

***“The myth of the Vanishing Indian” in the works
of James Welch – one of pioneers
of the Native American Renaissance movement***

***“Mit ginącego Indianina” w twórczości Jamesa Welcha –
jednego z pionierów ruchu Native American Renaissance***

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Słowa kluczowe

rdzenność, poezja, powieści, Indianie, Welch

Abstract

The article discusses the importance and influence of the *Vanishing Indian* myth in the poetry and novels of Blackfeet James Welch. Kenneth Lincoln in his book *Native American Renaissance* named Welch as one of the leading luminaries of native literary revival in the United States. Native American experiences presented by Welch are complex. He challenges both simplistic narratives of assimilation and extinction as only possible ways of mutual coexistence of Indians and non-Indians. These narratives conceptualize the myth of a culture that passes away.

Abstrakt

W artykule omówiono znaczenie i wpływ mitu „Ginącego Indianina” na twórczość Jamesa Welcha, rdzennego pisarza pochodzącego z narodu Czarnych Stóp (Blackfeet). Kenneth Lincoln w swojej książce *Native American Renaissance* nazwał Welcha jednym z czołowych luminarzy odrodzenia rdzennej literatury w Stanach Zjednoczonych. Doświadczenia rdzennych Amerykanów przedstawione przez Welcha są złożone. Kwestionuje zarówno uproszczone

narracje o asymilacji, jak i wymieraniu jako jedyne możliwe sposoby wzajemnego współistnienia Indian i nie-Indian. Narracje te konceptualizują mit kultury, która przemija.

“Let glory go the way of all said things
Children need a myth that tells them be alive...”¹

The concept (myth) of *Vanishing Indian*

The *Vanishing Indian* concept refers to a literary, historical, and cultural understanding of the clash between „civilized” colonizers and „savage” Indians. Europeans had invented the interdependent concepts of savagism and civilisation. The concept is rooted in the belief that in the face of „advancing civilization”, tribes and tribal citizens would necessarily and inevitably disappear. As a remnant of unchanging, primitive man, the Indian would melt before the tide of American progress². This idea shifted over time from one of extirpation of all individual Indians to the disappearance of tribes as sovereign governments as an organizing force, and the assimilation of tribal members into the dominant society. First used by colonists to both explain and justify the removal and destruction of tribes and the taking of their land by erasing tribes through eradication of language, ignoring tribes in opinions, and freezing tribes in one fixed, unobtainable point in history.

The concept was discussed, among many, by Philip Deloria who explores the white American dual fascination with the *Vanishing Indian* and the idea that the white man can be the true inheritor and preserver of authentic Indianness, with the only authentic Indians being dead and in the past. A recurring trope in this pattern is “the Indian Death Speech”, an example he cites is from James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Redskins*³. In order to maintain the cult and sanctity of the Dead Indian, Americans decided that Live Indians these days cannot be genuine Indians⁴. Live Indians are invisible, disappointing, Dead Indians are noble, but silent. Brian Dippie’s book, *The Vanishing American*, explores the influence of the belief in American Indian policy. Dippie argues that assimilation shifted thought from literal disappearance of Indian

¹ J. Welch, *Blackfeet, Blood and Piegan Hunters*, Riding the Earthboy 40, London: Penguin Books, 2004, p. 32

² T. Perdue, M. Green, *North American Indians*, New York, 2010, p. 71.

³ P. J. Deloria, *Playing Indian*. New Haven, 1999, p. 65.

⁴ A. Gondor-Wiercioch, *Kill the Savage, Save the Man – James Welch’s Chronicle of Native American History*, [in:] R. Iwicka, ed., *Manifestations of Male Image in the World’s Cultures*, Cracow, 2021, p. 53.

people to the disappearance of „only the Indian race and culture and not the individuals”. Berry Brewton in *The Myth of the Vanishing Indian*, claims on the other hand that the *Vanishing Indian* myth is not real as Natives have not vanished⁵.

According to historian Paul Jentz, white Americans felt the deaths of Indigenous individuals “could be mourned” while simultaneously believing that “Indians must die away into the ‘untrodden West’ as white civilization took its racially superior place on the continent”⁶. David Stannard in *American Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World* defines the treatment of Natives by whites as the most massive genocide in the history of the world⁷. Clinicians such as Eduardo and Bonnie Duran utilize Holocaust theory in their work, acknowledge that the concept of intergenerational trauma has been known. They find similarities in grief patterns among Indians and the children of survivors. Genocide is understood as catastrophic originary event and a recurrent condition⁸. Brian Dippie calls Indians as a cultural myth – which views them variously as America’s Noble Savages, as ungrateful heathens, as a *Vanishing Race*, and as objects for, assimilation, reform, and finally self-termination⁹.

The *Vanishing Indian* myth had a profound impact on US culture and policies towards Native American people. It justified the forced removal of Native American people from their ancestral lands, the establishment of reservations, and the forced assimilation of Native American children into white culture through boarding schools. It also perpetuated harmful stereotypes and misconceptions about Native American people and their cultures. This included portrayals of Native American people as primitive and uncivilized, as well as the notion that their cultures were stagnant and unchanging.

In reality, Native Americans were not “vanishing”. They were being displaced by war and coercion and dispossessed of their ancestral lands through illegal seizures and illegitimate treaty negotiations.

The historical background of the *Vanishing Indian* concept

The Indians have always been a mystery to Europeans coming to the American continent. The earliest answers to the questions relating to Native Americans were provided by the explorers themselves in their diaries, and

⁵ B. Brewton, “The Myth of the Vanishing Indian”. *Phylon* (1960-), vol. 21, no. 1, 1960, p. 57 [in:] <https://doi.org/10.2307/273734> (accessed 07 XI 2023).

⁶ P. Jentz, *Seven Myths of Native American History*, Indianapolis, 2018, p. 86.

⁷ K. Mroczkowska-Brand, *Deportowani z życia*, Cracow, 2017, p. 41.

⁸ M. Powell, ed., *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, Vol 18, number 3, 2006, p. 67.

⁹ R. N. Lynch, *American Indian Quarterly*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1984, pp. 60–62, [in:] <https://doi.org/10.2307/1184163> (accessed 07 XI 2023).

the settlers themselves. Questions were asked about the nature of the Indians, their origin. Finally, there was a debate on their future, their role in society or their exclusion, usefulness in the newly emerging republic.

In 1512 Pope Julius II decreed that Indians have souls and therefore should be elevated above the animals. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries many authors described the Indians as „more brutish than the beasts they hunt” or „animals vulgarly called Indians”¹⁰. Many such memoirs were written by captives. Rarely Indians were depicted here in admirable colors. One such story was provided by Mary Rollandson, who was a captive of the Indians for three months in 1676. The book was hugely popular on both sides of the Atlantic. Importantly, Rollandson was not mistreated at all, cared for just like the rest of the tribe. Nonetheless, she grounded the stereotype of Indians as savage, atheistic, cruel, barbaric, and even diabolical creatures.

There were also, though less numerous, views quite different from those of Rollandson. Already in 1636 poet Roger Williams wrote: „Boast not proud English of thy birth and blood. Thy brother Indian is by birth as good. Of one blood God made him, and thee, and all. As wise, as fair, as strong, as personal”¹¹. Cotton Mather had no doubt of whom he believed to be dealing with when in *The Wonders of the Invisible World*, he writes: “the New Englanders are people of God settled in those which were once the devil’s territories”¹².

Benjamin Lincoln, a prominent general in American Revolution, used to say that “civilised and uncivilised people cannot live in the same territory. The time will come when they will be either civilised or extinct”¹³. Civilisation or death to all American savages was a popular toast among soldiers. The eighteenth century created a polarizing image of Indians as noble and brave – “Le Bon Sauvage” and brutal, blood-thirsty creatures. The words once spoken by Theodore Roosevelt seem to be merciful here. The only apparent generosity of the government was limited to changing the name from liquidation to termination of the Indian problem¹⁴.

Native Americans were also aware of the existence of this myth and its impact on their lives. In 1829, an article in the Cherokee Phoenix noted:

It is frequently said that the Indians are given up to destruction, that it is the will of heaven, that they should become extinct and give way to the white man. Those who assert this doctrine seem to act towards these unfortunate

¹⁰ B. Brewton, op. cit., p. 51.

¹¹ R. N. Bellah, *Is There a Common American Literature?*, [in:] D. G. Hackett, ed., *Religion and American Culture: A Reader*, New York, 2003, p. 541.

¹² R. Lee, *Envisioning Native America: Text and Counter-Text*, [in:] Z. Maszewski, ed., *Visuality and Vision in American Literature*, Białystok, 2014, p. 129.

¹³ B. Brewton, op. cit., p. 52.

¹⁴ K. Mroczkowska-Brand, op. cit., p. 44.

people in a consistent manner, either in neglecting them entirely or endeavoring to hasten the period of their extinction¹⁵.

Aboriginal denigration and revival in law of the country

The myth of the *Vanishing Indian* was a national self-fulfilling prophecy pursued by federal government officials and agents throughout the nineteenth century as inscribed in the national slogan of Manifest Destiny as both inevitable and preordained by God. Territorial expansion meant displacement of Indigenous groups who had lived in these places for generations.

The latter half of nineteenth century brought the reservation system, the creation of boarding schools, destruction of buffalo and finally forced cession of land under Allotment Act. A brutal form of gradual degradation of the Indians, their dependence on the will of the whites and progressive annihilation was the system of government-sanctioned reservations imposed by Indian Appropriations Act of 1851. Pursuant to the General Allotment Act of 1887, the allocation of agricultural plots in reservations was introduced (in fact, it was the forced grabbing of land, sale and eventually poverty). According to the law, there was an obligation to cultivate the land, which was of the worst quality. It was not possible to support the family, and the sale of land was often deemed as necessary. This has put many Indians in a dire situation. Some of them moved to slums in cities. There they suffered from apathy, depression, and alcoholism. By the end of the nineteenth century when the vanishing Native myth reached its crescendo and most Indians had been contained on reservations, disappearance took the form of culturecide by assimilation. Several decades later, Adolf Hitler admired the reservation system in Mein Kampf. He even considered it a model way of termination of the problem of inferior races. Another example of the legal application of racism was universal schooling. In 1887, the boarding school system was introduced. It was a forced taking of children without their parents' consent to boarding schools. There they were indoctrinated under the slogan „kill the Indian – save the man”.

Indians were destined to disappear and had to reimagine themselves. Government policies designed to eradicate indigenous cultures also worked to convince Natives that they must surrender to survive. Thomas Jefferson believed that his contemporary Indians exterminated advanced race of “moundbuilders”. This behavior was supported by federal legislation throughout the century, reaching its zenith when President Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act of 1830. Jackson strongly believed that Native

¹⁵ R. Dunbar-Ortiz, D. Gilio-Whitaker, *All the Real Indians Died Off and 20 Other Myths about Native Americans*, Boston, 2016, pp. 60-75.

Americans were obstacles to civilization, and he negotiated nearly seventy removal treaties throughout his administration. In annual message to Congress on December 6th, 1830 Jackson stated that “humanity has often wept over the fate of the aborigines of this country”¹⁶. Some whites felt that the Indians were incapable of civilizing themselves. To others the Indian’s unwillingness to adopt the white man’s superior ways was a matter of surprise and chagrin, occasionally turning to scorn, and was attributed to his inordinate stubbornness. Indians were property of governments as they were deprived of their own lands. They were reduced to status of children not mature enough to manage own affairs.

It was not until Native American Movements of 1960’s and 1970’s that provoked a new awareness of Native lives. Settler governments soon shared their new consciousness. This drove passage of the Self-Determination Act of 1975 to advance tribal self-governance, Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978, and Religious Freedom Act to protect families and customs.

Literary voices of denigration

Humiliating voices ridiculing the Indian powerlessness were also heard among American writers. Ralph Waldo Emerson, transcendentalist luminary of a benign universal order in Nature (1836) sees only atavism, regress, in envisioning Columbus nearing “the shore of America, – before it, the beach lined with savages”¹⁷. The Indians missed the world taken from them by the Americans. Those, on the other hand, follow the past, the spirit of the West and the austere romantic life in the bosom of wild nature. Walt Whitman saw in the West „the only true America”¹⁸. By the early nineteenth century Enlightenment’s “civilization policy” had crumbled beneath a romantic version of nationalism and the invention of racial difference¹⁹. By the middle of nineteenth century American ethnology had scant interest in indigenous oral literatures, finding them often nonsensical and warranting attention merely as entertainment²⁰. William Bryant Jr. in *Montana Indians* offers a glimpse of mid-nineteenth-century white attitudes toward Indians quoting Colonel John Mullan: “The Indian is destined to disappear before the white man”²¹.

The end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century is a period of particular interest in the subject of Indians and the Wild West

¹⁶ B. Brewton, op. cit., p. 53.

¹⁷ R. Lee, op. cit., p. 129.

¹⁸ J. Wojtczak, *Jak zdobywano dziki zachód. Prawdziwa historia amerykańskiego Pogranicza*, Warsaw, 2016, p. 315.

¹⁹ T. Perdue, op. cit., p. 44.

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 56.

²¹ M. J. Lupton, *James Welch. A critical Companion*, Westport, 2004, p. 235.

among painters and photographers. Sarah Fling provides the example of a scenic wallpaper installed during the administration of John Fitzgerald Kennedy in 1961 in the Diplomatic Reception Room of The White House. Created in 1834, the highly detailed panorama designed by French artist Jean-Julien Deltil and produced by Jean Zuber and Company prominently features several Native Americans dancing and playing the drums for white onlookers. It was producer of the work Jean Zuber who requested Indigenous representation in Deltil's work. However, his representation of Native Americans was very different from American counterparts of the same period. American artists from the same period consciously and subconsciously excluded Native Americans from their portrayals of the national landscape²².

The conviction of the need to preserve the passing world on canvas and film was an impulse for the artists. From 1907–1930 Edward S. Curtis created 30 volumes of posed Indian images, sepia-tinted inert versions of the *Vanishing American*²³. George Catlin, an American painter active in the nineteenth century, became fascinated by the Indians when he saw their delegation in Philadelphia heading to Washington. He decided to paint them. He visited other tribes, learned about their customs and lifestyles. What is important here is Catlin's goal, which was to record a dying culture, because at that time Indian culture was thought to be dying and becoming a thing of the past. During the nineteenth century, Americans embraced a larger theme in artwork, literature, and political rhetoric which aimed at exclusion and denigration of Natives in society and culture.

Scientific approach to Aboriginal question

Scientists also deliberated on the role and fate of Natives in American society. Francis Parkman noted that “some races are of man seem moulded in wax, soft and melting at once plastic and feeble. But the Indian is hewn out of rock. He and his forest must perish together”²⁴. European contact decimated the indigenous populations of this hemisphere²⁵. At the beginning of the XX century a similar approach to Indian culture was represented by some scholars. Ales Hrdlicka claimed that the total number of Indians as recorded by census increases decade by decade is a result of miscegenation.

²² S. Fling, *The Myth of the Vanishing Indian. Art in The White House Collection*, [in:] <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/the-myth-of-the-vanishing-indian> (accessed 07 XI 2023).

²³ R. Lee, op. cit., p. 131.

²⁴ B. Brewton, op. cit., p. 53.

²⁵ M. Powell, op. cit., p. 70.

This increase is due to growing number of mixed-bloods, with pure-bloods rapidly disappearing causing a gradual extinction of tribes. The genuine Indian is passing away²⁶.

The myth in culture

When discussing the image of Indians, the significant role of cinema in confirming and shaping stereotypes is also worth mentioning. The Wild West has captured the minds of the creators of cinema from the very beginning. Many films have been made, from short cinematic forms of the silent age to talkies and Hollywood blockbusters. Indians appeared as early as in D.W. Griffith's silent two-reelers like the *Redman and His Child* (1908) or the *Squaw's Love Story* (1911). Other examples of Hollywood-made Indians are to be found in John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1919) and in such westerns as John Wayne's *Fort Apache* (1948).

An interesting example of difficulties or even unwillingness to assimilate resulting from disillusionment with white culture is the story of Sitting Bull's participation in Buffalo Bill's performance. Sitting Bull left life on the reservation in 1885 and quickly adapted to the white world. He enjoyed the benefits of performing on stage. However, over time, he realized that his place was among his own. After a year, he quit performing believing that „...teepee is a better place. All these houses, noise and swarms of people make me sick”²⁷.

Native literature and the myth

The often-unfair image of Indians as people with lower intellectual competences and inferior social status was tried to be changed through indigenous literature. Diane Glancy observed once that “there's a renaissance in Native American Literature”²⁸.

The first novel by Indian was *Joaquin Marieta* (1854) by John Rollin Ridge, a Cherokee. Creek writer Alice Calplahan wrote *Wynema* (1891) – the first Indian – authored novel openly addressing Native issues. Set in *Indian Territory* during allotment, the novel links two injustices: Indian dispossession and gender inequality – and attributes both to white domination. *Queen of the Woods* (1899) attributed to Simon Pokagon, a Potawatomi, was a nostalgic, fictionalized account of the author's youth that pointed to alcohol yet another destructive consequence of Indian contact with whites²⁹.

²⁶ A. Hrdlicka, *The Vanishing Indian*, “Science”, Vol. 46, No. 1185, 14.09.1917, p. 266-67, [in:] <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1643324> (accessed 07 XI 2023).

²⁷ J. Wojtczak, op. cit., p. 315.

²⁸ D. Glancy, *The Cold-and-Hunger Dance*, Lincoln, 1998, p. 96.

²⁹ T. Perdue, op. cit., p. 122.

Written fiction, poetry, and drama stem from European cultural tradition, not Native. Oral traditions in native societies pass from generation to generation. Each teller bringing to it his or her own experience. Audience contributes through responses and interjections. Oral traditions embody a communal dynamic that individual writers have tried to capture by infusing their writings with a sense of the cultural context.

Prior to the 1960s and 1970s the “true account” or “real” Indian life was in autobiographies not in fiction. These autobiographies have the effect of perpetuating the image of Noble Savage, defeated exotic member of the vanishing race³⁰. In March 1970, when Indians occupied Alcatraz prison writer N. Scott Momaday addressed the First Convocation of American Indian Scholars “we are” he said “what we imagine. Our very existence consists in our imagination of ourselves. Our best destiny is to imagine... who and what, and that we are”³¹. *Red Power* plans for recovery of Native Identity awakened Native American novel. Whereas American novel tends to celebrate leaving home to develop one’s character, the Red Power novel relies on the opposite. Native Americans already left home; stories begin on the cultural regeneration marks their return. Native writers adapted novel to express the experience of political awakening on reconnection with native land, community, and oral literature³².

By late XX century number of Native poets received extensive formal training. Momaday worked with Yvor Winters at Stanford, whereas James Welch and Roberta Hill took formal training with Richard Hugo at the *University of Montana*³³. Such poets adapted western poetic forms to express realities of Natives. Since 1970’s most Native poets worked in free verse. The memory-forming function common to all – the function of bringing the reader closer to the experience of losing one’s own culture and identity, alienation, and loneliness during the process of assimilation, acculturation, and emergence of hybrid forms of being and life³⁴. Far too often in Native American literature particularly novel, Native protagonists get drunk and, in a self-hatred, self-destruct, leaping off bridges or cliff sides³⁵. Authors provide mainstream readership with this portrait of Native self-destruction where alcoholism and suicide rates are highest in tribes³⁶.

³⁰ J. Porter, K. Roemer, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature*, New York, 2005, p. 238.

³¹ S. Teuton, *Native American Literature*, New York, 2018, p. 21.

³² Ibidem, p. 93.

³³ Ibidem, p. 104.

³⁴ K. Mroczkowska-Brand, op. cit., p. 36.

³⁵ S. Teuton, op. cit., p. 81.

³⁶ Ibidem.

James Welch and the concept of *Vanishing Indian*

James Welch was a prominent author of novels and poetry featuring the American West. He was born in Browning, Montana, and attended school on the Blackfeet and Fort Belknap reservations. He furthered education with Richard Hugo at the *University of Montana*³⁷. Welch received honorary doctorates from *Rocky Mountain College* and the University of Montana. In 1997 he was honored with a *Lifetime Achievement Award* from the *Native Writers' Circle of the Americas*³⁸.

Welch's life and work have been informed by several basic things: his tribal heritage; sense of belonging to a place; insistence on seeing Indians first as human beings and last – Indian lives and struggles³⁹. Welch's novels are dominated by the style of traditional and historical realism recreating the last years of Indian life in freedom and the years when they lost this freedom.

The authors, members of *Native American Renaissance* believe that to be Native American writers or poets one has to start from deconstruction of stereotypes (like: *Noble Savage*, *Vanishing Indian* in Curtis photographs, Hollywood *Squaw*). To represent his Blackfoot heritage Welch had to start by deconstructing one of the most widespread stereotypes, i.e. the Savage Indian⁴⁰. Blackfeet lived on the plains and were defeated during Indian Wars. Since then they were branded as vanishing Indians – stripped off cultural differences⁴¹.

After the defeat in the Marias River by the U.S. cavalry the *Blackfeet Confederation* ceased to exist. *Blackfoot Nation* was forced to accept acculturation through boarding schools, life in reservations, loss of language and history. Like boarding schools deprived Natives of culture and history, Welch wanted to regain it through his poetry and novels.

Riding the Earthboy 40

Riding the Earthboy 40 (published in 1971), is firmly rooted in the plains of Montana. Abbreviated yet lyrical, the poems enter moments of thought or experience that deal with seasons, animals, and the stories reservation Indians tell. The animals that populate Welch poems, as in *Magic Fox*, have a near-mythical significance, touching on Welch's Indianness. But often, Welch bitterly notes that the days of the Blackfeet are past. In *Spring for All Seasons*, he wryly states „Our past is ritual/cattle marching one way to re-

³⁷ *James Welch* [in:] <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/james-welch> (accessed 12.XI.2023).

³⁸ Ibidem.

³⁹ J. Porter, M. K. Roemer, eds., op. cit., p. 235.

⁴⁰ A. Gondor-Wiercioch, op. cit., p. 47.

⁴¹ Ibidem, p. 48.

membered mud”⁴². In *The Man from Washington* Welch recalls the arrival of a federal official to a nineteenth century reservation, with Native people recently “Packed away in our crude beginnings/in some far corner of a flat world”⁴³. The narrator understands with bitter irony the perception of his people as primitives with simple minds who believe in “flat world”. As people from the pre-contact world they should not even exist. Even “inoculation” against European diseases will not protect from colonial modernity.

Fools Crow

Few novels have better sought to invoke “Indian Country”, and the intrusion into it of a dispossessing white frontier than James Welch’s historical novel *Fools Crow*⁴⁴. For the epic story of *Fools Crow*, Welch opened his narrative style. Praised roundly by critics, the masterful work earned him a *Los Angeles Times Prize* for best fiction of 1987. Welch discusses here a nuanced portrayal of the Blackfeet tribe, highlighting their traditions, customs, and spiritual beliefs. The book follows the life of Fools Crow, who grows from a reckless young warrior to become the tribe’s medicine man. A vision Fools Crow has of his tribe’s bleak future foreshadows the end of the entire Native American prairie culture—a culture already threatened by disease, the extinction of the buffalo herds, and the encroachment of white settlers.

Welch’s historical realism is the presence of historical figures, such as Red Cloud and Crazy Horse. It is also depiction of historical events, such as Marias River Massacre of 1870. One of the three saved there was grandmother of the author.

A historical novel, *Fools Crow* depicts a small band of Blackfeet Indians who escape the Marias River massacre of 1870. As such, the world Welch depicts is vastly different from that of his first two novels. A band of warriors violate Blackfeet ethics by putting the individual ahead of the community, and they threaten to disrupt a social system rooted in reciprocity and mutual respect. Welch draws reader into Blackfeet society, in part by using literal English translations for Blackfeet words, and thereby is able to convey effectively the horror that emerges from the contact with whites⁴⁵. Louis Owens analysing the syntax and phrasing of James Welch in *Fools Crow* observes that „the language of novel become a radical indicator of the cultural denigration, displacement, even genocide that the novel is meant to demonstrate”⁴⁶. The narrator describes the story through the lens of a child’s memories. The

⁴² J. Welch, *Spring for All Seasons*, Riding the Earthboy 40, London, 2004, p. 24.

⁴³ J. Welch, *The Man from Washington*, Riding the Earthboy 40, London, 2004, p. 31.

⁴⁴ R. Lee, op. cit., p. 136.

⁴⁵ T. Perdue, op. cit., p.123.

⁴⁶ R. McFarland, *Understanding James Welch*, Columbia, 2000, p. 113.

protagonist--and the reader--journey through dreams and visions, guided by talking animals. Characters struggle with questions of identity that are rooted in the past. Literary critic Louis Owens phrased it as being “between realities”. They must struggle to recover “a continuing and coherent cultural identity”⁴⁷. It is a world with a firm sense of culture and history. The dilemma of Fools Crow, the narrator, is how to live in the present, after the Marias River Massacre knowing that things will get worse for his people. He sees Pikuni children in boarding schools losing their culture:

I grieve for our children, and their children, who will not know the life their people once lived. I see them on the yellow skin, and they are dressed like the Napikwans (whites), they watch the Napikwans and learn much from them, but they are not happy. They lose their own way⁴⁸.

The fate of the children and the tribe seems sealed: “Either way, we will lose’ Rides-at-the Door looked up at the night sky. He felt old suddenly and envied the stars their distance.’ We will lose our grandchildren, Three Bears. They will be wiped out or they will turn into Napikwans”⁴⁹.

Even if all the chiefs had shown up, it would not have changed the simple fact that the Blackfeet were to be eliminated by any means possible or at least forced into a position they would never peacefully accept⁵⁰. Fools Crow must find peace in loving and being grateful for what he has. Blackfeet encounter not only encroaching disease and soldiers but also generational differences and changing gender relation⁵¹. Welch also shows the vindictiveness and cruelty of the whites. Children and women die for killing a white officer. *Fools Crow* ends with a promise of survival. “The blackhorns had returned, and all around, it was as it should be” «Much will be lost to them» said Feather Woman, «But they will know the way it was. The stories will be handed down»⁵².

Winter in the Blood

Winter in the Blood (published in 1974) elegiacally tells the story of an unnamed narrator who lives on a Montana reservation. The unnamed narrator is, like Welch, part Blackfoot and part Gros Ventre. He describes himself

⁴⁷ Ibidem.

⁴⁸ J. Welch, *Fools Crow*, op. cit., p. 359.

⁴⁹ Ibidem, p. 256-57.

⁵⁰ Ibidem, p. 279-80.

⁵¹ S. Teuton, op. cit., p. 92.

⁵² J. Welch, *Fools Crow*, op. cit., p. 362.

as a “servant to a memory of death”⁵³. The protagonist’s life is marred by loss; his father and brother are dead, and his mother dies in the course of the novel. He is aimless and wastes his time drinking at the bar, where he can lose himself in fist fights and sexual encounters with barflies. Thus sadness permeates, but the novel is not flatly nihilistic. The young Blackfeet man recovers an oral history about the ethical decisions of his ancestors, when he regains his masculinity and cultural identity⁵⁴.

In the end, there is some hope for the narrator, who takes steps toward reclaiming his heritage. And technically, Welch’s subtle irony and comic undercutting holds the novel off from utter despair. Even with the first-person narrative, Welch is able to keep the story moving without falling into melodrama. In a final sentence a nameless narrator throws his grandmother medicine pouch into the grave. It is an irony, a dishonor for the burial ritual. In the past Blackfeet used scaffolds above the ground to deposit the remains of deceased. After the arrival of missionaries they buried their late tribal members in the ground. The scene shows the absurdity of the burial ritual enforced by the whites.

Death of Jim Loney

Welch’s second novel, *The Death of Jim Loney* (published in 1979) explores the psychological trauma and cultural dislocation experienced by Native Americans who are caught between two worlds. It is a culturally specific response to a history of trauma. Welch portrays the main character, whose name is Loney, as the one who struggles to find his place in white society and reconnect with his Native American roots. Even his name calls to mind the word „loneliness”. Loney is a son of a Grose Ventre woman and a white man who tries to remember his past in the weeks before Thanksgiving and Christmas. He lives in Harlem, Montana, abandoned by his parents. When Loney was one year old he was left by his mother. Raised by non-Indian father for ten years, then abandoned again to his father’s mistress. Like the narrator of *Winter in the Blood*, Loney is caught in a cultural abyss between his heritage and the white man’s world; he too seeks to numb himself in hard drinking. Then he often sees a black bird, unknown symbol that he associates with the absent memory of his past. But as the novel progresses, Loney remains caught more in the abyss. The sheriff who hunts him down represents the white man’s world. With the approaching death the protagonist experiences visions that may be from his ancestors’ spirit world, but he cannot interpret

⁵³ R. A. Lavonne, “Alienation and the Female Principle in ‘Winter in the Blood’”. *American Indian Quarterly*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1978, p. 107 [in:] <https://doi.org/10.2307/1184020> (accessed 07 XI 2023).

⁵⁴ S. Teuton, op. cit., p. 94.

them. In the end, there is no real resolution for this character. He sees no possibility of resistance and dies on Fort Belknap reservation⁵⁵. He is shot by Quinton Doore, a schoolmate. Anne Anlin Cheng writes that subjectivity is forced through a negotiation with pain⁵⁶. Loney's death can be understood as a result of such negotiation. He will be reconnected to his tribe and alleviate pain of the absence of the past. Welch however is not saying here that the only way for mixed bloods to survive is to engineer their own physical deaths. He is saying that the way to fulfilment lies in discovering one's Indian identity. His final transcendent fulfilment carries him beyond the pointlessness of his existence⁵⁷.

Heartsong of Charging Elk

The *Heartsong of Charging Elk* is of particular importance as the culminating novel in James Welch's canon. In the prologue, Welch describes the moment when the Sioux, separated from their horses, surrounded by the federal army, march to the Pine Ridge Reservation. Here Welch illuminates the experience of an Oglala Sioux trapped in an alien culture, lacking the resources to emerge from a nightmare of dislocation, isolation, and fear. The main protagonist – Charging Elk is born and rises in the last years of freedom of his tribe. When most of the Sioux are confined to the reservation, he hides and starves to death becoming the classic outlaw hero.

Charging Elk eventually takes on travelling with *Buffalo Bill's Wild West* show to France. Performance native rituals of the show are all but fabricated, the narrative dominant of the West. The Wild West creates the image of Indian severely conquered within and tied to this nation's creation myth⁵⁸. Quite contrary to the narrative of the *Vanishing Indian*, *Heartsong* conceptualises cultural identity as "becoming"⁵⁹. Richard White argues that Cody inverted the history of the West by casting the Indians as aggressors, attacking white settlers⁶⁰. One of the characters in the novel recalls that in Wild West the Natives are "disappearing – like the bison"⁶¹. In fact, Buffalo Bill tells the audience that "their culture is dying and soon they will be gone too"⁶². The Indian has become "non-existent, a ghost you might say"⁶³. Charging Elk

⁵⁵ S. Teuton, op. cit., p. 99.

⁵⁶ M. Powell, op. cit., p. 70.

⁵⁷ D. Westrum, "Transcendental Survival: The Way the Bird Works in The Death of Jim Loney", [in:] R. McFarland, *James Welch*, Lewiston, 1986, p. 145.

⁵⁸ J. Welch, *Heartsong of Charging Elk*, New York, 2000, p. 99.

⁵⁹ Ibidem, p. 99.

⁶⁰ Ibidem, p. 103.

⁶¹ Ibidem, p. 137.

⁶² Ibidem, p. 103.

⁶³ Ibidem, p. 178.

joined the show soon to be debilitated by the accident in Marseilles. When he wakes up in hospital, he sees darkness. It is the darkness of the world. Left alone, Charging Elk is no longer in a safe place of the show. He has already witnessed the battle of Little Big Horn and the incarceration of his Lakota tribe in the Pine Ridge Reservation. Charging Elk is confused by nearly every aspect of the white world and is a visible outcast in the French society. He soon escapes the hospital⁶⁴. After escaping from hospital, Charging Elk begins a painful emotional odyssey. He is arrested for vagabondage and, when released, is stranded in France. He decides to stay⁶⁵. Charging Elk in France becomes a farmer and marries a French girl. The tragedy is not his assimilation to European culture but the fact that he cannot return to United States⁶⁶. Welch's achievement here lies in his ability to convey the way a Lakota Indian would have interpreted the wasichu's of white world. The main character of the novel goes through phases of alienation and exclusion. The first is trying to live in the wild and performing with Buffalo Bill. Then he experiences the loss of his world. He does not know English, and every day is a necessity to adapt to white life. The second phase of alienation is a clash with European civilization and customs of France after escaping from a hospital in Marseille. The hero finds himself lost between worlds, cultures, and languages. The only salvation is the *Song of Death* – leading the spirit to the other side⁶⁷. *Death Song* is departure of soul, annihilation.

One major theme in *Heartsong of Charging Elk* is the contrast between civilization and “savagery” represented by city and white people and latter by wilderness and Indian⁶⁸. Both novels: the *Heartsong of Charging Elk* and *Fools Crow* depict deportation from culture, habitat, and life. Lisa Appignanesi in *Losing the Dead* deals with post-memory, experience of being departed from culture and calls it transgenerational haunting⁶⁹. Charging Elk like *Fools Crow* is aware that his world is changing unalterably. Like in *Fools Crow* the white world for Charging Elk seems to be alien, sometimes funny and repulsive.

Findings

Ojibwe writer Peter Jones states that writers should be adapting to changing world. Not as a vanishing race but indigenous adapting. Civilisation needed savagery to affirm its superiority. For this reason the savage had to ex-

⁶⁴ K. Mroczkowska-Brand, op. cit., p. 118.

⁶⁵ S. Teuton, op. cit., p. 99.

⁶⁶ A. Gondor-Wiercioch, op. cit., p. 60.

⁶⁷ K. Mroczkowska-Brand, op. cit., p. 122.

⁶⁸ M. J. Lupton, op. cit., 139.

⁶⁹ K. Mroczkowska-Brand, op. cit., p. 36.

ist. *Vanishing Indian* is a concept of savagism, where the Indian world would melt before the arrival of progress leaving the land to civilized people. A re-affirmation of cultural ancestry dominates contemporary Indian literature; an awareness of historical fact also invokes the act of self-discovery through tribal identification and a knowledge of the past⁷⁰.

Welch's novels and poetry offer a range of perspectives on Native American experience, from the struggles of reservation life to the challenges of urbanization and assimilation. In his novels Native Americans resist simplistic narratives of assimilation or extinction. Welch's characters are not passive victims of historical forces but active agents who navigate the complexities of contemporary life while maintaining connections to their cultural heritage.

Welch's critique of the myth of the *Vanishing Indian* is part of a broader tradition of Native American resistance to colonialism and cultural erasure. By refusing to accept the myth, Welch's work affirms the continuing vitality and relevance of Native American cultures and communities. Indians are not passive recipients of the fate but its active creators maintaining connections to their cultural heritage. Native Americans are vibrant and resilient people who have survived centuries of colonization, genocide, and cultural suppression.

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⁷⁰ M. J. Lupton, op. cit., p. 142.

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