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IDENTITY AND HERITAGE IN HOBSON'S *THE REMOVED*:A CULTURAL STUDY

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Abstract
This paper examines Hobson's The Removed (2021) through the theoretical framework of Stuart Hall's (1996) cultural studies, with a particular focus on the construction of identity, the trauma of cultural displacement and the lingering effects of colonial violence. Hall's (1996) theory conceptualizes identity as fluid, historically contingent and constructed through cultural representation—an idea that resonates deeply with the fragmented and saturated experiences of the novel's characters. This study explores how Hobson (2021) captures both personal and collective trauma, centres indigenous resistance and critiques the persistent suppression and erasure of marginalized voices. The brutal killing of Ray-Ray, a young Cherokee boy shot by a white police officer, serves as a haunting catalyst that exposes the ongoing racialized violence and systemic injustice faced by Indigenous people. Characters like Maria, Ernest, Edgar and the ancestral figure Tsala embody a continuous struggle to preserve cultural heritage and reclaim a sense of belonging within a landscape marked by genocide, forced displacement and institutionalized racism. By engaging with Hall's (1996) notions of cultural hybridity, ideological struggle and the politics of representation, this thesis argues that The Removed (2021) functions not only as a narrative of mourning and memory, but also as a powerful act of cultural reclamation. Ultimately, the study contributes to wider conversations in postcolonial literature and Native American studies, emphasizing literature's potential to bear witness to historical pain, reclaim suppressed heritage and reimagine cultural identity.

***Keywords*:** Cultural identity, colonial violence, cultural displacement, systemic oppression, marginalization

Introduction

This paper explores how native identity and heritage are manipulated, erased, and commodified within the context of settler-colonial violence, as portrayed in *The Removed* (2021). Each character in the Echota family represents a different way of coping with inherited trauma, revealing how deeply the scars of forced removal, cultural obliteration, and racialized violence run. The family's collective memory of Ray-Ray's murder by a white police officer acts as a central metaphor for the historical and ongoing assault on Native lives. Maria, the mother, suffers both physical and emotional deterioration, underscoring the psychic cost of unresolved grief and systemic injustice. "My blood pressure rose; I developed panic attacks, something that I had never experienced before" (Hobson, 2021, p. 112), she confesses, reflecting the embodied trauma that lingers long after violence occurs.

The novel's spiritual scaffolding is made vivid by the narrative voice of Tsala, a Cherokee predecessor who has been executed during the Trail of Tears for resisting forced removal. Tsala occupies a liminal space between life and death, to be a guardian of his descendants and a witness to cycles of violence and resistance. His observations provide a

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historical backdrop that illuminates the novel's present-day struggles. Late in the novel, he finds himself surrounded by children who see him as a saviour, "They were all looking down at him, their eyes wide in wonder. One of them said, 'Are you Tsala? The man who will save us?' 'I'm looking for my wife,' Tsala said. 'But first I will help you find your way home'" (Hobson, 2021, p. 118). This powerful moment encapsulates the spiritual longing among younger generations for guidance and healing in a world that has stripped them of their cultural anchors.

Stuart Hall's (1996) theoretical framework is used for unpacking the novel's portrayal of identity. Hall (1996) argues that identity is not a static spirit, nonetheless a position formed through historical and cultural representation. According to Hall (1996), "cultural identity is constructed through difference, through a continual process of negotiation between self and other" (Hall, 1996, p. 15). In *The Removed (2021)*, this negotiation is fraught with pain, as Native identity is constantly defined in opposition to the dominant colonial narrative. The characters are not simply struggling with who they are; they are struggling with how their identities have been shaped, suppressed, and overwritten by systems of power. Through Hall's (1996) lens, Ernest's Alzheimer's can be seen as a metaphor for cultural amnesia—not only in terms of personal memory but in the broader erasure of Indigenous history. Edgar's journey into the Darkening Land embodies Hall's (1996) sense of identity as a site of struggle, constructed by representation and always open to distortion. Maria's psychological unravelling underscores just how deep this struggle is buried—how, even when we think we're above it, we resist the gravity of being misrepresented, ignored, vilified—the body and mind absorbing all of this violence. Tsala and Wayyat, however, provide a counter-narrative: a reclamation of Indigeneity, voice, spirituality and resistance that Hall (1996) would describe as a counter-hegemonic assertion of identity.

Ultimately, *The Removed* (2021) is a song of mourning as much as a cry for resistance. Hobson's novel weaves intimate grief into a wider narrative of collective trauma, using both balls-to-the-wall realism and mystical folklore to explore the ways in which Native identity has been targeted and weaponized by colonial systems. The stories of Maria, Ernest, Sonja, Edgar and Tsala reveal the deep psychic and cultural toll of genocide, forced removal and assimilation. Through a reading of Stuart Hall's (1996) concept of identity, this research examines the conducts in which the text conveys Indigenous identity as a constructed, multifaceted and continuously bounded arena that is implicated in ongoing relations of violence, memory and relentless searching for belonging.

Drawing from these thematic foundations, this paper utilizes Stuart Hall's cultural theory as a critical frame to explore the manner in which identity and heritage function in Brandon Hobson's *The Removed* (2021). A foundational figure in British cultural studies, Hall transformed our understanding of identity by locating it in structures of power and historical context. In his article "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", Hall argued that identity is not an essence, but a "production" which is never finished but constantly in transit. He posited that cultural identity is based on difference and representation — on what we are not, as opposed to a fixed idea of what we are. Hall stated "In this second case, cultural identity is a composition of both 'being' and 'becoming'. This also implies the future in addition to the past" (Hall, 2015, p. 396). This perspective challenges the conventional understanding of identity resting exclusively on biology, ethnicity and tradition. Instead, identity is perceived as something that is fluid, hybridized and always negotiated among cultural discourses.

Research Questions

1. How does Hobson's portrayal of memory and trauma reflect the complexities of Indigenous identity formation in a contemporary post-colonial context?

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2. In what ways does Hall's (1996) theory illuminate the intersections of heritage and identity within the characters' experiences in *The Removed (2021)*?

Literature Review

Sarah Rachel Egelman (2021) provides background information for *The Removed*, so that readers can create their own summary for the novel. She says "The new novel is both realistic and mythical rendering of historic proceedings about an Indian communal of Oklahoma" (Egelman, 2021). The majority of the perspective it's told from is the Echota family whose RayRay Echota was killed by police gunfire. It underlines the trauma that has devastated the private and public life of the members of the Echota family. Sara experiences love and lust in the midst of massacre and suffering of Indian community in Cherokee.

Lateef and Raza's (2022) analysis of Removed Situations (RSAs) in Brandon Hobson's work offers a nuanced exploration of the narrative strategies employed to convey the experiences of Indigenous peoples (Lateef & Raza, 2022, p. 45). According to their analysis, the novel provides a nuanced representation of the intergenerational transmission of trauma, shedding light on the complex and lasting effects of colonialism and violence (Saleem, et al., 2024, p. 748). This review is about the history of the national ritual through the celebration of the national anthem in the Cherokee Indian community.

The event is detailed by Frank W. Porter in his *Strategies for Survival: American Indians in the Eastern United States* (1986). As a mixed blood South-east Brook, I have cultured to culturally navigate the discomforting spaces between the outmoded Indian and conventional white cultures. I am neither an insider nor an outsider, thus a highly curious spectator of both. I understand what it means to wish for healing from an identity crisis–from a debilitating loss of culture, spirit, and to feel that need as dire (Porter & Crawford, 1986).

In The Castle of My Skin (1953), the predominant theme is identity. Chiefly it is an exploration of concepts such as mimicry; composite objectivity and mixed racial heritage which are contained in one book and based on G. H., the story's main character: G. grows up on the brink of his childhood crisis. Consequently, the innate commences to contemplate of himself as malevolent, agnostic and rude. The black man misplaces his personal-identity for the reason that he can only see himself by the investigative vantage point of the colonizer. The black man loses his self-identity because he can only see himself through the analytical view of the white man (McWilliams, 2010). Unfulfilled, G. starts to study and after entering High School he learns his ancestors were brought in slavery, knowledge he did not have before. His friendly buddy Trumper moves to America looking for his true self. In return, Trumper tells G. that if he wants to know about himself, he must leave the village in which his been raised and go off at least a little way, somewhere like Carrington.

The subconscious expectation that hangs over American Indians was caught well by Arnold Krupat's rhetorical question, "can you be both a native American and an American?" (Krupat, 1989). Texts also re-enter historical experience and reinterpret it. This attempt aims to negotiate being without resorting to self-definition based on any fixed meaning.

Heritage incorporates the cultural, historical, and societal aspects received from previous generations which continues to form both personal and societal identities. It includes tangible forms like architecture, artifacts, and books as well as intangible forms such as languages, traditions, oral texts, and belief systems. In *Playing Indian* (1998), Philip J. Deloria examines how white Americans, from the colonial period to the 20th century, have adopted stereotypical images and performances of Native American identity to define their own national and cultural identity. Deloria argues that "this phenomenon reflects deeper issues of

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cultural appropriation, historical erasure, and the colonial foundations of American nationalism" (Deloria, 1998).

Kiran Desai concentrates largely on the Eastern region of India in a postcolonial manner, but she explores not just the impact of colonialism after the colonisers have left, but that which remains even after colonialism is over. "Post-expansionism is premised on the study of the social legacy of colonization and expansionism". Abdelkader, a poet, had written in the prefatory note to the 1993 Swedish conversion of Said's *Orientalism* (1973) that "Kahle wrote throughout the dissertation of East that it was the place he liked and would have wanted to visit he were young in her time" (Shands, pp.5-27). Just like Fanon, Said is considered one of the most important post-colonial thinkers of our time. Said highlights the stereotype that the West physiognomies the Easterly world. For ages there has existed and still continues to exist, misconception and mythologically elaborate information by the 'occident' about the 'orient'. "According to Dependency Theory, the Capitalist world can be divided into three parts; the core, the periphery, and the semi-periphery. The core is comprised of the developed nations, while the periphery includes the third world countries. The semi-periphery is associated with both the core and the periphery. Finally, it established that periphery is totally dependent on the core, and in fact, a victim of exploitation by the core. From the WST, the fighting of the contemporary world structure is felt it is because the world constructions that encompass the fundamental control the development of the margin by their financial development" (Chatterjee, 2021, p. 348).

Napoli et al. (2003) argue that a strong sense of belonging within the school environment contributes to lower levels of drug use among urban Native American students. Their study emphasizes that when adolescents feel accepted, respected, and connected to their school community, it enhances their emotional well-being and provides them with positive social support networks. The findings highlight the critical role educational institutions play in fostering protective psychosocial environments for Native youth, particularly in urban settings where cultural dislocation may be more pronounced (Napoli, et al., 2003).

Materials and Methods

The methodology for Brandon Hobson's *The Removed (2021)* is a qualitative, textual analysis approach, guided by Hall's cultural (1996) theory of identity. The study begins by closely analysing the novel's portrayal of Native American experiences, particularly the themes of cultural dislocation, trauma and the negotiation of identity in the context of historical and contemporary colonial violence. The primary focus is on key characters and their interactions with memory, heritage and loss. This analysis is complemented by a review of secondary sources to contextualize the text inside the comprehensive discourse on Native American identity and inheritance. The study aims to unpack the multifaceted interaction amid special and cultural identity, presenting understandings into the broader implications of cultural trauma, colonial legacies and the ongoing struggle for self-definition among Native American communities.

Theoretical Framework

By using Hall's (1996) framework, the study is providing further understanding of the cultural mechanisms involved in the creation of identity within the work, as well as enlightening the sympathetic of the fluid and dynamic growth of culture and identity in relation to changes in historical memory, indigenous trauma, and shifting cultural environments. Hall examined the concept of Diaspora with regards to the intricate relationship between culture and identity, particularly focusing on migration and various forms of displacement. "They remain receptive to undergoing a thorough historicization, and are perpetually in a state of flux and evolution" (Stuart Hall, 1996, p. 4). Focusing more on Stuart Hall, the idea of cultural identity was rooted in his concern for various movements in socio-intellectual and theoretical

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shifts. He illustrated the notion of how cultural identities cannot be classified as monocultural or monolithic, thus allowing room for dual or multiple modes of cultural identification. "Matters regarding identity concern the issues of utilizing the resources of history, language, and culture in the process of 'becoming' rather than 'being': not identity or origins, but more recuperation—and the conditions of possibility of representation" (Stuart, 1996, p. 4). He elaborates on how overarching cultural discourses dominate and shape the subjectivities of marginalized groups. He acknowledges that people and cultures have always had an ingrained way of viewing their cultures due to globalization. It removes other more formal distinctions and creates additional layers of complication for identity procedures. Halls provides elicits an understanding that cultural identities are always in the process of becoming. They are dynamic in nature, not stagnant, and continuously negotiate their unique socio-cultural identity framework.

The ethnic minority communities' needs being taken into regard can be said to have perhaps been the first step towards cultureless and cultural multiplicity. This was a reaction to the requests which traditional alternative associations made actively to the British society but also to the social tension caused by racism, poverty and, the new-born social inclusion or exclusion. It is important to be attentive to the huge gaps between the promulgation of policies and their implementation, said Hall in his important speech at the Manchester conference on heritage in 1999. To be "black" in Britain means that one is in the process of the racialization it means, state of becoming radicalized; it is the state of consciousness when colour is the primary factor defining a person. "Located through your otherness a conscious coalition emerges: an intentionally created area of individuality for which the subject is not determined by a biological classification but a political affiliation. Thus, to be black in Britain is to occupy an equivalent positional place; a racial place" (Mirza, 1997, p. 3).

Williams illustrates how the microaggressions of commonplace racism in a small town affects her self-perception as they define both recognition and erasure alongside inclusion and exclusion. It is the terms on which she is accepted that pose a problem "We never really saw you as coloured", they would say in paternalistic tones, or "You are not really black you are only brown," and, quite magically, everyone would be freed from the discomfort of being black. The problematic part for me was, however, the contextual frameworks, underlying assumptions that were embedded in the queries that puzzled me so much. "The daily prejudices that over time wear me down and reduce me to a state where I was unsure of myself and my identity" (Williams, 2002, pp. 49–50). Thus, "cultural creolization" or rather mixing of cultures and coming together of differences, "border crossing" that is the characteristic of diaspora, symbolize change, newness and possibilities of creativity. Potential consumers of cultural brands and traditions are various diaspora communities of people and those new hybrid identities and forms of culture which appear as a result of contacts with the culture and society in which initial migrants settled. In turn, these new developed cultural practices, forms and identities undermine both 'traditional' cultures and the dominant white societies in which non-white diasporic subjects are located.

Thus, Robert Young in his book *White Mythologies Writing, History and the West* puts forward three sub contexts where European humanism was self-constituted at the cost of colonial others using the works of Aimé Césaire, Fanon and Jean-Paul Sartre. Young responds this way arguing: "each time a literary critic asserts an ethical, moral or emotional instance for a portion of the globe and for a piece of English literature, in violent colonizing this critiquing reinforces in the way in which European mode or reference turns to totality of truth" (Young 1990, p. 124).

Textual Analysis

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An Analysis of Identity and Heritage in a Cultural Framework

Hobson's *The Removed (2021)* is a haunting, multi-voiced novel that navigates themes of identity, cultural heritage, historical trauma, and spiritual survival through the fractured narratives of a contemporary Cherokee family. By interweaving perspectives of multiple family members with ancestral voices and mythic elements, Hobson constructs a layered text that grapples with the enduring legacies of colonization, displacement, and systemic violence. The work's nonlinear narrative, poetic language, and interweaving of the real and spiritual world make for a important addition to Indigenous literatures and cultural studies. Instead of offering a unified narrative of cultural recovery, *The Removed (2021)* troubles the very notion of belonging by exploring how identity is perpetually being written by memory, loss, and the spiritual reverberations of historical trauma." The emotional and psychological dilemmas of the characters seem to speak for the tension between erasure and remembrance, in line with Stuart Hall's understanding of identity as not being fixed but rather a result of perpetual commitment to culture. Hobson provides no single answer, only to paint a picture of Native identity as multivalent, multiple, and grounded in layers of personal and collective memory.

The Repackaging and Destruction of Native Identity

Indigenous identity as commodification and distortion are taken to a troubling extreme in *The Removed* (2021), through the desolate and nightmarish landscape called the Darkening Land. This digital purgatory is then transformed into a symbolic battlefield on which Native self is not just placed on the margins, but mis-represented, manipulated, and assassinated as spectacle, surveillance, and settler story. Edgar, a central figure who is trapped in this waking hell, demonstrates how indigenous identity is stripped of all subtlety and becomes a spectacle, an enemy to whatever the imperial gaze can tolerate-a trope that not only represses historical trauma but also, because of it, Native subjectivity. In this instance, the digital figments not only refer to imagined worlds, but to violent forms of truth erasure and identity remaking that is agreeable to oppressive systems. Stuart Hall's notion that identity is a "production" endlessly and continually formed through representational practices is a useful theoretical frame through which to analyse this environment. According to Hall, identity is "never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (1990, p. 22). In the novel, this representation is violently manipulated, stripping Native characters of agency and voice in favour of roles that cast them as expendable, primitive, or monstrous.

Edgar's treatment in the Darkening Land provides a clear example of how digital representation can be a modern tool for colonial violence. His identity, particularly his Native heritage, becomes the basis of punishment, surveillance, and symbolic execution. Jackson, one of the figures controlling this surreal space, orchestrates much of this exploitation. In a chilling moment, Jackson tells Edgar, "We actually need you to get muddy... We'll take video. We just need you in the pit" (Hobson, 2021, p. 141). The request is not just dehumanizing—it reenacts historical exploitation where Indigenous bodies were used, displayed, and violated under the guise of curiosity, research, or entertainment. The mud pit becomes a metaphor for the centuries of degradation Native peoples have faced, now transposed into digital cruelty. In forcing Edgar to participate in his own humiliation, Jackson echoes the legacy of those who have commodified Indigenous suffering for art, academia, or policy.

The racial profiling Edgar experiences in the Darkening Land extends beyond individual moments—it becomes a repeated ritual of interrogation and denial. At one point, he is asked relentlessly, "Are you Indian?" by disembodied voices and strangers (Hobson, 2021). This question is not rooted in curiosity but in the need to categorize, control, and condemn. In Hall's (2021) theory, identity becomes meaningful only through contrast—the self is defined in opposition to the "Other." Here, Edgar's perceived "Indianness" becomes his curse, the justification for punishment in this realm. His answer does not matter because his racialized

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appearance has already sealed his fate. In this space, identity is no longer something lived or experienced—it is assigned, distorted, and used to rationalize violence. This reflects how colonial regimes have historically used racial markers to segregate, dominate, and eliminate Indigenous populations, often under legal or moral pretences.

The mechanisms of this distortion are further revealed in the repulsive digital games that populate the Darkening Land. In one scenario, Edgar hears a voice command: "I am the Indy Ann," followed by an instruction-- "Shoot the Indy Anns" (Hobson, 2021, p. 143). This sequence turns Native identity into a target, an enemy to be destroyed for fun or validation. The transformation of "Indian" into "Indy Ann" through a computerized voice underscores the loss of humanity and specificity; what remains is an abstracted stereotype. In a related moment, a projected figure proclaims, "I am the savage. Shoot the savage" (Hobson, 2021, p. 44). This echoes centuries of racialized propaganda that portrayed Indigenous peoples as violent, animalistic threats to white civilization. These portrayals are not merely offensive—they are lethal in their consequences, justifying displacement, assimilation, and genocide by reducing Native people to symbols of fear. In digital form, these archetypes persist, proving that colonialism adapts rather than disappears.

Edgar's increasing awareness of the system's cruelty intensifies his emotional and psychological unravelling. He becomes haunted by the role assigned to him in the violent video game "Savage," which simulates Native extermination under the guise of entertainment. He reflects: "I tortured myself over thoughts of the game Savage, wondering whether I would be captured or shot and killed... Jackson and Lyle wanted me dead, I was convinced" (Hobson, 2021, p. 170). His paranoia is not irrational—it is the logical outcome of being placed in a world where his racial identity marks him for death. The hallucinations of bombs, radiation, and men in gas masks evoke scenes not only from video games but from colonial history itself: the use of biological warfare, forced relocations, and secretive experiments on Native communities. His suffering reflects a deeper truth: that identity, once labelled as the Other, becomes vulnerable to any narrative the dominant power wishes to impose. Hall's theory of identity as produced through difference becomes vividly literal here—Edgar's perceived difference costs him everything, including his sense of reality.

The trauma inflicted by these digital constructs is not confined to Edgar alone—it extends across generations and dimensions in *The Removed (2021)*. Tsala, an ancestral figure, embodies historical wisdom and spiritual resistance. In a pivotal moment, he tells Edgar: "Remember your ancestors... They walked the Trail, walked and crawled and died. They suffered. But you already know this. Come with me, I want to show you something" (Hobson, 2021, p. 176). Tsala reminds Edgar—and the reader—that the violence in the Darkening Land is not new; it is an echo of past atrocities like the Trail of Tears, where identity was literally walked into oblivion. This connection reinforces Stuart Hall's argument that identity is a site of history and memory. Tsala's words insist that even within constructed realities, there remains a truth that resists erasure—the lived experience and enduring pain of Native people. His call is not just for remembrance but for resistance, urging Edgar to see through the simulation and reclaim his story.

The character of Jackson, as an orchestrator of virtual violence, personifies the settler gaze—the one that defines, distorts, and devours Native existence for its own gain. His presence in Edgar's journey reflects how identity is often shaped by those in power who have no genuine understanding or respect for the cultures they manipulate. Edgar's eventual revulsion and escape are deeply symbolic: "Fuck Jackson for bringing me there. I felt paranoid and antisocial and knew I had to get out of that place" (Hobson, 2021, p. 142). Edgar's flight isn't just physical, though — it's an existential rebellion against the identity they've imposed on him. He wants to be in control, to be more than a pawn. His longing to escape this perverted

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world indicates that even when the modalities of control are subtle and internalized, resistance remains a possibility.

The Removed (2021) brilliantly contrasts what it means to be removed from a story and removed from a person—is a scorching critique of the ways Native identity is packaged, homogenized, sanitized and how heritage can become a trope to exploit; it is destroyed, just as the Cherokee were. It uses Stuart Hall as a theoretical framework to show that identity can never be innocent or 'natural'; it is always political, always on the edge of being described by others. Edgar's sojourn into and out of the Darkening Land reflects broadly, if not with enough force or authority, the history of Native peoples in America: first displacement, followed by misrepresentation, survival and, more recently, revival. In a world where the question "Are you Indian?" predestines one's destiny, Hobson reminds us that the past is not even past: It has just mutated. With haunted symbols, distorted voices, and the persistence of ancestral memory, the novel demands that identity is not what the screen tells us it is, but what the heart remembers and what the heart decides.

Dehumanization in *The Removed*

In Brandon Hobson's *The Removed* (2021), one of the most devastating representations of the colonial inheritance is the digital dehumanization of Indigenous peoples, including in the metaphorical and physical space of "The Darkening Land." This virtual reality stage is a dystopic digital space that exaggerates and distorts Indigenous identity into violent stereotypes. Hobson introduces a fictional video game within this space, where players are instructed to eliminate "Savage Indians." Through this construct, Hobson exposes how settler-colonial ideologies adapt into modern platforms—technology, media, and entertainment—to reinforce narratives of Indigenous inferiority and extinction. The game's directive— "Players take on the role of police officers, special agents, soldiers, or assassins who are fighting a local threat of a savage (SAV) invasion… Players shoot Savages" (Hobson, 2021, p. 145)—lays bare the dehumanizing intent behind such portrayals. It does not merely trivialize Indigenous suffering—it transforms it into an object of amusement, a grotesque inversion of their history of resistance, survival, and trauma.

This digital re-imagining functions as an allegory for real-life cultural violence, echoing Stuart Hall's (1990) theory of identity as a process "in the making and unmaking". Hall stresses that identities are constructed within representational systems, not born from essential truths. Within the game's logic, the Native body is manufactured not as a subject but as an object—an obstacle, an enemy, a symbol of chaos that must be neutralized. These constructs do not occur in isolation; they are produced in direct contrast to the supposedly "civilized" figures players assume—officers, assassins, agents—who are legitimized through their mission of extermination. In doing so, the game reifies the binary of savage versus civilized, continuing the colonial project of dehumanization through digital means. The mechanics of the game are equally disturbing in their symbolic weight. Players are rewarded with "Red Helmets" and "Native jewelry stolen from SAVs suffering in TRMP"—the acronym for "Torturous Radioactive Mud Pit" (Hobson, 2021, p. 145). Such features mock real historical trauma—forced removals, land theft, cultural desecration—by turning them into reward systems for violent gameplay. These items, cultural relics of Native heritage, are commodified and stripped of their meaning, echoing the historical plunder of Indigenous artifacts. This digital simulation reflects the grotesque absurdity of cultural erasure being presented as entertainment. Hall's (1990) perspective becomes essential here: identity is "constructed through difference" (1990), and in the Darkening Land, Native identity is not allowed to be whole. It is fractured, vilified, and reduced to fragments used for personal gain by the dominant culture.

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Perhaps the most haunting scene unfolds when Edgar, the protagonist, is forced to participate in this simulation. Jackson, a figure of ambiguous morality, commands: "We actually need you to get muddy… We just need you in the pit" (Hobson, 2021, p. 141). This moment of forced participation evokes a deeper historical memory—Native peoples being dragged into spaces of violence, exploitation, and surveillance against their will. The imagery of the "pit," filled with radioactive mud, is not just metaphorical but an emblem of the toxic residue left by colonialism—poisonous, inescapable, generational. Edgar's reaction— "Fuck Jackson for bringing me there. I felt paranoid and antisocial and knew I had to get out of that place" (p. 142)—reveals his acute awareness of what this simulation truly is: a continuation of the violence Native people has always endured, now masked under the digital veil of interactivity and roleplay.

This sense of entrapment intensifies when Edgar is confronted with the phrase, "I am the Indy Ann… Shoot the Indy Anns" (Hobson, 2021, p. 143). Through a computerized voice, the game caricatures and commodifies Indigenous identity into a shootable avatar. The deliberate corruption of the term "Indian" into "Indy Ann" underscores the linguistic violence at work—how Indigenous identity is linguistically reshaped to fit colonial imagination. The command to "shoot" affirms that the Native body, once digitized, becomes even more disposable. Edgar's horror is mirrored in his experience when Jackson shows him another game clip: "The apparition said, 'I am the savage. Shoot the savage'" (p. 44). These virtual ghosts of identity serve as reminders of the real ghosts—those murdered, displaced, and silenced across centuries of colonial aggression. This virtual violence has tangible psychological effects. As Edgar processes his experience in the Darkening Land, he confesses: "I TORTURED MYSELF OVER thoughts of the game Savage, wondering whether I would be captured or shot and killed. I wondered how many others had died in this place" (Hobson, 2021, p. 170). His panic is not merely fear of the game's narrative—it is an existential crisis. He visualizes his own body being pursued, tortured, and discarded like so many avatars in the game. The boundaries between virtual and real collapse, reflecting how such simulations serve not as escapist fantasies but as digital embodiments of real historical violence. This disassociation—of identity from humanity—is what Hall identifies as the "Othering" process, in which power is reinforced through the alienation and representation of the marginalized.

A key moment of resistance occurs when Tsala, a spectral guide figure, reminds Edgar of his lineage:

"Recall your forebears… they were displaced from their abodes and thereafter became nomads. They traversed the Trail, walking, crawling, and dying along the way. Enduring unfathomable suffering. But you are already familiar with this. Accompany me because I wish to show you something" (Hobson, 2021, p. 176).

In this moment, Hobson counters the dehumanization of digital constructs with a reassertion of ancestral memory. Tsala's words challenge Edgar to remember not just the trauma but the resistance, not just the death but the survival. This act of remembrance serves as a reclaiming of Indigenous identity from the colonial simulation that seeks to erase it. Hall's theory posits that cultural identity can only be understood through "positioning"—and here, Edgar begins to reposition himself in relation to his ancestors, his trauma, and his ongoing role in resisting cultural annihilation.

Stuart Hall's framework allows readers to understand these representations as part of a broader cultural apparatus. In a society where identity is increasingly mediated through screens, algorithms, and simulations, *The Removed (2021)* offers a warning. It is not only statues and history books that rewrite narratives; it is also video games, social media, and pop culture. Hall writes that identity is "always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative,

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and myth" (1990). The myth in *The Removed (2021)* is that Native identity is dangerous, irrational, and inhuman. This myth is perpetuated and rewarded in the Darkening Land. By situating this critique within a digital environment, Hobson makes the violence all the more insidious—because it feels distant, imaginary, and thus permissible. The real horror, then, is not that the game exists in fiction, but that it mirrors systems already in place in reality. Native peoples continue to be disproportionately policed, incarcerated, and misrepresented in media. They are monitored and displaced, not just physically but psychologically, through ongoing cultural erasure. In this sense, it is not just a novel about the past—it is about the present mechanisms through which that past continues to destroy. The game in the novel becomes a mirror held up to a society that still finds entertainment in the suffering of the colonized, that still turns trauma into spectacle, and that still defines the "Other" as a problem to be solved.

The dehumanization of Indigenous people through digital constructs in *The Removed* (2021) is a chilling commentary on how colonial violence evolves with time. Using the analogy of the "Darkening Land," Hobson laments the continued commodification of the The Native Body, only now in a changed form: gone is the murder of the body, replaced by the annihilation of cultural and symbolic life. Stuart Hall's conceptual framework enables us to understand that identity is a construction, rather than a fixed and already formed identity. The novel is then both a warning and a call for remembering that which has been torn out: What has been removed can still be remembered, resisted and reclaimed.

The Impact of Colonial Violence on Cultural Expression

There is no element of Indigenous cultural expression that has been untouched by colonial violence. It exists not just in the physical or historical sense, but in language, memory, identity and intergenerational trauma. In Brandon Hobson's *The Removed* (2021), the legacy of centuries of colonial cruelty infiltrates the lives of Native characters who are grappling with questions of identity, memory, and connection. Their culture of tradition, storytelling and ritual goes underground, gets twisted or silenced under the burden of unacknowledged historical pain. In the lives of the characters Ernest, Sonja, Edgar and Maria, Hobson also shows us the way that colonial violence disfigures not only through destruction but also by distortion and, sometimes, suppression of the fundamentals of belonging, remembering and expressing a sense of cultural self.

Maria's grief over her son Ray-Ray's death is emblematic of this cultural rupture. Shot by a white police officer in an act of modern racial violence, Ray-Ray becomes yet another Indigenous life lost to the unbroken chain of colonial oppression. Maria mourns not only his death but the cultural and spiritual order that collapses in its wake. "How do you lose a child to gun violence and expect to return to a normal way of life? This was the question I struggled with the most…" (Hobson, 2021, p. 15). Maria's question is not rhetorical—it is a cry against the erasure of Indigenous healing and tradition. Hall (1990) argues that identity is shaped within history, culture, and power. Maria's identity as a mother, a Native woman, and a bearer of memory is thus disrupted by the violence of state power. Her grief blocks traditional forms of healing like storytelling and ceremony, leaving cultural expression suspended in sorrow.

This interruption is further emphasized in Maria's visit to the home of the police officer who killed her son. This scene in *The Removed (2021)* is loaded with quiet violence—not physical, but psychological. She enters a space of white domesticity, a house representing the same power structure that shattered her family. This confrontation is not just about justice; it is about the collision of two worlds—one that represents systemic violence, and another that represents its victims. The house becomes a symbol of historical privilege and impunity. Maria's presence there is a reclaiming of space, a forced reminder to the perpetrators that the dead are not forgotten, and that grief has a voice. Yet, she also feels the immense pressure of being perceived as the "other," the one who disrupts the illusion of innocence. Here, Hall's

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(1990) assertion that identity is produced within regimes of representation becomes apparent, Maria's cultural identity is shaped and constrained by her forced position within a dominant narrative that views her pain as an inconvenience, rather than a truth.

Ernest, Maria's husband, suffers from Alzheimer's disease, which Hobson uses as a metaphor for cultural amnesia—both personal and collective. Ernest's fading memory echoes the fading of cultural traditions, stories, and historical consciousness among Native communities under colonial pressure. And when he intermittently wakes on these cancers, usually spiritual and related to visions of Tsala, these temporary contextualization of his existence-quick recoveries of identity (flashes)…remnants of ancestral recall wrestling against erasure. Ernest's state mirrors the entire community gradually being weaned away from its culture in the face of enforced silence, and oblivion. Identity is not, as Hall (19906) has observed, a fixed essence, but always a process of becoming, a narrative that is (re)constructed around cultural memory. Ernest's decline is a reminder that violence, when perpetuated across generations, will eventually erode the foundation of memory, the primary means of cultural survival. Another and perhaps as affecting type of legacy of the colonial experience is the isolation and lack of connection felt by one of the three characters, Sonja, daughter of Maria and Ernest. Living alone and without a sense of deep connection to family or tradition, Sonja finds solace in unsatisfying sexual encounters and fleeting connections. She is not sure where she fits, caught between her Native identity and the modern world, which makes her culture invisible. Her isolation isn't just psychic — it's cultural. The disintegration of traditional kinship structures, community bonds, and cultural rituals due to colonial disruption leaves her adrift. Hall's (1996) theory of identity being formed through both difference and positioning resonates here—Sonja is positioned as "other" in both Native and non-Native spaces, resulting in a fractured self. Her silence, her longing, and her inability to connect are themselves expressions of colonial damage—a culture forced inward, left to fester in isolation.

The most visceral expression of the impact of colonial violence appears through Edgar, Maria's son. His confrontation with the son of the officer who killed Ray-Ray is a direct challenge to historical denial. "Do you remember that your cop dad shot a teenage boy?... That was my brother who got shot" (Hobson, 2021, p. 160). Edgar's act of speaking truth to the son of his brother's killer is a moment of reclaimed voice. In this interaction, Hall's view that identity is always constructed through power relations becomes clear—Edgar, long silenced by systems of white supremacy, speaks back, demands to be heard, and reclaims the narrative. His pain becomes political. His rage becomes testimony. And his identity, shaped by loss and resistance, becomes a form of cultural expression that fights against erasure.

This act of verbal resistance is cultural expression in its most raw form. It is storytelling as confrontation, remembrance as rebellion. Colonial violence seeks to steal from Indigenous people language, history and self-hood; Edgar's words demand all three back. He turns into a raconteur of truth, not the kind of mythic, but the kind that bites. His voice is culture refusing to expire. In this novel, Hobson reveals that the legacy of colonial violence on cultural expression is not merely historical, but ongoing, intimate, internalized. Abutting chapter by chapter, through Ernest's sloughing memory, Sonja's isolation, Maria's mourning and Edgar's rage, Hobson portrays an identity as fraught as it's been forged out of loss, quietness and defiance. Stuart Hall's theories allow us to understand that these characters are not simply responding to violence — they are traversing a world in which their identities have been shaped by it. But identity here is more than who you are; it's what you survive — and how you elect to speak, remember, express in the face of forces that sought to silence you.

The Loss of Land and Heritage

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For Hobson, in his novel the question of land – and its corollary, heritage – is more than an undercurrent of cultural memory, intergenerational trauma and spiritual endurance. This is most ardently portrayed in the character of Tsala, whose spirit voice details the history of his people's relocation and their exploitation of the ancestral connections. Tsala's memories are not just stories of dispossession, but the stuff of identity itself. "Land is not just land, it is part of us, telling us the story of who we are and who our people have been," he tells us. Tsala calls to his ancestors, opening his novel by paying homage to the power of the earth and its wisdom: "Love, the earth will thunder inside of us and for us whenever we need to hear her the most" (Hobson, 2021, p. 134). This statement is more than poetic—it captures a worldview where land is animate and ancestral, holding the voices of those who came before. For Indigenous people, the land is a sacred repository of identity and history. It is through this connection that Tsala's cultural legacy is passed on, not through linear storytelling, but through land-based memory and spiritual inheritance. Stuart Hall's assertion that identity is formed through history and power (Hall, 1996) is echoed here. Tsala's relationship to the land is intrinsic to his identity—his people *are* the land, and to remove them is to erase them. This connection is brutally interrupted by colonial violence, as Tsala recounts the moment of invasion:

"We were present ten nights before they subsequently arrived to seek the destruction of our homes and properties. We observed from a distance the way those who had descended upon our territory akin to a pack of wolves ignited their firearms. Great danger loomed over us now. The military was under instructions to be orderly, yet they systematically dismantled and burned down our cabins and barns. In addition, they ruthlessly butchered our domestic fowl and farming livestock such as pigs and cattle" (Hobson, 2021, p. 136).

These words emphasize the intimate violence of colonialism—not only were lives taken, but cultural rhythms disrupted. Homes were not just buildings; they were spaces of ceremony, of language, of storytelling. With each cabin razed and animal slaughtered, a piece of collective identity was destroyed. The horror escalates with the account of Tsala and his son's capture:

"The moment the soldiers spotted us; they closed in quickly. We struggled and fought, but it was futile, and we were outnumbered. In the midst of things, a guy hit you over the head with a shovel, and I went for him with my knife, slicing his arm. I was outnumbered by some other soldiers who prided themselves on pulling me away from him and then proceeded to pin me down. I felt constraining ropes being tied to my limbs. I told them to kill me first only to, logically, receive a 'No' as an answer. As they aimed their rifles at us I closed my eyes and bowed my head. I beg you so much not to open your eyes, even when they order you to do so" (Hobson, 2021, p. 137).

This moment is deeply symbolic—it illustrates how colonialism not only seizes territory but forces Indigenous people into roles of victimhood. Tsala's plea to his son not to open his eyes is a protective gesture, suggesting that witnessing this violence would be a second death—a spiritual erasure that begins even before physical death.

When Tsala says, "Beloved: Regarding my death, I do not understand the reason why I awoke when I did. The soldier had taken my life and your life from us, from our family. We were no longer of this world" (Hobson, 2021, p. 164), he frames colonial violence as a theft not just of life, but of continuity. Death, for Tsala, is not natural but an imposition. The cultural and spiritual lineage is broken, yet he continues to speak. In this way, his spectral voice challenges colonial erasure. Through Hall's 1996 lens, identity here becomes a matter of survival—not a static essence, but a process of negotiation and resistance through time and power. Tsala's resurrection in spirit form-- "I crawled out of the earth like a beast in the night,

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with necklaces made of bear claws and gold, with wet mud and worms matted to my hair, which hung to my chest" (Hobson, 2021, p. 164)—Is both literal and metaphorical. He rises from the grave, representing the survival of Indigenous identity through resistance. This resurrection is a counter-narrative to colonial depictions of Native people as defeated or extinct. His reference to tribal burial traditions, especially his fear of finding his wife's burned body, reflects a cultural memory that colonialism has tried to extinguish. His fear is not just of death but of the loss of ritual—of a world where cultural meaning is no longer accessible.

The most powerful moment comes when Tsala claims his true form: "And here I stood, not of flesh but of spirit, not of bone or skin as I had known" (Hobson, 2021, p. 165). Tsala is reborn not in the image imposed by colonial violence but as an ancestral spirit, a keeper of memory and truth. This aligns with Hall's 1996 view that identity among colonized peoples often forms through what he calls the "presence of the past," where the self is reconstructed through collective memory rather than colonial representation. This reconstitution of self is laced with pain: "I cried out in Cherokee like a wounded dog" (Hobson, 2021, p. 166). His use of the Cherokee language in a moment of anguish reclaims voice from a history that tried to silence it. Language, here, is an act of resistance—an echo of belonging. Tsala's cry is the cry of all displaced peoples whose identities were fractured but not erased. The sorrow of his voice connects the historical to the present: "There is a great sadness coming to the people and this land, he said. Your people are being forced to leave, to move west, and many will suffer and die" (Hobson, 2021, p. 166). This suffering is not just a physical hardship—it is the rupture of cultural transmission, the loss of place-based identity that Hall refers to when he discusses displacement and difference as forces in identity formation.

In the final pages of the novel, this intergenerational pain finds a resting place in Maria's closing reflection: "We heard the creaking of oaks, the rustle of trees shaken alive by a gust of wind. We heard the incessant voices all around us, the voices of our people, our ancestors, all of them whispering: Home..." (Hobson, 2021, p. 187). This moment is deeply symbolic. It connects Maria, Tsala's descendant, back to the land and to the voices of her people. The whisper of "home" is both a longing and a reclamation. In a world that sought to strip Indigenous people of their place and memory, Maria hears the land speak once again. The earth becomes a conduit for cultural restoration, where identity—though wounded—still endures. Stuart Hall's theory of identity as a construct shaped through historical trauma and systems of power (Hall, 1996) comes full circle here. The Indigenous identity in *The Removed 2021* is not static or nostalgic—it is dynamic, surviving through trauma, silence, and resurgence. Tsala's legacy lives through Maria's ability to hear the land, to feel the presence of ancestors, and to claim "home" not as a place of ownership but as a place of memory.

The Inheritance of Trauma and Cultural Displacement

In *The Removed (2021)*, Edgar's internal world reveals the splintered effects of unresolved grief and inherited trauma, contributing to his sense of fragmented identity. After the violent death of his brother Ray-Ray and the ongoing cultural disconnection he faces, Edgar withdraws into a solitary existence where visions and memories begin to blur the boundary between reality and imagination. He reflects, "Outside the window, I saw my ancestors walking and falling. Some were crawling. I saw the soft, yellow light on the horizon. I saw the rain lifting from earth to sky" (Hobson, 2021, p. 33). This moment captures how personal trauma disrupts not only Edgar's emotional state but also his connection to time, place, and self. The imagery of his ancestors struggling across a distorted landscape symbolizes his own spiritual disorientation and fractured sense of identity. As Edgar navigates the psychological aftermath of loss, these haunting visions suggest that his trauma is both personal and collective—his pain intertwined with a deeper cultural memory. This fusion of grief, history,

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and identity exposes the profound fragmentation experienced by individuals in the wake of personal and generational wounds.

The legacy of cultural displacement and historical trauma among marginalized communities is deeply embedded in *The Removed*, especially through the spiritual and symbolic voice of Tsala, a Cherokee ancestor. In this context, Tsala becomes a voice for those "carrying the dreams of children and the elderly, the tired and sick, the poor, the wounded. *The Removed*" (Hobson, 2021, p. 41). These lines underscore the generational pain inherited by Indigenous people forced from their homelands during the Trail of Tears. The use of the word "removed" speaks to both the literal displacement of the Cherokee people and the emotional dislocation experienced across time. Tsala's presence, drifting like "mist" and spreading "like a rainstorm," symbolizes the haunting persistence of unresolved history. He becomes a spectral embodiment of cultural memory—one that refuses to be forgotten despite centuries of attempted erasure. This haunting illustrates how trauma is passed down and how identity continues to be shaped by the loss of land, family, and belonging. Tsala's refusal to migrate west as, "I refused to migrate west on the Trail, and that is why we died… I was willing to sacrifice my life for you, our family, and our people" (Hobson, 2021, p. 41), further reveals the depth of resistance and ancestral defiance against unjust systems. His sacrifice becomes a symbolic inheritance, passed through generations as both trauma and pride. The Trail of Tears was not only a physical displacement but also a spiritual rupture, and Tsala's voice offers a form of ancestral testimony that challenges silence and forgetting. His words "an old man has a mouth full of thunder. So does an old spirit"—emphasize the enduring power of Indigenous memory and the refusal to be erased. This resilience, echoed in the voices of the living and the dead, affirms how cultural identity is sustained through memory, defiance, and collective loss. This inherited sense of loss and yearning is captured in Tsala's moving reflection: "Beloved son: when I look at the scope of our history, I can sese the longing to hold on to people, to keep them close so they don't leave. We were afraid they would depart and never return. I witnessed the removal of our people from our lands" (Hobson, 2021, p. 71). This passage underscores the emotional devastation tied to forced removal and separation. The fear of losing loved ones becomes generational, encoded in memory and cultural expression. It is not only the land that was taken, but the very security of belonging. Tsala's words reflect a broader Indigenous experience in which the past continually speaks through the present, shaping identity through a deep awareness of what was lost—and what must still be protected.

Conclusion

This study has investigated Brandon Hobson's novel *The Removed* (2021) by using Stuart Hall's (1996) conception of identity in order to explore the specifics of trauma, cultural dislocation, colonial violence and systemic racism in Native American identity and heritage. This study tells that at the centre of *The Removed (2021)* are the Echota family. It concludes, Maria's loss is not just a private one, but a cultural one too, and it reflects the grief of a nation that has been made to disappear but which will not disappear. Ernest is a painful emblem of an identity in descent. His decline represents the decay of cultural memory in Native American communities throughout American society, a cultural memory deliquescence aggravated by neglect and historical trauma. He is a ghostly presence in his role as a silent reminder of what is lost and forgotten and buried in the unconscious of a people displaced and mute translated by colonial legacies. Edgar, Maria's son, tells us that colonial violence is not over; that it lives in the present in systems of racism, poverty and neglect. Edgar's journey is also tragic, but also representative of the choices real-life Indigenous youth have had to make, between cultural memory and enforced assimilation. Eventually, through its multivocal narration, the novel breathes life into what Hall might call a "narrative of the self". The journey of each character

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highlights the way in which, for many Native Americans, identity is both a wound and a weapon. Hobson's creations demonstrate the different ways marginalized people are trying to deal with inherited trauma and to find a road somewhere toward healing. Their paths are those of a larger Indigenous story; a story of suffering but equally of perseverance, ingenuity and an insistence that they will not be buried.

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