Native American Stereotypes in Literature: The Noble Savage, the Utopian Man

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ABSTRACT

Historically, Western White society has portrayed Native American societies as utopias that we can look to for political, spiritual, and artistic inspiration. For example, Columbus's original "Letters of Discovery" began this tradition by writing the natives as a primitive, pure, communal society, and Montaigne's "Of the Cannibals" continued this tradition with his similar portrayal of native peoples. Such portrayals ultimately lead to harmful stereotypes, expectations, and marginalization of Native American people by White society. With the aid of Robert Berkhofer Jr's The White Man's Indian, this essay explores the idea of the noble savage in conjunction with utopian ideals and breaks down the process by which Native ways of life have been falsely portrayed as utopias. Additionally, it explores the consequences of such stereotypical depictions and looks at attempts to dispel such utopian myths.

Humanity has always been dreaming of utopia: a better, easier way of life could always be imagined, hoped for, perhaps even pursued. Religious utopias such as Christianity's Heaven and the Garden of Eden are just two pieces of evidence, along with Greek classics like Plato's *Republic* and Plutarch's *Lycurgus*. It is a part of being human: utopian visions represent humanity's potential for good taken to the extreme, whereas dystopias represent humanity's potential for extreme evil. It should be no wonder then that utopian ideas existed long before Thomas More coined the term in 1516. These ideas, developed in the petri dish of Western thought, before the discovery of the Americas, later became a cultural reference point that New World colonizers used to frame their interactions with Native peoples. Ideas about the inherent goodness of nature versus the corruption of civilization, mixed with the Natives' perceived naivety, culminated in a tradition of portraying Native American culture as utopias—one which still stands today. This stereotype began with Columbus and the concept of the "noble savage" but can be traced through history and is still visible in the ways Native people are written and conceptualized by some present-day thinkers. Ultimately, such stereotypes have been and continue to be harmful to Native people, refusing to afford them full humanity or modernity. Limited to what mainstream White society allows them to be, Natives continue to be othered by these harmful stereotypes despite contemporary efforts to change the narrative through both political and literary movements.

BEGINNING OF THE "NOBLE SAVAGE"

Images of Native societies as utopian began with the first European colonizers who stepped foot on American soil. In his book, *The White Man's Indian*, Robert Berkhofer Jr. explains that as the first Spanish, French, and English explorers came across Native societies and people, they made sense of the American Natives through two distinctly European cultural frameworks: Christianity and civilization, two ideologies so intertwined that they were assumed to be one and the same. In the process of making sense of the Natives, the colonizers tended to fall on one side of a cultural interpretation or the other: that the Natives were a gentle and naive people or they were savage cannibals. Berkhofer summarizes the process which ultimately resulted in these two European conceptualizations of the Native, writing,

> Spaniards debated what means were necessary to bring the Indian in line with their ideals of Christian civilization according to European criteria. Was the nature of the Indian so bestial as to demand force and ultimately enslavement to accomplish his conversion to Christ and Spanish ways, or was the Indian sufficiently rational and human to achieve these goals through peace and example alone? (11)

In the end, this debate was never exactly solved so much as responsible for the image of the Native as either savage—murderers and cannibals outside the realm of God, morality, and civilization—or as noble—like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, naive and simplistic, children of God who live as nature intended. European culture had, at least until that point, imagined that the biblical garden of Eden or some utopic paradise lay to the west, and such imagination overlaid the way European colonizers viewed and wrote back to Europe about the Natives. This explains, then, the origin of the mystery and conflicting ideas surrounding the Native—ideas still found in the American subconscious today. It is because of these two interpretations, and their dual longevity, that Western culture for so long performed the cognitive dissonance necessary to conceptualize the pre-colonial Native as gentle, sentimental, living in some ways in an elevated society, but at the same time the ferocious, subhuman savage who must be subdued. Columbus and later colonizers often meshed these two extreme visions of Natives into what later came to be called the "noble savage": people who were uncivilized, yet represented the natural good in humanity, untouched by modernity, preserved as Adam and Eve had been before taking a bite of the apple. Though the Natives practiced habits of "savagery" as well, which many condemned, those who were proponents of the goodness of the Natives dismissed these as a result of not knowing better. Their societies were described as utopias, or at least having utopian values, though it is important to note that they were never considered better than European societies and "always stood in Christian error and deficient in civilization according to Spanish standards of measurement" (Berkhofer 11). Christopher Columbus wrote of the Natives and their utopic societies in his 1493 letter: "all go naked…They have no iron or steel or weapons…well-built and of handsome stature… they refuse nothing they possess… content with whatever may be given to them" (60). In *Mundus Novus,* Amerigo Vespucci wrote "…all things are held in common. They live together without king, without government, and each is his own master…they live according to nature…They live one

and each is his own master…they live according to nature…They live one hundred and fifty years and rarely fall ill" (6). Here, these colonizers set the tone for the noble savage tradition, and it is important to recognize the utopic values they associate with Native societies: social equality, collectivism, care for the earth, innocence and inherent goodness, physical superiority, and living as nature intended. Such ideals are tropes of the utopian genre still today and have followed White society's conceptualization of the Native as well.

WHY IT WORKED: THE PATHOLOGY OF UTOPIAN THOUGHT

The concept of the noble savage was especially useful to White society because of its theoretical implications and was utilized within literature and political/ philosophical arguments. Berkhofer writes,

> Whether employed in political and philosophical treatise or play, novel, satirical essay, or imaginary voyage, the noble American Indian scored specific points against religious beliefs and institutions, the nature of education, the organization of government and codes of laws, the prevalence of commerce and the organization of the economy, the general social system and social inequality, and the very complexity of life and corruption of civilized and sophisticated customs in general. (76-77)

In other words, the supposed existence of Natives' utopian lifestyles in many ways challenged the legitimacy of European institutions and cultural norms. However, these utopian lifestyles were ones that existed only in writing; explorers documenting their travels, the Natives, and their lifestyles approached them with preconceived notions of what was desirable, good, and normal, as well as the prevalent European science and religion. Columbus and Vespucci, among all the other European explorers, therefore judged the Natives by how they did not conform to European standards (demonization of the savage) or how they fit into preexisting European narratives and myths (the Garden of Eden to the western horizon). In other words, Native customs and society were always being taken out of context by Europeans and were judged by European norms and ways of thinking. In the end, the concept of the "Native" and their society as imagined by Europeans was more of a European invention than anything representing the reality of the Natives.

One of the most notable examples of Natives used as tool for European education is Michel De Montaigne's fictional essay, *Of the Cannibals*, which presents Natives as noble savages from which much can be learned. Written in 1580, almost 100 years after European exploration of the New World had begun, Montaigne takes full advantage of the noble savage image, using it to critique European lifestyles for being artificial and far from what nature intended. At the heart of his essay is his opinion of the Natives—that they are not savage for not being civilized under a European definition, only different. He writes:

> [I] find that there is nothing barbarous and savage in this nation, by anything that I can gather, excepting, that every one gives the title of barbarism to everything that is not in use in his own country. As, indeed, we have no other level of truth and reason than the example and idea of the opinions and customs of the place wherein we live: there is always the perfect religion, there the perfect government, there the most exact and accomplished usage of all things. *They are savages at the same rate that we say fruits are wild, which nature produces of herself and by her own ordinary progress; whereas, in truth, we ought rather to call those wild whose natures we have changed by our artifice and diverted from the common order*. (Montaigne, 115; emphasis added)

Here, not only does the narrator argue that Natives are not savage, he employs the noble savage trope by arguing that civilization corrupts men and that the lack of such corruption reveals humanity's original "good" nature. Even the imagery of the wild fruit as the most good and natural form furthers the idea that Natives were (and are) spontaneous objects produced by nature, presented for consumption by those who were willing to take advantage of them. In this way, the utopian, or noble, Native was useful when critiquing the institutions and norms of the time, and, at the same time, was used as a static specimen, dehumanized and used as a tool to analyze Western culture.

If Native Americans as individuals have been portrayed as noble savages, Native American societies have been portrayed as utopias. But why do the two go hand in hand? The very origin of the utopian name and genre can help answer this question. Thomas More, in naming his work *Utopia*, created a phrase that simultaneously meant a "good place" and "no place." Utopia then, is inherently a place that exists in the mind, in the imagination, even as a collective social dream of some society

where something or everything is somehow better than in the dreamer's society. Nonetheless, utopia cannot exist outside of this dream. But why?

This question answers itself: a society made up of imperfect people cannot be perfect. Human nature is a mysterious mixture of good and evil, and society is a reflection of this mixture on a grand scale. Therefore, a perfect society cannot be achieved until a perfect set of people emerge. Such a theme is common in utopian societies: inherently better citizens must be present in order for an inherently better society. Such a theme is found in early works such as *Lycurgus* and Plato's *The Republic*. It can be traced through Karl Marx's *The Communist Manifesto*; and it continues into contemporary works such as Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*.

Even in works where the general public is not perfect, a utopian work can still make the statement that at least *some* inherently better people must exist in a utopia, through works where an extrinsic social structure is in place to provide or even control the *common* people. Though the better nature of all people in a utopia is not implied in such cases, they do imply the existence of at least some better people who run the government and must keep the others in check. Such ideas can be seen in Evie Shockley's "separation anxiety" as well as H.G. Wells's *A Modern Utopia*.

Where, then, do Native Americans and the noble savage fit in? The short answer becomes that the creation of the noble savage myth was so effective—and to some degree still is today—because it provided the missing link that "allowed" utopias to be possible. In other words, if Native Americans were portrayed as noble savages, a people who are *inherently better* by virtue of being uncivilized (think Adam and Eve), then Native American societies were simultaneously portrayed as inherently utopian. The portrayal of the noble savage was so useful for Western society because it supposedly allowed them a way to gain knowledge of how to create a better society through contact with a better people. This habit of White society looking to Native culture for wisdom is a trope that is still here today—with harmful effects on Native people.

THE NOBLE SAVAGE TODAY

Today, the savage portrayal of the Native American has fallen out of fashion, as it is the more obviously dehumanizing and harmful of the two extremes. Yet, many make the mistake of thinking

that the noble, or utopian, portrayal of the Native American is a way of elevating and paying homage to Native culture. However, the utopian vision of the Native American is harmful in ways that are less visible but which are, in the long run, just as destructive. Such idealized visions of Native people have stuck around to the modern day and are present everywhere—from sports team logos to commercials to children's books and movies. The image of the Native American as being in touch with the earth, as living in a communal society with little organized government or laws, and as possessing an inherent superiority or goodness is one that is familiar to the average American. Such imagery is harmful as it does not accord Native Americans full humanity, and it is not historically truthful; rather it idealizes, objectifies, and attempts to mold indigenous peoples into the White idea of what a Native American should be. Berkhofer observes that the modern vision of Native Americans allows no room for an actual modern Native American, as "[i]n spite of centuries of contact and the changed conditions of Native American lives, Whites picture the 'real' Indian as the one before contact or during the early period of that contact" (28). He goes on to point out the cognitive dissonance performed by White society: "If Whites do not conceive of themselves still living as Anglo-Saxons, Gauls, or Teutons, then why should they expect Indians to be unchanged from aboriginal times, Native Americans ask of their White peers?" (29). Such a condition is evident in, for example, the objectification of Native Americans through their use as sports mascots. Names such as "Chiefs," "Redskins," or "Braves," along with some form of accompanying "Native" imagery are common and are even used by national teams. A headdress, tomahawk, or chief in profile are all examples of this cultural phenomenon which reduces the "Native" to a thing of the past, a caricature of no higher significance than the animals and objects that comprise the majority of mascots. Such a conception ignores the reality of present-day Native Americans and does not allow them to simultaneously sustain a contemporary identity and their heritage. For, "[i]f the Indian changed through the adoption of civilization as defined by Whites, then he was no longer truly Indian according to the image, because the Indian was judged by what Whites were not" (Berkhofer 29).

Another example of the modern portrayal of the noble savage, or the idealized Native, is within the realm of children's books and stories. Two prominent Native American depictions are Disney's 1995 *Pocahontas*, and the American Girl doll, Kaya, along with her accessories and book set.

Pocahontas features Pocahontas as the noble, romantic savage—innocent, one with nature, and inherently good—while Pocahontas's betrothed, Kocoum, is the perfect savage, attacking John Smith with a tomahawk and consequently dying from John's musket. Kaya's books feature a representation of Nez Perce life (Northwestern Native American tribe) that is utopian on further investigation: although the book takes place in a seasonal gathering of upwards of 1,000 people, everyone communally shares the harvest of salmon from the river, work is done equally, and there is no hard and fast government or set of laws. The image of the Native American as an in-tune steward of the earth is also prominent in this children's work: on the American Girl doll website, Kaya's catchphrase is "Respect and protect the Earth because we are all connected" (Kaya). Not surprisingly, Kaya is the only Native American doll, her story set in 1764. She is among ten other historical dolls: six White dolls from different periods, two African American dolls, one Latina doll, and one Pacific Islander doll. It is clear from a glance at this single cultural artifact what effect the Eurocentric gaze has: the dolls representing minority groups are all represented as Whites see them and represented in periods where they historically were relevant to Whites. Kaya is a "traditional" Nez Perce girl from 1764, and her existence as the only Native American doll plays a role in perpetuating the image of the utopian Native American. The African American dolls are representative of the two historical images Whites have of that minority—slavery and the civil rights movement. The Pacific Islander doll from Hawaii is representative of Pearl Harbor, and the Latina doll representative of Mexico's independence. The White dolls, on the other hand, represent different "mainstream" time periods during which all of the above minorities were present or had their own movements and history but were not considered relevant by White society. All in all, the Kaya doll, though it may have been created with the purpose of educating young people and paying tribute to Native Americans, simply solidifies the single image mainstream society has of Natives as gentle, traditional, and stuck in the past.

The noble savage stereotype is present in modern media as well, for example through the Native's portrayal in the 1971 Crying Indian advertisement by Keep America Beautiful—an ad that is well remembered today, produced by an organization that is still active. This ad, which Keep America Beautiful's website proclaims an "iconic symbol of environmental responsibility and one of the most successful PSA campaigns in history," is a one-minute clip showing traditionally dressed Native

Americans paddling down a river past waste and pollution, cars and littering, with one Native man finally looking at the camera and shedding a single, solitary tear (Mission and History). Such an image was so successful precisely because it played off of White America's ideas of what Natives were—stewards of the land, stoic, a thing of the past. Even the attire—buckskin garments, headdresses, and embellishments of beads, quills, and feathers—plays into the Native American as a concept. Native Americans existed in the 1970s, just not in the minds of the American public. To them, the Native American ceased to exist after they were relegated to their reservations—after settlers had pushed as far west as they could. Here is the result of the Native and modern civilization when posed as diametrically opposite—when there is no room for a modern Native American and he is sequestered to the past, used as a symbol, a token, and ultimately as a fantasy to market to the White public.

Cumulatively, this compilation of images and narratives Whites have constructed surrounding what a Native American looks and behaves like creates a cultural constraint on what they are allowed to be. If they are too modern, they cease to be Native; too traditional and they become stuck in the past. If contemporary groups are too vocal about their condition, the rhetoric becomes "it happened a long time ago and doesn't matter now;" if they are too quiet they are complicit in their own destruction, loss of land, and loss of heritage. In the long run, the narrative Whites have constructed around Native Americans has become a trap, one which constricts the agency of Natives and which has historically shaped America's policies and histories concerning them.

A culture which eternally confines a group to one set of expected actions, customs, and traditions more or less forces Native Americans to be a sort of living museum. Here, Native American customs of antiquity (as Whites imagine them) are expected to be practiced, and if they are not, Native Americans are seen as not being true to their heritage. Often, dystopian literature can come eerily close to the issues of everyday life, and this topic is no different. Evie Shockley writes about the concept of a living museum in her short work "separation anxiety." Set about 100 years into the American future, it portrays a dystopia where African Americans and Whites are separated: more specifically, African Americans are separated into "ghettos" in order to preserve black culture. Meanwhile, it is assumed that other minority groups are also sequestered into their own camps. The main character, a dancer, must perform traditional dances that cannot be changed or modified, and

every aspect of daily life is studied and monitored, again in order to preserve the culture. In this context, Shockley's work creates an uneasy comparison when juxtaposed with Whites' conceptualizations and subsequent expectations of Native Americans. In Shockley's work, the concentration of a minority into its own community and its forced atrophy closely mirrors the real life fate of the Native American.

Such portrayals however, as seen in history and contemporary works, are harmful, and the flattening out of Natives into the noble savage figure allowed for their historical oppression. The perpetuation of such myths continues to be harmful today through the same "flattening out" process, which creates expectations for contemporary Native American societies, expecting them to conform to Western expectations about what is "Native enough". These myths are perpetuated through pop culture so seemingly benign that to see them as harmful is almost counterintuitive; such is true of the story of Pocahontas, which later became a Disney movie, or of the Keep America Beautiful campaign commercial, which featured a crying Native American as he looked upon a littered urban landscape. Such portrayals of Natives in modern culture create expectations that become ingrained in the everyday American, limiting what American culture allows Natives to be.

DECONSTRUCTING MYTHS ABOUT NATIVES

In the end, harmful Native stereotypes permeate American culture, and though the stereotype itself and the harm it brings is being recognized more and more, addressing the issue comes with its own challenges. Pushback against this harmful rhetoric has come in the form of Native American writers reclaiming their stories and the way in which indigenous people and culture are presented. Native stories such as *Ceremony* by Leslie Silko, *The Birchbark House* by Louise Erdrich, and *House Made of Dawn* by N. Scott Momaday exemplify Native American authors rejecting the flatness of earlier Native American characters and choosing to write complex tales with complex characters who deal with day-to-day contemporary struggles within the context of their Native identity. Such stories are so important, because, in these stories, Native characters are given full humanity, in which they are allowed to have flaws, and need not be simply the wise stoic character the Whites can learn from. By recentering the stories on Native people and their complexity, and especially on the modern

challenges they face between their American and Native identities, these authors create narratives in which Natives are allowed to be dynamic and where Natives' lifestyles are authentic to the Natives of today. In telling Native stories, these authors are able to expand readers' ideas of how a Native person can experience life.

The Native American struggle for recognition, sovereignty, respect, and the fulfillment of the promise to "life, liberty, and the pursuit to happiness" is much larger than what can be captured in an article or in any book. However, mining into the collective American subconscious, understanding how we as a society have created certain meanings, and being socially conscious of how we think about Native Americans and why, are small steps toward changing for the better. Such a goal is utopian in nature, for in its constant yearning to be perfect it makes us better, allowing for a better world than what we had before.

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