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The Politics of Primitivism: Historical and Cultural Constructions of Native Indians in U.S. Discourse

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Abstract
This paper examines the politics of primitivism in the context of U.S. historical and cultural representations of Native Indians. Primitivism, often rooted in colonial ideologies, has long served as a framework through which dominant societies define indigenous peoples as "other"—uncivilized, savage, and closer to nature. Such representations are not merely descriptive; they are deeply political, reinforcing power hierarchies and justifying exclusion, assimilation, or eradication. This study critically analyzes how U.S. discourse, through literature, media, policy, and education, has constructed Native Indians as primitive subjects. Drawing from cultural studies, postcolonial theory, and indigenous scholarship, the paper traces these constructions from early colonial encounters through the 19th-century expansionist period to contemporary cultural portrayals. In challenging these essentialist portrayals, the paper highlights counter-narratives offered by Native scholars, activists, and artists who reassert agency, voice, and cultural continuity. By exposing the constructed nature of primitivist ideologies, this paper contributes to ongoing debates about representation, cultural sovereignty, and the decolonization of knowledge within American academic and social discourse.
Keywords: Cultural Studies, postcolonialism, primitivism, indigenous, Native Indian, Native American, decolonization

Introduction

If there is one term that has been consistently used in cultural anthropology, it is 'primitive'. According to *The Reader's Digest Great Dictionary of the English Language*, the word "primitive" is derived from the English word "primeval", which in turn originates from the Latin "primaevus" or "primus", meaning "first age" (767). In its dictionary definition, primitive refers to something "relating to the earliest times in history" or denoting "stages of development" (768). However, when exploring the word's synonyms or examining its use in cultural discourse over time, terms such as "unsophisticated," "crude," "rough," "rude," or "uncivilized" often emerge (768; Thesaurus 236). This stark shift in connotative meaning reflects the influence of cultural politics, where the term primitive has been used to construct hierarchies and reinforce notions of cultural superiority. Such linguistic shifts reveal how language can be weaponized to marginalize communities deemed "other" by dominant cultures. The evolution of primitive from a temporal marker to a pejorative term illustrates how vocabulary can reflect and perpetuate colonial ideologies.

The earliest anthropologists have used the term in a derogatory sense, such as Edward B. Tyler who uses the word in his *Anthropology* (1881) and *Primitive Culture* (1871), referring to a "savage stage," or a "barbaric stage," as opposed to a "civilized stage" (qtd. in Francis 169). Keeping in line with a colonialist stance, he gives a sympathetic view also, declaring primitive cultures not as something separate or exotic, but as the starting point for all human cultural development. He states, "Culture or Civilization... is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Tylor 1). The "hypothetical primitive

condition" that these Europeans believed tribal people endured was thought to be similar to the "primitive condition" of prehistoric tribes of humans, or, more simply, the early state of the human race as a whole (19). Modern and postmodern discourse about art often uses the word "primitive" to refer to Western art before the Renaissance (Knapp 366), without considering the word's actual meaning or connotations, such as being less important, older, or simpler.

What accounts for the persistence of such an elaborate stance on primitivism? The idealistic Western endeavor to deconstruct modernity based on a conceived primordial state has encountered numerous apparent conclusions. It ought to have ended when aesthetic modernism, with which it was intricately linked, was overcome. The conclusion should have occurred when the Western ethnographic classification of the "primitive," upon which it ostensibly relied, was invalidated. The discourse should have concluded when critical theory, such as post-colonialism, revealed the admiration of the "primitive" or the "Other" as both appropriative and racist (Said *Orientalism Now* 203). It should have ended when the "civilization" from which it emerged touched the most remote areas of the world. Nevertheless, it persisted. Why, we will discuss that briefly.

The colonization by Europe was based on a major tenet of civilizing the savage, one that the likes of Columbus labelled as social service to the natives. According to him, they were of an "acute intelligence" and had "no religion" and would make "good servants" (Columbus 18, 21). The earliest encounters of natives with Western settlers are full of such depictions. In the first volume of their *History of the Indian Tribes of North America*, Thomas McKenney and James Hall state that though missionaries were sent to the Americas to establish education and religion, the natives were "little improved" as were their "savage ancestors" (36). Such ideas were, from the start, shadowed with the word "primitive" by European historians and anthropologists. It might seem strange, but according to Hilton Kramer, the colonizers had in mind a "primitivist ideal" that ultimately supported the idea that Western society is better (qtd. in Knapp 368).

The native people of the New World were turned into such a "primitivist ideal" by the colonizers, and this happened only after they were no longer a threat to European power. In the end, this idea, one we know as the "noble savage", helped the growing bourgeoisie because it quickly took away the nobility's claim to a special human position and gave that status to everyone. Ironically, this expansion was only done in theory. In an essay about the past of the idea of savagery, Hayden White gives us an interesting look at this apparent contradiction. He concludes that "primitivism is quintessentially a radical doctrine" that sees all men and women as basically the same, corrupted in different ways by civilization, and that a clearer understanding calls for rebellion against that corrupting culture (White 26). The New World inhabitants were not entitled to royalty, only the bourgeoisie. As soon as the middle classes established that they were as human as the royalty, they dehumanized the classes below them, just as Europeans did to New World tribes in the 17th and 18th centuries.

European history began with the rise of both new science and new capitalism. People were also very sure that the new political and social structures would be the greatest and most important thing in the world. This event was accompanied from the start by a deeply ingrained process of appropriation. In modern world history, colonialism didn't start with Cortés's trips to Yucatán or the destruction of Tenochtitlan (Couts-Smith 9). Instead, it began with the claim of a Renaissance-style historical appropriation and its representation as a dimly remembered narrative of political ambition, solidifying evident class interests. At this

point, we observe the beginning of the creation of a body of cultural work that would become known as the liberal-humanist tradition. Culture, according to the new post-Renaissance perspective, was from this point on to serve the interests of a class rather than the collective (9).

Theoretical Framework

Edward Said in his *Orientalism* contends that the West has historically constructed a body of knowledge that defines the East (Orient) as "irrational, depraved, childlike and different", positioning it as the "Other" in contrast to the civilized, "rational, virtuous and mature" Europe (40). While Said's focus is on the Middle East and Asia, his concept can be applied to Native Indians. Colonial narratives often portrayed Native Indians as noble savages or brutal primitives, constructing them as the other to justify colonization and assimilation policies. The ideology seeps into the minds of the colonizers and the colonized alike. Frantz Fanon also discusses this "psychological mechanism" concerning the colonization and slavery of black people, of how the internalization of inferiority often leads them to the desire to assimilate into the colonizer's culture (120). Native Indians subjected to assimilation policies, such as boarding schools, faced similar psychological consequences. They were asked to leave their languages and cultures, resulting in identity conflicts and internalized sentiments of inferiority, which mirrored Fanon's ideas. Linda Tuhiwai Smith in her book *Decolonizing Methodologies* has given a key indigenous perspective which even claims "research as one of the dirtiest words" and full of the "worst excesses of colonialism" (1). This is her way of calling out against the so-called history of imperialism, or as we know it, the Western discourse about colonialism, which was perpetuated through the imagination of the colonial bureaucracy, referred to by Said as the construction of the Orient. Following along a similar tone, this research paper examines the representation of Native Indians through the lens of the politics of primitivism. By interrogating how colonial discourse often constructs Indigenous peoples as the "Other", primitive, inferior, and in need of civilizing, this study critiques the lasting psychological, cultural, and epistemic effects of such portrayals in colonial and postcolonial contexts.

Historical Context: Colonialism to 19th-century Expansionism

As elucidated earlier, colonial portrayals of Native Indians by missionaries, explorers, and settlers led to their status as inferior and as people who needed civilizing. The depiction of the natives as "savage, barbarous, and primitive" by European invaders also accounts for their long-delayed acceptance as an essential part of America. History in the hands of the powerful is a narrative of cruel destruction and fanaticism. This statement would not be an exaggeration considering the likes of Diego de Landa, who burned twenty-seven volumes of valuable books on Mayan civilization and thereafter stated that the books "contained nothing in which there was not to be seen superstitious and lies of the devil" (Dani 57). Unfortunately, the truth has been changed, and the remaining sources have been misread on purpose to downplay the importance of the versatility and richness present in Native American cultures.

While assimilationist sentiment in the nineteenth century was prevalent, by the eighteenth century, racism had become institutionalized in missionary schools, and "Indian intellectual inferiority" had become a widespread belief (Fear-Segal, Introduction xiv). The U.S. tried to put an ideal face on these racial assimilationist policies, such as concepts of Manifest Destiny; however, in reality, they were only trying to hide the cultural genocide they committed along with "patterned racialization" in these schools (xiv). Congregationalist and Theologian Lyman Abbott, who vouched for Christian supremacy, insisted that all races

should enjoy "the same rights immunities and opportunities", but he condemned the missionary schools for their work in assimilating "Malays and Hindus and Negroes and Indians into second-hand Puritans" (qtd. in Fear-Segal 38). The hypocrisy is evident; the U.S. racial discourse is the one creating long-term racial discrimination in its own nation.

Rev. John Eliot was a 17th-century British missionary in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in New England, who printed an "Indian" Bible with help from others. Eliot wanted to change Native American practices, erase their heritage, and adopt European Christian ways of life. Evidence of his propagandist mindset is substituting the phrase "pipe-carrier" (which in Indian religious ceremonies referred to the person in charge) with "witch" in his translated Indian Bible. The result was, many native shamans or spiritual leaders were considered practitioners of outdated witchery or prohibited magic and persecuted because of that. He was just one of many colonizers who attempted to eliminate Native American religion. The converted natives or "praying Indians" were stuck between two worlds (Mifflin 354). By their native companions, they were considered traitors, and they became recipients of ruthless violence and even expulsion from their tribal homes on reservations. Neither were they acknowledged as kin by the Europeans, nor could they be accepted as fellow Christians. This led to a rift amongst the native people, with the creation of tropes like the "noble savage" and the "savage other," referring to the converted and non-converted natives. There was a clear distinction in the imposed ideological values, wherein the converted or praying Indians were often seen thanking their European masters for the religious instruction, as is evident in the comment of Caleb Cheeshahteamuck, who shows indebted gratitude in his 1665 address to his "Most Honoured Benefactors," as

> The Lord delegated you to be our patrons, and he endowed you with all wisdom and intimate compassion so that you may perform the work of bringing blessings to us pagans, who derive our life and origin from our forebears. We were naked in our souls as well as in our bodies, we were aliens from all humanity, and we were led around in the desert by various errors (qtd. in Hochbruck and Reichel 39).

Cultural Representations in Media and Popular Discourse

In Clyde Kluckhohn's *Mirror for Man*, he defined culture as "an abstraction from behavior" and as "a precipitate of history... as a map, as a sieve, and as a matrix" (qtd. in Geertz 5). In giving these terms, Kluckhohn was generally critical of anthropologists, as they tend to reconcile even the remotest cultures by a single definition. According to him, the theory of culture is only given by the anthropologist about how a group of people behaves. This means that the concept is necessarily a semiotic one (5). This is the true purpose, or rather the man-given purpose of the concept. As Clifford Geertz has stated, "Cultural analysis is (or should be) guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses" (20).

When we consider every aspect of social well-being, such as religion, ideology, art, science, law, and morality, we do not avoid the problems of life to create an unemotional form of existence; rather, we include them in the discussion. In this spirit, all that has been said about something includes its culture, and the renewed cultural interpretation of it will therefore start from where all that information is included, that is, the true cultural discourse. This becomes significant in the modern and post-modern scene, where media, representation, and narrativization are the adopted and rather preferred modes of discourse. The inclusion and renewed interpretation are sadly the areas being compromised most evidently.

Hollywood films have seldom depicted intricate, fully realized American Indian characters. James Fenimore Cooper, the renowned author, reinforced the "Noble Savage" archetype of indigenous peoples through his literary works. His writings elicited diverse reactions from the people; some criticized his uneven storytelling, while others commended him for attempting to offer them a platform for representation. George Copway, an Ojibwa Methodist preacher, was influenced by Cooper's depiction, describing it as "life-like" and asserting that "no living writer nor historian has done so much justice to the noble traits of our people" ("Copway on Cooper" 196). Cooper's novel *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) was adapted into a film in 1992 using the same title; nonetheless, the portrayal of Indigenous peoples in the film prompts significant concerns. The movie significantly changes Cooper's novel, and is criticized by scholarly critics for its stereotypical depiction of Native Indians.

Stereotypes, according to Walter Lippmann, are mental frameworks or pictures in our heads that simplify how we see the world, that often give a one-sided or incomplete view of reality and can strengthen unfair assumptions about others (96). One of the most striking narratives in *The Last of the Mohicans* (movie) is that of the heroic white male. Instead of Chingachgook and Uncas, indigenous braves of the Mohican tribe, the focus is shifted to the adopted white man Hawkeye (Nathaniel Poe), as the protagonist. The contrast between the "white heroic" archetype and the "noble savage" stereotype, exemplified by Chingachgook and Uncas, as well as the "savage other" represented by Magua, the Huron soldier, is obvious throughout the film. This cliché commonly portrays a European or European-descended hero, in this case, Hawkeye as the latter, as morally superior, intellectually educated, and physically strong over indigenous people in colonial encounter films. Hawkeye dominates the story, whereas Native American figures like Chingachgook and Uncas lack substance. Cora Munro's connection with Hawkeye is also explored in the film, placing doubt on the relationship between Uncas and Alice, Cora's sister. The filmmakers deliberately downplay the strength of the character of Uncas and avoid showing the interracial relationship between a Native man and a white woman, a sensitive topic in mainstream media.

In another movie, *The New World* (2005), a white adventurer, Captain John Smith, is the protagonist. The narrative is centered on Smith's interactions with Pocahontas and the indigenous people. Smith is perfectly portrayed as a morally superior character, validating the colonial myth of Europeans as civilization's agents. Even the character of Pocahontas is used to glorify the white protagonist in the film. Since in reality Pocahontas was believed to have been a ten to twelve-year-old girl at the time of Captain John Smith's arrival in Virginia, the romantic angle was deemed fictitious, and discussed by critics such as Reyna Green as fetishization of similar interactions between Native Indian women and European men, portraying Pocahontas with "psychosexual symbolism," protecting her white male love interest (704).

Even the earlier released animated film adaptation of her life story, *Pocahontas* (1995), had received criticism that it was historically inaccurate and exploited by a big banner company like Disney. It also features a racially stereotypical song titled "Savages" which has received much backlash. This romanticization of the "noble savage," in this case, a native woman who falls in love with a European, fits Edward Said's idea of Orientalism, portraying the Indigenous world as strange and enigmatic, depending on European intervention for order and balance. Although these films acknowledge Indigenous identity and presence, they eventually marginalize Native characters and downgrade female figures like Cora and Pocahontas to mere objects of masculine visual gratification, therefore constraining their narrative agency.

The third book in Laura Ingalls Wilder's autobiographical series, *Little House on the Prairie* (1935), recounts her family's adventures as settlers in 19th-century America. This book chronicles the Ingalls family's journey from Wisconsin's Big Woods to Kansas's broad grasslands, where they try to start a new home. While being based on Wilder's experiences, the novel has drawn criticism for romanticizing the westward expansion and leaving out the larger background of Native American displacement. Without thoroughly discussing the consequences of establishing on Indigenous territories, the story portrays the family's relocation as a commendable accomplishment. The way Native Americans are portrayed is noteworthy. The story frequently mirrors the biases of the day, and the Ingalls family settles on Osage tribal land.

Another famous stereotypical portrayal of natives by Disney is in the cartoon *Peter Pan*, in the episode, "What Made the Red Man Red," which depicts Peter Pan and the other children interacting with "piccaninny tribe" and their fantasy trip to "Neverland" of "Red Indians". The episode features a highly racist song titled "What Made the Red Man Red," employing multiple Native Indian stereotypes ("Peter Pan"). Anne Hiebert Alton, a professor of English at Central Michigan University and the editor of a scholarly edition of *Peter Pan,* says, "It was a popular fantasy trope…Barrie was telling the story in the very early 1900s…He was very Victorian—and that's the age when British people were still proud to brag that the sun never set on the British Empire" (Laskow). Ironically, in the storyline, Tiger Lily, the princess of the tribe, falls head over heels for Peter Pan and refuses to marry any suitor, fitting into similar depictions of native females, as discussed above.

Other mainstream representations also feature Native Indian stereotypes, or racialist naming, such as the logo of the Cleveland Guardians basketball team (known as the Cleveland Indians in honour of Louis Sockalexis, a Native American who played for the team, but changed in 2022). The logo was a caricature called Chief Wahoo, used till 2018, however, it was changed following the Native American civil rights movement. Another example is the nickname used by Washington Commanders, called Washinton "Redskins" until 2020. Textbooks often portray Native Americans only during the early colonial or frontier periods, making them seem like people of the past. Thanksgiving stories typically show Natives as peaceful, helpful, and submissive, erasing the genocide and land theft that followed.

The Pilgrims and "friendly Indians" narrative dominates over stories of resistance, forced removals, or contemporary Native life. One such example from the past is the Cherokee Trail of Tears. This was the infamous removal of the Cherokees to the west of Mississippi, so that the U.S. could make an absolute claim over Georgia, where large amounts of gold were found in 1829. It was often said that the Cherokees were "the most civilized tribe in America", and many white people thought of them as a model for "Christianization" and "civilization" of indigenous peoples (McLoughlin 3-4). However, in parliamentary battles, monuments, emails to the editors, lectures, journals, and reports, everyone who sought to get rid of the Cherokee Indians conveniently used the language of civilization. One such man who clung to his prejudices of Native Americans as savages was Andrew Jackson, who won the 1828 election. The newly elected President utilized his position to vigorously advocate for the emigration of the Cherokees, whether voluntarily or not, as eliminating Indians was a major component of his plan. According to Jackson, acculturation of the Cherokees had failed because the tribes held on to "their terrible names" and they must relocate west "to preserve peace on the frontier," where "the benevolent" might "teach them the arts of civilization" (Jackson).

The native cultures are often depicted as frozen in time, meaning they had reached their peak growth, and consisted only of age-old traditions of storytelling and dancing around fires, wearing outdated dresses and accessories such as feathers, often with a romanticization in the manner of the medieval ubi sunt, or "where are they?" The recurrence of such motifs in representation calls for a nostalgic and meditative position on the passage of time and the loss of those who came before; however, in no manner does it hint at a return to these gone days. In terms of development or growth, Indigenous voices, art, science, and politics are rarely acknowledged. Unlike the colonizer's narrative, these people were "knowledgeable" and creative, having mastered hundreds of plant-based therapeutic medicines (Pritzker, Introduction xi).

They looked at mental illness as a cause of other diseases long before Psychiatry was developed. They were not interested in material things and believed in giving back to nature. They even had sophisticated government models, with chiefs and leaders of their communities and consensual democratic councils, before "civilized" nations even considered these concepts. It is noteworthy that Benjamin Franklin, one of the American Founding Fathers, produced essential features of democracy in the U.S. Constitution only after his interactions with the Iroquois Nation, which functioned as a union of different tribes with an elected chief and law enforcement (Ross). Native people spoke at least forty Athapaskan, Haida, Tsimshian, Wakashan, Salishan, and Penutian dialects in the Northwest (Pritzker, "Pre-contact" 6). The U.S. borrowed a large number of words from these very languages and used them as names of cities, states, rivers, lakes, and more. All this is not public knowledge, it is not taught in schools, and is rarely focused upon in higher education institutions.

Institutional and Policy-Level Representations

During the latter part of the 19th century, the federal government implemented a policy wherein numerous Native American children were enrolled in educational institutions operated by Europeans. This initiative aimed to eliminate indigenous customs and communities, while also assimilating all Native Americans into the broader structure of the United States. The U.S. government supported Protestant denominations and missionary organizations in constructing Cherokee schools and churches to advance Indian culture. The government also promoted a relocation of the tribes away from traditional lands. One of the proclaimed Founding Fathers of the U.S.A., George Washington, was sure that more than one lakh Cherokee Indians living east of the Mississippi would become part of American society within 50 years because he believed in his policies and their ability to "civilize" them (Filler 12).

The boarding schools were intended to help indigenous children integrate into mainstream life, but Europeans challenged their legitimacy in turn hurting their tribal identity and desires. Additionally, persuasive language advocating Indian inclusion and acceptance masked an intense dispute on racial capabilities (Fear-Segal, Introduction xiii). For indigenous peoples, the schools were a place to ensure their "inclusion" and avoid their "obliteration", while for Europeans, they were a major force in acculturation agendas (xii). Unfortunately, few records and data exist on first-generation natives, although archives, stories, and firsthand accounts such as biographies comprise some information. However, analysis of these life accounts is also distorted in such a way that shows "asymmetries of power" because they have often been studied under privileged discourses of "identity and allegiance" (xvi). For a long time, Indian tribes had hidden their opinions and operations, which contributed to a scarcity of sources. The evidence was reduced and might be

considered one-sided or limited. Few historians have openly stated that facts were historiographed by the officials and government, and Indian voices were often muted under "hidden transcripts", which James C. Scott has talked about in his book *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1990) (xvii).

The emphasis on English led to the transition from scattered Christian conversion missions to centralized education. *Decolonizing the Mind* by Ngugi wa Thiong'o accurately challenges the supremacy of "English as the language" or the language "the others had to bow" to (11). In the US, indigenous languages were seen as signs of poor intelligence and moral inferiority. American commissioner John D. C. Atkins praised English and termed American Indian languages "worse than useless" and full of "traditions of carnage and superstition" (15). The use of language imperialism has been an important tool in global colonialism. Western languages were held in esteem, and the native languages were ignored, considering the change as an advancement in their degenerate race and justification for European rule.

Institutional and policy-level representations of Native Americans in the United States have historically oscillated between recognition of tribal sovereignty and efforts to assimilate Indigenous peoples into mainstream society. Legal discourse and state policy language have played pivotal roles in shaping these representations, often reflecting broader societal attitudes and governmental objectives. The best example of political wordplay is the word 'Native American,' which typically illustrates a cultural transition of the tribes. Only in the late 20th century did 'Indian' become 'Native Indian' and eventually 'Native American'. The latter is controversial, as it is a commonly known fact that the indigenous peoples of America predate the European civilization, and the word 'American' is derived from the Italian explorer Amerigo Vespucci.

Conveniently, the term 'Indian' remains in important political documents, tracts, and treaties, weakening the indigenous peoples' claim to American rights. They remain known as 'Red Indians,' living on their reservations outside main cities. The U.S. initially acknowledged Native tribes as independent nations through treaties. However, the Indian Appropriations Act of 1871 ended treaty-making, giving Congress exclusive control over Native affairs. This change permitted Congress to legislate on Native tribes without their agreement, often resulting in land confiscation and tribal sovereignty violations, rendering the earlier signed treaties as null and void. Furthering the takeover, the General Allotment Act of 1887 (Dawes Act) split the communal tribal lands into individual allocations, encouraging private land ownership and agriculture while reducing tribal landholdings.

As discussed earlier, the role of anthropology, such as found in museums, is key in shaping "primitive" imagery. Museums in the U.S. depict everything from the cultures of American indigenous peoples in the anthropological sections, presenting these cultures in a static, primitive, and completely outdated fashion. Examples of such tourist places include the American Museum of Natural History in New York and the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC. There is an absence of references to the significant cities and civilizations that existed before contact, with only dioramas illustrating small, primitive communities. There is a lack of acknowledgment of the evolution and intricate political and social structures of these cultures, as well as the continuous and severe intermingling of indigenous populations and European settlers from the initial moments of encounter. For example, in the American Museum of Natural History, there is depiction of Sioux of the Plains being introduced to horses by the Europeans, however, there is no

depiction of the introduction of alcohol and manufactured goods, or major clashes like the Wounded Knee Massacre (Weier).

According to Jacki Thompson Rand, an ex-worker at the museum, even to the native people, the NMAI in Washington, DC, fails to give "an accurate depiction of their past" (Rand). He cites an example from one of the staff, Jolene Rickard, a contractor for the museum, who is quoted as saying, "There are other places where you can learn the exact dates of the Trail of Tears. It's less important to me that someone leave this museum knowing all about Wounded Knee" (Rand). This is how the importance of historical context is neglected, and places of history are commercialised. According to Ruth B. Phillips, these museums have been regarded by Native North American museologists as "fetishizing" and "appropriative" (79). The exhibits often focus on primitive tools, clothing, or spiritual objects, with little input about indigenous communities or recognition of living cultures, decontextualising and othering them as insignificant in contemporary American society.

Resistance and Reclamation: Indigenous Voices and Counter-Narratives

The accounts of Indigenous peoples have been historically molded by colonial forces aiming to obliterate their languages, customs, and identities. Indigenous populations have consistently recovered their voices by means of literature, activism, media, and art. Native individuals have participated in vibrant forms of resistance and cultural reclamation, represented by authors such as Leslie Marmon Silko and Joy Harjo, as well as grassroots campaigns like the Standing Rock protests. These counter-narratives not only contest dominant histories but also validate Indigenous identity, memory, and sovereignty. Through works like Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller*, Zitkala-Sa's *American Indian Stories*, Mourning Dove's *Cogewea*, D'Arcy McNickle's *Surrounded*, and Linda Hogan's *Indios*, these authors not only immerse themselves in their oral traditions while integrating various genres to enhance their creativity, but also attempt to revitalize and preserve their tribal heritage and cultural history.

The role of media has strengthened Indigenous agency and helped resist colonial narratives. The American Indian Movement (AIM), formed in 1968, was crucial to Indigenous resistance. AIM has used grassroots activism and media to highlight Native American injustices, such as police violence, broken treaties, and institutional marginalization. Some examples are the Alcatraz Island takeover (1969–71) and the Wounded Knee standoff (1973), showing AIM's confrontational yet symbolic opposition to the government. Though few, some political reforms have come to light. The 1990 Native American Languages Act protects Native Americans' freedom to use and develop indigenous languages. Native languages are essential to cultural identity; therefore, this legislation promotes their use in school curricula and tribal affairs. Recent legal rulings have impacted Native sovereignty. Additionally, the revival of traditional practices—such as language revitalization, ceremonies, and storytelling—constitutes a powerful form of resistance. Programs aimed at teaching Native languages to younger generations are taking root across many tribes, combating the cultural loss inflicted by centuries of forced assimilation and boarding schools.

Activist Suzan Shown Harjo has worked for decades to shape a national Native American policy agenda, on issues that are faced by indigenous peoples in America, especially concerning protection and repatriation of sacred places, religious freedom, treaty and inherent sovereign rights, mascot eradication, and revitalization of languages. She is of Cheyenne and Hodulgee Muscogee ancestry and is a recipient of the Presidential Medal of

Freedom (2014). The 2016–17 Standing Rock protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline became a global representation of Indigenous resistance. The movement rekindled pan-Indigenous unity, uniting over 300 tribes and supporters worldwide. The appointment of Deb Haaland as the Secretary of the Interior in 2021 marked a historic moment, as she became the first Native American to serve in a U.S. Cabinet position. Her leadership symbolizes increased representation of Native voices in federal policymaking, particularly in areas directly affecting Indigenous communities.

Indigenous counter-narratives contest the notion of the "vanishing Indian" by emphasizing presence, agency, and persistence. These narratives not only seek inclusion in the dominant society but also assert the acknowledgment of Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination. Both individual and collective memory are crucial in this recontextualization. For Indigenous groups, the act of remembrance is inherently political; recalling murders, appropriated lands, and violated treaties surpasses victimization and pertains to justice. Indigenous peoples recover their history and assert futures unconstrained by colonization through the act of remembrance. Sovereignty is not only a legal or political notion; it also has cultural and spiritual dimensions. For several Indigenous groups, sovereignty encompasses the freedom to narrate their own histories, uphold their traditions, and adhere to their ideals. In this context, each poem, protest, and artwork is an assertion of sovereignty—a proclamation that Indigenous peoples are not only enduring but flourishing.

Conclusion

This study critically examined how colonial primitivism has shaped U.S. historical, cultural, and institutional narratives about Indigenous peoples. Native Americans have been portrayed as "noble savages" or "savage others" in media and museums since colonial times, minimizing and dehumanizing them to justify invasion, assimilation, and marginalization. These colonial superficial depictions have promoted political objectives and racial hierarchies. Although political and scholarly thought has changed, primitivist ideals survive. Through missionary instruction, boarding schools, and Hollywood misrepresentations, mainstream narratives have portrayed Native civilizations as static, obsolete, and inferior. Indigenous identity is often romanticized rather than shown as multifaceted and contemporary. This marginalization is reinforced by policy documents and museum exhibitions that exclude Indigenous perspectives and reflect a constructed pseudo-reality.

Despite this, Native authors, activists, and artists continue to provide significant counter-narratives. These voices affirm sovereignty, criticize the settler colonial past, and revitalize traditional knowledge. The central theme is remembrance and narrative for survival, resistance, and identity building. An essential insight through this discussion is the significance of decolonizing knowledge and representation. This involves contesting prevailing narratives and prioritizing Indigenous viewpoints in education and representation of history, identity, and culture. Literature, visual arts, and activism serve as counter-narratives that validate Indigenous memory, sovereignty, and existence. In contemporary society, when matters of racial equality and historical accountability are more prominent, the precise and respectful representation of native peoples is vital. Misrepresentation results in their continued marginalization, whereas honest narratives foster understanding and equity. Future studies should concentrate on incorporating Indigenous knowledge systems into schools and examining how digital platforms may enhance Indigenous voices. Decolonizing education and representation imply rectifying historical injustices while fostering a more equitable and inclusive future for everyone.

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