

East Fork: A Journal of the Arts

[Home](#)

[About Us](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Submit](#)

[Meet the
Editors](#)

[Issue 23-
Spring
2022](#)

[Previous
Issues](#)

[Join Our
Team](#)

Literary Essay Contest

[Back](#)

First Place
Power Exchanges and Identity Loss in *Désirée's Baby*
By Mary Kathryn Forsyth

Second Place
A Journey for Survival: Leslie Marmon Silko and the Acculturation of the Pueblo People
By Heather Brunner

Third Place
"If You Believe It, I Believe It": Finding Faith in Uncertainty in DeLillo's *Falling Man*
By Tim Combes

Honorable Mention
A Balancing Act Between Cultures
By Jasmine Warner

Copyright Eastfork Online Literary Journal. All Rights Reserved.

POWERED BY
WebsiteBuilder

East Fork: A Journal of the Arts

[Home](#)[About Us](#)[Contact Us](#)[Submit](#)[Meet the
Editors](#)[Issue 23-
Spring
2022](#)[Previous
Issues](#)[Join Our
Team](#)

Power Exchanges and Identity Loss in *Désirée's* Baby

[Back](#)

By. Mary Kathryn Forsyth

Throughout the years, racism and sexism have done nothing but create divisions within society itself and within the home. It has done its best to tear people apart and make certain minority groups powerless. The separation between races and sexes during the time of slavery created a power struggle and made finding and understanding one's identity even more complicated than it is now. For women and black slaves during this time, identity was almost nonexistent because they had no power to make choices for themselves. Instead, their identity was created by whatever their masters or husbands expected from them. Because women and slaves had very little, if any, rights at the time of slavery, they were forced to do what they were told or else they would be risking everything they had and in some cases that even meant risking their own lives. Unless you were a white male citizen during the time of slavery, you didn't have a place in society. When Kate Chopin gives both *Désirée* and Armand doubts about whether they were black or white, they deny it because they know that being black will make them outcasts and take away the freedom that they have always known. Even though they both deny having any black heritage, the days that follow the accusation change *Désirée's*, Armand's, and their baby's lives; some for the better, and some for the worse. Kate Chopin shows the harmful consequences that slavery, sexism, and racism have on Armand as he starts to lose his identity while *Désirée* gains the power to take her son and leave him after the initial shock of being accused of being black wears off.

By showing that *Désirée* is the first to be blamed for her baby not being white, Kate Chopin conveys the lack of power that women, specifically women of color, had during the time of slavery. Before *Désirée* and Armand are married, it does not matter to him that no one knows where she comes from or who her real parents are. When he is told that no one knows where she comes from and that she does not have a name, he doesn't care because he can give her his own name. Chopin says, "Armand looked into her eyes and did not care. He was reminded that she was nameless. What did it matter about a name when he could give her one of the oldest and proudest in Louisiana?" (Chopin 559). Namelessness is a sign of someone with a lack of power, but since Armand does not expect a woman to have power anyway, it doesn't matter if his wife's lack of a name makes her powerless. Author and scholar, Ellen Peel, says, "Namelessness connotes not only femaleness but also blackness in antebellum society, where white masters can deprive black slaves of their names. Although *Désirée's* namelessness literally results only from her status as a foundling and a married woman, her lack of a name could serve figuratively as a warning to Armand that she might be black" (Peel 226). Even though *Désirée* lacks her own name, Armand does not care about her lack of an identity until she has a baby. Because *Désirée* absorbs his identity, it is not until she produces a child who he believes is black because of her, that he cares about who she is. When *Désirée* asks Armand what it means that her baby is the same color as the slave woman's baby, Armand simply says that he isn't white because *Désirée* isn't white. There is no conversation about it and when she tries to defend herself he brushes her off and leaves. It doesn't make a difference to him that she has lighter skin than him because in his mind, there is no way that he, a well-respected man, could pass on such a shameful gene. It is simply her fault because she is powerless in his eyes. Because Armand knows that *Désirée* doesn't have any power, it is easy for him to blame her and push her away.

Through Armand's abandonment, *Désirée* gains enough power to leave him and take her baby with her. During the time of slavery, women were powerless and had to do what their husbands told them to do, but after Armand tells *Désirée* to go, she decides that she will take her baby and go back to her mother's house where they are accepted. Kate Chopin says, "*Désirée* went in search of her child...She took the little one from the nurse's arms with no word of explanation, and descending the steps, walked away, under the live-oak branches," (Chopin 541). Instead of asking anybody's permission or trying to explain her actions, *Désirée* goes and finds her baby and takes him. This would have also been considered strange because women in divorce situations were not allowed to keep their children, especially if they had brought disgrace upon their husband's name like *Désirée* was being blamed for doing. It was even more strange that *Désirée* got to take and leave with her baby boy because they were both considered "black" and black mothers and children were often separated because they were treated as animals instead of human beings. *Désirée* no longer cares about all of the rules that are placed on her both by society and her husband at this point because she knows that it is now up to her to protect herself and her baby.

As *Désirée's* power kicks in and she takes her baby back, she leaves Armand's plantation down a path that she has chosen for herself. If a woman was kicked out by her husband, shame would be on them and they would more than likely leave and die with no other way to take care of themselves. No one would want to help them because they would be considered an outcast to society since she is an outcast to her husband. However, *Désirée* doesn't leave Armand with her head held down in shame. Kate Chopin says, "Her hair was uncovered and the sun's rays brought a golden gleam from its brown meshes. She did not take the broad, beaten road which led to the far-off plantation of Valmondé" (Chopin 541,542). While it is true that *Désirée* leaves because her husband tells her to, she rejects the societal norm and does not take the "broad, beaten road". By obeying Armand's orders, she is set free to live her life. Chopin herself never says whether or not *Désirée* leaves and dies or lives, although some scholars and readers assume the line. "She disappeared among the reeds and willows that grew thick along the banks of the deep, sluggish bayou; and she did not come back again," means that she kills herself when she leaves (Chopin 542). However, because Chopin leaves it open-ended, there is some hope for both *Désirée* and her baby that they are able to escape. Ellen Peel says, "We should turn to *Désirée*, who is absent from the ending. Although submissive, the young woman does have some power. Her boldest action is disappearance, but she does act. While she neither desires nor anticipates the havoc she wreaks, she does catalyze the entire plot" (Peel 252). *Désirée* herself most likely does not see the power that she possesses by leaving Armand, but those surrounding her can see that she has rebelled against him and also the idea of slavery because she is a "black" woman who is taking her child and walking freely away from an oppressive husband and slave owner. Since *Désirée* never returns to the home of Armand, she is not aware of the mess that he finds himself in after she takes her son and leaves, but the impact of her leaving, along with the note that he finds while burning her things is enough to show Armand's power slipping away as *Désirée* rebels and gains some power and freedom for herself.

Armand's identity begins to crumble as he comes to the realization that he is the son of a black woman just like he thought his son was before he sent *Désirée* and the baby away. Never in his life did Armand think that he had any black blood in his family or in himself, which is why he is so angry when he finds out that his son clearly has some black blood. Armand thinks that *Désirée* has brought shame upon his family name. Chopin says, "Moreover he no longer loved her, because of the unconscious injury she had brought upon his home and his name" (Chopin 541). When Armand sees that his son is not completely white, color is all that he can see. It is not until *Désirée* leaves Armand and takes her baby with her that he finds the note from his mother. Chopin says,

"The last thing to go was a tiny bundle of letters; innocent little scribbles that *Désirée* had sent to him during the days of their espousal. There was the remnant of one back in the drawer from which he took them. But it was not *Désirée's*; it was part of an old letter from his mother to his father. He read it. She was thanking God for the blessing of her husband's love:— 'But, above all,' she wrote, 'night and day, I thank the good God for having so arranged our lives that our dear Armand will never know that his mother, who adores him, belongs to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery.'" (Chopin 542).

Until this moment in time when Armand's world comes crashing down around him, he has no idea that he is what he has been hating his son for all along. Not only that, but he has sent his wife away for doing nothing wrong even though his father had loved his mother despite the "sin" of having black bloodlines. Armand's identity— everything that he has always thought that him and his name embody, no longer exist because their "proud" name will be destroyed if anyone ever finds out about Armand's heritage. Ellen Peel says, "For Armand, his wife was originally a screen onto which he could project what he desired. When he found a black mark on the screen, he rejected it. Now he has learned that the mark was a reproduction of his own blackness. The mark, which he considers a taint, moves from her to him," and "Armand at first rejects his baby for being the child of a white man and a black woman but then finds that the description fits him" (Peel 229). These two surprises, along with the fear of being enslaved and rejected by upper class society if anyone finds out about his secret, leaves Armand alone to deal with the guilt and identity crisis that he has to face. Armand starts to lose his power when he loses his identity because as a man with black blood, he knows that he is no longer considered a first-class citizen and he no longer has a wife or a son whom he can rule over. After losing his identity, Armand loses his power and is forced to live his life alone and scared of anyone learning his secret.

Kate Chopin works to address the idea of "passing" and what it means to pass as white even if a person isn't, through the character's interactions with each other in *Désirée's* Baby. Because she shows the characters' opinions of each other both before and after they realize that someone has black blood, the reader gets a glimpse of what it would be like to be black and have the opportunities that white citizens did as long as they looked white. She also addresses the fact that it didn't matter if a person had white blood because the "curse" of having the tiniest bit of black blood overshadowed all white blood that they did have. Because of the amount of babies that slave masters had with slave women, the number of those who were able to pass as being white continued to increase, causing the idea of "race" to crumble. In *Désirée's* Baby, not only did the idea of race crumble, but also the idea of sex and identity. Because *Désirée* gained enough power to fight back against Armand while he lost power because he lost identity as a white man, Kate Chopin conveys how racism and sexism disintegrate as those affected by the ideas fight back.

Works Cited

Chopin, Kate. "Désirée's Baby." The Norton Anthology American Literature, edited by Julia Reidhead, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2017, pp. 538-542.

Peel, Ellen. "Semiotic Subversion in 'Désirée's Baby'." American Literature, vol. 62, no. 2, June 1990, pp. 223-237. Duke University Press. <http://www.jstor.org/proxy/libraries.uc.edu/tc/accept?origin=/stable/pdf/2926914>.

[Back](#)

East Fork: A Journal of the Arts

[Home](#)[About Us](#)[Contact Us](#)[Submit](#)[Meet the
Editors](#)[Issue 23-
Spring
2022](#)[Previous
Issues](#)[Join Our
Team](#)

A Journey for Survival: Leslie Marmon Silko and the Acculturation of the Pueblo People

By Heather Brunner

[back](#)

As humans, our very existence is dependent on growth and change. Physically, without growth we would be stuck in our infancy; helpless, with no chance of survival. Evolution and modification have always been essential to the survival and advancement of the many different races of people and cultures around the world. Laguna Pueblo writer and poet, Leslie Marmon Silko, is an advocate for the growth and survival of the Pueblo people and their culture. Her first full-length novel *Ceremony*, published in 1977, is a statement of what she believes is the only way her culture can survive in modern America. *Ceremony* is an expression of her belief that for Native American culture to continue to survive and become a stronger presence in the United States, Native Americans must make adaptations to their ancient ceremonies and rituals. Only this change and growth will keep their ceremonies and rituals, and therefore the people, strong. Without this evolution, Native Americans risk losing their culture to full assimilation into the dominant white world. *Ceremony* expresses the message that acculturation is necessary through the careful structuring of the novel, and its heavy emphasis on the mixed-racial identity of the characters Tayo and Betonie.

Silko's exposure to stories of alcoholic war veterans growing up in Laguna caused her to think about what it meant to preserve her culture in a new light. Yale University scholars Allan Chavkin and Nancy Feyl Chavkin co-wrote an essay discussing an unpublished essay Silko wrote for Viking Press. Silko's essay explains the origins of the story for *Ceremony* and her intent for the novel. *Ceremony* began as a short story that was intended to be funny and light-hearted. Silko wanted to tell a story she heard growing up about a Laguna war veteran who would go to extreme lengths to drink. While writing the story, she realized that it was, in fact, not funny. Writing about the shame and embarrassment felt by the Laguna community regarding the alcoholism of their war veterans made Silko begin to wonder. Why was it that some vets could come home and figure out how to go on living, but many came home so deeply broken that they could not? She questioned if the failure of the ceremonies indicated that the community's traditional beliefs were inadequate. She concluded that these rituals and ceremonies created thousands of years ago were not designed with twentieth-century warfare in mind (Chavkin and Feyl Chavkin 24). The ineffectiveness of these ceremonies brought Silko to the conclusion that there must be some adaptations made in the rituals to accommodate the modern world. Without the proper balance of old and new, the total assimilation of the Pueblo people would be imminent. Silko wrote *Ceremony* to make her thoughts about the need for the acculturation of her people known.

Many elements in *Ceremony* make it a statement of the necessity of acculturation; the structure of the novel itself is key. The novel contains a disorienting mix of Western-style prose and the poetic style of the sacred stories of the Laguna people. The uncertainty of the reader is reflected in the confusion Tayo feels living in two separate worlds. As the novel progresses, the two styles seem to begin blending together. As the transitions flow more smoothly, the reader can start to make sense of what is happening. This change happens at the point in the story when the main character, Tayo, begins the ceremony of the progressive medicine man, Betonie. It starts with the story of Coyote Man, an ancient Pueblo Indian who has been transformed into a coyote, and the ceremony performed to bring him back to his people. Silko writes, "They made Pollen Boy in the center of the white corn painting...There were pinches of blue pollen at his joints," (Silko 131). So far, this story has been given in the poetic style of a sacred story, but after this line the story continues in the familiar Western prose. The merge happens with the sentence, "He sat in the center of the white corn sand painting," (Silko 131). Here, the story of Coyote Man becomes Tayo's story. Tayo is sitting in the center of the sand painting; it is the same story now as it was then, only the people are different. The way the sacred stories and Tayo's story flow together starts to become clear to the reader. Silko's intent with her careful structuring is to provide an example of what it means to live in the liminal space of two drastically different cultures. Integrating new elements and old traditions to keep ancient ceremonies relevant assures that they are carried forward by the next generation. By merging two drastically different writing styles into a single book, Silko proves one cohesive, powerful and healing story can be created.

The Pueblo ancestors were unable to create ceremonies capable of destroying the evils they could not anticipate. This can be seen in Tayo's encounter with Ku'oosh, a traditional tribal medicine man. Ku'oosh can not understand how it is possible for Tayo to be unsure if he had killed anyone in the war. Silko writes:

But the old man would not have believed white warfare- killing across great distances without knowing how many had died. It was all too alien to comprehend, the mortars and big guns; and even if he could have taken the man to see the target areas... the old man would not have believed anything so monstrous. (Silko 33)

The fact that Ku'oosh, who is a symbol of the old, traditional ways, cannot fathom such horrible truths is representative of the Pueblo ancestor's inability to foresee twentieth-century evils. How could a person who has never seen a firearm, or the devastation caused by an atomic bomb, know how to successfully combat them?

The main character in *Ceremony*, Tayo, is symbolic of the confusion and despair felt by all Native American people caught existing between two worlds; ancient tribal culture and modern America. One of the most important elements to Tayo's character is that he has a mixed-racial identity. His mixed-racial identity is the symbol of the two drastically different cultures the Pueblo find themselves caught between; his illness represents the anguish felt by the entire community. Through Tayo's journey to cure the illness that afflicted him after his time in WWII, which today would be recognized as PTSD, Silko emphasizes the importance of balance and cultural hybridity. The military hospital pumps him full of mind-numbing drugs, causing Tayo to fade away in a drug-induced haze. When he returns home, his grandmother decides to bring Ku'oosh to help Tayo. Ku'oosh performs the traditional Scalp Ceremony but is unable to complete it when Tayo begins to vomit. Ku'oosh then says, "Some things we can't cure like we used to, not since the white people came...I'm afraid of what will happen to all of us if you and the others don't get well," (Silko 35). The traditional ceremony was not just ineffective on Tayo, but many of the other "pure" Pueblo war veterans as well. Silko is saying that the old ways are not enough for the issues faced by modern-day Pueblo.

The healer, Betonie, is the most clear and direct representation of Silko's ideas in the novel. Like Tayo, Betonie has a mixed-racial identity. This is significant to Betonie's character, because a medicine man of "mixed blood" was something unheard of in Pueblo culture. Betonie's mixed heritage lets him see the world from both sides, taking old ceremonies and improving them with modern elements to insure they are suited to deal with the witchery of the modern world. Betonie believes it is the witchery, not just white people, that are destroying the Pueblo. He says, "You don't right off all the white people, just like you don't trust all the Indians," (Silko 118). Betonie is trying to make Tayo see that the white people are not the only ones who contribute to the loss of Pueblo culture. Pueblo people who refuse to recognize the modern world they live in are also to blame. Betonie also says:

At one time, the ceremonies as they had been performed were enough for the way the world was then. But after the white people came, elements in the world began to shift; and it became necessary to create new ceremonies. I have made changes in the rituals. The people mistrust this greatly, but only this growth keeps the ceremonies strong. (Silko 116)

This statement is a direct reflection of Silko's belief that without the modernization of ceremonial rituals, they will be ineffective. This ineffectiveness will ultimately be the cause of the complete demise of Pueblo culture, because without growth their ceremonies cannot stay strong.

Even though the Pueblo are fearful of Betonie's ideas, he knows it is the witchery that has put the fear of change in their minds. It takes someone who is from both worlds to teach Tayo about what is really happening. Betonie is a product of the modern world, as is Tayo, and can teach Tayo how to accept every part of himself. When Tayo opens his mind to Betonie's progressive ways, he is able to begin healing. Betonie says to Tayo, "That is the trickery of the witchcraft. They want us to believe all evil resides with white people. Then we will look no further to see what is really happening," (Silko 122). Betonie is trying to make Tayo understand that just because an idea comes from white culture, that does not inherently make it evil. Indian witchery unleashed the white destruction on the world; making Indians partially responsible for their own devastation. The witchery wants to destroy all races across the world, and it intends to accomplish the destruction through wide-spread hate. The only way to ensure the survival of their race is to take power from everywhere they can, even whites, and create something new and stronger than before. That is the only hope they have in defeating the witchery and ensuring their survival.

Silko has made it her mission to record Pueblo orature in the written form. She shows us with her work that literacy is essential for the growth and development of ceremonial life. Scholar Bernard Hirsch from the University of Nebraska has researched the blending of the oral tradition and the written word in the works of Leslie Silko. He discusses how even though writing a story down, "...freezes the words in space and time," (Hirsch 1). It allows for individuals to create new storytelling events of their own. The flexibility and inclusiveness of the oral tradition means even writing has its place in the evolution of the story (Hirsch 2). The way Silko has chosen to blend two writing styles in *Ceremony* is an excellent example of what this type of liminality should look like. The combination of Western-style prose and traditional oral storytelling techniques make *Ceremony* a hybrid itself. It is only fitting that a story so focused on blending and change is itself something completely different from the norm.

We live in a world that is constantly changing; this is a fact humanity cannot ignore. War and wide-spread hate threaten to destroy life as we know it. Betonie would say that the witchery has blinded us, so we cannot see what is really happening. Whatever the reason for the uproar our planet is in, there is a way to fight back. It is important to remember that Betonie's ideas are not one-sided. We can all learn to be like Tayo and open our minds to each other's ideas. If we are open to the idea of change and learning from other cultures, we open ourselves up to endless possibilities. Adopting a more modern idea from another source does not mean that a culture is being phased out. It means that the culture is alive and growing, progressive-minded and strong; it is possible to change and still hold onto the essence of who we are. *Ceremony* teaches us an important lesson in the power of hybridity. The strength we need to save our world is something that can only be created by joining together all our ideas and creating unified, cohesive solutions for our most globally pressing issues. If we do not find a way to work together, we are sure to destroy the world with our single-minded ideas of self-preservation.

[back](#)

East Fork: A Journal of the Arts

[Home](#)[About Us](#)[Contact Us](#)[Submit](#)[Meet the
Editors](#)[Issue 23-
Spring
2022](#)[Previous
Issues](#)[Join Our
Team](#)

A Balancing Act Between Cultures

By. Jasmine Warner

[back](#)

For centuries, Native Americans have been faced with stereotypes and criticism that often times lack actual meaning to their culture. It's equivalent to the racism that African Americans faced yet it is far less known. Overtime, Natives have been pushed to stand up for their beliefs and lifestyles while trying not to get caught up in the white washed world that was quickly overtaking their land. Keeping in touch with their roots became more difficult as whites squeezed their way in, ergo many found it challenging to balance the two worlds while still remaining true to themselves. Many Native authors have faced this idea head on in their works that showed characters juggling what they know and what they are being exposed to. Sherman Alexie and Louise Erdrich's works represent Natives in a way that depict characters who learned to balance their culture and not internalize the stereotypes in order to survive.

At a young age, Victor, the character from Alexie's novel, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, is met with the challenge of balancing what he knows versus what he is being told during his years in school. Throughout the collection of short stories, the reader becomes familiar with his background and hardships. The beginning years of his life are highlighted in the short story entitled, "Indian Education," where the reader is able to see how Victor changes through his years in school and how his surroundings influence his desires. From the first grade of wanting to get revenge on his bully, to the fourth grade of wanting to maybe be a doctor when he grows up, to the seventh grade of wanting to be with the white girl, to his last three years of understanding the treatment he had and how the history of Natives will affect his life forever. With this story in particular, Victor's growth is being shown in a condensed version starting with the most impressionable years of his life. By attending a whitewashed school at such a young age, he could have easily fallen off of the "Native horse." During the second grade, Victor has a missionary teacher that treats him differently than his peers. She sat him in a different area during a spelling test and gave him a more difficult set to spell. When he completed the test with satisfactory answers, she found it disrespectful and sent him home with a note telling his parents to cut his braids or keep him home from class (Alexie 175). This short story is the epitome of Natives in modern time because Victor is longing for acceptance and the ability to be himself, which is difficult when the people around him are telling him why it isn't okay.

Victor kept to who he was, despite the action of his peers, and didn't partake in certain acts to fit in with everyone else. During Victor's eighth grade year, he describes the sound of "white girls' forced vomiting" and how he once confronted one of them by asking for their lunch since she would just be throwing it up anyway (Alexie 177). He compares this instant to how he was happy with the food his mother brought home despite its awful taste. Both instances describe Victor and the girl growing "skinny from self-pity" followed by "there is more than one way to starve" (Alexie 177). Aside from the gender difference, Victor wasn't falling victim to the norm of the white girls. This section provides an example of how each culture struggles differently, but more importantly how Victor didn't follow in the tracks of his peers.

Another character that deals with balancing two cultures is Victor's childhood friend, Thomas, who does so in quite a different way from Victor; which brings an apparent imbalance of lifestyles between the two characters and the internal imbalance that they juggle alone. In the short story, "This is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona," the readers are met with Victor, who has long since graduate, and has recently been hit with the news of his father's passing. Victor and Thomas embark on a journey to Arizona to retrieve his father's ashes and belongings. There is a distinct difference between the two friends; Victor, at this point in life, seems to be more in touch with the white ways, while Thomas is still deeply in tune with their Native culture. With the insertion of flashback scenes in the story, the reader is given glimpses of what life was like prior to where the two characters are at today. They show a kind of falling out between the two boys and how they evolved overtime. In the flashback where the boys are going to watch the fireworks on the Fourth of July, Thomas says to Victor, "It's strange how us Indians celebrate the Fourth of July. It ain't like it was our independence everybody was fighting for" (Alexie 65). This scene in particular shows how aware and thoughtful Thomas is. Victor, on the other hand, tells Thomas that he thinks too much; showing how he didn't let these events get to him. It seems as though Thomas only attended events like this with his friends to feel included, not because he actually enjoyed them.

As the journey progresses, Victor becomes more aware of their differences and starts to feel guilty for the way he has slipped away from his roots. Thomas was the friend he didn't know he needed until their travels because he made Victor open his eyes to the fact that he changed in a way that he didn't like. This emotion can be seen when the two return home, "Victor was ashamed of himself. Whatever happened to the tribal ties, the sense of community? The only real thing he shared with anybody was a bottle and broken dreams" (Alexie 74). This is how Victor internalized the stereotypes; by drinking and feeling sorry for himself. It was a moment of weakness that was broken after he spent ample time with Thomas. He was reminded of the ways he should be juggling life's events and how he shouldn't be falling into the stereotypical Native category.

As shown by Victor, Natives have to work twice as hard to defend their true lifestyles because of the involvement of white culture that makes it harder to walk an authentic Native path. In the essay, *Custer Died for Your Sins*, by Vine Deloria, the author touches upon the idea of what it's like to be a Native living in the modern world. He discusses the idea of how many white people are proud to say they have Native in their blood, but choose the most widely known tribes to be a descendant of such as the Cherokees. When sharing this information, it is common for the person to claim that they were a receiver of this bloodline through their grandmother or a woman figure because no one wanted to be in relations to the horrible, savage Indian (Deloria 3). This is the opposite standpoint from the Natives who are balancing the two cultures. Whites in today's society seem to feel like they have an understanding of who the Natives were through the half-told stories they learned in school, meeting a Native, reading books, and watching movies and TV documentaries. Due to incorrect sources such as these, Deloria states, "The more we try to be ourselves the more we are forced to defend what we have never been" (2). With whites trying to be involved with a culture they only half want to appreciate causes more issues for the Natives. By not being fully informed, it isn't beneficial at all.

A Native lifestyle can be demanding when surrounded by a primarily white culture that is regularly critical. Erdrich conveys the idea of living a culturally balanced lifestyle while showing sides of humor and pain that comes along with it in a similar yet different way than Alexie with her poem, *Dear John Wayne*. The poem depicts a group of Natives going to a drive-in to watch a Western film starring John Wayne. Wayne is the face of the poem because he is the epitome of Western films. These films, like all, are for entertainment purposes, so the film writers were okay with bending the truth if it meant that audiences would be entertained. Erdrich's piece is lighthearted and it can be shown in the line, "A few laughing Indians fall over the hood slipping in the hot spilled butter" (Stanza 6 Line 1-2). The Natives found it ridiculous that people actually buy into these films, but they, personally, are trying to be unbothered by the absurd portrayal. This also seems to be the feelings of Deloria when people share that they too have Native blood and how Victor's parents found the note sent home to be laughable.

Along with this idea, whites are typically shown as though they believe they are superior to Natives. The mosquitos in the poem are a metaphor for the whites. Mosquitoes are blood sucking insects that take until they're fully satisfied, whether the host wants it or not. The whites did the same and what's ironic about this is the fact that Wayne, the star of these awful portrayals, died of cancer, which is a disease that took over his body against his will. This isn't to say that the Natives never fought back, they typically did if they needed to take action. Much like "the bear," they weren't provoked unless they had a good reason (Erdrich Stanza 3 Line 6). It's painful to the Natives that they have to defend their identity and their land because they settled the land long before whites stepped foot on American soil. This feeling of pain in the poem can be translated in not only Alexie's work, but in Deloria's work as well.

The characters depicted in these author's works defy the odds of embodying the stereotypes that society expected them to fall into. The characters are trying not to internalize the white customs in order to fit in or feel accepted. They don't allow what they are being told to affect the lives they are pursuing even though it is extremely difficult due to how plentiful the white population is. As stated by Deloria, "Everywhere an Indian turns he is deluged with offers of assistance, with good, bad, and irrelevant advice, and with proposals designed to cure everything from poverty to dandruff. Rarely does anyone ask an Indian what he thinks about the modern world" (225). It isn't uncommon for whites to believe that Natives are stuck in the past or that they fill the stereotypical "Indian mold." They are more interested in providing them with their opinion and mindset as opposed to letting them follow their own path. It goes along with the idea of whites feeling superior and how their ways are the best. It can leave one pondering what it would be like if the Natives were constantly pushing their beliefs and culture down the throats of the whites. How would they react if the tables were turned?

Works Cited

Alexie, Sherman. *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. New York: Grove Press, 1993. Print.

Deloria, Vine. *Custer Died For Your Sins*. University of Oklahoma Press, 1987. Web

Erdrich, Louise. *Dear John Wayne*. Print.

[back](#)