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A Settler Colonialist Reading of *Firekeeper's Daughter* and *Crooked Hallelujah*

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Abstract: In this paper, a settler colonialist reading of *Firekeeper's Daughter* by Angeline Boulley and *Crooked Hallelujah* by Kelli Jo Ford is attempted. *Firekeeper's Daughter* is a young adult novel set in the year 2004 in Sault Ste. Marie. It offers an intimate glimpse into the lives of members of the Anishinaabe community in the wake of mounting drug-related deaths. *Crooked Hallelujah* opens in 1974 and is structured as a collection of vignettes centred on four generations of Cherokee women as they grapple with religious conservatism, violence, and poverty. Distanced from their Indigenous cultural heritage, these women seek solace in community, sisterhood, and family.

The primary aim of this paper is to identify and examine instances of settler colonialism such as oppression, cultural erasure, racism, and white supremacist tendencies. The impact of settler colonialism will also be investigated, particularly how it has manifested in the contemporary world as depicted in the selected works of fiction. The various ways by which Native American communities resist and negotiate their cultural identities will likewise be highlighted.

At its centre, this paper explores what it means to be a Native American individual in a rapidly changing world. The selected works expose settler colonialism as a continuing structure of oppression that disrupts kinship, faith, and cultural continuity, even as Indigenous characters resist through community and survival.

Keywords: *Settler Colonialism, Native American, Identity, Trauma, Cultural Identity*

Native American identity is one that has always been contested since the 15th century. What does it mean to be a Native American woman living in contemporary America? How has settler colonialism impacted the present-day lives of Native Americans? The answers to these questions will be explored in relation to two works by Native American authors namely *Firekeeper's Daughter* (2021) by Angeline Boulley and *Crooked Hallelujah* (2020) by Kelli Jo Ford. The texts chosen for the study are primarily told from the perspective of women and as a result stress on experiences and challenges that are specific to Native American women.

Firekeeper's Daughter by Angeline Boulley is a young adult novel that centres around 18-year-old Daunis Fontaine, a biracial teen who is an unenrolled member of the Ojibwe community in St. Sault Marie. The protagonist is described as an indigenous Nancy Drew who fights against all odds to ensure justice is served in her community. The novel won the Edgar Allan Poe Award for the Best Young Adult Novel in 2022. Boulley was the Director of the Office of Indian Education (OIE) at the U.S. Department of Education in 2019.

Crooked Hallelujah, Kelli Jo Ford's debut novel is an intergenerational story told from the perspective of the women in a Cherokee family based in Oklahoma. Set against the 1980s's Texas Oil Bust, Ford creates a multi-layered narrative that is both representational and dynamic. Ford is the recipient of the 2019 The Paris Review Plimpton Prize.

A Brief Look into Native American History

The history of the Native American community is one that is wrought by great tragedy and injustice. When Christopher Columbus first disembarked in 1492 America, he did so, changing the trajectory of an entire community. Thereafter, more and more European explorers arrived, setting in motion a series of changes in the landscape. The first colonists arrived in 1607 in the Chesapeake Bay setting up the Jamestown Colonies in Virginia. The Pontiac's Rebellion in 1763 was a major Native Indian uprising against the British forces that subsequently contributed to positive changes in the national policies involving the Native American community (Rindfleisch).

The number of white settlers grew paving the way for the many often isolated Indian-American wars which lasted till the 19th century. The 19th century was marked by many forced relocations and treaties. It is also believed that the Americans used biological warfare to eradicate the Native American population resulting in the genocide of millions. A notable instance is the weaponisation of smallpox: contaminated blankets were gifted to the Native people (Kiger). As the Native population shrunk, it became easier to control and terrorise them and thereby steal their lands. The white settlers continued to plunder the land of the Native Americans often resorting to mass murder to acquire land. In 1830,

the then-president of the United States of America Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act, displacing thousands of Cherokee Indians from their homeland in the east of the Mississippi river and forcing them to move to “Indian territory” in the west in Oklahoma. This long and arduous journey was hailed as the Trail of Tears as it spelt disaster for the Cherokee community with as many as 5000 dying because of it.

In an effort to ‘civilise’ and acculturate the indigenous people into American society Christianity was imposed on them. Consequently, the Indian Reservation system was created to ensure that the Indigenous community had a place of their own while the American government took over. Life on the reservation was fraught with numerous difficulties with high rates of poverty and unemployment (“Indian Reservations”).

The Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 granted American citizenship to Native Americans providing a sliver of hope for a better future for the community. The Indian Reorganization Act in 1934 finally enabled the Native people to reorganise themselves into sovereign tribal nations and to create their own constitutions. Today, there are 574 federally recognized tribes living in the United States. Measures continue to be taken by Native American communities to revitalize Native languages and traditions. The effort also extends to making positive changes in the social, economic and political sectors (Native American History).

The Legacy of Settler Colonialism

Settler Colonialism is a system of oppression that relies on genocide and colonialism to exploit the lands and resources of an indigenous group carried out with the intention of eradicating them. This is done to accommodate the region to welcome the new settler population. Settler Colonialism encompasses various forms of oppression such as racism, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism. The concept has Euro-centric origins and believes in the natural superiority of European values and customs. This theory was postulated by Patrick Wolfe, an Australian historian and academician in his work *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnography Event* (1999). He is most notable for his theory of the logic of elimination which regards settler colonialism not as an isolated historical event but as an ongoing system that systematically erases indigenous people and their culture over a period of time (Cox).

Through the Lens of Settler Colonialism

Land and Legality

From the 18th to the 19th century, it is estimated that about 1.5 billion acres were seized from Native Americans as a part of the American invasion. Today, only 2.3% of that land is occupied by indigenous people. In *Firekeeper's Daughter*, Angeline Boulley gives the readers many examples of the impact of settler colonialism, particularly the violent history associated with it. Throughout the book, she illustrates the complex and strained relationship between the Native American people and the government.

Colonisation included the relentless plunder of the land and the resources of the Native Americans. Boulley discusses ongoing battles between the federal government and tribal nations over land claims. Land owned by tribal nations comes under tribal jurisdiction and is governed by tribal laws. Daunis, the protagonist of *Firekeeper's Daughter*, mentions how her aunt regularly tried to buy lands that originally belonged to tribals from the federal government to reclaim what was theirs. Boulley, underscores the significance of the Ojibwe people's relationship with their ancestral lands. The knowledge of traditional medicine is inextricably linked to the tribal lands and its native fauna.

The novel through Daunis, also critiques the pernicious effects of post-colonial laws, including blood quantum laws, adoption laws, and land laws, which perpetuate the erasure of Native American identity and sovereignty.

The Blood Quantum laws, a product of colonialism, determine whether an individual can be considered Native American. Blood quantum is a fraction that is used to calculate how much Indian blood a person possesses. Officially, the blood quantum laws were enacted after the Indian Reorganisation Act of 1934 (Chow). Boulley's portrayal of the per-cap system, a direct consequence of colonialism, underscores its role in maintaining tribal autonomy while also acknowledging its vulnerabilities to misuse. In *Firekeeper's Daughter*, the per cap is mostly derived from the casino revenue and is paid to the enrolled members of the tribe. Per caps must be regarded as a basic income for members of the tribal community to access better healthcare, education and related facilities. The novel sheds light on the misconceptions surrounding per-cap payments which are often perceived as "winnings" by the non-Native American majority rather than as a vital source of basic income for tribal members. The per cap system which was initiated as a means to combat the economic instability in the Native American community is often exploited by white members of the society. An example of this is Ryan Cheneaux (an individual who identified as 'white') submitting an application for enrollment in the tribe when he gets to know that Joey Nodin is his father despite criticizing the practices and

policies that cater to the upliftment of the Native American community all his life. His white lawyer is ecstatic that he gets to keep ten per cent of the per cap payments.

With Jamie's character, Bouley represents the countless native Indian children who were forcibly removed from their homes and given up for adoption. It is estimated that 35% of all Native American children were displaced and placed in non-native dwellings severing them from their parent culture and heritage.

Louis La Rose of Winnebago Tribe of Nebrasaka's remarks are quite telling:

I think the cruelest trick that the white man has ever done to Indian children is to take them into adoption court, erase all of their records and send them off to some nebulous family . . . residing in a white community and he goes back to the reservation and he has absolutely no idea who his relatives are, and they effectively make him a non-person and I think . . . they destroy him (Kleven).

Jamie, despite being in the centre of a Native American community, feels isolated and out of touch as he has no real knowledge of his Cherokee culture. What is common knowledge to a Native American such as the cultural significance of owls as companions in the afterworld is lost on him.

This practice was yet another legacy of colonialism rendering the displaced Native American children as non-persons even within their own community. This changed with the implementation of ICWA (The Indian Child Welfare Act) in 1978 which gives complete jurisdiction to the tribes in cases involving the custody of a Native Indian child ("Indian Child Welfare Act").

In *Crooked Hallelujah*, the intergenerational story unfolds in the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma. The Cherokee people are regarded as having an enduring relationship with land in the tradition of indigenous communities. The line describing Lula in Part I, section 1 of Book of Generations reflects this sentiment: "In the way of Cherokee women, Lula could still make you feel that she held down the Earth around her one moment and then seem almost like a girl the next."

The Trial of Tears is a major historical event wherein thousands of Cherokee were forced to relocate and assimilate in Oklahoma. In the city of Oklahoma, a checkerboard jurisdiction is observed as tribal land exists in tandem with non-tribal land creating challenges in governance and law enforcement (Conley). Lula's family considers Oklahoma as their homeland, the land on which their rental stands, the Little Locust Creek and Lake Tenkiller are areas that define their hometown and their personal history.

Following the Post-Civil War Treaty in 1866, the Cherokee nation was able to establish a permanent homeland in Oklahoma and to reaffirm its sovereignty. In the case of the Cherokee Nation, the members are expected to have direct ancestry and do not impose the blood quantum law (“Blood Quantum and the CDIB – Cherokee Registry”). The author also touches upon the support services offered by the Cherokee Nation in education and housing signalling the many measures taken by the tribe to bolster the members of the community.

Kelli Jo Ford in an interview with Alexander Sammartino points out the significance of displacement in the lives of Cherokee women. She says:

These characters are living through displacement. Displacement upon displacement. Oklahoma isn't where Cherokee people came from. But Lula has been able to absolutely see it as her home and embrace it, whereas Justine made the decision to run looking for a better life. As a result, Reney is raised removed from her grandmothers. Justine also didn't grow up experiencing a lot of Cherokee culture because of the church that they were a part of. What I see in those passages are characters who are learning about or craving connection, and then they're getting it from Westerns or commercials.

Religion and Culture

Daunis religiously follows the Ojibwe way of life and culture. She along with the people on Sugar Island truly embrace and celebrate their place within the tribal community. The community gets together for sweatlodge ceremonies, powwows, funerals and various other social events. She follows the Anishinaabe teachings called the Seven Grandfathers which include love, humility, honesty, respect, bravery, wisdom and truth. These precepts guide her in leading a respectable and honourable life as an Ojibwe member. The language spoken is Anishinaabemowin and the members of the community take active efforts to ensure that the language is spoken and studied by the younger generation. In line with the Ojibwe tradition, she begins every day by offering tobacco or semaa to the ancestors.

Daunis also points out that there are families within the Ojibwe community who blend their Native American religion with Catholicism and there are those who have been converted into Catholics highlighting the pervasive and enduring effect of colonialism. The blanket parties in the Ojibwe culture reveal the insidious reality of the treatment of Native women by the federal government. The women in the community exact their form of justice by organizing blanket parties to punish sexual perpetrators.

On the otherhand, the women in *Crooked Hallelujah* are nearly completely disconnected from their Cherokee culture and language. Lula is a devout Catholic and as a result raises her children as daughters of the church. The lack of reliable male partners pushes them to follow the matrilineal tradition generally seen in Cherokee culture. The women in *Crooked Hallelujah* embrace Christianity in a way partaking in the cultural erasure of their heritage. Justine specifies that stomp dances which are an integral element of Cherokee culture is seen as the invention of the Devil. What is clearly observed is not just the Christianization of the Cherokee community but a demonization of their culture by the church. Annie Mae is the only person in the family who knew the Cherokee language and with her death, yet another link to their cultural past dies. It is only later when Reney is in college does she realise the depth of her ignorance, she has no real knowledge of her Cherokee heritage – the language, the stories, and the core principles. Reney starts with the decolonization process by asking her mother to tell her stories of the past. On skin and paper, they were Cherokee women belonging to the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma but beyond that, there were no other signs that affirmed their cultural history.

At present, the majority of the Cherokee community in Oklahoma practice some denominations of Christianity ranging from Baptist to Methodist. The women in *Crooked Hallelujah* are part of the highly conservative Holiness Church known for its modest approach to life. The Holiness Church culture is highly patriarchal and preaches simplicity in appearance as well as way of life. Simplicity is a crucial precept so much so that that even wedding rings are forbidden as they are regarded as ‘outward adornment’. According to their school of Christian faith, marriage can only happen once and divorce does not exist. The only acceptable way to be a woman of the church is to be silent and in subjugation. The Holiness Church believes in the doctrine of the second work of grace and emphasises the importance of a sin-free life to be a perfect Christian. It enforces strict gender roles and employs fear-based teachings. Faith healing was a central aspect of the church which was often employed as a replacement for medical care. Lula refusing medical care in favour of faith healing is an example of this.

Identity

Native American women experience discrimination on multiple levels - on account of their skin colour, gender, and status in society. Daunis’ biracial identity makes her an interesting narrator as she represents those who are caught between two worlds – white and Native American. She says, “We both learned early on that there is an Acceptable Anishinaabe Skin Tone Continuum, and those who land on its outer edges have to put up with different versions of the same bullshit (Boulley13).” Other young Nishnaabs call her ‘ghost’ on account of her pale skin. Hence, she experiences discrimination from both sides. Daunis’ white skin and her mother’s family name of Fontaine bestows on her power and

privilege that has been denied to many of her peers and as a result she is wary of how she is perceived by the other members of the community. Growing up, Daunis had many strong role models - Auntie, Granny Pearl, Granny June but she also realises that while being a Native American woman means to be strong and resilient, it also bestows on her the status of vulnerability and expendability particularly in legal matters.

Daunis also has her share of racist encounters. She is aware of the impact of racial profiling in everyday life and the role it plays in reinforcing stereotypes. Mary, her grandmother on her mother's side is unwilling to accept her Ojibwe heritage. She says, "'Don't be obstinate, Daunis Lorenza. You're a Fontaine, not one of them'" (288). Mary regards Native Americans who had converted into Catholicism "unoriginal," she sees them as inferior beings.

In *Crooked Hallelujah*, it is implied that Justine is biracial with her blue eyes. She refers to herself as "a hillbilly, a half-breed of the Oklahoma hills." The Cherokee women lead a highly anglicised lifestyle centered around the Holiness Church and this informs their way of life in varying degrees. Justine is covertly referred to as the "Indian" by Ferrell, Pitch's father. Even though he never calls her that in front of her, it is evident that he sees her as inferior and as an other. When Reney returns to Bonita with her husband, she witnesses signs of white supremacy in town, underscoring the often cyclical nature of colonialism.

A common denominator that one can discern in both novels is the capacity of Native American women to exhibit resilience and resistance in the face of danger and hardship. Daunis too demonstrates extraordinary courage in the face of adversity: Daunis transfers to Lake State University to help her mother and her grandmother who is suffering from a stroke. She continues to help the FBI investigation even through her sexual assault showcasing her strong will and resilience. Throughout the book, the women in the Ojibwe community continue to be a major source of traditional knowledge and encouragement to Daunis greatly influencing her identity.

When Lula's husband abandons her, she is forced to take up the role of breadwinner and caretaker for her three daughters and her mother. Single and estranged from her husband, Lula struggles to maintain respectability within the Holiness Church community. At fifteen, Justine becomes the poor pregnant teen and is rejected by the Holiness Church and this experience shapes the paradoxical nature of her relationship with Christianity. Justine leaves school and works two jobs to provide for Reney. Bereft of reliable male partners, the women in Lula's family learn to be self-sufficient and independent. In a family where the male partner is always quick to abandon the family, Reney breaks this pattern by leaving Wes. She recognizes that her marriage with Wes is a failure and

moves to Portland to rebuild her life. *Crooked Hallelujah* celebrates the undying strength of single women who have been mistreated and abandoned by their partners.

Trauma

Trauma in its various forms – historical trauma, sexual trauma, economic trauma forms the crux of both the novels. Historical trauma plays a formative role in the selected novels. Dr. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart defines historical trauma as “the cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over one’s lifetime and from generation to generation following the loss of lives, land, and vital aspects of culture.” This trauma then manifests in the form of high rates of addiction, violence, and sexual abuse. The boarding school generation is believed to have suffered the most as a result of the complex network of physical, emotional and psychological abuse. The children who are stripped from their heritage in this way go on to repeat the same patterns of abuse and violence in their personal lives. Scientific evidence also supports the epigenetic nature of trauma (“Native American Life Today”).

When Daunis informs her nieces of the violence their ancestors were subjected to – of the systemic removal of Native American children from their families, the forced enrollment of Native American children in boarding schools, and the erasure of their Anishinaabe culture, she realises how trauma is passed through history. And that the only way to mentally decolonise themselves is to reclaim their past with sensitivity.

Granny June’s daughters were forcibly sent to boarding schools and when they returned home following their ‘forced’ American education, they were physically and mentally scarred beyond repair. Cutting the hair of Native American children was a common practice in the boarding schools to further the separation from their culture. Daunis mentions that both her aunt and Granny June kept their distance from the church as they knew of their involvement in running the boarding schools along with the federal government. She recalls the trauma response Gramma Pearl had to the sound of barking dogs. She had armed herself with a rifle after hiding Daunis under the trap door in her room. In the past, barking dogs meant that men had come to take the Native American children away.

Historically, the Trial of Tears is a significant episode in the lives of Cherokee Indians but this is not referenced in the novel indicating yet another instance of cultural erasure despite it being a highly traumatic historical experience. The lives lead by the women in *Crooked Hallelujah* is as a result of forced assimilation, Cherokee heritage has in many ways been replaced by the patriarchal and oppressive rules of the church. They have adjusted to the hardships life has thrown at them – poverty, forced assimilation, absentee male figures and intergenerational trauma.

In Part 1 in the Book of Generations, it is mentioned that Lula had attended Chilocco Indian School which was a real school in Oklahoma. The Chilocco Indian Agricultural School was started in 1884 and it was one of the largest federally-funded boarding schools that catered to the education of Native Americans. The school was established with the aim to civilize, Christianize and educate Native American youth to ensure their easy assimilation within modern society. The school welcomed students from the Five Civilized Tribes but by 1925, the Cherokee tribe made up nearly 26% of the entire student population. The school is notable for its stringent military discipline that was enforced by twenty-two bugle calls. Poor healthcare, inadequate meals and lack of attention are the issues that marked the school experiences of Chiloccoans (Lomawaima). Changes in federal policies were implemented in the school system but certain foundational rules remain untouched. The school curriculum provided a combination of academic and vocational instruction training Native Americans for a life particularly in the labour industry (“Chilocco History Project”).

Being a student of a school that was designed to erase indigenous cultural practices and beliefs, Lula is an example of the urbanized, Christianized Native American. This erasure of Cherokee heritage further problematizes Native American identity.

“Granny had been brought up in Indian orphanages, and later, in Indian boarding schools. She’d never taught her grandchildren the language beyond the basic greetings. She simply said that life was harder for those who spoke it.” This statement from Part II in the chapter titled You’ll be Honest, You will be Brave, is the answer to why the Cherokee people have had to sever themselves from their culture. Granny realised that to have a future in America meant letting go of their heritage and adapting to the changes that were imposed on them. By distancing themselves from their culture, they are rewriting identity the way they want. When Justine comes across an Indian doll in Lula’s garage, she sees it as a relic of the past with its melted plastic and rotting buckskin.

In the 1970s and 1980s, poverty and unemployment rates were high in the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma and many Cherokee families lived below the poverty line. Poverty and struggle have been a constant in the lives of Lula, Justine and Reney. Lula works as a secretary at the insurance officer and also assists at the church, Justine works two jobs since sixteen to provide for her daughter. Reney also continues this tradition of working ceaselessly. The limited housing options in Oklahoma is a testament to the economic status of the region. Lula lives in two rentals and when she gets to finally move into her dream home, she is old and ailing. The first house they occupy is described as a two-bedroom house where the walls are as thin as tar paper.

In *Firekeeper's Daughter*, the per cap system is depicted as a means to ensure economic stability. The revenue from the tribal casinos, hotels and other establishments enable the Ojibwe community to make economic progress. Trauma is also inextricably linked to stories. The members of the Ojibwe community gather around a fire and exchange stories communicating their historical and personal traumas. These stories later become part of their oral history.

Historically, women have experienced horrifying atrocities in the name of war and colonisation and the same holds true for Native women. In present-day America the federal laws imposed on tribal lands continue to work against Native women. The statistics highlighted in the Author's Note are horrifying. Boulley states that that 84% of Native women have experienced violence with 56% of them being subjected to sexual violence. She also points out that 94% of the Native women have experienced violence at the hands of a non-Native perpetrator highlighting the "predatory targeting of Native women and the jurisdictional quagmire on tribal lands."

The implications of Ron's revelation that "When a crime takes place on Indian land and the victim is a tribal member, the feds decide whether to press charges (472)." is appalling. Boulley highlights the federal government's complicity in perpetuating historical trauma through forced assimilation policies and jurisdictional loopholes that deny Native women justice.

The same holds true in the treatment of white men involved in the meth ring – Grant Edwards and his son Michael. Despite masterminding the meth ring, they are able to successfully evade punishment on account of the legal loopholes that exist in connection with tribal lands.

A God-fearing attitude is drilled into the Cherokee community (in Oklahoma) so much so that it manifests as religious trauma. Sheila, Reney's cousin, is clearly suffering from religious trauma syndrome when she reveals that she lives in fear of hell. People like Justine and Sheila still continue to bear within them the traces of religious conditioning and manipulation years after moving away from the church. *Crooked Hallelujah* underscores how the church, despite bringing everyone together, also results in the undoing of its members on account of its rigid practices.

Drug and Alcohol Abuse

Currently, Native Americans have the highest mortality rates related to alcohol and drug consumption in the country. Even though fermented beverages did exist prior to the arrival of European settlers, they were primarily used for ceremonial purposes. However, following European contact, the sudden and explosive exposure to alcohol was detrimental to members of the Native American community. Alcohol was initially employed as a tool of diplomacy to smooth rough waters between the white

settlers and the Native communities. Thereafter, alcohol and drugs were supplied to the Native American community setting in motion a vicious cycle of self-destructive behaviour (Frank).

Boulley addresses the chronic drug abuse in the Native American community by making it a central concern in her novel. *Firekeeper's Daughter* revolves around the mysterious drug-related deaths of teens in the Anishinaabe community in St. Sault Marie.

In *Crooked Hallelujah*, John Joseph is portrayed as a delinquent who spends his time drinking and causing trouble. Justine also goes through a period of intense drinking. It is important to point out that the Holiness Church promotes teetotalism and therefore this might have been a major influence within the community in discouraging alcohol abuse.

In conclusion, the responses to settler colonialism demonstrated in *Firekeeper's Daughter* and *Crooked Hallelujah* have been starkly different. In the former, the characters freely embrace and explore the Ojibwe culture and in the latter there is almost a total rift from Cherokee culture. However, this changes toward the end with Reney's newfound interest in her Native American heritage. The divergence matters as it reorients the scholarship from a single model of indigenous response toward a precise understanding of colonial contexts. Thus, intergenerational trauma, poverty, legal conundrums, the enduring impact of alcohol and drug abuse are aspects that are not just incidental features of Native American life but outcomes of colonial policy. The study also reveals that the Native American women in the novels reinvent themselves through their understanding of historical knowledge and solidarity and this emerges as a consequence that complicates established frameworks that view Native American women as helpless victims.

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