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HAUNTED IDENTITIES: HISTORICAL TRAUMA AND COLLECTIVE GRIEF IN ERDRICH'S *THE SENTENCE*

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Abstract

Erdrich's *The Sentence* (2021) situates personal identity within the weight of historical grief, exploring how Indigenous communities navigate trauma that reverberates across generations. Centered on Tookie, an Ojibwe woman haunted by both her past incarceration and the ghost of Flora, a white customer fascinated by Indigeneity, the novel dramatizes the persistence of colonial wounds alongside contemporary crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the murder of George Floyd. This article examines how Erdrich depicts identity as inseparable from collective grief, drawing on Volkan's concepts of large-group identity and chosen trauma alongside Brave Heart's theory of historical trauma. Volkan's framework highlights how unresolved traumas become embedded in group identity, resurfacing in moments of crisis, while Brave Heart's work underscores how Indigenous communities inherit grief rooted in colonization, forced assimilation, and systemic violence. Reading the novel through these lenses reveals Flora's haunting as a manifestation of colonial appropriation and Tookie's survival as emblematic of intergenerational negotiation with trauma. The bookstore, where Indigenous stories circulate, becomes a space of resilience, resisting erasure and transforming grief into memory and survival. Ultimately, *The Sentence* insists that historical grief is not merely a burden but a constitutive force of identity—painful, haunting, yet also capable of sustaining community and ethical witness.

Keywords: *Collective Memory, Historical Trauma, Indigenous Identity, Louise Erdrich, Survivance, The Sentence.*

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1. Introduction

Erdrich's *The Sentence* (2021) is a novel haunted not only by ghosts but by the weight of history itself. Set in Minneapolis during 2019–2020, the narrative centers on Tookie, an Ojibwe woman whose life is marked by both personal and communal scars. After surviving incarceration for a crime rooted in systemic injustice, she rebuilds her life as a bookseller in an Indigenous bookstore. Yet her present is unsettled by the ghost of Flora, a white customer fascinated with Native identity, who dies but continues to haunt the store. Flora's spectral persistence symbolizes more than eccentricity; she becomes a figure for the unsettling intrusion of colonial desire—the settler urge to appropriate Indigeneity without acknowledging its histories of grief and dispossession. "She wanted to be a real Indian," Tookie remarks of Flora, laying bare the painful absurdity of cultural theft and the violence it conceals (p. 35).

At the same time, Erdrich situates her narrative against the backdrop of two contemporary crises: the COVID-19 pandemic and the murder of George Floyd. These events are not merely historical markers but catalytic forces that intensify the novel's meditation on survival, loss, and identity. For Indigenous communities, the disproportionate toll of the pandemic and the racial violence witnessed in Minneapolis resonated with much longer histories of systemic oppression. Erdrich emphasizes this entanglement of past and present when Tookie reflects, "I was carrying grief that wasn't only mine" (p. 212). In that admission, the novel articulates how grief circulates beyond the individual, binding the self to a collective experience shaped by historical trauma.

To grasp how Erdrich entwines identity with grief in *The Sentence*, it is useful to draw on the insights of Volkan and Brave Heart. Both theorists, from different disciplinary positions, emphasize the persistence of historical wounds and their role in shaping the identities of individuals and communities. Together, their frameworks allow us to see Erdrich's novel not only as a ghost story or pandemic narrative, but as a meditation on the ongoing force of inherited trauma.

Volkan (1997), a psychoanalyst, introduces the concept of large-group identity to describe how communities define themselves through shared history, culture, and collective experiences. Central to his work is the notion of chosen trauma, which refers to historical losses or humiliations that are not resolved but instead transmitted through generations, becoming a marker of group identity. Chosen trauma, Volkan argues, is not simply remembered, it is re-experienced whenever contemporary crises evoke past wounds, producing what he terms a time collapse. In Erdrich's novel, Flora's ghost may be read as a manifestation of this phenomenon: her spectral presence reopens the wound of colonial appropriation, reminding Tookie and her community that the trauma of

dispossession is not past but continually intruding into the present. Flora's desire to consume Indigeneity without acknowledging its grief reflects the way unresolved historical trauma resurfaces, disrupting the boundaries of Native identity.

Complementing Volkan's psychoanalytic model, Brave Heart (2003) offers a framework rooted in Native American experience. She defines historical trauma as the cumulative emotional and psychological wounding across generations caused by colonization, genocide, and forced assimilation. Unlike Volkan, who emphasizes the symbolic and psychoanalytic dimension of trauma, Brave Heart foregrounds the lived, intergenerational transmission of grief in Indigenous communities. She identifies symptoms of historical trauma, including depression, substance abuse, and internalized oppression, but also stresses the possibility of healing through acknowledgment, cultural revitalization, and storytelling. Erdrich's *The Sentence* resonates profoundly with this framework. Tookie's incarceration can be read as part of the systemic violence Brave Heart describes, while her recognition that she carries grief that extends beyond herself (p. 212) mirrors Brave Heart's insistence on the intergenerational dimension of Native mourning. The bookstore, filled with Indigenous stories, represents the kind of cultural space Brave Heart views as crucial for healing—where narrative and memory become acts of survival.

Bringing Volkan and Brave Heart together provides a richer interpretive lens for Erdrich's novel. Volkan helps explain how Flora's haunting symbolizes the resurfacing of collective wounds tied to colonial dispossession, while Brave Heart clarifies how Tookie's personal struggles, her incarceration, her grief, her resilience, reflect the broader patterns of intergenerational trauma among Indigenous peoples. Both frameworks highlight that identity in *The Sentence* is inseparable from grief: it is formed through the memory of loss, but also through the capacity to endure, narrate, and resist.

This article therefore argues that *The Sentence* illustrates how historical grief is constitutive of identity in Indigenous communities. The novel dramatizes how colonial appropriation and systemic injustice continue to haunt Native lives, how crises like the pandemic and racial violence reactivate inherited wounds, and how storytelling provides a path toward survival. By situating Erdrich's narrative within the theories of Volkan and Brave Heart, the analysis will show that identity in *The Sentence* emerges not despite grief but through it: fractured, haunted, yet sustained by memory and the ethical imperative to bear witness.

1.1. Flora's Ghost and the Haunting of "Chosen Trauma"

The figure of Flora, the white customer who dies and haunts the bookstore, is one of the most unsettling elements of *The Sentence*. Her ghost is not merely a supernatural

presence but a symbolic intrusion of colonial history into Native life, what Volkan (1997) would call a chosen trauma the shared, transmitted wound of a group that resurfaces across time. Flora represents the unresolved colonial wound of cultural appropriation and erasure, her spectral return dramatizing how settler desire continues to impose itself upon Native identity. Tookie recalls, "Flora always wanted to be more Indian than Indians" (p. 47), a statement that encapsulates the violence of her obsession. Flora's haunting reveals how the colonial past is not past at all: it infiltrates the present, reminding Tookie and the community of their unresolved histories.

Flora's haunting is insidious precisely because she is not overtly malicious; her love of Indigeneity masks her appropriation. Tookie admits that Flora "bought every Native book she could find, as if through osmosis she could absorb our experience" (p. 39). Here, Erdrich underscores how settler fascination masquerades as admiration while perpetuating extraction. This aligns with Brave Heart's (2003) theory of historical trauma, which emphasizes how Indigenous people are forced to constantly reencounter colonization in everyday forms. Flora's reading obsession becomes another way in which Native identity is consumed, distorted, and commodified, rather than respected.

The ghost's refusal to leave is significant: "Even after death, Flora lingered, demanding attention, her presence thick as dust" (p. 76). This lingering presence mirrors Volkan's notion of trauma as frozen in time, where the group's historical suffering collapses into the present moment. Flora becomes a haunting embodiment of colonialism's refusal to let go, as if settlers themselves cannot release their claim over Native stories and spaces. For Tookie, Flora's refusal to move on disrupts her sense of peace, reminding her that her identity is never free of the colonial gaze.

Perhaps most disturbingly, Flora claims she is possessed by a Native spirit before her death, insisting that her obsession has transformed her. This grotesque inversion underscores what Brave Heart identifies as the denial of Indigenous grief: by claiming Indigeneity without enduring its trauma, Flora trivializes the actual burden carried by Native communities. Tookie's anger at Flora's wannabe Indianness is not simply irritation but a recognition that such appropriation itself is a form of violence, it reopens wounds by making Native grief invisible, even while obsessively circling it.

In this way, Flora's ghost dramatizes the persistence of chosen trauma within Indigenous identity. She is both absurd and dangerous, embodying the colonial past that refuses to stay buried. By presenting Flora as a spectral figure whose obsession becomes haunting, Erdrich illustrates how historical grief does not simply exist in memory but reappears in new forms, intruding, suffocating, and demanding constant negotiation. For Tookie, confronting Flora is thus symbolic of confronting colonial trauma itself:

unfinished, unacknowledged, and always threatening to consume Native identity. When Tookie finally exclaims, "She would not leave me alone, even in death" (p. 119). It confirms that Flora's ghost is not about personal animosity but about the unresolved legacies of appropriation and erasure that continue to haunt Native lives.

1.2. Incarceration and the Transmission of Historical Trauma

Tookie's incarceration is one of the central sites where Erdrich explores how individual experience is tied to collective, historical trauma. Wrongfully sentenced for transporting a body across state lines, Tookie spends years in prison, her life shaped by the state's power to criminalize Indigenous existence. "I was given the weight of a crime I hadn't committed," she recalls, "but it fit me, like history's sentence passed down" (p. 12). This acknowledgment of punishment as a kind of inherited fate aligns with Brave Heart's framework of historical trauma, which argues that Indigenous peoples inherit grief and oppression across generations. The carceral system, in this sense, becomes a modern mechanism for the repetition of colonial dispossession. Tookie's prison term thus represents more than personal misfortune; it becomes a symbolic continuation of centuries of Indigenous containment, forced removal, and systemic targeting by colonial powers.

The prison becomes a site where Tookie internalizes the continuity of trauma. She reflects: "Behind bars, I was not just myself; I was everyone who had been locked up before me" (p. 23). Volkan's notion of large-group identity clarifies this moment: the self becomes inseparable from the community's shared wounds. Tookie's identity is framed not only by her personal suffering but by the recognition that her incarceration echoes the systematic targeting of Native peoples. Her imprisonment embodies what Volkan calls the deposit of trauma in identity, where unresolved wounds define how groups see themselves and their place in the world. For Indigenous peoples, incarceration is never a purely private ordeal; it taps into collective memory of broken treaties, boarding schools, forced removals, and policing practices that have disproportionately criminalized Native bodies.

Erdrich emphasizes how incarceration erodes individuality, collapsing past and present violence into a single continuum. "The bars cut me off from time," Tookie confesses, "but they also reminded me of every fence, every line, every treaty broken" (p. 30). This imagery of containment connects the personal space of prison with the historical geography of colonization, from reservations to land theft to boarding schools. Tookie's cell becomes a microcosm of Native history: walls and bars that echo the fences erected around reservations, the boundaries drawn on stolen land, and the bureaucratic lines that confined Native sovereignty. Brave Heart's theory helps us see that such connections are not abstract but visceral: Indigenous people continue to carry grief in their bodies, grief that is triggered by present-day forms of marginalization. Tookie's reflections show how

even in the silence of a prison cell, history presses in, refusing to separate the individual from the collective past.

At the same time, Tookie develops a form of resilience within prison. Books become her refuge, offering survival through knowledge and imagination: "Words gave me air when the cell closed in" (p. 44). Reading allows her to reclaim a sense of interior freedom, a way of resisting the suffocating confinement imposed upon her. Yet even this survival strategy highlights the uneven burden carried by Native peoples, who must transform trauma into endurance. Survival requires labor, constant negotiation, and creative strategies that emerge precisely because of systemic injustice. Volkan suggests that groups often cling to chosen traumas as a way of sustaining identity, and in Tookie's case, reading becomes both a shield and a reminder of her entrapment within history. By turning to books, she asserts identity and agency, but the act is born out of necessity in response to structural violence. Her resilience does not erase the trauma but reshapes it into a tool of survival, a paradox that underscores both strength and precarity.

Most strikingly, Tookie's release does not erase the imprint of incarceration: "Even in freedom, I heard the clank of chains inside me" (p. 52). Here, Erdrich illustrates how historical trauma is transmitted not only across generations but also across life stages. The experience of imprisonment becomes a lasting scar, one that structures how Tookie moves through the world even after her sentence has ended. This lingering burden reflects Brave Heart's central claim: that historical grief does not end with survival but reverberates through memory, body, and community. The trauma of prison does not dissolve with release; instead, it follows Tookie, shaping her sense of freedom as partial, haunted, and conditioned by past violence. In this way, Erdrich shows how colonial legacies reproduce themselves not only in intergenerational transmission but also in the enduring psychological afterlives of personal experience.

Tookie's narrative also reflects broader realities for Indigenous peoples, who face disproportionately high rates of incarceration in the United States. Prisons, like reservations and boarding schools, become extensions of colonial control, institutions designed to regulate, contain, and erase Native life. By situating Tookie's imprisonment within this continuum, Erdrich emphasizes that the personal cannot be detached from the structural. The sentence she carries is not only a judicial ruling but also history's sentence, a phrase that encapsulates how punishment has always been weaponized against Indigenous survival. This double meaning allows readers to see how carcerality itself becomes a metaphor for ongoing colonialism, another way in which freedom is promised but never fully delivered.

Through Tookie's incarceration, Erdrich demonstrates how personal punishment is inseparable from collective trauma. The prison sentence becomes another manifestation of the sentence of history: a structure of dispossession that Native peoples must continually navigate. By tying individual confinement to generational grief, the novel illustrates how historical trauma operates as both a personal and communal inheritance. Tookie's story ultimately reminds us that incarceration is not simply about crime or justice but about the persistence of colonial systems that redefine survival as resistance. Her survival does not mark the end of trauma but reveals the depth of its transmission, showing how Indigenous identity continues to bear the weight of historical grief in every stage of life.

1.3. Grief, Loss, and the Inheritance of Memory

In *The Sentence*, grief is not a private burden but a collective inheritance, a weight passed down through generations of Native families. Erdrich illustrates how memory itself becomes a conduit for trauma, transmitting both pain and resilience. Tookie reflects on her community: "We carried losses that were not ours, yet they lived in our bones" (p. 61). This statement resonates with Brave Heart's (2003) description of historical trauma as the unresolved grief across generations, in which descendants continue to feel the pain of ancestors who endured genocide, dispossession, and erasure. Tookie's recognition that grief exists in her very body suggests how trauma is embodied, not just remembered.This notion reflects epigenetic research as well, which suggests that trauma leaves physiological imprints that shape descendants' stress responses, making the idea of grief "in the bones" both metaphorical and literal. Erdrich, therefore, situates Tookie's mourning within a broader framework of Indigenous inheritance, where grief becomes a lived, bodily reality.

The novel shows how personal loss intertwines with historical grief. When a community elder dies of COVID-19, Tookie observes: "Her death was not only hers but every death before her" (p. 142). This collapse of individual and collective mourning recalls Volkan's concept of the time collapse of trauma, where past wounds resurface in the present as though they are happening again. The pandemic becomes a contemporary site where historical grief is reactivated, exposing how Native communities remain disproportionately vulnerable due to systemic neglect and centuries of structural violence. Erdrich thus insists that present-day tragedies cannot be separated from historical wounds. The pandemic, in this sense, is not only a health crisis but a reminder of colonial devastation: lack of adequate medical access, underfunded infrastructure, and the legacy of prior epidemics imposed by settler contact. Each death reverberates as a reminder of earlier waves of loss, from smallpox epidemics to boarding school deaths, making COVID-19 inseparable from the continuum of colonial violence.

Memory plays a crucial role in sustaining both grief and identity. Tookie notes, "Stories kept the dead alive, but they also kept the pain alive" (p. 88). This duality reflects Brave Heart's claim that remembering is both necessary and devastating for Indigenous communities: remembrance preserves culture but continually reopens the wound of loss. For Volkan, such narratives become linking objects that keep chosen traumas alive across generations. In Erdrich's novel, books and stories function as these linking objects, simultaneously preserving Native identity and prolonging historical grief. The bookstore itself, as a central setting, becomes an archive of memory—a place where Indigenous history is preserved and transmitted through literature, yet also a site where the weight of grief is catalogued and made present.

Tookie's relationship with books reflects this paradox: literature sustains her but also binds her to the inescapable cycle of remembrance.

Yet Erdrich also shows how this inheritance of grief is complicated by ambivalence. Tookie confesses, "I wanted to forget, but forgetting felt like betrayal" (p. 101). This tension illustrates the difficulty of negotiating between healing and remembrance. For Brave Heart, unresolved mourning often leads to cycles of silence or guilt within families, where the desire to protect younger generations from pain collides with the fear of erasing ancestral suffering. Tookie embodies this ambivalence: she recognizes that to forget would mean erasing the sacrifices and struggles of her ancestors, but to remember is to continually reopen wounds. This dual burden speaks to the generational paradox of trauma: communities need remembrance for survival and continuity, but remembrance comes at the cost of renewed suffering.

The persistence of inherited grief becomes clear when Tookie admits: "Even joy carried shadows, reminders of what we had lost" (p. 165). Erdrich demonstrates that trauma is not simply about sorrow but about the impossibility of experiencing joy without recalling the weight of history. Happiness cannot be wholly separated from mourning, because each moment of celebration exists against the backdrop of what has been taken. This dynamic reflects Volkan's theory that chosen traumas are never resolved but instead integrated into a group's identity. The shadow that trails even joyful experiences reveals how grief is not episodic but constant, always present as an undercurrent in Native life. For Tookie and her community, grief is not an interruption of life but a permanent condition, shaping how they live, love, and remember.

Importantly, Erdrich also emphasizes that grief, while devastating, functions as a form of continuity and survival. To inherit grief is also to inherit strength, memory, and the insistence that ancestors are never forgotten. This complexity demonstrates how Indigenous mourning cannot be reduced to despair alone; it is simultaneously a refusal of

erasure. In this sense, grief becomes an act of resistance, ensuring that colonialism's attempt to silence history does not succeed. Tookie's ambivalence—caught between wanting to forget and feeling obligated to remember—captures the difficulty of balancing pain with survival. Yet it also testifies to the resilience embedded in carrying grief forward as testimony.

Through its focus on memory, loss, and mourning, *The Sentence* illustrates how grief functions as a historical inheritance within Indigenous communities. By connecting individual deaths to collective wounds, Erdrich underscores Brave Heart's insistence that healing must address not only present pain but the entire genealogy of loss. Grief becomes both a burden and a form of resistance, a reminder that history cannot be silenced, even when it is unbearable. For Tookie, and for the community around her, to grieve is to remain connected to ancestors, to recognize the continuity of suffering, but also to affirm the endurance of Native identity. In Erdrich's narrative, grief is not only the shadow of loss but also the echo of survival, carried forward in memory, body, and story.

1.4. Language, Storytelling, and Survival

In *The Sentence*, storytelling emerges as both a survival mechanism and a cultural inheritance. Erdrich highlights how words are more than mere communication: they are instruments of memory, identity, and healing. Tookie explains, "Books had saved my life more than once" (p. 57). For Brave Heart, the survival of Indigenous peoples depends not only on physical endurance but also on the continuity of cultural practices, including oral traditions and narrative. Reading, for Tookie, becomes a contemporary adaptation of this cultural resilience, linking her to stories that anchor her in history and community.

Storytelling also resists erasure. Tookie remarks, "Each book carried another life, another struggle, and I read them as though my own survival depended on it" (p. 133). This act of survival through words recalls Volkan's idea of linking objects, where material or symbolic practices connect present identity with historical trauma. Books in Erdrich's novel function as such linking objects: they hold voices of the dead and oppressed, ensuring that trauma is not silenced but integrated into the fabric of Native identity. Storytelling thus becomes a way of reclaiming agency against the forces of erasure represented by colonial history.

Language, however, is also depicted as fragile, subject to distortion or misuse. Flora's appropriation of Native stories demonstrates how storytelling can be weaponized, reinforcing colonial authority rather than resisting it. "She wrote us wrong," Tookie reflects, "and she believed the wrongness was truth" (p. 75). This recognition parallels Brave Heart's concern that unresolved trauma often manifests in distorted narratives, whether internalized or imposed from outside. By exposing Flora's flawed storytelling,

Erdrich shows how survival requires not only preserving stories but also protecting their authenticity.

At the same time, storytelling connects grief to healing. Tookie recalls a moment of communal storytelling during the pandemic: "We sat apart, but our words reached across the distance" (p. 198). Here, Erdrich emphasizes that even in isolation, language allows communities to endure. Volkan's theory of large-group identity helps explain this: shared narratives reinforce the bonds that sustain identity in the face of loss. By telling stories together, even in fragmented form, the community reaffirms its continuity despite the disruptions of grief and separation.

Finally, Erdrich underscores the sacred dimension of words. Near the novel's conclusion, Tookie insists, "Every sentence was a prayer, every story a survival" (p. 250). This statement encapsulates the centrality of language in Indigenous survival. Brave Heart's framework emphasizes that healing requires re-engaging with cultural practices, and Erdrich presents storytelling as precisely that practice: a form of survival that transforms grief into continuity. Volkan, too, helps us see how stories allow groups to carry chosen traumas forward without erasing them. Through language, historical grief is not silenced but reshaped into resilience.

By foregrounding storytelling as both fragile and powerful, Erdrich situates language at the heart of survival. For Tookie and her community, words become both shield and lifeline, ensuring that trauma, while never fully healed, is carried in ways that strengthen rather than destroy.

1.5. Pandemic, Collective Trauma, and the Continuity of Identity

Erdrich situates *The Sentence* in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, making the crisis not merely a backdrop but a living symbol of collective trauma. For Indigenous communities, the pandemic intensifies preexisting historical grief. Tookie notes, "The virus found us the way history had found us — first, worst, and hardest" (p. 162). This line reflects Brave Heart's argument that historical trauma amplifies present suffering, as structural inequities rooted in colonization leave Native peoples especially vulnerable to new catastrophes. The pandemic thus becomes another chapter in a long genealogy of grief, where the violence of history reappears in modern form. The structural neglect of Native health systems, the disproportionate mortality rates, and the isolation of communities all echo earlier histories of devastation, from the epidemics of the colonial period to the systemic underfunding of Indigenous health care.

Loss during the pandemic is never isolated; it is layered upon centuries of violence and dispossession. When Tookie describes a funeral held over video call, "We grieved her

through a screen, and yet I felt every ancestor grieving with us" (p. 186), the scene dramatizes Volkan's time collapse. The grief of COVID-19 deaths fuses with ancestral losses, as though history's wounds have erupted in the present. For Native communities, the pandemic exposes the simultaneity of past and present trauma, making continuity of identity inseparable from continuity of grief. This layering demonstrates how new crises cannot be understood outside the historical framework of colonial violence. Each contemporary loss reverberates with memory, reawakening grief that has never been fully resolved. The pandemic, in this sense, does not simply add to the burden of history but reanimates it, forcing communities to experience multiple registers of mourning at once.

Erdrich also emphasizes how trauma reshapes communal practices. Tookie observes: "We could not gather, so we carried the dead in our words instead" (p. 204). Here, language becomes the vessel for grief, connecting Section 4's emphasis on storytelling to pandemic survival. Brave Heart insists that healing requires collective mourning rituals, and in Erdrich's novel, those rituals adapt to new circumstances. Though physically separated, the community preserves identity through shared words and stories, sustaining both memory and survival. This adaptation demonstrates resilience: even when traditional forms of gathering are denied, cultural practices shift without losing their essence. The shift from physical gathering to virtual storytelling reflects the elasticity of Indigenous survival, where continuity is preserved not through rigid adherence to form but through the commitment to memory, voice, and collective presence.

The pandemic also creates opportunities for reflection on resilience. Tookie admits: "Even as we mourned, we learned again how much we had survived before" (p. 217). This echoes Volkan's notion that chosen trauma, though painful, can also solidify group identity, reminding communities of their endurance through centuries of catastrophe. For Erdrich, the pandemic is not only another site of devastation but also a reminder of Native resilience, of survival despite loss. Grief, while devastating, also becomes a register of persistence: every act of mourning affirms that the community remains, still able to carry its memories, still able to resist erasure. In this way, the pandemic underscores the paradox of Indigenous history—catastrophe and survival entwined, with each new crisis reinforcing both vulnerability and endurance.

Finally, Erdrich closes this reflection on continuity with Tookie's affirmation: "We were still here. Grief had not erased us; it had written us" (p. 259). This powerful line embodies Brave Heart's emphasis on transforming trauma into survivance, living beyond victimhood by carrying grief as part of identity. Volkan's framework also illuminates how trauma, once integrated, becomes a defining component of group identity rather than a purely destructive force. To be "written" by grief is not to be erased but to be inscribed with survival, to carry scars as part of the story that defines existence. Through the

pandemic, Erdrich reveals how Indigenous communities weave new traumas into old wounds, creating an identity shaped not only by loss but also by persistence, adaptation, and continuity.

By situating the narrative within the pandemic, *The Sentence* underscores that historical grief is never past but always unfolding. The pandemic does not replace old traumas; it layers upon them, demanding new strategies of survival. In showing how Tookie and her community carry grief into continuity, Erdrich affirms that Native identity is both haunted by history and strengthened through its endurance. Grief, far from silencing, becomes a testimony to survival. Through this, Erdrich insists that Indigenous identity is not defined solely by tragedy but by the capacity to endure and narrate tragedy, ensuring that history, however painful, remains part of an unbroken continuity of survival.

2. Conclusion

Erdrich's *The Sentence* demonstrates how Indigenous identity is profoundly shaped by historical grief yet sustained through practices of resilience. The novel shows that trauma is never simply past; it haunts, repeats, and reconfigures itself in the present. Flora's ghost captures this haunting most vividly. She embodies what Volkan calls a chosen trauma, the intrusion of colonial appropriation into Native lives that refuses to be silenced. For Tookie, Flora's lingering presence confirms that identity is always shadowed by unresolved histories.

Incarceration extends this logic into systemic injustice. Tookie's imprisonment illustrates Brave Heart's notion of intergenerational trauma, as her suffering reflects not only personal error but the broader legacies of Indigenous dispossession and marginalization. Trauma here is structural, reproducing itself through institutions that continue to wound Native peoples.

Yet grief is also revealed as a source of continuity. Funerals, memories, and mourning practices collapse past and present, carrying ancestral voices forward. Storytelling emerges as the most vital tool for survival: while Flora misuses stories to distort Native identity, Tookie and her community reclaim narrative as an act of healing, affirming Brave Heart's claim that cultural practices are essential for recovery.

Even the COVID-19 pandemic, experienced as another echo of colonial devastation, reinforces both fragility and endurance. In mourning through adapted rituals, Tookie and her community affirm their resilience: "we were still here" (p. 259).

In uniting these strands, *The Sentence* portrays grief not as an erasure of identity but as its very ground. Historical trauma persists, yet through mourning, storytelling, and survivance, Indigenous identity endures, carrying history without surrendering to it.

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