

AMERICAN INDIAN STEREOTYPES IN WHITE AMERICAN DISCOURSE

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Abstract

When Columbus set foot on American soil, he did not find it empty. In fact there were people so diverse culturally and ethnically that diversity had become a norm for them. It was this exposure to diversity that prompted the Natives to welcome Europeans with open arms. Native American tribes lived in harmony with each other as well as with nature. However, the European immigrants had a predominantly colonial project behind their venturing into American soil. During that time Europe was wrought with strife and conflict. European monarchies were looking for resources that would power their conflicts. In fact, Columbus succeeded to persuade the Spanish queen Isabella to fund his voyage only by convincing her that it would help the monarchy to accumulate wealth and power. With this underlying concern, Columbus wanted to simultaneously perform his missionary role by spreading Christianity among the alien people he confronted. Despite the obvious hypocrisy that was evident in the underlying motives, one based on exploitation and the other on religion, Columbus proceeded to put the project into a practical form. Most of the early explorers that came to America followed his lead and went on to portray their advent as based upon a noble cause. In order to justify the project of Christianizing the Natives and ruling upon them, early European writers began to create certain stereotypes about the indigenous peoples of America. The diverse cultural tribes of America came to be homogenized as uncivilized, savage Indians. The four famous stereotypical myths about the Indians created through white discourse saw Indians as ‘uncivilized’, ‘barbarian’, ‘noble savage’ and ‘vanishing’. The European endeavour of defining Indians has ever since continued to be a predominant factor in the history of Native Americans.

Key Words: Native American, White American, Identity, Colonization, Stereotypes, Christianity, Uncivilized.

After his advent to America in 1492, Columbus took on a leading role in determining the approach of the Europeans towards the indigenous people of America. Columbus's friend and sympathetic biographer, Padre Bartolomé de Las Casas (b. 1484), included in his pioneering *Historia de las Indias* composed between 1527 and 1560, Columbus's private journals, the *Diario* containing Columbus's intimate revelations written for presentation to the Spanish monarchs. Revealing through personal accounts and other indirect sources, Columbus laid a basis of Native American misrepresentations and colonial appropriations that went on to obliterate the identity of the indigenous peoples of America. He predominantly spoke about his Christian missionary zeal placing his material motives side by side with the moral ones. In his writings, he reveals the prospects of converting the indigenous inhabitants of the newfound land to Christianity. Gretchen M Bataille quotes Columbus: "I have observed that they soon repeat anything that is said to them, and I believe that they would easily be made Christians, for they appear to me to have no religion" (2001: 2). Conversion to Christianity was an important tool in the hands of European immigrants to tame the incomprehensible diverse tribal peoples of America. Such was the prejudice against the Natives that Europeans formulated a belief that the natives have been deployed by the devil in the American continent so that the Christian faith could not touch them (2001: 3). Ward Churchill quotes Alexander Whitaker (b. 1585) to the same effect: "They [Indians] acknowledge that there is a great God, but they know him not, wherefore they serve the devil for fear, after a most base manner..." (1998: 4). Besides his colonial approach, Columbus confused his view towards the Native people by believing that in America he had found an earthly paradise and thus he could not place the human race already inhabiting it anywhere in his worldview thereby discarding them as inhuman devoid of any religion and culture.

Columbus was merely reiterating what had been created in the European discourse over a long period. Europe believed in the presence of an Eden upon earth and for them it was to be sought in the Far East specifically in India (Moffitt & Sebastian 1998: 30). Drawing from a resource of European scholarly debates about the location of Eden upon earth and its specific characteristics as portrayed in the Bible and expounded by Christian religious scholars, Columbus went on to follow the European assumptions and place his findings accordingly to formulate his opinions about his discoveries. Moffitt and Sebastian quote Columbus "I am really looking for India," and, furthermore, "In India I have found (just as I knew I would) the Earthly Paradise" (1998: 21). It, therefore, became necessary that the newly invented Native American inhabitants must be then somehow fitted into the pre-existent paradise picture of a soft primitivism typically adhering to the ancient idea of the Golden Age. Moreover, by equating the new land with "*el Paraíso terrestre*" or "the Earthly Paradise" and characterizing the inhabitants as innocent and savage, Columbus nullified the history of about thirty thousand years of Native American past (Gray 2004: 3). Recent studies in anthropology have proven that at the time of the first meeting between the Europeans and the Native American people, "there were more than ten million Native Americans speaking more than three hundred and fifty languages" (Gray 2004: 4). However, these languages were not taken into consideration and were denied any value. All that the natives meant to the Europeans was an inconceivable 'other'. Moreover, they were not looking for 'otherness' but for a way of eliminating it. Indians were placed in the familiar category of 'barbarian,' implying inferiority, someone distinguished by a lack of ability to speak, someone who can only make animal-like noises (Swann 2004: xvi). Besides labelling the native languages as 'barbarian' and the natives as savages "de facto devoid of logos, or reason" (Swann 2004: xvi), Columbus and the other early Europeans saw comparison as a useful

strategy to deal with America and the Americans. The new world was to be understood by discovering its likeness with that of the old. This was a process of familiarizing the unfamiliar by means of renaming and re-contextualizing the places to mark non-Indian possession of them. Columbus thus christened the inhabitants with a single collective descriptor, *Indian*. William Apess (1798–?), the most prolific nineteenth century Indian writer in the English language and the first Native American to write and publish his own autobiography *A Son of the forest* (1829), writes in it, “I know nothing so trying to a child as to be repeatedly called by an improper name” (1992: 10). He saw the word ‘Indians’ as “a slur upon an oppressed and scattered nation... a word imported for the special purpose of degrading us” (1992: 10). He out rightly rejects the use of the word ‘Indian’ and suggests “the proper term which ought to be applied to our nation, to distinguish it from the rest of the human family, is that of ‘Natives’” (Apess 1992: 10). Regarding the use of this label contemporary Anishinaabe critic Gerald Vizenor states, “The Indian was an occidental invention that became a bankable simulation; the word has no referent in tribal language or cultures” (1999: 11). Europeans continued to fictionalize the indigenous population as a homogeneous ‘Indian’ even though they encountered diverse, and sometimes divided, sets of people. With the advent of fifteenth and sixteenth centuries colonizing countries increasingly began to perceive the indigenous population, not on their own terms but as counter-images of aspects of themselves. The question of understanding the ‘other’ had no prospect for the Europeans. The Natives were seen as culturally static and somehow outside history. The ‘Indian’ was stereotyped in stories and travel narratives “as a fierce, cannibalistic creature, and the woodcuts accompanying the stories portrayed the Indian as less than human — naked, violent, warlike, and, frequently, more animalistic than human” (Bataille 2001: 2).

With Columbus acting as a pioneer, a process of transforming the ‘other’ into a conceivable, dominated and possessed property was started. This process of transformation affected the Indian population severely. The import of manufactured items from Europe at the cost of exploitation of animal resources and the import of adulterated alcohol resulted in the Native population becoming ever more dependent, and at the same time losing connection with their land and culture. William Apess gives an account in his book *A Son of the Forest* of the abuse he had to face on account of his drunken grandparents and out rightly blames the whites for the same:

At a certain time, when my grandmother had been out among the whites, with her baskets and brooms, and had fomented herself with the fiery waters of the earth, so that she had lost her reason and judgment and, in this fit of intoxication, raged most bitterly and in the meantime fell to beating me most cruelly; calling for whips, at the same time, of unnatural size, to beat me with... Thus I was beaten, until my poor little body was mangled and my little arm broken into three pieces, and in this horrible situation left for a while. And had it not been for an uncle of mine, who lived in the other part of the old hut, I think that she would have finished my days My sufferings certainly were through the white man's measure; for they most certainly brought spirituous liquors first among my people.

(1829: 61)

Moreover, non-Indian people brought to America epidemic disease against which the native people had no resistance. Porter & Roemer states:

Recurrent epidemics of smallpox, measles, pneumonia, scarlet fever, typhus, and, after 1840, cholera, alongside loss of livelihood and land coupled with the effects of alcohol were what principally reduced tribal populations, rather than military engagement.

(2005: 48)

Owing to inexperience in matters relating to war and since the idea of national conquest, total victory or defeat, or the development and evolution of a sophisticated military technology, as it had developed in the European continent, was new to the American Native population, Europeans had the upper hand in the conquest of America. These factors, especially the exposure to disease, “resulted in the diminishment by almost 85% of the aggregate Native American population during the contact period” (Dorris 1979: 149). Sovereignty of indigenous rights to indigenous lands was ignored by the application of a doctrine known as ‘discovery’ devised for the special purpose of claiming the native land and avoiding of conflict between the European nations. The United States officially embraced the same doctrine in 1823 Supreme Court case as justification of its legal claim to sovereignty over the Indian lands.

Columbus maintained written records and send them back to Europe for preservation, and for further use by later immigrants. Numerous immigrants that came to America actively participated in the process of laying the foundations for a new world by excluding the original inhabitants and ‘legalizing’ the confiscation of Native American peoples’ lands (Elliott 2010: 13). The advent of the Europeans to America coincided with the establishing of the printing press in the European Continent. Thus the written text was about to explode in Europe. With the rapid spread of the written text, the process of formation of a white American identity with the native indigenous population stereotyped as the ‘Other’ became available to more and more immigrants. These stereotyped images were used to subjugate and dominate the native population. In this connection Moffitt and Sebastian remark:

As we demonstrate, the complex process of an evolving iconographical invention of America, particularly as applied to its native inhabitants, was made possible largely due to two factors: the new technology of the printing press and old mythic contexts established in late medieval Europe.

(1998: 8)

The misrepresentation of Native Americans was later continued by other means like drama and movies. “The Native American presence moved easily from the printed page and portrait to the stage to become a stock figure in drama, with the roles played by whites, anticipating what was to become standard practice in the movies” (Bataille 2001: 3). Natives were considered subhuman; subjects to be erased and restructured into a new frame. The Indian in today's world consciousness is a product of literature, history, and art all aimed at depicting a predetermined picture of a savage uncivilized brute who bears little resemblance to actual living heterogeneous Native American people.

Most of the early European settlers and those promoting European settlement of America wrote narratives primarily to motivate people back in Europe to embark on a journey to America wherein the dream of creating an Eden could be realized. Edward Williams (b. 1650), one such early immigrant called America a “‘Virgin Countrey’ sealed in its aboriginal state” (Gray 2004: 26). The idea of America as ‘virgin land’ became popular in the European discourse and was used as an enticing bait for people to come to America and realize the project of creating “a new England in which would be recovered the lost virtues of the old” (Gray 2004: 29). An important

person who figured prominently in the array of these early explorers was Captain John Smith (1580-1681), who used writing to promote the influx of European immigrants. Soon after his first contact with the natives, he wrote books and proclaimed that his was a more authentic and reliable approach to the project of colonization. He proudly asserted at the beginning of *The Generall Historie*: “I am no Compiler by hearsay, but have been a real Actor” (qtd. in Gray 2004: 29), implicating that he could speak with authority about the New World. Even though his books went on to assume the status of ‘authentic’ historical documents for the Europeans about American Indian history, these texts were primarily endeavours undertaken with the goal of colonizing the Natives and were based more upon fiction than fact. Smith is remembered for his role in establishing the first permanent English settlement in North America at Jamestown, Virginia. Most notable textual creation of Smith is *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New-England, and the Summer Isles* (1624). His primary purpose in writing this book was to eternalize “the memory of those that effected the settlement of Virginia” (Lemay 1991: 26). Similarly, Alexander Whitaker (b. 1585), in his sermons, which were sent to Europe, portrayed the Indians as “slaves of the devil” (qtd. In Churchill 1998: 4) to help him win support for the establishment of new colonies in North America. His most famous book of sermons *Good Newes from Virginia* (1613) was of considerable influence in the stereotyping of the Indians. Stereotyping of natives as savages was also achieved by the so-called ‘Captivity Narratives’. Such narratives often focused upon the portrayal of inhuman treatment meted out by the Native men to white captives as well as to their own womenfolk and children (Churchill 1998: 5).

Besides other methods of misrepresentation, literature was used to justify the inhuman attitude of the white man towards the native population. Since one of the Christian commandments prohibits killing of humans, literature was used to dehumanize the Indians in order to justify their extermination. Ward Churchill finds intimate links between American literature and the process of colonization. He states that the “treatment of the American Indian in the arena of American literature must be seen as part and parcel of the Angloamerican conquest of the North American continent” (1998: 9). Fiction writers in Europe created imaginary Indians based upon a distorted perception of the Indian people. In France Chateaubriand (1768-1848) created fictional Indians, and in Germany Karl May (1842-1912) created Winnetou, a fictional Apache chief. Karl May wrote a series of novels based on such fictional characters like the Old Shatterhead and his sidekick Winnetou. The Native was represented as ‘The Noble Savage’ and this image was perpetuated by writers, artists, missionaries, explorers and continues till date. In most of the descriptions, America was portrayed as a Native American woman in an Eden-like setting welcoming the European immigrant or, conversely, as an Indian who was a hostile enemy, savage and uncivilized. The story of Pocahontas gained much circulation, as it represented native women loyal to the white explorers who had invaded her tribal land (Bataille 2010: 2). Artists like John White, George Catlin, Alfred Jacob Miller, and Frederick Remington were fascinated by the Native Americans and portrayed them in a variety of, often opposing, roles ranging from their portrayal as domestics to their characterization as regal (Bataille 2010: 3). Most of the times in these distorted versions, the Indian cultures and the Indian people were portrayed as a dying race and it was emphasized that records had to be maintained and preserved for historical purpose. Bataille mentions that “Dime novels and movies have defined Native Americans as ‘discovered’ by Columbus, ‘lurking in the wilderness,’ ‘attacking wagon trains,’ ‘scalping pioneers,’ ‘savages’ who hindered progress, and, usually, groups who would ‘vanish’ along with the buffalo.” Quoting Vine Deloria, he writes that “historically African Americans were viewed as domestic animals whereas Native Americans have always been viewed as wild

animals, providing justification for their extinction” (2010: 5). In the late nineteenth century the tradition of dime novels and books cashed on these images of Native Americans and used “titles such as *The Death of Jane McCrea* and *The Murder of Lucinda*, tales that warned readers of menacing Indian males who would attack white women” (Bataille 2010: 3). Another French novelist Michel René Hilliard d'Auberteuil (1751-1785) published *Miss McCrea: A Novel of the American Revolution* (1784), also based upon the murder of Miss McCrea in 1777. McCrea's story was highly fictionalized in many artistic forms including writing and painting. Her story was used to promote the idea of white male supremacy and to portray the natives as horrifyingly dangerous (Harris 2005: 88).

Early nonfiction writers provided the grounds for the later tradition of fiction writers to follow and promote the stereotyping of the Indians. Literature produced after the creation of the United States held on to the image of the Indian that had been created by the colonizing forces and propagated it further rather than changing it. The basic instinct of white fiction writer was to justify the holocaust of the Indian population, terming it necessary for the new nation's progress. Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntly* (1799) was the first in the construction of this image. It was aimed at portraying the tension in the white American mind towards horrifying brutal killing of the Indians. Brown was trying to justify the white American character as “compelled by ‘cruel lenity’ to perform and to witness acts of horrifying brutality...Edgar Huntly encompasses the dire ambivalence of the American constitution” (Bergland 2000: 56) He was closely followed by Washington Irving who tried to “contain the madness” as it figured in the depiction of white American character by Brown in *Edgar Huntly*. He aimed at unifying the American subject and to construct a national literature. In order to do this he felt the need to first cure the “diseased state of public mind” (Bergland 2000: 56) for which he turned back to “the ghostly figure of the Native American” (Bergland 2000: 56) in his essays “Traits of Indian Character” and “Philip of Pokanoket” published in *Analectic Magazine* in 1813. He focuses generally on the role of Native Americans in American literature. Both the essays were later on compiled side by side in *The Sketchbook of Sir Geoffrey Crayon* (1819). These sketches were intended to act as a “...call for Americans to take advantage of Native American sources and themes to differentiate Anglo-American writing from English” (Bergland 2000: 57). As against Brown's American Gothic, Irving proposed a new American romanticism which also relied on presenting Native Americans as ghosts and assumed the inevitability of the disappearance of the Indian. In *The Sketchbook* Irving's technique is one of displacement of the phantasmal Natives by civilized and controlled beings. These phantom images of the Native continued to be reinforced in American literature reiterating the need for their vanishing. Fiction writers in the US were writing with the purpose of creating new foundations of their nation upon the graves of the indigenous peoples. Samuel Woodworth's novel *The Champions of Freedom, or, The Mysterious Chief* (1818) enacts a displacement that was surely inspired by Irving, a displacement of the Indian ghost by the figure of the father of the new nation, implying that the new nation bases itself on the image of the natives as dead and displaced. James Fenimore Cooper went on to firmly establish the Native American stereotypes in his cumulative novels including *The Pioneers* (1823), *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), *The Deerslayer* (1841), *The Prairie* (1827) and *The Pathfinder* (1840). Cooper was not alone in this enterprise, many contemporary writers were writing in the same vein. Chateaubriand's *Atala* (1801), William Gilmore Simms' *The Yemassee* (1835) and *Guy Rivers* (1834), Mayne Reid's *The Scalp Hunters* (1851) and *Desert Home* (1852) were all based upon the distorted image of the Indians contained within the white American historical and fictional discourse of the past. The construction of the Indian, ghosts haunting the fiction of the time was

influenced by the recent historical and political events relating to the white expansion on the American continent. “Because white America displaces, disposes, and even attempts to destroy Indian America, the texts must construct America as a nation haunted by Indian ghosts” (Bergland 2000: 59-60). Thus, the above mentioned writers could lay claim to the ‘authenticity’ of a firm grounding in the ‘historical record’. It was an attempt to fulfil a literary “Manifest Destiny”.

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