names among the tribes (Wakan Tanka among the Sioux, Manitu among the Algonquins, Orenda among the Iroquois, and many more), yet it is more pantheistic rather than “a personal being presiding omnipotently over the salvation or damnation of individual people.”<sup>32</sup> The spirit is of a pantheistic nature and therefore can be perceived as a set of different spiritual beings, rather than just one entity. These beings were believed to be often intervening in the lives of the Indians<sup>33</sup> and they had many opportunities to do so as they reside in all animals, plants and also material objects: “their world was infused with the divine.”<sup>34</sup> Such inseparability of the divine and nature leads to a different understanding of the world itself – it does not exist only for the humans’ use. The Indians are aware of their own dependence on animals and plants which were, according to the legends, usually given to them by the spiritual beings as gifts. They pay their respects to these creatures in ceremonies which were specially designed to thank plants and animals that sacrificed their lives so the Indians could survive. The emphasis is also put on moderation when using the sources of nature; wasting of them was unthinkable.<sup>35</sup> James Olson compares the two diverse points of view. American Indians “believed in the kinship of all living things and practiced a form of reciprocity with nature, giving something back for something taken.”<sup>36</sup> Whereas the thinking of the European settlers relied on “the traditional faith in ‘Manifest Destiny,’ with its emphasis on expansion, progress, unbridled growth, as well as racial superiority.”<sup>37</sup> Another reason for Europeans thinking in this manner is the scientific approach which requests a hierarchical structuring of the world whereas the Indians perceive all aspects of life as a part of the larger whole. The

---

<sup>32</sup> Olson and Wilson 11.

<sup>33</sup> Nancy Bonvillian, *Native American Religion* (New York; Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1996) 13-14.

<sup>34</sup> Olson and Wilson 11.

<sup>35</sup> Bonvillian 33-36.

<sup>36</sup> Olson and Wilson 3.

<sup>37</sup> Olson and Wilson 3.

Europeans were therefore estranged from nature which allowed them to exploit nature, with the Indian being part of it, without much remorse.<sup>38</sup>

As the spiritual beings were thought to be present everywhere, the Indians were more open to the supernatural, and although human beings do not have spiritual power in themselves, they can acquire it through a demanding training.<sup>39</sup> The Indians communicated with the spirits by prayers, similarly to Christianity, believing they were able to release the cosmic energy, which can also be achieved by songs and dances. Some tribes believe that a song or a prayer must be reproduced accurately otherwise they are not effective; some tribes, on the other hand, appreciated spontaneity.<sup>40</sup> To secure the continuing of the harmonious cycle of nature, the Indians regularly performed renewal ceremonies, such as the Midwinter ceremony among the Iroquois or the Sun Dance among the tribes of the Great Plains.<sup>41</sup> The disruption of the harmony was thought to lead to natural disasters and human diseases.<sup>42</sup>

## **2.2 Cyclical Understanding of Time**

The notion of cycles plays an important role in the culture of Indians on many levels. The world itself consists of many circles and the Indians are moving between these circles. The meaning of life is located in the middle.<sup>43</sup> As opposed to the European thinking, time is not understood as linear but as cyclical, which is reflected by the cycles of the moon and the sun and also the rhythm of life adheres to the cycles of the nature.<sup>44</sup> Paula Gunn Allen also suggests that the cyclical understanding of time changes the value judgement of the individual moment in time:

---

<sup>38</sup> Olson and Wilson 15.

<sup>39</sup> Bonvillian 16-18.

<sup>40</sup> Bonvillian 18-19.

<sup>41</sup> Bonvillian 45-51.

<sup>42</sup> Bonvillian 72.

<sup>43</sup> Freke 13-14.

<sup>44</sup> Larry Zimmerman, *Indiáni Severní Ameriky*, trans. Dušan Zbavitel (Praha: Knižní klub, 2003) 12-13. All translations from this book are mine.

The American Indian tends to view space as spherical and time as cyclical, whereas the non-Indian tends to view space as linear and time as sequential. The circular concept requires all 'points' that make up the sphere of being to have a significant identity and function, while the linear model assumes that some 'points' are more significant than others.<sup>45</sup>

To relate the differences between these two views of time to the notion of death, the linear understanding of time causes the past to seem as distant which then separates them from their dead ancestors. On the other hand, the dead ancestors are often still present in the native thinking.

### **2.3 Visionary Experiences and Vision Quests**

The communication between the Indians and the divine powers were, as opposed to communication with the Christian God, more frequent and reciprocal. The message can either come unexpectedly in a dream, in which the spiritual being reveals to the dreamer a solution to a problem or transmits to them a message from the dead,<sup>46</sup> or a person might go to a vision quest intentionally in order to obtain a message. In both these cases, the person undergoing the visionary experience creates a very special and personal bond with the spiritual being. The vision seekers usually spend time isolated in the nature and fasting, self-mutilation is often used to achieve a vision. Timothy Freke offers a comparison with Jesus' stay in the desert which shares many similarities with the traditional Indian vision quests.<sup>47</sup> The vision quest was also among many tribes functioning as a maturation process for boys.<sup>48</sup> A lot of Indians sought the visions through the Sun Dance Ceremony and the self-mutilation which was

---

<sup>45</sup> Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992) 59.

<sup>46</sup> Bonvillian 15.

<sup>47</sup> Freke 114.

<sup>48</sup> Bonvillian 61.

frequent in the Sun Dance was one of the reasons why the US authorities prohibited the ceremony. The ban was of course not really kept among the natives.<sup>49</sup>

## 2.4 Death in Traditional Thinking

Timothy Freke writes that “[t]here is no death in the life ways of American Indians, only a mere departure.”<sup>50</sup> The cyclical nature of native thinking facilitated the acceptance of death as it is a part of the cycle, therefore it is not viewed as a failure.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, death is closely connected to rebirth which again minimizes its frightfulness. Death also symbolizes spiritual rebirth in visions.<sup>52</sup> The attitude towards death in the native tradition might be compared to the western concept of “tame death” which was coined by Phillippe Ariès as “tame death” is considered natural and not encouraging fear.<sup>53</sup> As for the burial ceremonies, the funerals in the native societies serve similar purposes as in the European tradition – to allow the relatives to grieve and give opportunity to the community to express its sympathy. Yet the funeral also serves to prepare the deceased for the journey to the world beyond. They are often given clothing and other things which are meant to serve them in the afterlife. It is believed by many tribes that the souls of the deceased ones stay around for a short period of time. Some tribes hold ceremonies to release the souls and prevent any harmful interaction with the living.<sup>54</sup> The world of the dead is not strictly separated from the world of the living and it is possible to visit it through visions.<sup>55</sup> It is also thought that because old people are closer to death, they are closer to the spiritual powers.<sup>56</sup>

The approach to death began to change after the arrival of the colonists as the ways of dying started to be transformed, both because of the new diseases which were wasting the

---

<sup>49</sup> Olson and Wilson 13.

<sup>50</sup> Freke 10.

<sup>51</sup> Freke 92.

<sup>52</sup> Freke 109.

<sup>53</sup> Michael Jacobsen, “‘Spectacular Death’ – Proposing a New Fifth Phase to Philippe Ariès’s Admirable History of Death,” *Humanities* 5.2 (2016): 19, MDPI <<http://www.mdpi.com/2076-0787/5/2/19>>, 21 Apr 2018.

<sup>54</sup> Bonvillian 62-65.

<sup>55</sup> Freke 106.

<sup>56</sup> Zimmerman 99.

Indian population in great numbers and because of the physical conflicts with the settlers.<sup>57</sup> Death was no longer so easily justifiable or accepted for that matter. The need for clarification gave rise to new stories, for instance the Kiowa smallpox story.<sup>58</sup> The always present Indian death also influenced the Christians. It made them pose questions about God's intentions when they saw all the Indian deaths around. To both Europeans and Indians, death was connected with the next life and has a spiritual meaning. But the question is whether the Christians ascribed the religious meaning to the Indian death as well or if their view of Indians as inferior beings did not allow them to.<sup>59</sup>

## 2.5 The Tradition vs Christianity – A Cultural Conflict

Although it is natural for traditional thinking to evolve to some degree over time as the society develops, the Indian tradition's trajectory of development was disturbed with the arrival of Christianity. The Puritan colonists did not usually understand traditional spirituality as a proper set of religious beliefs. They perceived the Indians as pagans, therefore possible converts. In their view, God perceived only the Christians as the rightful ones and hence all pagans, the Indians included, were damned to suffer in hell as they were seen as fully corrupted (particularly by the Calvinist tradition). Furthermore, Indian spirituality is largely based on a vast spectrum of ceremonies which often appeared to the Christians as witchcraft. It is also important to mention that one of the main issues for the Puritans was the fact that the members of Indian communities were usually able to communicate directly with their Gods which was for the Christians completely unacceptable.<sup>60</sup>

At first, the Puritans did not want to interact with the Indians at all as they did not want to get involved with someone who is damned to hell, but from the 1640s, the Puritans in

---

<sup>57</sup> Richard W. Pointer, *Encounters of the Spirit: Native Americans and European Colonial Religion* [Electronic Resource], (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007) 161, EBSCOhost <[search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?authtype=shib&custid=s1240919&profile=eds](http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?authtype=shib&custid=s1240919&profile=eds)>.

<sup>58</sup> Collin G. Calloway, *Our Hearts Fell to the Ground* (Boston; New York: Bedford Books, 1996) 50-53.

<sup>59</sup> Pointer 162.

<sup>60</sup> Svatava Raková, *Víra, rasa a etnicita v koloniální Americe* (Praha: Nakladatelství Lidové Noviny, 2005) 83. All translations from this book are mine.

Massachusetts started the Christianizing process. In 1663, the Bible was translated into one of the indigenous languages (belonging to the Algonquian language group) by John Eliot but the theology was for many incomprehensible because of its abstractness which further estranged Christianity. Also, some concepts were completely strange to the Indians; for instance the constant guilt and the fear of being damned which the character of God evokes were not familiar to the Indians.<sup>61</sup> Not every missionary was completely strict – some were trying to make the Christian religion as accessible as possible for the indigenous population, for instance Thomas Mayhew aimed to merge certain aspects of Christianity and the traditional Indian beliefs and therefore offer Indians a more acceptable option. He was also more tolerant, in comparison with others, when it came to clothing and general physical appearance and did not force them to abandon some spiritual ceremonies, for instance their burial rites.<sup>62</sup>

Yet Mayhew was more of an exception as the christianizing and consequently the assimilating process often used whatever means possible – as an illustration can serve the Richard H. Pratt’s quote “Kill the Indian and Save the Man.”<sup>63</sup> In fact, Pratt did his part, being the founder of the Carlisle Indian School, as the residential system of schooling played again an important role in forcing European culture and religion on the young Indians. Similarly, the system of foster child care did its part, often unnecessarily separating the children from their family and therefore from their traditions, in order to assimilate them.<sup>64</sup> The government systematically attacked native beliefs, banning many ceremonies, in order to clear space for Christianity.<sup>65</sup> In the 1880s, the US Government outlawed Indian religious ceremonies but the people maintained them and performed the ceremonies in private.<sup>66</sup> It might be perceived as almost ironic that the very First Amendment to the United States Constitution which secures

---

<sup>61</sup> Raková 85.

<sup>62</sup> Raková 84.

<sup>63</sup> Calloway 15-16.

<sup>64</sup> Devon A. Mihesuah, *American Indians: Stereotypes & Realities* (Atlanta: Clarity Press, Inc., 2004) 67.

<sup>65</sup> Calloway 17.

<sup>66</sup> Mihesuah 67-68.

free exercise of religion has been denied in regard to Indian religions. Yet the Indians are claiming its protection. John Petoskey says that the denial of the First Amendment is caused by the standards which are developed for Judeo-Christian religions.<sup>67</sup> The government issued American Indian Freedom of Religion Act in the year 1978 which is supposed to protect the religious belief of the indigenous population yet it was not always adhered to.<sup>68</sup> The latest important act relating to guarantee of the native religious freedom is the American Indian Religious Freedom Amendment signed by President William Clinton in 1994.<sup>69</sup>

## **2.6 The Outcome of the Conflict**

Many Indians did convert to other faiths, including Christianity. Some Indians converted for economic opportunities, for some the conversion to Christianity was often seen as the only way to survive physically. Accepting Christianity often meant giving up spiritual traditions, losing the securities which are tied to the known cosmos,<sup>70</sup> and Christianity was not able to sufficiently replace the tradition lost.<sup>71</sup> Most frequently, the Indians developed a new religion combining aspects of both the traditional spirituality and Christianity, therefore even a believing Christian could be attending the Sun Dance ceremony without giving it much thought.<sup>72</sup>

## **2.7 The Sheltering of Spirituality**

Native spirituality always tended to be secluded from the eyes the outsiders, as Joseph Dandurand points out, “[t]rue Native spirituality is not talked about, it is not shared with those who cannot truly be a part of it. The only way you can learn about true Native Spirituality is

---

<sup>67</sup> John Petoskey, “Indians and the First Amendment,” *American Indian Policy in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Vine Deloria Jr. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985) 221.

<sup>68</sup> Mihesuas 68.

<sup>69</sup> Bonvillian 94.

<sup>70</sup> Raková 86.

<sup>71</sup> Zimmerman 26.

<sup>72</sup> Murray L. Wax and Rosalie H. Wax, “Religion Among American Indians,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 436 (Mar 1978): 32-34, JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1042166>>, 2 Mar 2018.

to become a part of it.”<sup>73</sup> Yet the constant persecution of Indians’ religious rights and the modern appropriation of native spirituality inflicted even a more covert treatment of the religious practices.<sup>74</sup> This endeavour to shelter the spirituality often creates conflicts also among Indians themselves, an example would be the animosity between reservation Indians and urban Indians. In 1924, the US government issued the Relocation Act which offered Indians the possibility to leave the reservation and relocate to urban areas for better life options.<sup>75</sup> Many Indians did relocate, which complicated their status as they are not perceived as “proper Indians” by the reservation inhabiting ones. The conflict goes as far as that the reservation Indians are withholding teachings about the traditional culture and spirituality from the urban Indians and the urban Indians are also kept away from sacred religious ceremonies.<sup>76</sup> Another problem is revealing too much to the non-Indians, who are excluded altogether. Such disclosure can be understood as a betrayal of the Indian tradition by the rest of the Indian community.<sup>77</sup>

## 2.8 New Religious Movements

The historical period of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries is marked with the rise of religious revival moments because the Indians felt that the traditional ceremonies were not functional anymore as they did not protect them from the expansion of the white settlers and these new prophecies provided them with hope. Some of the representatives of these new religions are the Peyote religion, the Ghost Dance movement and the Longhouse Religion created by the prophet Handsome Lake. Only the first two movements will be discussed in greater detail

---

<sup>73</sup> Dandurand 126.

<sup>74</sup> Irwin 1.

<sup>75</sup> Behind the Act hides the government’s hope for the Indians to join the mainstream society which would end the government’s responsibilities towards them. Barbara Helen Hill, “Home: Urban and Reservation,” *Genocide of the Mind: New Native American Writing*, ed. MariJo Moore (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2003) 22.

<sup>76</sup> Hill 25.

<sup>77</sup> As an example can serve Paula Gunn Allen’s critique of Silko’s *Ceremony* which she, although appreciating its literary value, perceives as too revealing of the traditional Pueblo ceremonial practices.

here; peyotism for its utilization of the First Amendment and the Ghost Dance movement as its concept is closely connected to the notion of death.

### 2.8.1 Peyotism

One of the new religions emerging in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the Peyote religion which produced a great deal of controversy, among both the whites and the Indians, and consequently created a large public discussion. The controversy arose from the fact that the movement encouraged the use of peyote, a cactus with psychotropic and hallucinogenic effects. It was traditionally used already before the arrival of the colonists among tribes in Texas and Mexico but the movement caused it to spread among the entire United States. According to the peyotism followers, peyote consumption produces religious meanings and enables a contact with the world of the spirits. The religion is said to combine certain aspects of both Christianity and native spirituality but the contact with the divine entity is more direct than in Christianity. Nancy Bonvillian recorded a quote by Comanch chief Quanah Parker describing this immediate communication: “The white man goes into his church and talks *about* Jesus, but the Indian goes into his tipi and talks *to* Jesus.”<sup>78</sup> As soon as the Peyote religion began spreading, the US authorities were attempting to ban peyote use. The movement eventually officially formed the intertribal Native American Church in 1918 to gain the protection of the First Amendment yet it did not stop the harassment or the controversy for that matter. The freedom to practice Peyote religion was finally secured by the American Indian Religious Freedom Amendment.<sup>79</sup>

---

<sup>78</sup> Bonvillian 90.

<sup>79</sup> Bonvillian 89-94.

## 2.8.2 The Ghost Dance Movement

The turbulent events of the 19<sup>th</sup> century gave rise to the Ghost Dance Movement at the end of the 1880s.<sup>80</sup> It was originated by Wowoka, a Nevada Paiute Indian who was said to undergo a visionary experience in which he encountered God. Nancy Bonvillian describes the message God gave to Wowoka to transfer to other Indians: “God told Wowoka that a new world was coming, where the living would be reunited with their deceased loved ones, where there would be no illness, and where there would be no old age.”<sup>81</sup> Wowoka then became a prophet and proclaimed that those Indians who will follow his instructions and perform special ceremonies designed by him, would be then allowed to live in the promised land. The movement spread very quickly through the Great Plains, with each tribe adding their own contributions coming from their tribal customs, such as the songs.<sup>82</sup>

The participants of the movement performed the Ghost Dance, a spiritual dance ceremony, which enabled them to travel to the land of the dead and bring back the dead buffalo and dead Indians.<sup>83</sup> The American authorities were concerned about the movement as the position of the white society in Wowoka’s plans was not clear and each tribe understood it slightly differently. Some thought that everyone will live in the promised land in peace, some expected that the white people would simply disappear and some assumed that the white people would be killed by a divine intervention, which would allow the Indians to come back to the traditional ways of life. The third group worried the authorities the most as they saw the movement as the possible platform for the Indians to unite and rebel against the whites. The worry about the movement eventually rose to such a degree that the authorities decided to ban its manifestations and persecute its leaders. Furthermore, tribal leaders who were suspected of

---

<sup>80</sup> Olson and Willson 13.

<sup>81</sup> Bonvillian 83.

<sup>82</sup> The American ethnographer James Mooney who spent time observing different Indian tribes compiled an extensive study on the Ghost Dance which contains songs from different tribes which were sang during the Ghost Dance ceremonies by both individuals and groups. James Mooney, *The Ghost Dance* (North Dighton: JG Press, 1996).

<sup>83</sup> Wax and Wax 35.

encouraging the religion were also prosecuted, which turned out to be fateful to one of the most prominent native leaders, Sitting Bull (Tatanka Yotanka in Lakota). On the 15<sup>th</sup> December 1890, a group of Indian policemen approached the home of Sitting Bull in order to arrest him. A few dancers of the ghost dance appeared at the scene, not willing to extradite the leader. The situation eventually broke into a shoot-out in which Sitting Bull was killed.<sup>84</sup>

The government's opposition to the ghost dance escalated with the Wounded Knee massacre which is again related to an attempt to arrest another leading figure – Spotted Elk. He and his group of Indians were escorted by the Cavalry Men and when being disarmed, a skirmish broke out which then grew into a shoot-out. The estimated number of victims is close to 300, with majority being women, children and the elderly.<sup>85</sup> The Wounded Knee Massacre might seem as an end to the Ghost Dance Movement but it is not so as the religion still resonates in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the year 1973, the members of the American Indian movement seized in protest Wounded Knee, choosing it for its symbolic value. One of the leaders of the takeover was Leonard Crow Dog, who also reinterpreted Wowoka's message. He claimed that Wowoka's teachings were never meant to bring back the dead; it was rather aiming to secure the survival of the traditional ways of life. He continues in keeping the dance ceremonies alive.<sup>86</sup>

General characteristics of American Indian spirituality were briefly introduced as they are essential for understanding how death is approached and portrayed in the works of American Indian authors. The following chapters will now examine closely three selected novels and the image of death which is created in them.

---

<sup>84</sup> Dee Brown, *Mé srdce pohřbíte u Wounded Knee*, trans. Dušan Zbavitel (Odeon: Praha, 1976) 279-280. All translations from this book are mine.

<sup>85</sup> Brown 281-284.

<sup>86</sup> Zimmerman 137.

### 3 Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*

The novel *Ceremony*, first published in 1977, thematically strongly resonates with N. Scott Momaday's novel *House Made of Dawn*, which came out nine years before. Both the protagonists, Tayo and Abel, are World War II veterans, unable to find their place in society yet they are both eventually healed by reconnecting with the Indian tradition. Tayo's reconnection with the tradition through a sacred ceremony allows the rebirth of the whole community. The rebirth is symbolized by the motif of death which is present throughout the novel. The whole world must symbolically die in order to be purified and it does so by Tayo's symbolical sacrifice of himself, allowing him to become the saviour of his people.

The novel introduces the Laguna Pueblo people and their land as dying – Tayo “cries because they are dead and everything is dying.”<sup>87</sup> It is so because the land suffers from draughts which then affects the people inhabiting it. Furthermore, Tayo struggles with his traumatic memories from the war and he is also described as balancing on the border between life and death: “It was too late to ask for help, and he waited to die the way smoke dies, drifting away in currents of air, twisting in thin swirls, fading until it exists no more” (16-17). All this suffering is said to be induced by “Indian witchery” which created white people (132). The white people then by their own world-views destroyed the balance and brought death into the Indian community:

The world is a dead thing for them  
the trees and rivers are not alive  
the mountains and stones are not alive.  
  
The deer and bear are objects  
They see no life.  
  
(...)

---

<sup>87</sup> Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986) 16. All future page references in this chapter will be to this edition and will be included in parentheses in the text.

The will kill the things they fear  
all the animals  
the people will starve.  
(...)  
They will fear what they find  
They will fear the people  
They kill what they fear. (135-136)

### 3.1 Interconnection with Nature

Scholars such as Lee Schweningen agree that respect for nature and gentle usage of its sources are frequently reflected in the literature of American Indian writers,<sup>88</sup> and all the three novels explored in this thesis prove that. Momaday calls this relationship “reciprocal appropriation” which he further explains as “appropriation in which man invests himself in the landscape, and at the same time incorporates the landscape into his own most fundamental experience.”<sup>89</sup> Not only that the state of nature in *Ceremony* reflects the condition of the Indian people, Tayo’s own experience is interwoven with natural imagery. The constant death of people close to Tayo causes him to become alienated from nature as it becomes the object of his blame:

Tayo hated this unending rain as if it were the jungle green rain and not the miles of marching or the Japanese grenade that was killing Rocky. He would blame the rain if the Japs saw how the corporal staggered; if they saw how weak Rocky had become, and came to crush his head with the butt of a rifle, then it would be the rain and the green all around that killed him. (11)

---

<sup>88</sup> Lee Schweningen, “Writing Nature: Silko and Native Americans as Nature Writers,” *MELUS* 18.2 (Summer 1993): 47, JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/467933>>, 20 Mar 2018.

<sup>89</sup> Quoted in Schweningen 48.

Yet when Tayo comes back from the war, the land of his people suffers from drought. He now blames himself for hating nature and he perceives the drought as his punishment – affecting everyone in the community. His survivor’s guilt is mirrored by the guilt he feels towards nature. The fact that he is able to feel responsible for the condition of nature is induced by his perception of nature as an Indian – Lee Schweningen points out that “[f]or the Native American the land is alive. (...) For the Euro-American the land is outside himself, separate, objectified, alien, and therefore ultimately dead.”<sup>90</sup> Therefore Tayo is able to understand how his actions could kill nature as he is aware that he is capable of killing it. The interconnectedness is crowned when Tayo’s completes the ceremony and the natural order is restored – bringing the rain back. Yet the nature does not only reflect the character of Tayo, the disrespect towards nature characterizes also Emo, the antagonist of the novel, when he says: “Here’s the Indians’ mother earth! Old dried-up thing!” (25) In conclusion, Silko draws a comparison between the mainstream society’s treatment of the native population and their treatment of nature: “Oppression of nature, Silko suggests, goes hand in hand with oppression according to race, gender, or class.”<sup>91</sup>

### **3.2 Tayo’s Feelings of Guilt**

Tayo returns from his service in the US army in Japan during World War II. He comes back after witnessing deaths of many – especially of his cousin Rocky, with whom he grew up. Yet the place to which he is coming back is not much more pleasant. During his service overseas his uncle Josiah, the relative to whom he feels closest to, also dies. From these events, immense feelings of guilt spring up in Tayo. He feels guilty for surviving the war, whereas Rocky, the favourite one, did not. Tayo did enlist in the army solely to protect Tayo who had enlisted already – and he failed this task. The guilt is even heightened by the approach of his family, namely that of his aunt, as Tayo senses that she would prefer if Rocky

---

<sup>90</sup> Schweningen 49.

<sup>91</sup> Schweningen 51.

were the one to survive instead: “she was waiting for something to happen; but he knew that she always hoped, that she always expected it to happen to him, not to Rocky” (73). Furthermore, not only that did Tayo witness the death of his cousin in Japan, he also blames himself for the death of Josiah. The death of Josiah and Rocky inflicts survivor’s guilt in Tayo.<sup>92</sup>

Tayo’s stay in Japan is painful as he witnesses a great number of deaths with the omnipresent possibility of his own death. He also struggles with his mission to kill the Japanese soldiers. On the other hand, Rocky is more assimilated and honestly believes in his role of an American soldier as when he says: “But, Tayo, we’re supposed to be here. This is what we’re *supposed* to do” (8). Tayo is not able to justify killing the Japanese men as they are the American enemy – not his. Furthermore, he seems to identify the Japanese with the Indians – as when he sees his uncle’s face on one of the Japanese soldiers (7), and his guilt rises as he feels as if he was killing his own. The guilt towards the Japanese people is developed even further in the novel when the subject of uranium mining and nuclear testing on the reservation land is raised,<sup>93</sup> because Tayo identifies the damage done to the Indian land with the damage done to the Japanese cities which were struck by the atomic bomb during World War II.

### 3.3 Tayo’s Metaphorical Death

When considering the development of Tayo’s story-line it becomes clear that while it follows the structure of the traditional American Indian myth – “the hero-quest as a framework in which to establish prototype ceremonial procedures,”<sup>94</sup> several aspects of the

---

<sup>92</sup> Naomi R. Rand, “Surviving What Haunts You: The Art of Invisibility in *Ceremony*, *The Ghost Writer*, and *Beloved*,” *MELUS* 20.3 (Autumn 1995): 24, JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/467740>>, 2 May 2018.

<sup>93</sup> Kyoko Matsunaga, “Leslie Marmon Silko and Nuclear Dissent in the American Southwest,” *Japanese Journal of American Studies* 25 (2014): 69, EBSCOhost <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?authtype=shib&custid=s1240919&direct=true&db=asn&AN=108400676&site=eds-live&scope=site&lang=cs>>, 6 May 2018.

<sup>94</sup> Robert C. Bell, “Circular Design in *Ceremony*,” *American Indian Quarterly* 5.1 (Feb 1979): 47, JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1184724>> 20 Mar 2018.

Christ myth can be identified. Robert Detweiler calls the Christ myth “the most familiar, most pervasive narrative in Western civilization.”<sup>95</sup> For a successful literary portrayal of a Christ figure, the character must have “identity on its own” – must be described successfully on its own as a character.<sup>96</sup> The character of Tayo meets this condition as his primary identity is that of an American Indian. What else makes Tayo the Christ figure is his sacrifice, his symbolical death, by which he is able to help his community:

It is much more than a reconnection to his cultural roots that heals Tayo and his community. It is a sacrifice of self and complete surrender to vulnerability that allow healing to take place in Tayo’s life and combat the witchery in his community.<sup>97</sup>

Tayo is sacrificing “his individual selfish behaviour,”<sup>98</sup> meaning the hatred which he feels towards the Western civilization. By his sacrifice he not only redeems the guilt he himself feels, but he also redeems the guilt which the story of the witchery, which is being told in the novel, ascribes to the Indian community: “it was Indian witchery that made white people in the first place” – who then brought the death and destruction. By submitting to the ceremony, Tayo experiences “the healing power of sacrifice”<sup>99</sup> and saves both his community and himself, letting go of the painful reminders of death which infested the Indian community: “The green waves of dead faces and the screams of the dying that had echoed in his head were buried” (104).

Detweiler describes the Christ figure in a following way:

[T]he protagonist or a significant character remind one of Christ without ever becoming Christ or a direct reflection of him. Rather, the suggestion of Christ leads

---

<sup>95</sup> Robert Detweiler, “Christ and the Christ Figure in American Fiction,” *The Christian Scholar* 47.2 (Summer 1964): 114, JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41177375>>, 6 May 2018.

<sup>96</sup> Christine Downing, “Typology and the Literary Christ-Figure: A Critique,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 36.1 (Mar 1968): 25, JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1461478>> 11 Apr 2018.

<sup>97</sup> Monica Avila, “Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*: Witchery and Sacrifice of Self,” *Explicator* 67.1 (2008): 53, EBSCOhost <[http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?authtype=shib&custid=s1240919&direct=true&db=edselc&AN=edselc\\_2-52.0-61449424503&site=eds-live&scope=site&lang=cs](http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?authtype=shib&custid=s1240919&direct=true&db=edselc&AN=edselc_2-52.0-61449424503&site=eds-live&scope=site&lang=cs)>, 4 May 2018.

<sup>98</sup> Avila 53.

<sup>99</sup> Avila 54.

one further to recognition of any one of the archetypal possibilities, all of which Christ has symbolized for the West.<sup>100</sup>

Although Tayo follows the traditional path of the Christ-figure, it must be held in mind that such a figure in the American Indian context has many other connotations. Christ mainly stands as a symbol of Christianity which is the source of the large part of the crisis in the American Indian communities. Therefore by introducing the Christ figure in the American Indian context, Silko points out a new archetypal possibility which Christ symbolizes – as the destructor of the community:

Christianity separated the people from themselves; it tried to crush the single clan name, encouraging each person to stand alone, because Jesus Christ would save only the individual soul; Jesus Christ was not like the Mother who loved and cared for them as her children, as her family. (68)

Ascribing Tayo, a native character, the characteristics of a Christ-figure suggests the blending of Christianity and the traditional spirituality. This merging is further stressed by Tayo's intimate relationship with Ts'eh whose character symbolizes the spirituality. The character is female which stresses the matriarchal nature of the Indian tradition, rather than the patriarchal sovereignty of Christianity. By having sex with Ts'eh, the representation of the tradition, Tayo is able to reconnect to it.

### **3.4 The Importance of Story-telling**

Similarly to the theme of nature, the act of story-telling is a feature appearing frequently in the native literature. The novel itself begins with a story:

I will tell you something about stories,

(he said)

They aren't just entertainment.

---

<sup>100</sup> Detweiler 116.

Don't be fooled.

They are all we have to fight off

illness and death. (2)

The story emphasizes the importance of story-telling in preventing the tradition from dying out. The self-appointed civilized society aims to suppress the belief in the power of story-telling in order to belittle the traditional spirituality: "He had believed in the stories for a long time, until the teachers at Indian school taught him not to believe in that kind of 'nonsense'" (19). Yet Tayo does not succumb to this persuasion and his belief in the importance of story-telling is essential to his recovery as "[t]he act of storytelling is the act of remembering,"<sup>101</sup> which is a tool for creating the better future in the world with the circular approach of time, therefore with the repetition of the history. As Tayo's grandma says: "It seems like I already heard these stories before...only thing is, the names sound different" (260).

### **3.5 The Rebirth of the Tradition**

The image of death is reappearing constantly in the novel. Death itself shapes into something vastly different than what it meant to the Indians before the colonization as it now can hardly be perceived as something natural. It is now transformed into something destructive which overwhelms the native population. Yet Silko offers a more positive perspective to it – she portrays it as a symbol of rebirth. Both the community and the character of Tayo are described as dying but it never happens – as Tayo completes the ceremony, the dying Indian tradition is reborn, offering a new hope for the future. The whole process is crowned by Tayo's explicit comment on the funeral of Harley and Leroy: "[T]wo big flags covered the coffins completely, and it looked as if the people from the village had gathered only to bury the flags" (259). Coming back to life, the community "buries" its past of oppression. Yet the last words of the story suggest that the war against the dilapidation of

---

<sup>101</sup> Rand 31.

the native tradition and community, which is described as witchery, is not finished nor will it ever be: “It is dead for now” (261).

In Silko’s *Ceremony*, death creates in Tayo a feeling of guilt. He feels guilty for surviving and blames himself for the death of the ones close to him. This guilt of a native character represents the guilt which is felt by the whole native population for losing so many of its members.<sup>102</sup> It also contributes to Tayo’s alienation from his community and heritage yet he manages to reconnect with it through the character of Ts’eh who is the embodiment of the tradition. Tayo is an example of a Christ-figure which suggests the blending of Christianity and the native beliefs. Similarly to Christ, Tayo sacrifices himself and metaphorically dies, healing both himself and his community in conclusion. Some of these aspects can be found also in Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks* which will be analysed in the next chapter – for instance the juxtaposition of Christianity and Indian traditional beliefs or the survivor guilt.

---

<sup>102</sup> Roppolo 195.

#### 4 Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*

Louise Erdrich's novel *Tracks* came out shortly after Silko's critique of Erdrich's work, calling it concerned with the postmodern style rather than with the stories of the indigenous people. *Tracks* can hardly be criticized for the lack of records of the struggles of the American Indians as it includes several central issues – such as the loss of land, new diseases or the imposition of Christianity.<sup>103</sup> Yet the historical account is delivered in a special manner, much influenced by traditional spirituality and story-telling. The novel has two quite diverse narrators: the first being old Nanapush, the second a young woman named Pauline. Both these narrators come out as rather unreliable. Pauline is often proclaimed to be a liar by the other characters and also her psychological and emotional development throughout the novel undermines her credibility as a narrator. Nanapush's narrative ability can be questioned due to the aspects of his trickster nature, for instance his humour (which is usually sexually tinted).<sup>104</sup> It is also implied by the name he was given by his father: "Nanapush. That's what you'll be called. Because it's got to do with trickery and living in the bush."<sup>105</sup> These two narrators hold opposing worldviews which affects their accounts of the events.<sup>106</sup> Besides the pair of narrators, the novel is built on several other dichotomies which this chapter will aim to explore, one of them is between the dead and the living. The boundary between death and life is often rather blurry in the novel, portraying death as natural yet pervasive at the same time.

---

<sup>103</sup> Nancy J. Peterson, "History, Postmodernism and Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*," *PMLA* 109.5 (Oct 1994): 982, JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/462966>>, 28 Apr 2018.

<sup>104</sup> Susan Stanford Friedman, "Identity Politics, Syncretism, Catholicism, and Anishinabe Religion in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*," *Religion & Literature* 26.1 (Spring 1994): 111-112, JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40059588>>, 28 Apr 2018.

<sup>105</sup> Louise Erdrich, *Tracks* (New York: Holt, 1988) 33. All future page references in this chapter will be to this edition and will be included in parentheses in the text.

<sup>106</sup> Peterson 990.

#### 4.1 Living vs Dead

One of the dichotomies on which the narrative of *Tracks* is built is that between the dead and the living. Early in the novel, the Indian nation is by Nanapush described as dying:

We started dying before the snow, and like the snow, we continued to fall. It was surprising there were so many of us left to die. For those who survived the spotted sickness from the south, our long fight west to Nadoussioux land where we signed the treaty, and then a wind from the east, bringing exile in a storm of government papers, what descended from the north in 1912 seemed impossible.

By then, we thought disaster must surely have spent its force, that disease must have claimed all of the Anishinabe that the earth could hold and bury.

But the earth is limitless and so is luck and so were our people once. (1)

The death of the nation is both physical and metaphorical. The nation is being reduced in numbers due to the new diseases brought by the settlers and at the same time the traditional way of life is getting lost because of the assimilation of the Indians. Therefore death as a motif is frequently present in the novel. The worlds of the dead and those of the living are not clearly separated and they often overlap – the woods are said to be full of ghosts (35) and the living often encounter the dead.

An example of that is when Nanapush tries to save Fleur from her family house, where everyone else is already dead. By entering the house, Nanapush at the same time enters the world beyond. Although he manages to bring Fleur back, it transforms her for the rest of her life. Fleur no longer belongs to either of the worlds, is destined to exist in between them, and so does her cousin Moses. Their condition is described thus: [Moses] “didn’t know where [he] was anymore, this of reservation surveys or the other place, boundless, where the dead sit talking, see too much, and regard the living as fools” (7-8). It is also what draws Eli to Fleur

as he himself is rather unanchored: “he might as well have been in the next world, or the one before, for all he cared of this one” (56).

After Nanapush saves Fleur from the dead, both of them begin to suffer from the so-called “invisible sickness.” This sickness is in fact guilt from surviving, very similar to what Tayo feels in *Ceremony*. Although Nanapush warns the dead Pillagers not to blame Fleur for surviving – “I told them not to pester their daughter just because she had survived” (5) – he cannot prevent Fleur from feeling this way. The guilt towards those who did not survive overwhelms both of them, as Nanapush also carries a lot of emotional baggage because of the death of his wives and his children: “We felt the spirits of the dead so near that at length we just stopped talking” (6). The weight of the survivor guilt then causes them to fall in a peculiar state which is very close to being dead. This condition is also described as quite common among the Indians because a lot of them share these feelings of guilt:

Their names grew within us, swelled to the brink of our lips, forced our eyes open in the middle of the night. (...) Within us, like ice shards, their names bobbed and shifted. Then the slivers of ice began to collect and cover us. We became so heavy, weighted down with the lead grey frost, that we could not move. Our hands lay on the table like cloudy blocks. The blood within us grew thick. (...) We had gone half windigo. I learned later that this was common, that there were many of our people who died in this manner, of the invisible sickness. (6)

It is actually the priest figure who heals them from this sickness and it is done so by talking: “The sound of my own voice convinced me I was alive” (7). This suggests the story-telling tradition yet it must be pointed out that the situation also strongly resembles the act of confession – Nanapush confides in Father Damien, commenting: “I kept Father Damien listening all night” (7), and then he is healed from a sickness which is induced by guilt. Therefore in this situation in the novel, the tradition intertwines with another aspect of the

Christian religion. Fleur's survival with the help of Nanapush is what creates the link between these two characters: "Since I saved her from sickness, I was entangled with her" (33).

The blending of the worlds of the dead and the living is constant throughout the novel. Although the dead people appear among the living, they are harmless. The real issue to be worried about is something very much alive: "Our trouble came from living, from liquor and the dollar bill" (4).

## 4.2 Power over Death

The novel portrays the ability to control death as a great power to have, almost as an "art": "woods inhabited by ghosts and roamed by Pillagers, who knew the secret ways to cure or kill, until their art deserted them" (2). Yet this ability cannot save the Pillagers as the way of dying has changed. A character which still has a residue of such an ability is Nanapush. This power of Nanapush, "the ability to come back to life after death or neardeath,"<sup>107</sup> can be ascribed to his trickster nature. The model to his character, the traditional Chippewa figure of Naanabozho, is also said to have this power over death.<sup>108</sup> Nanapush is able to control his own death thanks to the act of storytelling: "I saved myself by starting a story. [...] But I did continue and recovered. I got well by talking. Death could not get a word in edgewise, grew discouraged, and travelled on" (46). Not only is he able to save himself, he also saves others from death. Besides Fleur, he saves Moses Pillager by tricking death (35-36).

Another character who has a close connection to death is Pauline. Although she is not able to stop dying, she channels a great comfort from accompanying those who are dying on their last journey. It is Bernadette who initiates her into this function, but who herself does it for pragmatic, almost selfish, reasons as only when looking after the dying she finds enough quiet to do her bookkeeping:

---

<sup>107</sup> Peterson 990.

<sup>108</sup> Peterson 990.

In the deep night, waiting for the angel's wings to fold, she totalled and divided and subtracted and found amounts. The nuns thought her holy because she visited the dead. I knew she was practical and needed quiet to balance books. (65)

For Pauline, this function becomes far more personal and she develops into almost a servant to death, as she "entered each house where death was about to come, and then made death welcome" (69). Yet she is not able to help her community, she can only witness its dilapidation: "good at easing souls into death but bad at breathing them to life, afraid of life in fact, afraid of birth, and afraid of Fleur Pillager" (57).

### 4.3 Fleur vs Pauline

Another dichotomy besides the one between the living and the dead is the pervasive conflict between traditional Indian spirituality and Christianity. In this novel, the conflict is represented by two opposing characters – Fleur and Pauline, with Fleur representing the tradition and Pauline as the symbol of the new religion<sup>109</sup>. Hanif and Marandi see Fleur as another trickster character in the novel, due to her tendency to gamble and her being often compared to a wolf. Nevertheless, she does represent the American Indian tradition – "being an embodiment of Native American values and beliefs."<sup>110</sup> Although Fleur represents the tradition, her lingering to the old ways is what makes her an outsider in the Chippewa community.<sup>111</sup> Fleur is often in the narrative slandered by Pauline, who is, as aforementioned, an unreliable character,<sup>112</sup> being described as follows: "She messed with evil, laughed at the old women's advice and dressed like a man" (12). This symbolizes the misrepresentation and defamation of the Indian culture by the Western society. At the end of the novel, Fleur

---

<sup>109</sup> Michelle R. Hessler, "Catholic Nuns and Ojibwa Shamans: Pauline and Fleur in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*," *Wisazo Sa Review* 11.1 (Spring 1995): 40, JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1409041>>, 28 Apr 2018.

<sup>110</sup> Hanif and Marandi.

<sup>111</sup> Mohsen Hanif and Seyed Mohammad Marandi, "The Significance of the Lake Monster in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*," *The Explicator* 72.3 (2014): 250, EBSCOhost <[http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?authtype=shib&custid=s1240919&direct=true&db=edselc&AN=edselc\\_2-52.0-84907477253&site=eds-live&scope=site&lang=cs](http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?authtype=shib&custid=s1240919&direct=true&db=edselc&AN=edselc_2-52.0-84907477253&site=eds-live&scope=site&lang=cs)>, 18 May 2018.

<sup>112</sup> Hanif and Marandi 250.

voluntarily leaves. By this act she acknowledges that the desperate retaining of the old ways is not an option in the new world.

Besides sharing a number of characteristics with Indian culture, another important aspect of Fleur's symbolical nature is the incident which happens in Argus. There, she is raped by three white men who are then punished by death or by severe physical impairment. This rape is symbolical and represents the rape of the Indian culture by the western one. Such a representation by the act of rape is not rare in indigenous writing.<sup>113</sup> Shortly after Fleur comes back from Argus, it becomes clear to the community that she is pregnant. Yet she is already romantically involved with Eli so the situation around the paternity of the child is unclear: "no one can decide if the child is mixed blood or what, fathered in a smokehouse, or by a man with brass scales or by the lake" (31). Although it is Eli who assumes the position of the father, the reader is never explicitly said who the biological father is. If we assume Fleur to be the representation of Indian culture, the child whom she carries after her metaphorical rape by the white culture is then the product of the clash of these two subjects, giving the character of Lulu a great importance.

#### **4.4 Pauline as Christianity**

The counterpart to Fleur is Pauline who represents Christian religion. She completely rejects her Indian roots, aiming to be assimilated and to pass for white:

I wanted to be like my mother, who showed her half-white. I wanted to be like my grandfather, pure Canadian. That was because even as a child I saw that to hang back was to perish. I saw through the eyes of the world outside of us. I would not speak our language. (14)

---

<sup>113</sup> Another example of such metaphor can be found in the plays of Tomson Highway. Anne Nothof, "Cultural Collision and Magical Transformation: The Plays of Tomson Highway," *Studies in Canadian Literature* 20.2 (1995): 39, EBSCOhost <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?authtype=shib&custid=s1240919&direct=true&db=edsglr&AN=edsgcl.H1420090315&site=eds-live&scope=site&lang=cs>>, 22 May 2018.

Her attitude towards her heritage is clearly induced by her defining herself through the opinion of the mainstream society therefore she does come out as a rather unfortunate character, although she is often described as rather annoying by the other characters. She is the product of the cultural genocide, a literal example of what was actually happening to many native youths.

Pauline eventually decides to join the nunnery as she is an outsider everywhere else and feels that in here she may finally belong. The figure of God helps her further deny her native identity when she imagines him saying:

He said that I was not whom I had supposed. I was an orphan and my parents had died in grace, and also, despite my deceptive features, I was not one speck of Indian but wholly white. (137)

Yet her dedication to Christ later practically develops into an obsession and she mutilates herself on a variety of levels.

Pauline's self-induced suffering often serves as an opportunity to ridicule Christianity, as when she describes her innovativeness of new ways to make herself suffer: "I had made a set of underwear from potato sacks, and when I wore it the chafing reminded me of Christ's sacrifice" (143). Christianity is ridiculed on several more instances, not always in connection with the character of Pauline. It is often done in a rather obscene manner, possibly to counter the strict morality and severity of Christianity. An example of this ridicule is when Eli meditates on how to make Fleur forgive him after his adultery: "If Fleur was only in the church I could go there, get forgiveness by the priest, and then she would have to forget what happened" (108). Another one is when Nanapush complains to Father Damien about the uncomfortable benches in the church:

'God sometimes enters the soul through the humblest parts of our anatomies, if they are sensitized to suffering.'

‘A god who enters through the rear door,’ I countered, “is no better than a thief.” (110)

Christianity is therefore frequently present in the novel but it is often regarded with a lack of seriousness. On the other hand, Christianity is not completely rejected as the character of Father Damien contributes to the well-being of the Indian community.

#### **4.5 Lulu as the New Nation**

As the novel resolves, it becomes clear that the conflict between Pauline and Fleur, between Christianity and tradition, is inconclusive. Although Christianity and its imposition on the native population is frequently criticized in the novel, holding on to the past is not an option either. Fleur therefore leaves and makes place for Lulu, who represents the new Chippewa nation. This may be observed in Nanapush’s very final description of her:

You were the last to emerge. (...) Your braids were cut, your hair in a thick ragged bowl, and your dress was a shabby and smoldering orange, a shameful color (...) Your knees were scabbed from the punishment of scrubbing long sidewalks, and knobbed from kneeling hours on broomsticks. But your grin was bold as your mother’s. (226)

It is the relationship between Nanapush and Lulu which is essential because he is the one who shapes her. The significance of their relationship is stressed by the fact that they share the family name: “[I]t was through Fleur Pillager that the name Nanapush was carried on and won’t die with me, won’t rot in a case of bones and leather” (34). Nanapush is not Lulu’s father genetically, but Peterson points out that he is to be her spiritual father who has the responsibility to teach her the traditional ways.<sup>114</sup> This is the aim of his role as the narrator in the novel: “Nanapush insists on telling this history to Lulu, for only by creating his own narrative can he empower her.”<sup>115</sup>

---

<sup>114</sup> Peterson 990.

<sup>115</sup> Peterson 985.

To conclude, *Tracks* reflects the conflict of traditional spirituality and Christianity. The two beliefs are represented by the characters of Fleur and Pauline who are both closely related to death. Fleur is caught in between the world of the dead and the living as she managed to escape dying yet she cannot fully free herself from this experience. Pauline looks after those who are dying and this function empowers her. Also Nanapush, the trickster character of the novel, possesses certain amount of power over death. In general, the motif of death is present constantly in the novel and this frequency suggests on the one hand the naturalness of death but at the same time points out its pervasiveness in the native community. The image of death as unceasing is present also in the third novel this thesis will explore – N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*. Whereas the focus of *Tracks* is on several characters, which creates at least some sense of community, Momaday's novel concentrates mainly on the character of Abel and his feelings of alienation.

## 5 N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*

N. Scott Momaday's novel *House Made of Dawn* is essential in the discourse of the native writing as it was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1969 which meant acknowledging writing about American Indians as a part of the American literature. Furthermore, it meant acknowledging the literary value of these writings. The novel works with the theme of identity crisis in a native character, identity crisis which is induced by the transformation of the world around. The novel's protagonist Abel does not fully belong either to the Indian community or to the urban white society – similarly to the character of Tayo in *Ceremony*. Abel is torn between these two worlds and his crisis is reflected by the non-linear narrative which alternates between the past and the present, creating in the reader confusion similar to that which is inflicted upon Abel.<sup>116</sup> He tries to drown his pain in alcohol yet that only causes further trouble and he eventually finds himself struggling to survive. Nonetheless, at the end of the novel, Abel eventually manages to resolve his identity crisis and finds his way back to the Pueblo tradition.

### 5.1 Blending Christianity and the Tradition

The novel does not portray a pure set of religious beliefs which the native community follows. Rather, it offers an image of religious ceremonies as a blend of aspects of both traditional native spirituality and those of Christianity. Such blending suggests that natives do

---

<sup>116</sup> Irem Seklem, "Abel's Identity Crisis and his Journey to his Native Self in *House Made of Dawn*: A Critical Analysis Perspective," *International Journey of English Language and Translation Studies* 2.1 (2014): 21, EBSCOhost  
<[http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?authtype=shib&custid=s1240919&direct=true&db=edsdoj&AN=edsdoj\\_6e26ddc1c142f88d993ddaa4a83f2b&site=eds-live&scope=site&lang=cs](http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?authtype=shib&custid=s1240919&direct=true&db=edsdoj&AN=edsdoj_6e26ddc1c142f88d993ddaa4a83f2b&site=eds-live&scope=site&lang=cs)>, 29 May 2018.

not necessarily reject their tradition and replace it by Christianity nor that they maintain beliefs free of influence of the colonization process:

[A]fter four centuries of Christianity, they still pray in Tanoan to the old deities of the earth and sky (...) They have assumed the names and gestures of their enemies, but have held on to their own, secret souls.<sup>117</sup>

The novel also describes the changing attitude of the white society concerning the religious beliefs of the natives. At the time of Father Nicolas, as apparent from his diary, holding on to the native spirituality is denounced and it is also the reason why Nicolas hates Francisco – because he performs old rituals. On the other hand, Father Olguin, Nicholas's successor, is open to adjusting the Christian beliefs in order to make them more accessible to the indigenous people and therefore he overlooks the blending of these two faiths.<sup>118</sup>

## 5.2 Death and the Character of Abel

Death is a key factor in forming the personality of Abel as his whole life is a chain of deaths of people who are close to him. Abel witnesses the transformation of the native life and he is aware of how it contributes to the mortality of that population. He therefore feels animosity towards those who brought the change and at the same time loses hope in the tradition – becoming alienated from both. Abel does not know his father, which contributes to his feeling of being uprooted.<sup>119</sup> The father figure in his life is therefore occupied by his grandfather Francisco. The first person Abel loses is his mother:

[H]e knew somehow that his mother was soon going to die of her illness. It was nothing he was told, but he knew it anyway and without understanding, as he knew already the motion of the sun and the seasons. (15)

---

<sup>117</sup> N. Scott Momaday, *House Made of Dawn* (New York: New American Library, 1969) 56. All future page references in this chapter will be to this edition and will be included in parentheses in the text.

<sup>118</sup> Alan R. Velie, "The Return of the Native: The Renaissance of Tribal Religions as Reflected in the Fiction of N. Scott Momaday," *Religion & Literature* 26.1 (Spring 1994): 136-137, JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40059589>>, 29 May 2018.

<sup>119</sup> Seklem 23.

Soon afterwards, his brother Vindal dies, leaving him with only his grandfather Francisco:

But even then, when he knew what it was that he was waiting for, it seemed a long time before his grandfather called to him. (...) He went into the room and stood by the side of the bed. His grandfather left him there alone, and he looked at his brother's face. It was terribly thin and colorless, but all the pain was gone from it. Then, under his breath and because he was alone, he spoke his brother's name. (16)

In addition to forming Abel, death also reflects the alienation from his heritage. After his return from the service in World War II, he slips to a hazardous pattern of behaviour which includes fighting and drinking heavily. All of that only further contributes to his alienation. Yet when he tries to gain his identity back, during the feast of Santiago, he fails and the result is yet another death – this time caused by Abel himself.

### **5.3 Murder of the White Man**

Not only must Abel frequently witness death but he also causes one. He murders a man which then completely changes his life. The murder is partially caused by Abel's hurt pride which often gets him into trouble, as when he attacks Tosamah or when it gets him nearly killed by the policeman later in the novel. In this situation, Juan Reyes, a local albino who is frequently referred to as "the white man", disgraces him during the feast of Santiago when he repeatedly hits him with the corpse of a rooster (44). The fact that a non-native defeats Abel in a traditional ritual, although it must be pointed out that this festival is also influenced by Christianity,<sup>120</sup> further suggests Abel's alienation from his native identity. It is also why Abel hates the white man so much – it serves as a reminder of his crisis.<sup>121</sup>

The fact that Abel's victim is the white man offers the possibility to read the situation differently – as Abel killing white culture, represented by the character of Reyes. This is demonstrated by Abel's comment on the murder:

---

<sup>120</sup> Velie 138.

<sup>121</sup> Seklem 24.

He had killed the white man. [...] It was the most natural thing in the world. [...] They must know that he would kill the white man again, if he had the chance, that there could be no hesitation whatsoever. For he would know what the white man was, and he would kill him if he could. A man kills such an enemy if he can. (95)

Nevertheless, John Konevich argues that “[a]lthough the albino may be a symbolic representation of white culture, Abel does not kill him out of a sense of righteous vengeance, but rather as a result of his own disassociation from tribal customs.”<sup>122</sup> Abel therefore commits the murder as an attempt to resolve his identity crisis.<sup>123</sup> This is also supported by the fact that Abel is not really associated with the victim himself, he serves merely as a symbol, which is apparent from Father Olguin’s description of the events:

‘[I]n his own mind it was not a man he killed. It was something else.’

‘An evil spirit.’

‘Something like that, yes.’ (94)

After the trial for the murder, as a result of which Abel is sentenced for several years in prison, the narrative shifts both concerning time and location. Abel has been released and he has relocated to Los Angeles but his crisis has only worsened, and that to such a degree that the next death which Abel must face is actually his own. Again his pride gets him into trouble when he wants to stand up to a policeman named Martinez, who once humiliated him, similarly as the albino did. Yet his revenge gets out of hand and he is almost beaten to death. He is then left to die on a beach and on the verge of life and death, he realizes he does want to stay alive and he fights for it. In Los Angeles he also grows close to a social worker named Milly with whom he gets involved romantically. Death again plays an important role in

---

<sup>122</sup> John Konevich, “Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn*,” *Explicator* 60.4 (Summer 2002): 236, EBSCOhost <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?authtype=shib&custid=s1240919&direct=true&db=hsi&AN=509312635&site=eds-live&scope=site&lang=cs>>, 4 Jun 2018.

<sup>123</sup> Seklem 24.

establishing the relationship between these two characters. They are brought together by the shared feeling of loss as Milly lost her small daughter in the past.

#### **5.4 Abel's Return to His Heritage**

The last from the series of deaths is that of Abel's grandfather Francisco. His dying is contrasted with the condition of Abel: "His own sickness had settled into despair. He had been sick a long time" (175). This sickness is later elaborated on when Abel describes the room which he and the dying Francisco are in: "It was the room in which he was born, in which his mother and his brother died. Just then, and for moments and hours and days, he had no memory of being outside of it" (176). The room is not only physical but also symbolical – serving to describe Abel's sickness which is the feeling of loss. This feeling captures Abel, keeping him metaphorically paralyzed. Abel also points out that the room is the same place where he was born and where his relatives died, which stresses that he is the one who survived whereas the others did not. It is therefore possible to assume that Abel feels similar survivor guilt as the characters of Tayo and Fleur.

The death of Francisco thus helps to heal Abel. Once again, story-telling is an essential feature in this process as Francisco is telling stories on his deathbed to Abel. After the grandfather dies, "Abel fulfills the burial procedures properly and this death brings a transforming change to in his journey to his heritage."<sup>124</sup> He joins the so-called "race of the dead". Charles R. Larson understands the race of the dead as Abel's attempt to perform "a kind of ritual suicide" when he "runs toward death."<sup>125</sup> But it can be argued that such a reading does not correspond with Abel's near death experience on the beach in which he clearly realizes his desire to live. Robert L. Berner offers a different reading of Abel's run – as

---

<sup>124</sup> Seklem 23.

<sup>125</sup> Charles R. Larson, *American Indian Fiction* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1978) 88-89.

“the tribute of the living to the dead.”<sup>126</sup> By joining the race, Abel accepts and comes to terms with both death and life, therefore accepting the dual powers of nature which the novel reflects – creation and destruction.<sup>127</sup> Only after this is he able to heal and reconnect with his heritage.

Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn* frequently employs the motif of death. It is an inseparable part of Abel’s life as his mother and brother both died early in his life. These experiences formed him to an alienated and uprooted youth. The novel describes his struggle to find his place in two different worlds: the native community of his tribe and the urban white community. However, it is again the motif of death which aids him to appreciate the value of his own life when he goes through a near-death experiences. Furthermore, the process of dying of his grandfather Francisco reconnects him with the native tradition – although it must be noted that similarly to Silko’s *Ceremony* and Erdrich’s *Tracks*, the traditional native spirituality described in this novel is not unblemished by the influence of Christianity. Nonetheless, Momaday portrays death as both destructive but also creative, which resonates with the traditional native perception of death as not strictly terminal.

---

<sup>126</sup> Robert L. Berner, “Trying to Be Round: Three American Indian Novels,” *World Literature Today* 58.3 (Summer 1984): 342, JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40139371>>, 7 Jun 2018.

<sup>127</sup> Berner 343.

## 6 Conclusion

After exploring the three novels – *Ceremony*, *Tracks* and *House Made of Dawn* – in greater detail, it is possible to determine several characteristics which these novels, as chosen representatives of American Indian writing, share. To briefly scan through some of these, the importance of nature must be noted. Nature often serves to reflect the narrative of the novel, for which Momaday introduces the term “reciprocal appropriation”.<sup>128</sup> Another characteristic feature is the frequently appearing process of story-telling.

To explore how the native authors portray death, it must be considered how the spiritual thinking of the native population was developing from the arrival of the colonists in North America to the present, as they are closely related. The traditional native spirituality was either completely suppressed and forcibly replaced by Christianity or the spirituality accepted some features of the Christian religion and worked them into the traditional belief. Furthermore, new religious movements emerged during the 19<sup>th</sup> century – such as the Ghost Dance Movement or the Native American Church, unofficially known as peyotism.

With such a great transformation in the life of the native population, it is possible to assume certain change in the approach towards death. The notion of death has completely changed and new ways of dying were decimating the Indian population. Therefore it is no longer possible for the native characters to accept it as a natural part of life. These changes are so immense that they cause alienation of the native characters from their culture but they do not offer them any other place to which they can fully belong. In *Ceremony*, Tayo experiences feelings of alienation and guilt. The feeling of guilt is induced by the deaths of his relatives Rocky and Josiah, for which he feels responsible. With the aid of a traditional ceremony, he is able to free himself from the survivor guilt and accepts Rocky’s and Josiah’s deaths. Erdrich builds her novel *Tracks* on several dichotomies, one of them being the contrasting worlds of

---

<sup>128</sup> Quoted in Schweninger 48.

the dead and the living. These two worlds often overlap, especially through the character of Fleur, who represents the native tradition. The novel concludes with Fleur's leaving which symbolizes that the tradition must evolve to survive. *House Made of Dawn* shares many aspects with *Ceremony*. It describes the struggle of Abel to regain his identity and reconnect with his heritage. Death is important in forming his character and it also contributes to the resolution of his crisis. The deaths portrayed in the three novels often induce feelings of guilt from surviving. The survivor guilt is often displayed on a personal level – as when Tayo, Fleur or Abel feel guilty for surviving members of their family. But the personal level only underlines the communal level of the survivor guilt – that is the whole generations of Indians who must live on with the remembrance of both cultural and physical genocide which was done on their ancestors:

[T]he 'survivor guilt' from being alive and suckered in by colonialist capitalism when so many were butchered in its creation, the shame of being men who descended from those unable to protect our women and children in the face of a demonic killing machine we could have never envisioned in our traditional cultures, the shame of being women who descended from those raped and tortured.<sup>129</sup>

Accepting the new reality can eventually become a tool of regaining power over one's identity, allowing these characters to free from the guilt and reconnect with their heritage. Coming to peace with the history is not to be mistaken with simply accepting it. Native authors use the image of death and dying also to portray the injustices of the colonial era and their effects on the contemporary native nations. Death in their writing is physical but also metaphorical, reflecting the death of the tradition which contributes to the disintegration of the native community. Therefore the image of death has a dual meaning – as both the

---

<sup>129</sup> Roppolo 195.

destruction of the native population but also as foreshadowing a possible rebirth, offering hope for a better future of the native population in the United States.

## 7 Bibliography

Primary sources:

Erdrich, Louise. *Tracks*. New York: Holt, 1988.

Momaday, N. Scott. *House Made of Dawn*. New York: New American Library, 1969.

Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Ceremony*. New York: Penguin Books, 1986.

Secondary Sources:

Allen, Paula Gunn. *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992.

Avila, Monica. "Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*: Witchery and Sacrifice of Self."

*Explicator* 67.1 (2008): 53-55. EBSCOhost

<<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?authtype=shib&custid=s1240919&direct=true&db=edselc&AN=edselc.2-52.0-61449424503&site=eds-live&scope=site&lang=cs>>. 4 May

2018.

Bell, Robert C. "Circular Design in *Ceremony*." *American Indian Quarterly* 5.1 (Feb 1979): 47-62. JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1184724>>. 20 Mar 2018.

Berner, Robert L. "Trying to Be Round: Three American Indian Novels." *World Literature Today* 58.3 (Summer 1984): 341-344. JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40139371>>. 7

Jun 2018.

Bonvillian, Nancy. *Native American Religion*. New York; Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1996.

Brown, Dee. *Mé srdce pohřbête u Wounded Knee*. Translated by Dušan Zbavitel. Odeon: Praha, 1976.

Calloway, Collin G. *Our Hearts Fell to the Ground*. Boston; New York: Bedford Books, 1996.

- Campion-Vincent, Véronique. "Native Americans as a Source of Wisdom. History and Analysis of a Contemporary Mythology." *Studia Ethnologica Pragensia* 2 (Jul 2017): 13-29. EBSCOhost, <[search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?authtype=shib&custid=s1240919&profile=eds](http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?authtype=shib&custid=s1240919&profile=eds)>. 14 Apr 2018.
- Detweiler, Robert. "Christ and the Christ Figure in American Fiction." *The Christian Scholar* 47.2 (Summer 1964): 111-124. JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41177375>>. 6 May 2018.
- Downing, Christine. "Typology and the Literary Christ-Figure: A Critique." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 36.1 (Mar 1968): 13-27. JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1461478>>. 11 Apr 2018.
- Freke, Timothy. *Spiritualita severoamerických indiánů*. Translated by Helena Hartlová. Praha: Aurora, 2000.
- Friedman, Susan Stanford. "Identity Politics, Syncretism, Catholicism, and Anishinabe Religion in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*." *Religion & Literature* 26.1 (Spring 1994): 107-133. JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40059588>>. 28 Apr 2018.
- Hanif, Mohsen, and Seyed Mohammad Marandi. "The Significance of the Lake Monster in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*." *The Explicator* 72.3 (2014): 249-252. EBSCOhost <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?authtype=shib&custid=s1240919&direct=true&db=edselc&AN=edselc.2-52.0-84907477253&site=eds-live&scope=site&lang=cs>>. 18 May 2018.
- Hessler, Michelle R. "Catholic Nuns and Ojibwa Shamans: Pauline and Fleur in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*." *Wisazo Sa Review* 11.1 (Spring 1995): 40-45. JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1409041>>. 28 Apr 2018.

- Hobson, Geary ed. *The Remembered Earth: An Anthology of Contemporary Native American Literature*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1981.
- Irwin, Lee. *Native American Spirituality: A Critical Reader* [Electronic Resource]. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000. EBSCOhost <[search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?authtype=shib&custid=s1240919&profile=eds](http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?authtype=shib&custid=s1240919&profile=eds)>.
- Jacobsen, Michael. “‘Spectacular Death’ – Proposing a New Fifth Phase to Philippe Ariès’s Admirable History of Death.” *Humanities* 5.2 (2016): 19. MDPI <<http://www.mdpi.com/2076-0787/5/2/19>>. 21 Apr 2018.
- Konevich, John. “Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn*.” *Explicator* 60.4 (Summer 2002): 236-238. EBSCOhost <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?authtype=shib&custid=s1240919&direct=true&db=hsil&AN=509312635&site=eds-live&scope=site&lang=cs>>. 4 Jun 2018.
- Larson, Charles R. *American Indian Fiction*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1978.
- Markusen, Eric. Review of *The United States and the Genocide Convention*. By Lawrence J. Leblanc. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 530 (Nov 1993): 203-204. JSTOR <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1047686>>. 25 Jun 2018.
- Matsunaga, Kyoko. “Leslie Marmon Silko and Nuclear Dissent in the American Southwest.” *Japanese Journal of American Studies* 25 (2014): 67-87. EBSCOhost <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?authtype=shib&custid=s1240919&direct=true&db=asn&AN=108400676&site=eds-live&scope=site&lang=cs>>. 6 May 2018.
- Mihesuah, Devon A. *American Indians: Stereotypes & Realities*. Atlanta: Clarity Press, Inc., 2004.
- Mooney, James. *The Ghost Dance*. North Dighton: JG Press, 1996.
- Moore, MariJo. *Genocide of the Mind: New Native American Writing*. New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2003.

- Nothof, Anne. "Cultural Collison and Magical Transformation: The Plays of Tomson Highway." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 20.2 (1995): 34-43. EBSCOhost <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?authtype=shib&custid=s1240919&direct=true&db=edsglr&AN=edsgcl.H1420090315&site=eds-live&scope=site&lang=cs>>. 22 May 2018.
- Olson, James, and Raymond Wilson. *Native Americans in the Twentieth Century*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984.
- "Overview: *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*." *Gale Online Encyclopedia*. Gale, 2018. *Literature Resource Center*, <<http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/H1430003582/LitRC?u=karlova&sid=LitRC&xid=ce5177>>. 3 Apr 2018.
- Peterson, Nancy J. "History, Postmodernism and Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*." *PMLA* 109.5 (Oct 1994): 982-994. JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/462966>>. 28 Apr 2018.
- Pointer, Richard W. *Encounters of the Spirit: Native Americans and European Colonial Religion* [Electronic Resource]. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007. EBSCOhost <[search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?authtype=shib&custid=s1240919&profile=eds](http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?authtype=shib&custid=s1240919&profile=eds)>.
- Raková, Svatava. *Víra, rasa a etnicita v koloniální Americe*. Praha: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 2005.
- Rand, Naomi R. "Surviving What Haunts You: The Art of Invisibility in *Ceremony*, *The Ghost Writer*, and *Beloved*." *MELUS* 20.3 (Autumn 1995): 21-32. JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/467740>>. 2 May 2018.
- Seklem, Irem. "Abel's Identity Crisis and his Journey to his Native Self in *House Made of Dawn*: A Critical Analysis Perspective." *International Journey of English Language and Translation Studies* 2.1 (2014): 20-30. EBSCOhost <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?authtype=shib&custid=s1240919&direct=true&db=edsdoj&AN=edsdoj.6e26ddc1c142f88d993ddaa4a83f2b&site=eds-live&scope=site&lang=cs>>. 29 May 2018.

- Schweninger, Lee. "Writing Nature: Silko and Native Americans as Nature Writers." *MELUS* 18.2 (Summer 1993): 47-60. JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/467933>>. 20 Mar 2018.
- Stanley, Sandra Kumamoto. "Claiming a Native American Identity: Zitkala-Sa and Autobiographical Strategies." *Pacific Coast Philology* 29.1 (1994): 64-69. JSTOR <[www.jstor.org/stable/1316348](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1316348)>. 2 Feb 2018.
- Velie, Alan R. "The Return of the Native: The Renaissance of Tribal Religions as Reflected in the Fiction of N. Scott Momaday." *Religion & Literature* 26.1 (Spring 1994): 135-145. JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40059589>>. 29 May 2018.
- Vine, Deloria Jr, ed. *American Indian Policy in the Twentieth Century*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985.
- Wax, Murray L., and Rosalie H. Wax. "Religion Among American Indians." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 436 (Mar 1978): 2. JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1042166>>. 2 Mar 2018.
- Zimmerman, Larry. *Indiáni Severní Ameriky*. Translated by Dušan Zbavitel. Praha: Knižní klub, 2003.