

*Original Paper*

An Analysis of Reservation Writing in  
*Where the Pavement Ends*  
from the Perspective of Internal Colonialism

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**Abstract**

*William Yellow Robe Jr.'s Where the Pavement Ends: Five Native American Plays is his representative drama collection published in 2000. These five dramas faithfully present Indian's life in Reservation in the 1970s. Based on the perspective of Internal Colonialism, this paper reveals the economic situation, political rights, and Civil Movement of Indian in Reservation. How does the Reservation System affect Indian in the 20th Century? This essay argues that Indian Reservation is the product of White colonization, and the negative effects brought by Whites' colonization cannot be eliminated. Even today, Indian still struggles to find their place in American society.*

**Keywords**

*William Yellow Robe Jr, Indian Reservation, Internal Colonialism, Indian Drama*

**1. Introduction**

As American citizens, Indians are one of the most impoverished ethnic groups in the US. They are notorious for the high rate of unemployment and alcohol abuse. Apart from these problems, the poor literacy rate is another obstacle Indians faced. According to "Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups 2018" published by the National Center for Education Statistics, Native American has the lowest college participation rates compared with other ethnic groups. And the rate of 19% is much lower than the average rate of 41% (p. 116). Thus, most Native American still depend on the traditional handicraft industry to make money, such as beading, star quilting, and lumbering. In 1855, the Federal Government gave Indian American citizenship for the first time. The government was figuring how to solve Native Americans' political identity problem. The ambiguous situation of citizenship did not ensure Native Americans' political rights but brought political obligations. During World War II, 44,000 of the

350,000 Native Americans in the United States enlisted in the military, which occupies about one-third of the healthy male population. In the 1960s, along with African Americans' Civil Movement, Native Americans also stood out to fight. They rose up to protest, aiming for economic independence, revitalization of traditional culture, protection of legal rights, and most importantly, the autonomy of Indian tribes, which states the awakening of Indian's racial consciousness.

In her article "Settler Colonialism and Empire in Early America", Anne quoted from Patrick Wolfe and emphasizes that "Internal Colonialism functions as a phenomenon not only international but intranational (Greer, 2019, p. 389)." Deborah Weigel interprets the symbolic meaning of Star Quilt as a non-commodity in her paper (Weigel, 2011, p. 47). Few domestic research has touched upon the issue of Internal Colonialism in Robe's work. Professor Xianghui Liu analyzes Indian national identity in his paper, probing into Indian's sense of belonging as a community (Liu, 2022, p. 15). As a prolific playwright, Robe's anthology has been studied as a practical drama script. David H. Fenimore comments Where the Pavement Ends as "an ironic and sometimes bitter humor" one-act drama, dealing with "intratribal as well as interracial relations (Fenimore, 2003, p. 310)." These studies give us new prospects to review Robe's work. This study enlarges the vision, revealing the overall colonized situation of Indians in Reservations, especially in the aspects of economic and political. However, in the end, Indians stand up to fight oppression from the mainstream for a better life. Indian Civil Movement reflects their awakening racial consciousness of them. Due to the limit of the study, *The Council* will not be included in the discussion.

## 2. Theory of Internal Colonialism

Internal colonialism is a notion of structural political and economic inequalities between regions within a nation-state. The term is used to describe the uneven effects of economic development on a regional basis, otherwise known as "uneven development", and to describe the exploitation of minority groups within a society.

When colonization happens within a country, it becomes internal colonization. The American critic Patrick Wolfe repeatedly emphasizes that Settler Colonialism in America is "a structure not an event" (qtd in Greer 389). The relationship between domination and exploitation of internal colonialism is realized mainly through economic and political structures. The former includes plunder, compulsory unfair goods exchange, usury, servitude, etc. The latter includes policy discrimination and persecution and violent force, etc. The term is used to describe the uneven effects of state development on a regional basis and to describe the exploitation of minority groups within the wider society. The dependency theorists use it to explain the racial effects of poverty and isolation on indigenous communities and their community's subordinate status in the United States (qtd. in Song 7). However, it is regrettable that most debates about race are around Afro-Americans, Hispanics, and Asian. Native American are seldom mentioned.

The Reservation System is evidence of colonizing Indians. It can be originated in the 18th century, and in the past two centuries, the step of colonizing Indian has never stopped. White has colonized Indian in America for centuries. While expelling Indians from their land, White is also destroying their culture. Internal Colonialism Theory helps to understand the process more clearly and structurally.

### 3. Economic Situation in Reservation

#### 3.1 Handicraft Industry in Reservation

Among all the occupations of Indians, the most common one is the handicraft. Due to backward education. They don't have access to work in the high-salary industries. Thus, handicraft becomes a major part of their income. *The Star Quilter* tells a story between an Indian woman Mona and a White woman Luanne. In the play, Luanne visits Mona several times to get the star quilt. In Indian culture, the star quilt is a gift for family members, instead of a commodity. But Mona still helps to make the star quilt. It turns out the star quilt is very popular among White. Thus, they start to run a business. Mona and other Indian women make the quilts; Luanne and her White partner are responsible for selling them. After a long time, Indian women and Mona find out that White sell their quilts at a high price, but they only get a little wage.

Mona: They didn't leave you right away. They did work for about two months and made over twenty-five quilts

...

Luanne: It wasn't my fault. How was I to know the man in New York was selling the star quilts for over eight hundred dollars a piece? It took me two months before I found out (p. 29).

In this play, Mona and other Indian women make star quilts for Luanne to make some money to improve their life. These Indian women not only sell star quilts as a commodity, but also, they cooperate with Luanne. The project doesn't work out as they expected. They could only get a small portion of the profit. This plot reflects the real economic situation in Reservation. Native Americans still depend on a traditional way to make their living. Handicraft is the representative industry of Indian. On the one hand, their handicrafts often combine unique cultural elements, such as star quilts, beads, and dream catchers. Such uniqueness attracts people to buy their handicrafts as souvenirs. On the other hand, the time invested in handicraft weighs much more than its profit. It is a complicated but underpaid work.

#### 3.2 Lumber Industry in Reservation

In 1830, Federal Government promulgated the Indian Removal Act which relocated Indian to the west of Mississippi. The wood resources in the west of the US. are rich. However, enriched natural resources were not essential in the 19th century. It was the time that American society stepped into the modern world. The land of the forest gave way to modern factories. Thus, the occupation of lumber appeared in Indian reservations. The majority of lumbermen are Indians because it requires no intellectual skills but physical strength.

*Rez Politics* tells a battle between Curtis and Gerald. Curtis is half African and half Indian and Gerald is an Indian. They fight to argue about who is a real Indian. The theme of this play is to explore ethnic identity. The African blood of Curtis's family is despised in Reservation. Gerald's father, an African American is discriminated against in such a situation. When other Indian people tell Gerald's family that they want to buy wood from him. Gerald's father accepted the deal but when he offered the wood for the buyer, things turned different.

Gerald: ... He and Lewis went out to get some wood last Saturday to sell.

...

Gerald: Yeah. They told my dad they would buy wood from him. Then when my dad and Lewis got back, Krantz wouldn't pay for it. My dad asked him why, but Krantz said my dad was trying to steal from him and there would be no way in hell he would buy wood from a nigger (p. 65).

"David Krantz", is a common White name. According to the Oxford Dictionary, Krantz is of Dutch origin. This conversation demonstrates how Gerald sell his wood to the White but failed. Though there are no detailed descriptions of Gerald's father's job, the information provided suggests his father is most likely a lumberman. Lumber, along with the handicraft industry, is another major income of Indian. Reservation is rich for wood; thus, lumber becomes another Indian way to make money.

Compared with the handicraft industry, lumber seems to be easier. They only need to take down the tree and move them to buyers. But the payment is not very satisfactory due to America's large acres of land. The rich resource of wood makes the price of trees very low. Thus, lumber as another major income of Indian still, cannot bring too much financial support for them. Another perspective to analyze the lumber industry is to see its consequence. After taking down the trees and the forest, the large land was open to cultivate. While these lands were not used to plant but to build factories. That is how the White internal-colonized Indians: buy the woods of Reservation at a low price and then use the land to build the modern world.

#### **4. Political Rights in Reservation**

Being American citizen, Native American do not have correspondent political right. They have special tribal laws. However, it also means they are excluded from the mainstream of the society. Neglecting Indian's political rights is one of mistreatment. Besides, Native American's political rights is "given" or "guaranteed" by White, which means White can interfere with Indian's political affairs but Indians cannot interfere with Whites'. It demonstrates a hierarchical relationship between Indian and White: the internal-colonized Indian by White. In *The Star Quilter*, Luanne comes to Mona to buy her star quilt to help the governor to win the election. Their conversation leads to the state election.

Mona: LuAnne, up until 1954, we Indian people didn't get to vote in "your" elections. We weren't even considered citizens in our country until 1924. Our tribal election who rules

the roost on the reservation. You can vote if you are an enrolled Indian. White people have the option of voting with their feet. We lost our moccasins a long time ago (p. 7).

The identity of Native American is, most of the time, a cultural issue, but is also a legal one. The first time when Indian got American citizenship was 1855. After that, different states recognized Indian citizenship one after another. In Montana, it was 1924 as Mona said when Indian became American. But the corresponding political right was not given to them, such as voting right.

Voting as a political right is seen as an essential civil right. However, Native American didn't have the right to vote until the mid-20th century. American government promised Indians sovereignty when they migrated to Reservation. However, Native Americans are ignored in the state, and national elections. In 1920, American women gained the right to vote. Yet, it was until the 1950s that Native American have the right to vote. Such exclusion of Indian in American politics is a classification. Indian, along with other ethnic minorities, are treated as second-class citizens. Seemingly they are protected by the tribal law, but at the same time, Indian are limited to the space of Reservation. Indian are deprived of political rights in American society.

Admitting Indian as American citizens does not ensure their political rights. However, Indians were asked to fulfill their political obligations. Serving in the military service is one of the obligations that belong to Indian. Claiming itself as a peace lover, America continuously initiated or interfered in wars with other countries, such as Korean War, Vietnam War, and Iraq War. In every battle in which Americans participated, there are Indian enlisted. In *Body Guards*, Skin and Benny talked about a medal on Clarence. Skin wants to steal it to sell. But Benny told him it was the Koran medal.

BENNY: Behave. Hey, look. What is that?

SKIN: What? Oh, that. That's one of the medals he won during the Korean War.

...

BENNY: A lot of Indians around here have those. A lot of these boys went off to fight. Came back and there wasn't anything for them. Just like their grandfathers. Didn't mean anything then, doesn't mean anything today (p. 53).

Benny's few words reflect Indian's high enrollment rate in the war. It seems most men in his tribe attended the Korean War. Military service is a civil obligation. A citizen has a certain political obligation to fulfill. In return, there are corresponding political rights to compensate, for example, the taxes would become civil insurance. However, things become different for Indians.

There is a double standard for Native American. As American citizens, they don't have appropriate political rights but have political obligations. Living on Reservation is a shield but also a limit. On settling Native American's citizenship, the mistreatment of the US. government to Indian is obvious. The unequal relationship between Native American's political rights and political obligations again reflects Native American's colonized situation.

## 5. Civil Movement in Reservation

As time goes on, people pay more attention to the unfair treatment of ethnic groups. In the 1960s, as African American Civil Movement started, other ethnic groups continuously joined this campaign, including Native American. In *The Star Quilter*, the scene of Indian protest has been briefly mentioned. Mona told LuAnne that she noticed the news of Indian protesting, and LuAnne commented these Indian as “bad Indians”. “It’s so sad about how all the young people are acting up, and then the coloreds. All the marches and protests are slowly coming to a halt. It’s just wonderful none of our Indians here in Montana did any of that marching stuff or protesting (p. 15).” LuAnne, as a White woman, is unsatisfied with Indian’s protest. She doesn’t understand the hard-living situation as Indian Besides, as a politician, she doesn’t want there is any political protest to happen under her administration. But her comments reflect that she is a racist and hypocritical politician. After commenting Indian protest was “sad”, she further add some disrespectful words to Indian community: “Well, you saw the Gazette. The pictures they carried of the protest. All those young long-haired Indian men, holding weapons and burning flags, It was just disgraceful. Not one of our Indians was there, I can promise you that (p. 17).” LuAnne can be seen as the representative of her White community. Her commentary suggests the White community’s disappointment and fear of Indian’s rebellion. For White, Native American have always been loyal and submissive subjects. On the other hand, it also implies the obstacles and suppression that Indian would face while protesting. The process of their fight will not be peaceful and smooth as they wished. The immediate response from society would be oppression from White, as LuAnne in *The Star Quilter* shows. However, the more White wants to suppress and assimilate Indian, the more Indian advocates their traditional culture. Claiming their subject position is the first step to get rid of the object of colonization, for example, in *Sneaky*, three brothers try to bury their mother in their Indian way. Every resident of the state should be buried according to the law, in other words, buried in White’s way: in the church. The three sons decide to steal their mother’s body from the mortuary. *Sneaky* shows the process of their action to readers. During the process, three brothers demonstrate their rejection of White’s assimilation and defense of Indian culture.

Jack: I’m getting tired and it’s getting chiller. I’m thinking seriously about getting the cops out there.

Frank: You do that! You go ahead. I don’t care what you do after the funeral. Just don’t try to stop us from having it. I’m willing to sacrifice whatever I have to, Jack. Having this woman as a mother was a great gift. And now we’re returning her to her god, her family, and her relations. We have an old woman to bury now, Jack... (p. 163).

Toward the end of the play, the White mortician came to the brothers. Frank and Eldon were sneaking to steal their mother’s body, and they were afraid of being found. But at the end of the play, they are confronted by the mortician Jack publicly. They announced that they would be willing to do anything to bury their mother according to Indian traditions.

In contrast to the title of the play, what the brothers do is obvious and public. They challenge the state law, claiming it violates Indian's tradition. From this, it is evident to say that Frank and Eldon are proud of their Indian identities. As for the youngest brother, Kermit, he has the most Indian element in this character. He is the only one who says Assiniboine among the brothers. Even though he is drunk all day, he is a true adherent to Indian culture. He despises Eldon's celebration of Thanksgiving Day. For him, it is a betrayal of their Indian ancestors. "All the Indian people I know. You're the only one who celebrates Thanksgiving, the coming of White man" (p. 153). Kermit's anger toward Eldon shows his dislike for White and proud of an Indian. Recognizing one's ethnic identity and rebellion shows the awakening of racial consciousness. This is also the essence of the American Indian Movement.

After five hundred years of marginalization, Native American began to stand out to protest. In social activity, the Civil Movement shows their determination. It also implies their rebellious spirit. The protest is just a start. Hopefully, it contains not only Indian's actions but also the whole society's effort to equalize Indian's position.

## 6. Conclusion

Yellow Robe's *Where the Pavement ends* presents a true picture of Reservation life. The historical problem brought about by Reservation system still affects Indian nowadays, which implies White's Internal Colonialism to Indian in the US. Indian community's economic situation is backward and their political rights cannot be ensured. However, the Civil Movement in Reservation reflects Indian racial consciousness is awakening. Robe showed his concern about his Indian community: Where should the pavement to Indian future go? The path to their future is still unclear, and it takes effort to find their way.

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