

Identity Crisis as the Main Motive of Contemporary Native American Literature

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This research offers a linguacultural analysis of the main ideas and goals of institutions for the preservation of the culture and language of the Indigenous peoples of America, through the publication of relevant research in thematic journals and popular books, to determine the relevance of the problem of the identity crisis in the worldview and literature of Native Americans.

The authors used the thick description method to analyse the main goals of twenty-five Native American organisations, basing their research on articles published in the past few years in nine scientific journals on various topics (from culture to business) and books written by Indigenous authors. The authors reached their conclusions based on this research material.

The results of the study, which focused on institutions that preserve the culture and heritage of the Indigenous peoples of America and their activities, found that one of the main challenges is the preservation of identity. Analysis of the articles of leading journals on literature, culture, politics, business, philosophy, as well as analysis of the content of the books written by Indigenous people, revealed that identity crisis is an urgent problem. Despite the prevailing opinion in American society, it is obvious that a crisis is inevitable.

All 25 of the organisations, whose goals were studied in this article, support, preserve, broadcast, and transmit values, heritage, and spiritual culture, and, in one way or another, confront the identity crisis. After analysing more than 550 articles in nine scientific journals devoted to the culture of American

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Indians, it was found that the vast majority of materials directly or indirectly relate to the problem of the crisis. To count the exact number of articles in which this problem is raised, in our opinion, is impossible due to subjective views, but we argue that this percentage is very significant. Almost all materials in one way or another relate to the problem of an identity crisis.

Keywords: Native American Literature, American Culture, Identity Crisis, Self-Identity

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Introduction

“When questioned by an anthropologist on what the Indians called America before the white man came, an Indian said simply, ‘Ours’” (Deloria, 1969: 166). This quote characterises the dramatic nature of the acculturation process of Native Americans and European colonists. As a result of this process, the aborigines lost their territories and their language, culture, and worldview. On the one hand: “language as an intrinsic property of man, as his research focused not on individual national languages but also on general linguistic characteristics” (Sobolievskiy & Liebidieva, 2021: 109). But on the other hand, it is difficult to argue with the meaning of language for the national question, culture, and self-identity. In this study, we approach the problem of language in a complex manner.

In fairness, it should be clarified that there are exceptions to this generalisation. For example, thanks to the writing of the Europeans, it was possible to preserve the heritage of the Indigenous authors. Thanks to missionary activities, the cultural heritage was preserved. “Since their first contact with Westerners, Native Americans have faced open racism, indifference on the one hand, and compassion, respect, and even admiration on the other” (Rudenko & Sobolievskiy, 2020: 179). In this study, we try to avoid radical statements, revealing only certain problems. Literature is an essential source of information to study the identity crisis faced by Native Americans. Therefore, to determine the relevance of this problem, we turned our attention to modern literature.

The process of studying Native American literature is a particularly challenging task, and it should be remembered that there are currently more than five hundred federally recognised Indian tribes in the United States. An important nuance is that although very few tribal groups have received official recognition, all tribes have had contact and have been impacted to varying degrees by the influence of the colonial policies of European countries (Great Britain, Spain, France, Holland, etc.). It is known that the Indigenous tribes of the United States experienced the impact of colonisation during their existence before the U.S. Supreme Court decided to intervene at the state level. The interactions between surviving Native cultures and these colonial influences have shaped the narrative of Native American literary texts. These problems may not be familiar to non-indigenous people from other cultures, however, many people understand these problems intuitively. For example, Professor Irina Khomenko has a similar opinion, and she claims that there is a direct connection between argumentation in folklore and language: “...folk cultural predispositions and understandings of interpersonal arguing as a background of modern views” (Khomenko, 2020: 25).

We selected three sources to study the relevance of the identity crisis among American Indians. The first source comprised the activities of institutions designed to assist the Indigenous peoples of America in matters of politics, law, economics, culture, language, literature and

philosophy. The second source of information was articles in periodicals written by both Indigenous people and researchers of other nationalities. An important feature of the research was the search for the mention of the problem of the identity crisis and how frequently it was mentioned. The third source of information was books written by both Indigenous authors and representatives of other peoples. The publications had to be modern and had to reflect reality.

Native American Organisations Serving the Community

In studying the activities of Native American organisations, we looked at the statutes and objectives of these institutions to determine the importance of the concept of identity. A list of these 25 institutions includes American Indian Business Leaders (AIBL); the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC); the First Nations Development Institute; the American Indian College Fund; the American Indian Policy Center; the National Indian Council on Aging (NICOA); the Native American Disability Law Center; Americans for Indian Opportunity; the Association of American Indian Affairs (AAIA); the American Indian Society of Washington, DC; the National Alaska Native American Indian Nurses Association (NANAINA); the National Indian Child Care Association; the National Native American Law Enforcement Association (NNALEA); the Native American Art Council; the Native American Capital (NAC); Native American Today; the Native American Financial Official Association (NAFOA); the Native American Journalists Association (NAJA); the Native American Rights Fund (NARF); the Indian Country Media Network; The Native American Times; the National Native American AIDS Prevention Center; the National Native American Bar Association (NNABA); the American Indian Science and Engineering Society (AISES); Women Empowering Women for Indian Nations.

Analysis revealed that the organisations have common motives, which are manifested both in the slogans (for example, culture, tradition, language = Indigenous Identity) and in their purpose. Some organisations, such as The Native American Disability Law Center, are dedicated to helping people with special needs, but they also care about mental health and respect the individual, the community, and the laws they seek to uphold. Founded by Ladona Harris in 1970, AIO draws on traditional Indigenous philosophy, and Americans for Indian Opportunity promotes, from an Indigenous perspective, the cultural, political, and economic rights of Indigenous peoples in the United States and around the world.

For example:

“The American Indian Society has worked to support the goals it established in 1966:

- to preserve Indian culture and perpetuate Indian tradition;
- to promote fellowship among members of all American Indian tribes;
- to enlighten the public and encourage a better understanding of the Indian people;
- to assist young Indian boys and girls in their academic studies through its scholarship program.

We hope you will join us to support the next generation of native leaders and continue our work to preserve Indian culture in this nation” (American Indian Society of Washington).

The very first goal is the need to preserve Indian culture; the word ‘preserve’ implies that there is a need to protect it from someone or something, which means there is a threat. The Native American identity crisis can be confronted by educating the public and facilitating communication between members of different tribes.

American Indian journals and identity

The list of American Indian journals that address the crisis is long: *the American Indian Culture and Research Journal*; *the Journal of American Indian Education*; *the American Indian Quarterly*; *Ethnic and Racial Studies*; *the American Indian Law Review*; *Studies in American Indian Literatures*; *the Journal of the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association*; *the Indigenous Policy Journal*. This list, which is far from complete, only includes frequently cited journals. This study analysed articles in nine journals published over the last three years. The total number of articles published over this period is approximately 550, including book reviews, scientific reports, and opening words. It is very difficult to determine the exact percentage of articles that relate to the topic of the crisis, but according to our estimates, more than half of the articles directly or indirectly relate to the problem of an identity crisis, loss of heritage, the threat of loss of culture, and political, social and legal problems.

The first journal worth mentioning is *the American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, published since 1971. This journal is a renowned multidisciplinary journal dedicated to the publication of interdisciplinary research in the study of Native American peoples. In addition to articles, the journal publishes reviews of books and literature. The journal's topics are diverse, covering the fields of history, anthropology, geography, sociology, political science, health care, literature, law, education and art. It is published by the Center for American Indian Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. While the first journal is devoted to culture, education is the focus of the scientific journal, the *Journal of American Indian Education*, founded in 1961. This scholarly journal contains original articles on the education of American Indians, Alaska Natives, Hawaiian Natives, and Indigenous peoples around the world, including Aboriginal, Maori, Native American peoples and others. The peer-reviewed *American Indian Quarterly* is an interdisciplinary journal that publishes articles on the anthropology, history, literature, religions and arts of Native Americans. The scientific journal covers a variety of issues and topics related to the life and work of the Indigenous peoples of America.

Another example is *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, which aims to be the leading journal that analyses the role of race, racism, ethnicity, migration, and forms of ethnonationalism. These social phenomena are at the heart of many of the modern world's major social and political issues. As for the legal field, it is important to mention the scientific journal *American Indian Law Review*. The journal publishes articles that analyse changes in legal issues affecting Native Americans and Indigenous peoples in America and around the world. Although the journal adheres to the traditional legal review format, it offers in-depth articles by legal scholars, lawyers and other expert observers. In addition, the review features comments and notes written by students and editors on a wide range of topics related to Indian law. The only journal in the United States that focuses exclusively on American Indian literature is *Studies in American Indian Literatures*. With a broad scope of scholars and creative contributors, this journal is on the cutting edge of activity in the field. The journal's broad definition of "literatures" includes all written, spoken, and visual texts created by Native peoples. Finally, the policy of the scholarly journal, *Journal of the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association*, promotes the convergence of Indigenous peoples despite their geographical location. Scientific journal editors strive to create a dynamic intellectual space for communication and exchange of excellent scientific knowledge related to Indigenous research.

Using the example of one issue of one journal, we aim to demonstrate the significance of the problem of identity crisis to extrapolate this to other publications. Almost all materials in one way or another relate to the problem of the identity crisis. It seems impossible to calculate the exact number and percentage of publications on this topic due to the subjectivity of the approach, but here are some examples. The introduction discusses the structural racism of colonialism that continues to have many negative impacts on Indigenous peoples, and the impact of COVID-19 is no exception. The theme of the special issue, while focusing on the impact of the pandemic, touches on the resilience of Indigenous communities and the importance of self-determination in public responses. This theme is also evident in the rest of the articles. Examples of the titles of articles and the formulation of problems are as follows:

Urban American Indian Caregiving during COVID-19 (2020).

Risk and Resilience Factors in Urban American Indian and Alaska Native Youth during the Coronavirus Pandemic (2020):

“American Indians and Alaska Natives suffer disproportionately from poverty and other inequities and are vulnerable to adverse health and socioeconomic effects of COVID-19” (D’Amico et al., 2020).

Stress and Coping among American Indian and Alaska Natives in the Age of COVID-19 (2020):

“Despite demographic similarities, American Indian/Alaska Natives exhibited more stressors related to COVID-19 as well as higher depressive symptom scores compared to non-Hispanic whites” (Burton et al., 2020).

COVID-19, Intersectionality, and Health Equity for Indigenous Peoples with Lived Experience of Disability (2020):

“We propose a “call to action” framework comprising four elements: (1) guaranteeing self-determination for *tāngata whaikaha*; (2) addressing all forms of racism, ableism, and other structural forms of oppression; (3) rectifying historical injustices; and (4) allocating resources for the pandemic and beyond in alignment with need” (Jones et al., 2020).

First Nations’ Survivance and Sovereignty in Canada during a Time of COVID-19 (2020), “First Nations people in Canada have demonstrated and continue to demonstrate persistent and resilient cultural, linguistic, and traditional endurance: survivance. The devastation resulting from centuries of health pandemics such as smallpox, influenza, cholera, tuberculosis, measles, and scarlet fever reinforces the ongoing resilience of First Nations people, cultures, and traditions in Canada. Despite the history of pandemic-related trauma and myriad social, political, environmental, and health challenges, as well as the added burden that COVID-19 is placing on the healthcare system in Canada, First Nations organisations and leadership are enacting their inherent rights to sovereignty and governance” (Rowe et al., 2020).

Native American writers and their books

Books written by Native American peoples describe their vision of the problems that plague them. Identity crisis problems can be considered in the example of a separate nation. The book *Eastern Cherokee Stories: A Living Oral Tradition and Its Cultural Continuance* (2019) is an in-depth study of the traditions of the Eastern group of Cherokee Indians. The conditions creating this work are quite typical. Sandra Muse Isaacs, the author, grew up in Detroit but reunited with her heritage while living in Cherokee, North Carolina, where she pursued her PhD in English and cultural studies. The author has not proposed any new

methodologies, but her research is extremely interesting. A characteristic feature of the work is a mix of stories from both respected residents and native people. Her book contains five chapters, and the language balance is achieved using terminology in the Tsalagi language with English explanations. The idea is to steal the traditions politically and to share the research with a wide audience. Central to the study are two ideas: “coming together” (*gadugi*) and the “right path” (*duyvhta*) – which, according to the author, determine the fundamental principles of the Cherokee worldview (Isaacs, 2019).

On the other hand, this work could be seen as a study of the process of acculturation and the coexistence of Indigenous peoples and settlers/colonists. Celine Carayon, assistant professor of history at the University of Salisbury, Salisbury, MD, specialises in the study of French colonial history and Native American history. In her book *Eloquence Embodied: Nonverbal Communication among French and Indigenous Peoples in the Americas* (2019), she has outlined a thorough study of the history of non-verbal communication between the first French explorers, settlers, and Native Americans in the 16th–18th centuries. The research is based on *Jesuit Relations*, a 17th century literary and historical monument; this is the correspondence of New France missionaries with Europe, published mostly in Paris in 1632-1672 (Carayon, 2019). The uniqueness of this work is that the author argues that scholars have over-emphasised the complexity, even the impossibility, of intercultural communication in early America, due to strong modern skepticism about probable success in non-verbal communication. Also, she traces the vast role of non-verbal communication, not only in basic forms such as asking for directions, or food or shelter, but also in complex diplomatic and religious conversations. The following researcher touches on a slightly different problem in his research. Author of a similar study, Gonzalo Lamana, associate professor in the Department of Hispanic Languages and Literature at the University of Pittsburgh, writes an intellectual history in his monograph *How “Indians” Think: Colonial Indigenous Intellectuals and the Question of Critical Race Theory* (2019). The author’s temporal range begins in 1492, when Christopher Columbus’s Spanish crew first landed in America, through to the Spanish colonisation of Peru in the seventeenth century. From Lamana’s perspective, colonialism and the forms of domination that it entails are supported by notions of white supremacy, which predominate among Spaniards. But, at least in theory, it is not necessarily to skin colour (Lamana, 2019: 17). The author describes the way Andean Indigenous peoples and Spanish colonists came to understand (as well as misunderstand) and interact with each other.

A unique collection of essays, *Decolonising Research: Indigenous Storywork as Methodology* (2019), compiled by Native researchers from Canada, Australia, New Zealand, is a good example of collective work. It joins other outstanding works on decolonisation, such as *Decolonising Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999, 2012) and *Indigenous and Decolonizing Studies in Education: Mapping the Long View* by Smith, Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2019). There is an interesting thought about decolonisation in the foreword of this book; the author believes that by studying private stories, we can get more authoritative information than if we study the comments of unbiased scholars. “...we mostly hear that version from a dominant perspective that has assumed the right to tell the stories of the colonised and the oppressed that they have re-interpreted, represented, and re-told through their own lens” (Archibald, 2019: XI).

This book emphasises the rights to self-determination guaranteed by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. In the context of the work required for decolonisation, these essays embody the unique experiences of scholars who work in the

territory of representatives of different nations and communities. Languages, land, society, and many other key questions in the essays demonstrate the depth of understanding of the problems.

Earlier, in 2008, Jo-Anne Archibald conducted an active study into the culture of the native people of America. She worked closely with tribal elders and renowned storytellers, collecting and organising both traditional and personal stories to describe life experiences. She published the book *Indigenous Storywork: Educating the Heart, Mind, Body, and Spirit* (2008), in which she described oral stories of Indigenous peoples. According to the author, the stories are an important source of information about the life of Indigenous peoples. She believes that stories can serve as teaching tools (Archibald, 2008). The issue of education is extremely acute for American Indian society since there is still no teaching model that takes into account the needs of Indigenous people and historical justice. In 2015, researchers found that 87% of primary school curricula focusing on Native American culture were dedicated only to Native American history, and more than half of the U.S. states did not even mention Native Americans by name. There is a false impression that this topic is not worthy of coverage in literature and education, which directly affects the identity crisis of the Indigenous population. The book *An Indigenous People's History of the United States for Young People* (2019) describes the current situation; most schools in the United States limit the teaching of Indigenous culture to the Thanksgiving story. This book seeks to change that, starting in pre-European North America and continuing to the present, ending with a chapter on recent Standing Rock activity (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2019).

Besides culture, politics, and history, writers often turn to the topic of ecosophy since a well-known feature of the worldview of the Indigenous peoples of America is not anthropocentrism but ethnocentrism. Roberts, an assistant professor of history at Bowdoin College, examines the life and work of colonial leaders, showing how they influenced social and commercial relations in the Connecticut Valley and Boston and Europe throughout the West Indies. In his book, *Colonial Ecology, Atlantic Economy: Transforming Nature in Early New England* (2019), the author analyses how Indigenous people and Europeans forged communication and trade in the regional and transatlantic economy of New England. The book shows how the rise of modern capitalism took place and how it changed the ecological landscape of the 18-19th centuries (Roberts, 2019). Mythology, which we believe is an integral part of a person's worldview, is deeply rooted in the culture of the Indigenous population of America. The book *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America* (2019) is not the first of its kind, but it is one of the latest to address this topic. The author proposes an intellectual history of the border myth, details the genocide that accompanies territorial expansion, and explores the pathological symbiosis of capitalism and the inherent promise of the frontier. Grandin describes in detail how, from the earliest days of its existence, America's national border: "Didn't just move occasionally, in response to episodic war or diplomacy, but constitutively as a quality of its being" (Grandin, 2019: 31).

Grandin's work is the first to argue that the myth of borders is dead, pointing to the wall as evidence that separates the past from the present as clearly as it is intended to separate Mexico from the United States. For more than two centuries, war-driven territorial and economic expansionism has allowed Americans to hide deep social and political divisions with an expansionist imperative narrative. According to Professor Oleg Bazaluk, unfortunately, in the history of America, the issue of peace and war has been raised quite often, despite the peace-loving intentions of the leaders. "The creators of the American democracy made a significant contribution to the comprehension of war and peace in international relations... Charles-Louis

de Montesquieu, Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, and others defended the idea that the law was able only to stop the violence, but not eradicate it; that the destinies of independence of states, and the Republican system, depended only on the moral development of people” (Bazaluk, 2017: 96-97)

Gender issues are also relevant for Native American writers. In *Indigenous Women Writing and the Cultural Study of Law* (2017), the author emphasises the ways that Indigenous women are enacting their sovereignty by writing about Indigenous issues of Native America. Suzack focuses on Indigenous women writers such as Leslie Mar Mon Silko (Laguna Pueblo), Beatrice Culleton Mosionier (Canadian Metis), Louise Erdrich (Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa), and Winona LaDuke (Ojibwe White Earth Band of Chippewa) (Suzack, 2017). Each of the four Indigenous women has written novels to address real issues that continue to impact Indigenous women’s sovereignty. The author discusses these novels in relation to real-life Supreme Court cases that have addressed concerns around gender identity, blood quantum, domestic violence, and land to show the importance of Indigenous women’s voices through writing. The second example is a book written by the Indian rights activist Winona LaDuke, who was a Green Party vice-presidential nominee in 1996. Although she has written many relevant books, her artistic debut is a provocative novel based on her own life experiences, *Last Standing Woman* (1997). The author skillfully combines social experience with a mythological picture. The novel, which is set in the White Land Reservation in Minnesota, covers three centuries, with the main events taking place in the 20th century. At the centre of the plot is the struggle for dignity and self-determination against the crisis of self-identity (LaDuke, 1997). The focus is on strong women who resist ongoing U.S. persecution and corrupt tribal governments. Other books by the author on this topic are *All our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life* (1999), about the drive to reclaim tribal land for ownership; *Recovering the Sacred: the Power of Naming and Claiming* (2005), a book about traditional beliefs and practices; *The Militarization of Indian Country* (2013); *The Sugar Bush* (1999); *The Winona LaDuke Reader: A Collection of Essential Writings* (2002); *All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life* (1999).

In the search for the identity of Native Americans, a classic work is the book *The Search for an American Indian Identity: Modern Pan-Indian Movements* (1971). “Pan-Indian,” the author notes, “...seems first to have been used in 1950 by Charles S. Brant in a study of the Native American Church” (Hertzberg, 1971: 291).

Since that date, the term has frequently been employed by anthropologists and ethnohistorians (whether Indian or non-Indian), although seldom by the Indian actors themselves. In conceptual asides to her historical narrative, Hertzberg contrasts “pan-Indianism” with “assimilation,” the “melting pot,” and other terms that characterise the nature of interaction on an ethnic frontier. However, it would be a mistake for present-day readers to take the title of her volume seriously and to approach it for social-psychological interpretations of identity and “the self” on that frontier (for such discussions, consult the work of Neils W. Braroe, Robert V. Dumont, Jr., and Robert K. Thomas). Hertzberg gives her readers scholarly history that is based closely on relevant documentary sources and occasionally enlivened by comparisons with the immigrant experience of the early 20th century.

The importance and relevance of studying the literature of Indigenous people of America are undoubted. To better understand their worldview and the crises they face, we will give an example of the importance of the study. The *Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature* (2012) provides an up-to-date and significant overview of a new area of literary research related to Native American culture. The collection includes texts of various genres in

the language of the American Indians from the 18th century to the present day. The companion consists of seventeen chapters, each written by professional scholars, both Indigenous and non-Native Americans, Europeans, etc. This companion describes historical and cultural contexts and raises gender issues. A wide variety of authors and genres cover not only the 18 to 19th centuries but also the 20th century (Momaday, Silko, Welch, Ortiz, Vizenor, Erdrich, Harjo, Alexie), and the work includes biographies of forty authors. Complementary to the text are maps, chronology charts detailing Native American and American literature, and their links to important social, cultural, and historical events. According to Ray B. Browne: “[This book should have been titled] “Native American Writers” because it is concerned with the authors, not the literature. Limiting the discussion to full coverage of the literature of native and mixed-blood Americans, the volume is very useful” (Browne, 2006: 98-99).

Conclusion

Research on the presence of an identity crisis in the modern narrative of American Indians indicates that this problem is urgent. To search for signs of this issue, the study focused on the activities of 25 organisations that are designed to preserve the culture of Indigenous peoples, specifically to help in social and economic spheres. All these organisations support the preservation and transmission of values, heritage, and spiritual culture. Thus, by their very essence, they resist the crisis of identity in one way or another. This study analysed publications in nine scientific journals devoted to American Indian culture, which include approximately half a thousand articles and reviews. In a broad range of journal articles that covered different topics, from literary reviews to medical problems, the topic of identity crisis was pervasive, as illustrated by the examples mentioned. It was found that the overwhelming majority of materials directly or indirectly relate to the problem of the crisis, which indicates the need for fundamental research in this area to mitigate the crisis.

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