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REDEFINING CEREMONY AND THE SACRED: SHORT  
STORIES FROM THE DINÉTAH

by

Stacie S. Denetsosie

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

English

Approved:

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Charles Waugh, Ph.D.  
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UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY  
Logan, Utah

2019

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## ABSTRACT

Redefining Ceremony and the Sacred: Short Stories from the Dinétah

by

Stacie Denetsosie, Bachelor of Science

Utah State University, 2019

Major Professor: Dr. Charles Waugh  
Department: English

This collection of short stories explores the experiences of three Navajo protagonists navigating their identities and their understanding of mortality, ritual, and ceremony. The critical introduction prefaces elements within Native American Literature and post-colonial trauma.

This collection is comprised of three short stories entitled “Dormant,” “Under the Porch Way,” and “The Missing Morningstar.” The first story, “Dormant,” is about a young female Navajo protagonist and her budding relationship with her math teacher. She has a pregnancy scare and considers the meaning of motherhood and her sexuality. The second story, “Under the Porch Way,” is about an adolescent Navajo boy who is being haunted by his father’s ghost, and has a traditional ceremony done, but it fails to work. Instead, after attempting to have sex with his girlfriend, Jenni, under the porch, he finds that his father’s ghost has left him. The final story “The Missing Morningstar,” is about a young two-spirit woman whose romantic interest is kidnapped and left for dead in a ditch. The protagonist considers her sexuality and traditional Navajo identity.

(56 pages)

## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

## Redefining Ceremony and the Sacred: Short Stories from the Diné'tah

Stacie S. Denetsosie

This is a creative thesis comprised of three short stories centered on the experiences of three Navajo protagonists living on the Navajo reservation. The short stories fit within the field of Native American Literature and highlight issues of mortality, sexuality, and ceremony. The stories illustrate the experiences of modern-day Navajo youth grappling to understand how to connect traditional knowledge with modernity. The three stories featured within this thesis are offered as a way to understand these challenges. Each protagonist is faced with an issue of morality, sexuality, or ceremony, and each reach differing conclusions about these topics within their lives.

This collection is comprised of three short stories entitled "Dormant," "Under the Porch Way," and "The Missing Morningstar." The first story, "Dormant," is about a young female Navajo protagonist and her budding relationship with her math teacher. She has a pregnancy scare and considers the meaning of motherhood and her sexuality. The second story, "Under the Porch Way," is about an adolescent Navajo boy who is being haunted by his father's ghost, and has a traditional ceremony done, but it fails to work. Instead, after attempting to have sex with his girlfriend, Jenni, under the porch, he finds that his father's ghost has left him. The final story "The Missing Morningstar," is about a young two-spirit woman whose romantic interest is kidnapped and left for dead in a ditch. The protagonist considers her sexuality and traditional Navajo identity.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to say *ahéhee'*, thank you, to the members of my committee, Dr. Charles Waugh, Dr. Brock Dethier, and Dr. John Gamber, for their kindness, compassion, and dedication to this collection of short stories. Without their mentorship and words of affirmation this work would have remained in the confines of my computer. From my committee I have learned how to craft good medicine through the written word. Thank you for helping me conduct my own ceremony.

I would also like to thank my mother and extended family who patiently answered my questions about Navajo ceremony and ritual. My family has always been my greatest source of inspiration and this work is a reflection of their unyielding love. Thanks, shik'éeí.

Stacie S. Denetsosie

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## CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

I discovered the field of Native American Literature at the age of thirteen. My aunt, a special education teacher on the Navajo Reservation, sent me a package brimming with books. I received Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, and Joseph Bruchac's *Code Talkers*. Naturally, I was excited about these books. My aunt has always nurtured my love of reading, and she sent me these books to encourage me to continue reading. However, my mother wanted me to develop practical talents like making frybread, butchering sheep, and cooking, while maintaining a fire. I would later understand that books did not appeal to my mother, because my mother was functionally illiterate, which is defined as lacking the literacy necessary for coping with most jobs and many everyday situations. The reason my mother is functionally illiterate is complicated but boils down to my Navajo maternal grandmother's mistrust of schools in general, but particularly boarding schools.<sup>1</sup> Despite my mother's distaste for books, she would buy me Archie Digest Comics, which appealed to her because they were inexpensive and included graphics of Archie and the gang getting into mischief. I loved my Archie Comics and promised to myself that I would one day become a comic book artist. My youth was spent with my nose pressed against sketchbook pages and straightening the lines on my comic panels. I drew comics regularly, filling up entire notebooks with complicated storyboards, complete with heroes, villains, and gorgeous wardrobes I've only seen people wear on TV.

That was until my maternal grandmother died.

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<sup>1</sup> This mistrust has a long history in Navajo Nation, dating back to at least 1893 when leader Manuelito's son died of disease while attending the Carlisle Indian School.



After returning home from my Grandmother's funeral, I sat down with Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. I read the entirety of the book from noon until late that evening. I remember reading as the John Deere clock on our wall ticked and the pages of the book tinted blue in the fading evening light. As I read about the protagonist, Junior, burying his grandmother, I felt the sharp pang of shared grief. "But my family had to bury my grandmother. I mean it's natural to bury your grandmother. Grandmothers are supposed to die first, but they're supposed to die of old age. They're supposed to die of a heart attack or a stroke or of cancer or of Alzheimer's. THEY ARE NOT SUPPOSED TO GET RUN OVER AND KILLED BY A DRUNK DRIVER" (Alexie 158). When I read that simple but charged passage, something about Junior's grief resonated with me. I began writing in my journal about my grandmother's death. I wrote about the loss of my two Uncles, Julius and Jones, who had died in alcohol-related accidents. In the following passage of Alexie's text, Junior describes his grandmother's opinion about alcohol: "Drinking would shut down my seeing and my hearing and my feeling...Why would I want to be in a world if I couldn't touch the world with all of my senses intact?" (Alexie 158). For me, this passage directly related to the Navajo philosophy of *hózhó* or beauty way, which strives for balance in all aspects of human wellness including physical health, spiritual health, mental health, and healthy relationships. Without my senses, I would not be able to perceive experiences or understand the needs of myself and my community. To my understanding, alcohol coupled with pain dulled all experience through the body.

All throughout this experience, I felt the weight of my Indian-ness settling on my young shoulders and felt an urgency in my need to share my own narrative as a Native

American. That urgency has not left me, which is why my thesis must engage in the tradition of Native American Literature, because my experiences are unique to the field. For me, no other literary field has resonated with me as viscerally as Native American Literature. Our complicated and ongoing history with colonialism, the United States and its governing forces, have shaped Native American Literature like hardened sinew to be raw, visceral and resilient.

Individuals in the literary community often try to define Native American Literature as tribally specific, or all encompassing, which is not what it is. Native American Literature seeks to define itself, reclaim a historic narrative, all while using the English language to give space to our experiences. For this reason, it is essential that my stories are self-determined narratives, that define themselves outside of settler-colonialism. My stories will all be from the perspectives of Navajos navigating their identities and their understanding of the world. Their thoughts, actions, and conclusions will differ, because much like our 573 tribes, each individual is different.

Native American Literature as a field is as unique and complicated as the United States' history with Indigenous peoples. For this reason, many of the stories included in my thesis grapple with issues of material and cultural genocide, death, ceremony, and sexuality—and often the overlapping and intersecting realities of these elements for Native people and communities. Additionally, I use terms such as Native American, Indigenous peoples, American Indians, or just Indians, interchangeably. However, these titles are typically exonyms, ascribed to Indigenous populations by outsiders. When describing particular Native nations, I will use that nation's/tribe's chosen name. Because Indigenous identity is self-determined, many communities have a preferred name, most

tribes simply call themselves "the people." Settler society, however, often lumps Indigenous people of the Americas together, which makes it difficult not only for communities to assert their self-identification, but also for outsider readers to define exactly who Indigenous writers are and what they are doing. Within any single Indigenous identity, there may be a massive variety of factors at play: American citizen, tribal citizen, enrolled, unenrolled, disenrolled, Native American, American Indian, Indi'n, NDN, Half Ute, Half Navajo, urban, rural, reservation, recognized, unrecognized, secular, Christian, traditional. Each identity comes with different histories, attitudes, and sets of cultural rules.

Under the umbrella of Native American Literature, 573 different federally recognized (and hundreds more unrecognized) tribes and nations share one field (U.S. Department of the Interior Indian Affairs). This number does not account for the First Nations peoples of Canada or the rest of the Americas. This is problematic because the field of Native American Literature labels Native-authored literature as singularly great Native American Literature, and not great American Literature. Because Native American Literature encapsulates such a breadth of voice, readers of this field subconsciously group together 573 culturally different tribes. This singularity in voice perpetuates a colonizer's Pan-Indian fantasy and further removes Native authors from who they are, *authors*. In this context, Native American Literature should be the most American of all literature, yet Native literature is still challenging stereotypes perpetuated by old western films and other narratives. As a field, Native American Literature is critical in reshaping American and global attitudes and opinions about Natives through writing. More than anything, Native American Literature is challenging western

perceptions about what constitutes "great" American literature. So many themes, symbols, and meanings are obfuscated, or coded, and can seem unintelligible to European/Euro-American western readers. Issues of ceremony, sexuality, gender, and Indigeneity are often misinterpreted by or disguised to western readers. In fact, this disguising is often intentional, as Native peoples have persisted through history because of their ability to obfuscate the truth. To be Native is to obfuscate the truth within a myth, legend, or story so that outsiders receive a different message than the intended audience.

I want to offer three Twenty First Century Native authors' work as demonstrations of this key element of obfuscation's role in communicating Native realities in the contemporary moment. In the work of Deborah Miranda (Esselen/Chumash), Tommie Orange (Cheyenne), and Therese Marie Mailhot (Seabird Island First Nation), I identify a tension between surviving genocidal and ethnocidal policies of colonizers (including the racialization of Indigenous identities in the form of Blood Quantum) and maintaining Indigenous lifeways. How do Native people remain Native people in the face of hundreds of years of being legally and materially precluded from doing so? An example of this tension is evident in Deborah Miranda's poem "Lies my Ancestors Told For Me," the narrator begins the poem in the second person by starting the poem with a riddle.

Riddle: when is a lie the truth?

when is the truth a lie?

When a lie saves your life,

that's the truth; when a lie saves the lives

of your children, grandchildren

and five generations forward,  
 that's the truth in a form so pure  
 it can't be anything  
 but a story. (Miranda 38)

The narrator establishes that a lie is a survival tactic used by Indigenous peoples to preserve their descendants. More importantly, these ancestors considered the fate of their descendants when they made decisions. Another context important to this poem is that beginning in the first years of California statehood, in 1851 and 1852 laws encouraged white men to hunt Native peoples for their scalps by allotting bounties on Indigenous lives (Miranda 45). Miranda reclaims this historic Native American narrative through her poem by reframing the reader's perceptions of Indigeneity and truth. She equates truth with bodily survival. At the same time, truth is "story," a narrative that one shares with outsiders that runs contrary to the one Native people tell themselves and each other. She continues to rewrite the narrative within the next few stanzas:

After the mission broke  
 up, it was better to lie  
 like a dog about blood,  
 say that you are Mexican  
 Mexican Mexican Mexican  
 put it on birth certificates  
 put it on death certificates  
 tell it to the census takers  
 tell it to the self-appointed

bounty hunters who appear  
 at your door looking for  
 Indians Indians Indians  
 and when you tell that lie  
 tell it in Spanish. (Miranda 38)

Miranda repeats Mexican to emphasize the frequency with which Indigenous peoples have needed to tell these lies, to hide their identities to protect their lives and those of their loved ones. After the lie is said and repeated enough, it is documented, and indigenous erasure, at least in terms of legal and administrative visibility or recognition, is ensured. Through that lie, the ancestors forfeited their descendants' certificates of Indian birth. As a result, large swaths of Native populations are non-federally recognized—such histories mark the struggles not only of California tribes, but also those in the East and South of what is currently called the United States who were legally identified as Black or “Colored.” These biologically Native outliers must then navigate the erasure of their heritage and peoples. Documented erasure is not without consequences; Miranda further complicates this poem by adding the following stanza:

...That's the lie  
 your descendants will hate you for  
 but lie anyway,  
 so they'll be alive to complain. (39)

Here, Miranda highlights the descendants resenting their ancestors because of the lies they told. But, the impact of this stanza lies in the descendants being alive to resent their ancestors. Miranda illustrates a fundamental tension between Natives and their

connection to their ancestors, and as a direct result of that, this poem critiques a construction of identity central to Indigenous people in settler colonial societies, namely, the concept of blood quantum.

Blood quantum takes the form of a fraction that determines a person's degree of Native American heritage (a person might be, for example, three-quarters Ho-Chunk, one-half Navajo, one-quarter Seminole, or one-two hundred fifty second Cherokee and be enrolled in their respective tribal nation). Native American Studies scholar Elizabeth Rule, states that blood quantum, "emerged as a way to measure 'Indian-ness' through a construct of race. So that over time, Indians would literally breed themselves out and rid the federal government of their legal duties to uphold treaty obligations" (NPR). In this regard blood quantum functions as the obverse of the one-drop rule which was constructed to disenfranchise mixed African American peoples as property. Today the one-drop rule is a vestige of America's history with African American peoples, used to remember the injustices African American people faced. Despite the debunked one-drop rule, blood quantum still exists as a measurement of "Indianness" for the American government and for many Native American nations. The framers of this racialization recognized that Native people will eventually out-marry enough to reduce the Indigenous population (and their rightful claim to the lands the United States occupies) to nothing. Ultimately in the case of Native Americans, the American government sought to eliminate Native peoples, and when that proved difficult, they tried to assimilate them into society.

In "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," Patrick Wolfe continues this discussion of the racialization of Indigenous people under what he calls

“repressive authenticity.” He further argues that “settler colonialism strives for the dissolution of native societies. Positively it erects a new colonial society on the expropriated land base—as I put it, settler colonizers come to stay: invasion is a structure, not an event” (388). Essentially, Wolf argues that settler-colonial methods are meant to erase indigenous understanding and lifeways, to eliminate Native people either literally or within the colonial imagination. Blood quantum as a measurement of indigeneity is a structure of invasion.

At its heart, *Blood Quantum* builds on the idea that Native identities are ultimately racial. However, many Native people understand Native identities to be more complicated, more culturally based, community defined, or ineffable. As such, it is critical that Natives write about Native experiences in order to highlight the complexities of Nateness particularly in light of the ways those identities have been hidden and/or erased. In Tommy Orange's *There There*, his character Orvil grapples with his sense of Native identity. He attempts to ask his aunt, Opal, about their indigenous heritage. His aunt's succinct response to him is:

Listen, baby, it makes me real happy you want to know, but learning about your heritage is a privilege. A privilege we don't have. And anyway, anything you hear about me about your heritage does not make you more or less Indian. More or less real Indian. Don't ever let anyone tell you what being Indian means. Too many of us died to get just a little bit of us here, right now, right in this kitchen. You're Indian because you're Indian because you're Indian. (Orange 119)

A lot is at stake in this brief passage. It's important that Opal speaks within this passage because it illustrates a Native woman passing on her wisdom about self-identification. In



her perspective, Orvil doesn't need a certain blood quantum to be Indian. She explains that no one, not even herself, can ascribe Indian-ness to her nephew. In her opinion, Orvil's identity is dictated by birth and relationship to herself and his community. Her understanding of identity is important to pass down to Orvil because it implicitly states to the reader that Indianness cannot and should not be measured. However, her understanding of cultural knowledge is a privilege and thus is treated differently from identity. In this context cultural knowledge is so valuable that she would rather die with it, than pass it on.

Coupled with the Miranda poem, the passage reinforces the tension between ancestors and descendants. Despite the difference between the two tribes, Wolfe's argument rings true for both Orange and Miranda. Invasion is a structure, not an event. Opal does her best to preserve her nephew's survival by not passing on cultural knowledge, because she has conflated the non-passage of cultural knowledge with survival. Historic trauma fuels Opal's motives. Her distrust of the American government and systems can be seen as a form of cultural paralysis. Thus, Opal's generation is a product of the assimilationist impulses of her era, or her childhood. She is the product of the lies that her ancestors told for her. Opal's reluctance to pass down cultural knowledge illustrates the structure of invasion at work, which directly effects future generations of Native people.

Wolfe states: "Settler colonialism destroys to replace" (388), which marks this colonial ideology as antithetical to Indigenous beliefs, wherein destruction harms the spirit. Alternatively, Native Literature should be read as a ceremony to reconcile the ruptures in Indigenous lifeways and worldviews that have arisen in the face of

coloniality. In her memoir, *Heartberries*, Therese Marie Mailhot states, "In white culture, forgiveness is synonymous with letting go. In my culture, I believe we carry pain until we can reconcile with it through ceremony. Pain is not framed like a problem with a solution. I don't even know that white people see transcendence the way we do. I'm not sure that their dichotomies apply to me" (28).

In essence, Native American Literature functions to heal through the process of pain. Balance or wholeness is only achieved through ceremony, which implies that pain inflicted in the past or present demands to be felt. Native American Literature functions on a variety of levels to reclaim the narratives of the Indigenous peoples of the United States and Canada. Thus far, I have identified many common themes within Native American Literature, but each theme is just as unique and historically grounded as the tribal member who shared their narrative. Inherently any work I create will be Native American Literature, because I am Native American. My work exists within the tradition of Native American Literature, but because the tradition is breaking conventions, anything I write will be considered Native Literature. As for my thesis, I will write about the themes that resonate with me the most, which are ceremony, sexuality, gender, and indigeneity.

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