

Appropriate Appropriation: A White Writer's Attempt to Understand His Own Complicity  
in the Media's Ongoing Colonization of Native Americans

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**Abstract**

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**Colonization presents itself in psychological parameters both culturally and individually. The way modern, mainstream media represents and manifests Native Americans perpetuates a historic trauma that began with European colonization and has since evolved into an intellectual mode of appropriation. This paper studies, specifically, contemporary literature's complicity in this type of cultural appropriation and emotional colonization.**

In early March, 2004, two 11-year-old boys were found dead in a field near Ronan, Montana. The rural town of 2,000 people sits along a lonely stretch of I-93, near the southern border of the Confederated Salish Kootenai Reservation. Taken together, all of these similar towns, villages and ranches form a massive federally-recognized reservation that rings Flathead Lake in northwestern Montana and extends south and east of the water. For many miles in any direction there are mostly planes, foothills and, on the other side of the lake, the Mission Mountains – so named because of the Catholic presence in the area starting in the first half the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

But along the Highway, which runs north-south on the west side of the lake, the confederated Salish and Kootenai tribes have integrated their lives into both the white and Native development since 1855. The tribal college – a modest collection of impressively furnished and technologically advanced buildings – spreads across a few acres of tall grass on the east side of the highway. Across the road is the People’s Center museum. Mission Valley Power, a tribal-run utility with its power hub behind chain-link is up the road, along with the tribal resources department, the health clinic and the land management offices in Polson.

Down near the southern tip of the reservation, about 30 miles south of Polson across loping high planes that disappear into the Montana big sky, is St. Ignatius, a town even smaller than Ronan, where the Behavioral Health clinics have been moved, updated and renovated. Here, Native behavioral health experts have been working to contextualize and understand how these boys wound up dead in a field.

The professionals in this office have their work cut out for them, but one can begin to piece together what happened to those boys from the many theories, diagnoses and historical analyses necessary to gain the appropriate context. And you would have to travel here and talk to someone who remembers the boys or is working with the same type of

people that are in danger of the same fate to get a sense – a real sense – of what actually happened.

Contemporary psychoanalysts would argue that the deaths were a fallout of “postmemory” – the lingering effects of one generation’s traumatic experience on the succeeding generations in ever-compounding and exponential ways. Abigail Ward explains it thusly: “The engulfing traumatic experience cannot be grasped during the moment of its occurrence, but only belatedly” (177). In other words, trauma – in this case, European colonization starting hundreds of years ago – is too big, too dramatic and too enormous an emotional wound to process completely within one generation or one region. Two 11-year-old boys died in a field in 2004 because their ancestors were ripped of their lives and successive generations, ever since, have been trying to re-establish their identities.

Fryberg, Covarrubias and Burack extrapolate it in their joint paper when they say write, “...the effects of both historic and contemporary forms of colonization of indigenous peoples continue to cultivate profound disruptions to the families, language, and culture of a community,”(3).

Consider this: starting in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and ending only in the 1980s, European settlers designed a system whereby Native children were torn from their home and placed in boarding schools in order to “kill the Indian and save the man” (Fryberg 8). Students at these boarding schools were subjected to sexual, emotional and physical abuse as well as foreign curriculums designed to subjugate and devalue the “nativeness” in the Native students. It’s no wonder, then, that – considering these people had only this abusive model of parenting as examples – their own children would be subjected to similar horrors.

The point is, colonization in its traditional sense, ended decades ago once the last tribes were moved to reservations and their land was seized, but psychological colonization

continues and its effects are devastating and, in the case of these two 11-year-olds, just as deadly as smallpox blankets.

The Salish Kootenai tribal Behavioral Health clinic has been renovated since 2004, moved to a new building in St. Ignatius with the standard bleached wood-finished cabinetry and tiled waiting room of any modern doctor's office. Among the changes is a new focus on treating alcoholism, depression, drug-addiction and anxiety (rampant on many North American reservations) with an approach that considers and employs postmemory or historical trauma psychoanalysis. This is because the fight is ongoing and this psychological colonization occurs, most predominantly now, in the media. A trap I, as a non-Native writer, must be weary of as I continue to write a Native-themed novel.

The Missoulian, the daily newspaper distributed from Missoula, Montana an hour south of Ronan and off the reservation, reported after the boys' deaths that, "There are no obvious signs of foul play and the cause of death will not be known until autopsies have been completed by the state Crime Lab in Missoula... Evidence points toward death from exposure, with alcohol being a contributing factor."

We can rest assured that the journalist did his job and did it well: he went up to the reservation, got the facts as they pertained to that specific event and reported them back to his readers without flourish or speculation.

But the reporter didn't comment on the fact that, not only was this not an isolated incident but was a continuation of a trauma that had begun before the boys were even born. Any facts he uncovered, in other words, couldn't possibly pertain to just that specific event. The death of those two boys is, in so many ways, a slow death the reservation, the tribe and all Native Americans have been experiencing for two, three and four centuries; a historical trauma that continues to inform a reservation culture generations later.

What the journalist failed to do was report from inside the proper framework-- from within the continuing narrative of Native American struggle-- to understand the circumstances of the boys' deaths. It was reported from the outside, with the perspective that the incident of the boys' deaths had a concrete beginning with a concrete end and that an investigation would reveal those dates. But those dates exist as a parenthesis to many Native Americans for whom the struggle began long before the boys were born and continues now, a decade after.

While the concept of Historical Trauma is largely understood in a psycho-analytic framework, applying its concepts to literary analysis is seamless considering its treatment is that of connecting contemporary behavioral health patients to the culture that was usurped. It is, essentially, the act of plugging in a contemporary victim to their history – their *story* – to re-establish a connection to their community.

...

I went to Montana just after Christmas in 2014 to investigate where I might belong in this ongoing narrative. I felt uncomfortable with the prospect of pursuing my novel with only my own perspective to draw from.

This, of course is what so many – too many – non-native authors have done in the process of writing their own novels. They, like I was about to do, seem to begin their project with a plot, character, theme and overall agenda in mind, then collect whatever historical information is required to make those elements more “life-like.” What follows, though, are tropes that are both narratively limiting and perpetuate the psychological trauma of Native Americans and play into ongoing psychological colonization.

The media (in my case novels, but this refers to television, film, music, art, etc...) has immense power to shape and create cultural identities. This essay isn't a philosophical

examination of art, but I am operating from the notion that, among any culture's many defining elements, media and art are extremely powerful. And, any individual's sense of belonging to their culture or community goes a long way to set them on a positive and healthy path. Humans are social creatures and when we are cut off from our communities, we are left feeling physically and emotionally isolated. So, when Euro-centric media takes it upon themselves to define American Indian identities, what we are left with are depictions that leave Native communities fractured.

Here's Fryberg again: "... when Native Americans are represented, the portrayals are homogenous and outdated, rarely depicting Native Americans as contemporary people. For example, the most common depictions of Native Americans are negative stereotypes (e.g., as poor and uneducated), caricatures and cartoons (e.g., sports teams mascots, Disney's Pocahontas), and 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century historical figures (e.g., warrior-chiefs, teepee-dwelling figures...)"(12). And since the predominant western media are the ones crafting these depictions, Native American individuals shift, internalize, adapt and live-out these representations. Native Americans become invisible because others are less likely to even see them as Native American when compared to someone like Tonto: "Really? You don't look Native American," Fryberg says. What then, Native Americans are left wondering, *is* a Native American?

So I went to Montana to figure out how I should depict the Native characters in my novel so as to avoid rendering them as caricatures or, even worse, in such a way as to make them invisible.

The Native American individuals I tried to call and meet with were mostly unwilling. Reservation and American Indian leaders are acutely aware of the power of western media and of a white writer's destructive ability, so it was frustrating but understanding most were

suspicious of me at best. I was however able to make a few contacts, one of whom picked me up from the tribal resort and casino in a muddy SUV to drive me around the reservation. He asked to remain unnamed lest a less-enthusiastic member of his tribe disagree with his involvement.

“My wife didn’t want me to come today,” he told me immediately, before saying hello. “She said, ‘oh God, another one? Why doesn’t he just write what he knows?’”

We drove through the tribal college, the utility company’s land, we drove up and down the lake, through a slum, through a government-subsidized new(ish) housing complex, he took me to the government building and showed me the meeting rooms. He was showing me that his people are not the trope they had been distilled to before by writers like me. Some of Indians Indians. Some do not. Some of them live in dilapidated trailers, some of them live in two-story, landscaped bungalows; some of them are unemployed, some of them are social workers at the behavioral clinic or internists who pass out Suboxone to meth and heroin addicts for treatment, or are elected government officials with the same weight of governance on their shoulders my city council members have.

In other words, they are not the tropes Fryberg mentions. They are not mascots, they no longer live in teepees and, in fact, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribe no longer even has a chief. They have a council president. But what, then, are they if not the tropes I was familiar with? More importantly, I gnawed on the original question my source posed. Why don’t I write what I know?

....

I started my search with examples of bad, egregious and stereotypical renderings in fiction.

A best-selling novel by a best-selling author, *Caleb's Crossing* by Geraldine Brooks follows its young, female narrator, Bethia, in the pre-revolution American colonies befriending and, ultimately, defending a young Native American boy who learns to read, write and, eventually, goes to Harvard.

This is all thanks to the efforts and open-mindedness of Puritan teenager Bethia Mayfield. But, what made her Puritan mind so willing to accept Caleb and help him succeed in a European culture?

Near the beginning of the book, Bethia is wandering the dunes near her Nantucket home and happens upon a ceremony of which Caleb is a part:

But then a voice rose, high and fierce, in notes that I had not known a human throat could produce. The sounds went through to the very core of me. I could not turn away. Indeed, I felt drawn towards the maker of those sounds... There was power here; spiritual power. It moved me in some profound way. I had striven for this feeling, week following week, as the dutiful minister's daughter at Lord's Day meeting. But our austere worship had never stirred my soul as did this heathen's song (30).

Let's return to postmemory for a moment. Remember that it functions as a constant reminder of one's culture's traumatic past. That is why Ward and her contemporaries argue that even the youngest Native Americans are grappling now with a continuing psychological colonization that traces its origins to the physical colonization of European invasion. The damage done by the postmemory of colonial-era trauma is experienced in this culture-wide remembrance of a time before colonization and an urge to connect this happier past to a healthy, progressive future. Think of Fryberg's example of the historical teepee-dwelling chief: the perpetuation of these images in western media force Native Americans to wonder:

if we were that, what are we now? What Native people are missing in popular media are images by which to model this necessary historic continuity. Through boarding schools, forced removals, and treaties, Native Americans were cut off from their history. And books like *Caleb's Crossing* do nothing but perpetuate a dead image of what westerners took from them as opposed to present a modern image of a hero that may be able to bridge this seemingly insurmountable historic chasm.

In other words, my novel should do nothing to perpetuate the cycle of presenting Native Americans as historic figures with no contemporary place. Through more accurate, multi-dimensional characterization, plotting and theme-development, I should present a more dynamic image of Native Americans useful to contemporary Indians as a way to contextualize their current situations.

Brooks' narrative exists entirely on the wobbly foundation of understanding Native Americans as extra-human. Able to, literally, call spirits down with drums and dances. Only their spiritual power – not a Christian power – could make Bethia wonder whether or not her way of life was misguided. And while Brooks spends the rest of the novel trying to craft a complex human character of both Bethia and Caleb, she's set herself up for failure because Caleb is already Godlike. Inhuman. He satisfies both Bethia's and the reader's desire for the representation of a higher power. The fact is, we are still a Judeo-Christian nation and, while we are more enlightened than in Pilgrim New England and, therefore, make room for a broader spirituality, we are still attracted to inhuman, Godlike spirituality. Brooks gives this to the reader in the form of the Native American dancing, half-naked, by the sea.

To Brooks' credit, Caleb's character goes on to foster his own unique understanding of the world around him that incorporates both an indigenous spirituality and contemporary (for the 17<sup>th</sup> Century) intellect.

In a deft and beautifully economic scene, Brooks shows the reader a Caleb who is trying to bridge an ancient world with an acceleratingly modern one. Both he and Bethia have arrived at Harvard to discover that the Indian maid of the dormitory had been raped:

He passed through the door, silent and invisible, into the dark. Even if I had summoned the courage to follow him, I could not have done so. He had vanished entirely, as if conjured away.

I lay there, fretful, sweating with anxiety and oppressed by a sense of doom and helplessness. My first thought was that Anne had indeed confided the name to him and that he had set forth thinking to administer some rough justice, an exploit that likely would cost him his life. Then, as clouds scudded across the luminous disc, riding high now in an inky sky, the truth of the thing fell into my heart. I had told him to pray, and he was doing so. But not necessarily to a just and loving God.

... The heaviness about his brow had lifted, and he applied himself to preparing for the coming examination with a renewed diligence.”

Here, we see Caleb appealing to his own indigenous spirituality for guidance in searching for a place among these evil, rapist European settlers while at the same time finding the strength to proceed with a Harvard education. He exists as the bridge that spans between indigenous history and a Native American future.

But consider Caleb's origin in the narrative: he is a stereotype, a cliché typeset into a mold for the service of European readers and the fictional, sexually and religiously confused Bethia. He is an artifice, the professional wrestler made up and costumed to represent the universal underdog onto whom an audience can direct their sympathies. He is a mascot championing the ancient, *noble savage* cause.

This noble savage trope is highly familiar and serves to freeze Native Americans in history, effectively closing the gate on a path between past and present and a cultural continuity. Alice B. Kehoe explains it thusly:

Out beyond civilization's frontier supposedly live "simpler" peoples close to nature and each other, preserving an ancient, original pure religion.[1] Classical Greeks thought nomadic Scythians on the steppes northeast of Greek lands were such a noble society. From Christopher Columbus' "discovery" of American "Indians," Europeans liked to see indigenous peoples as a simple, untainted noble "race" practicing true, primordial spirituality. Alternately, of course, city dwellers could view barbarians beyond the frontiers as brutish, stupid savages. Europeans feeling the "discontents of civilization," as Austrian psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud termed the malaise in his 1929 book *Civilization and Its Discontents*, might travel to Asia or America seeking spiritual fulfillment among Hindus or Native American peoples. (1)

In such a way, Native Americans are used in popular media as one-dimensional spiritual apotheoses rather than as individuals within an historic context within the North American community.

It strikes me as no coincidence, for example, that the same year Geraldine Brooks published *Crossing* the New York Times reported on James Arthur Ray, a self-help guru who was convicted in 2011 of the negligent homicide of three people after they each paid \$10,000 to participate in his purifying sweat-lodge ceremony in Arizona. Ray is not a blood member of, nor is enrolled in, any Native American community recognized or unrecognized by the federal government.

He capitalized on the popularity of Native American narratives and ignored his clients' symptoms of dehydration and heat stroke.

This is, if nothing else, evidence of the oversimplification and dehumanization of communities like the Native American community by clichéd narratives. Where did this inhuman willingness to spend \$10,000 on bastardized Native American ceremonies come from if not the media's ability to, literally, sell these concepts. If that's not appropriation, what is?

One can picture a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Bethia shelling out 10 grand for the same reasons she was so attracted to a loin-clothed, tanned Caleb in the opening chapter of *Crossing*.

Ray might have not been stealing Hopi or Anasazi land in the Arizonan desert, but he was stealing their traditions, their identities with unsurprisingly tragic consequences.

...

On the way back to where I had parked my own truck at the casino, my source's wife called her husband.

"Got hungry kids at home," he told me. "Do you have a second to, maybe, stop at Wal Mart?"

He bought a pizza and we ran into a young-looking 20-something in the checkout line. She worked for the tribal newspaper and while they exchanged pleasantries, on the way across the parking lot, he explained to me that there was bad blood. Turns out, she's involved with the language school and the tribal college and doesn't appreciate my source (who worked for a time for the newspaper) being as open to the media as he is.

Finally, he dropped me off at my car and, before peeling away, gave me a stapled packet of paper.

"For your consideration," he said. It was a short story he had written about an Indian journalist working for a white newspaper in Spokane.

How appropriate that he's a storyteller too and the story he is telling is his own. He, and everyone else I tried to talk to, were skeptical of me because I was trying to tell their story when they were already doing it without me. They don't need me. They're perfectly capable of telling their own story. And that story, ever since European settlers began to metastasize in indigenous river valleys, coastal planes, and mountain ranges, was one of historical trauma playing out in the chasm between historic and contemporary identities.

Despite my source not seeing eye-to-eye with much of the tribe, he still shares a postmemory with all of them and that historical trauma is what makes the story his to share with other tribal members. Not mine.

So as he dropped me back off at my truck and we shook hands, the question still gnawed at me: why don't I just write what I know? I don't have this postmemory, or any context for, or understanding of, a specifically indigenous trauma. Was I being just as appropriative by assuming I should – or even could – write about Native Americans as Brooks or Ray?

Kehoe says the practice of cultural appropriation: "...is racist" in that it contrasts "non-Westerners with 'us' and take from these "others" as if the world is a supermarket stocked with free goods." (1)

That is, after all, what I had been doing: searching through Native histories and other representations to build my own characters.

No matter how much research, editing and consulting an author does, once he or she sits down to write, the characters which, in this case exist in real life on ghettoized reservations, are completely at the author's whim. Characterization is, on one level, a way to bring humanity to an inanimate object, an unreal thing that exists in the author's mind alone. But it can be equally dehumanizing when that character, in the form of a complex human American Indian, is reduced to character archetypes, plot devices or, if published, selling points.

This being the case, writing what I do not know is appropriative. An author of fiction uses his or her character; he or she builds them and molds them as if they don't have their own autonomy because they don't. They're fictional. They are the creations of the

author. The author has the ultimate authority – his or her authorial power – over his or her character. But what happens when the author’s characters are pulled from reality?

In most cases, what *happens* is the appropriation of Native American characters, histories, identities and cultures.

Lorenzo Veracini, in his essay “The Settler-Colonial Situation” explains colonization as a process by which one culture (in this case the colonizing culture) adapts another (the colonized) in such a way as to render the colonized useful to them. It is a process of the forced adaptation of the colonized by the colonizer to the colonizer’s way of life. He says, “Indigenization is driven by a crucial need to transform an historical tie (“we came here”) into a natural one (“the land made us”) (106).”

“These tendencies,” he goes on later, “are only ostensibly opposed, and both function in a context in which the settler-colonial entity operates systematically towards the suppression of its settler and colonial characteristics” (106).

Frantz Fanon extrapolates this point in a way to include how popular or, at least, the predominant culture completes this colonization. Why, he wonders, would a state colonize another in the first place?

“The colonial system, in fact, was only interested in certain riches, certain natural resources, to be exact those that fueled its industries,” (57) he says. And in order for a colonizing state to justify their use or exploitation of those resources, it must first reframe these goods as theirs, inherently, to take. The North Americans called it Manifest Destiny, they were directed by a benevolent God to believe that they were given the land, that it was theirs to settle.

Although Fanon and Veracini are discussing an economic colonization (the function of capitalism on indigenous territory) the same truth holds for less tangible and more literary

and humanistic “resources.” In my case, in the case of writing literature, those resources are the emotional lives of Native American individuals. If I am to build a Native American character to serve my or my story’s needs the way the Europeans approached indigenous land during settlement I would, in no small way, colonize those emotional lives.

Therefore, it is not, in the same way, appropriative for my source to write a short story about Native Americans as he did because he *is* a Native American. And that is enough. He might be the author and employ his own authorial voice and direct his subject about like a domineering puppet, but he is also the subject. The story is his to tell and if I try to tell it (and as we have seen, potentially burden it with damaging and isolating tropes, stereotypes and clichés) the Native American story would be yet another thing a white man takes from them; I would colonize their story the way early Americans colonized their land.

While it seems a bold claim to assert that any of these white writers who’ve written Native American narratives are racist, it is hard to deny that the practice of cultural appropriation is rooted in the notion that the authors’ subjects are inherently removed or partitioned from them. The very idea of author and subject is dehumanizing and, in its binary setup, allows only one party with authority while the other must be stripped of agency.

By following this logic to its seemingly natural conclusion, I wouldn’t be able to write about women, minorities of any kind, Christians (as I am Jewish) or anyone who is *not me*. However, the intellectual process is not that linear. One must consider the concept of postmemory when framing a counterargument to the notion that telling stories about people other than the self is appropriative.

Take women for example: I’ve written short stories from the perspective of women many times. And while no sane person would argue that women don’t have their own

historical trauma to overcome (suffrage, the current pay gap, the incredibly barbaric numbers of sexual assault, and abuse and impossible beauty standards) their trauma is potentially more easily-surmountable because the trauma doesn't include a separation from their community. They are not left powerless to define their own identities in the face of popular media as their identities aren't distilled to mascots and historically palatable representations. You won't find the Kansas City *Bitches* or a movie (hopefully) about a wagon train of men kidnapped by pregnant single moms. At least, in this generation, no one would (again, probably) tell a woman she doesn't look like a woman because she's not pregnant or cooking or wearing a dress. Exceptions of course exist as in the stereotype that all lesbians are butch or women can't have muscles: *you don't look like a lesbian* or *you're not very lady-like*. But consider, also, that athletic women or feminine lesbians don't live on institutionalized ghettos sometimes thousands of miles separated from their ancestral homeland. We see muscular women, "ladylike" lesbians, masculine gay men and Latinas who are not house cleaners more often than we see an Indian with a PhD. Therefore, when I write a female character, I imbue her with all the contemporary and highly visible elements of a woman's life which includes motherhood as well as human sexuality, emotional complexities, etc... That's not to say I don't ignore her particularly female struggle, but I also do not define her by it.

It is not impossible, in other words, to write what I know when writing about Native Americans. Native Americans, after all, are not the cardboard, one-dimensional tropes we see. Something in a Native American must match something in me, much the same way a woman is like me: I may not be as concerned about sexual assault or earning a living wage as a woman would be, but I am equally concerned about any of the other various human concerns men and women both share. I may not have grown up on a reservation or be

struggling with a postmemory of unspeakable trauma, but I've experienced my own trauma, my own fear, my own joys, my own disappointments with which any fully-formed human, Native American or otherwise, could identify.

...

In Charles Frazier's *Thirteen Moons*, published in 2007, a young, white orphan is "adopted" by a Cherokee Chief in pre-reconstruction Georgia. Will Cooper is turned out by his aunt and uncle to a trading post in the Cherokee Nation and, over the course of 400-plus pages becomes a respected member of the Cherokee tribe, an American senator, a tribal lawyer, a land-owner, and a slave-owner until he dies in a state of introspective depression in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, lamenting the loss of, what his character calls, "The Old Ways."

Will Cooper's character is sympathetic to the Cherokee and through his perspective, we see the sad and violent details of the Cherokee Nation's decline. Ostensibly, this has all the trappings of an enlightened and progressive worldview as it pertains to European colonization of the South in the time of Jacksonian politics. One can believe that Frazier himself feels a sadness – like most modern Americans might – at the catastrophic sacrifices Natives made in the early days of the country that non-Natives continue to benefit from.

Considering this, authors like Frazier often draw a Native American character in such a way as to be the simple, empty receptacle into which non-Native readers can project their sympathy and guilt.

In Frazier's *Moons*, Bear is a powerless Native American character, reliant on a white benefactor that serves as a proxy or even substitute for non-Native sympathy. Will serves as a tool more for the non-Native to redirect their complicity than for a model of Indian empowerment. It is much more palatable to white readers to see a white sympathizer than to

read about autonomous Native Americans. Brooks and Frazier, therefore, don't draw their Native characters to satisfy Native American's desire to see themselves as historically relevant, but instead to satisfy their white readers' need to assuage their guilt in the false assumption that the Native needs their help.

Brooks and Frazier both show readers a "true, primordial spirituality," akin to Kehoe's "racist" subjects in her essay "They've Taken Our Land..." You can see in both Brooks' and Frazier's characterizations of Indians, they are both guilty of framing their characters in such a way as not to be *accurate* but rather to *satisfy* their readers' need to explore a more mystic existence.

Listen to how Frazier's narrator describes the Cherokee's spirituality:

"Bear and his people were deeply bewildered by the strange new world forming up around them. It was a different country, where you had to own land by paper deed even to have a place on earth to be. Otherwise, you'd go wherever the buffalo and elk had gone. Everybody footslogging toward the Nightland together." (72).

Frazier's Cherokee sounds, if not downright ignorant, confused and unprepared; simple, basic and elementary. To a white reader, this may sound like a compliment – the Cherokees are pure and pristine. But the Cherokees, along with many other Indian nations, developed complex economies and markets with the colonizing Europeans. While, indeed, they retained their spirituality, they developed in ways today's reservation youth, in particular, would benefit from understanding. Fryberg says, "...even as cultures are modified over time or adapt through encounters with other cultures, they can endure and even thrive if the integrity of the culture, community, and individuals are maintained,"(6).

By the 1830s, when the Cherokee were being pushed out of the South, they were a developed and commanding nation that still retained a sense of self. Except, Frazier doesn't allow for this self, only allows a sense of an inaccurate *noble savage*. And Fryberg warns, "When this integrity is not maintained, change can signal a variety of enduring negative psychological effects,"(6). This characterization of "Bear's people" is not, as it were, for the benefit of contemporary Native Americans but, instead, for contemporary white people.

It's important to remember that, in the early 1800s, the United States were far fewer states than now and the country, literally, petered out into the Mississippi River Valley. The U.S. stopped at the edge of an unknown wilderness in which the borders of an indigenous nation and a colonizing power bled together. Beyond the edge of the U.S. could have been a massive tract of land (ultimately, proved true) that dwarfed the U.S. This notion of an expansive Indian nation in the backyard of the fledgling U.S. nation inspired Congress to approach the Cherokees as a foreign country and, therefore, regulate U.S. states' commerce with this foreign entity.

As a sort of survival mechanism, the Cherokees responded in kind and developed a legislature and governing bodies with which the U.S. could interact on an official level. Chief John Ross was its president. He was a bold and formidable opponent to Andrew Jackson himself and was, even within his own tribe, a controversial figure.

Instead of this image, though, Frazier gives us:

It is tempting to look back at Bear's people from the perspective of this modern world and see them as changeless and pure, authentic people in ways impossible for anybody anymore. We need Noble Savages for our own purposes. Our happy imaginings about them and the pure world they occupied do us good when incoherent change overwhelms us. (71).

It's nice for white people to see Native Americans this way, but damaging for Native Americans to be denied the truth of their own once-powerful autonomy. The Cherokee leaders in Frazier's rendering have none of the impressive political and cultural intersectionality of which historical Cherokees were masters. In fact, in Frazier's most efficient swipe at Native American autonomy and identity, the Cherokee leader most adept within the arenas of politics, intellect and economy isn't a Cherokee at all; is, in fact, not even a Native American.

In *Thirteen Moons*, the most dynamic character is the white Cooper. An enigma, he seamlessly travels between white and Cherokee worlds to foster a respect, awareness and stewardship of Cherokees among government officials in Andrew Jackson's Washington. Cooper's character draws many similarities to Cherokee Chief John Ross who served as the Cherokee Nation's chief and advisor in the early days of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century working to forestall the Trail of Tears. The real-life Ross spoke both Cherokee and English, owned slaves, was educated rich and, therefore, made for a multi-layered character on which Frazier could have modeled Will Cooper. But John Ross was a quarter Cherokee while Frazier decided to render Ross' avatar white. Meanwhile, the actual Cherokee characters in *Thirteen Moons* are the same stagnant, frozen-in-time archetypes Stephanie Fryberg outlines in her examination of the media's view of Native Americans.

What writers such as Frazier have mistakenly thought for decades is that by casting Indians as noble beyond comparison and as the mythic holders of transcendent knowledge, they are casting them in a positive light. Instead, this light casts a long shadow that extends back through history and denies contemporary Native Americans any link between their ancestral identity and a forward-thinking future. It denies Native Americans the cultural and historic cohesion Fryberg refers to as a "groupness... established by the group's ability to

persist over time despite changes in culture” (3). If all popular culture offers are Indians like Frazier’s Bear, what’s to say Native Americans will have anything but the same archetypes that have little to no similarities with their current lives.

You can literally trace your finger along a map, perhaps overlaid with a timeline, to physically touch and follow the fallout of a historical trauma within the Cherokee Nation in the 1790s to today’s United Keetoowah Band reservation east of the Ozarks. Perhaps the most damaging aspect of this trauma is the fact that so few popular narratives exist that actually draw this empowering connection. It’s hard, if not impossible, to find sources of Native images that allow for a contemporary Keetowah reservation dweller to see his or her direct line back to the politically powerful Chief John Ross. If anything, they get only images of helpless victims on the Trail of Tears or helpless and drunk victims of reservation poverty. That leaves them with two choices: achieve their desired “groupness” by internalizing and embodying these images or remain unanchored as outsiders who don’t fit these inaccurate and racist molds.

When I met with my source in Montana, he was worried that I’d draw him and his people as if they were lost fauns in the woods, naïve and ignorant of the world around them, holding on to ancient rituals because that is what writers like Brooks and Frazier have always done. While it seems Frazier and Brooks are doing all Native Americans a favor by asserting their “primordial” simplicity or, as Kehoe would say, their enviable nobility, what my source would say is that these authors are, instead, dehumanizing Native Americans. By constantly recycling inaccurate images of Native Americans, authors further reinforce the separation between real-life Native Americans from the inhumanly flat and trite images they see of themselves. It’s like looking in a funhouse mirror – distorted and wonky – so long, you don’t recognize your true reflection.

...

In *Reading Culture*, noted Native American literature critic, David Treuer has written a, sort of, self-critique of Native American writers who attempt to assert their own canon separate of the Western literary canon. Treuer, who is Native American, argues that, by the very nature of fiction, one novel or character cannot represent the voice of all Native Americans. This is in response to many Native Americans critiquing both Native and non-Native representations of Indians in literature for failing to capture the Native American voice or experience. Treuer argues that, by claiming there even is *one* voice to achieve, a critic is belittling the many rich, cultural differences among every individual Native American.

“We can evoke a connection to the past in our writing, but our novels are wishes, fantasies, fairy tales, bounded by our present. Writing, as we all should know by now, doesn’t represent our reality; it creates new realities.” (62).

Treuer’s argument serves as an answer to the question: why don’t I just write what I know? Treuer argues that it is actually regressive for Native American novelists to claim that there must be a Native American canon because he says there isn’t actually a singular “Native American voice.” (This is actually a similar argument critics have been engaged in regarding the Western canon). Native Americans, Treuer says, are too varied and too individually unique to claim a canon would do them any justice.

The trap Frazier and Brooks have fallen into, therefore, is that they’ve attempted to *represent* Native Americans. They’ve taken what they needed, as Kehoe warned, “like a supermarket stocked with free goods,” in order to represent the whole of Native culture. But there is no “whole Native culture.” There is only a contemporary culture within which certain individuals are Native Americans and, so, follow certain Native American mores, norms and traditions.

Indeed, I do not share a postmemory of Native American trauma nor do I have expertise in certain Native American ceremonies, traditions or histories. But that is not all that makes up a Native American individual. Therefore, I can still write what I know and write a Native American character because as history has shown, Native Americans are like me (or I them) in more ways than contemporary fiction has allowed.

...

What I'm referring to, then, is an intersectionality of both American and Native American identities. Unlike Frazier and Brooks, my Native characters should (for the sake of avoiding appropriation, racist representations and perpetuating psychological colonization) and will be both Native *and* American at the same time.

Here, I should define what I mean by Native American – the definition is in the name. An American Indian. Before European contact, there was no America and so, an indigenous person on the modern North American continent was not a Native American. That person was simply indigenous. But at the moment of European contact, historical trauma broke out and indigenous populations became Native American as America grew. Therefore, any story which takes place after first contact must present the Native American not as either pristine, mythical *creatures*, or as homeless victims. But as members of a culture that has existed, continuously, through mega shifts of history and context. What changed, in other words, wasn't the Native. What changed was the American. What it meant to be Native American changed the moment the first ships landed on Plymouth Rock. The struggle, as Ward and Fryberg have pointed out is the difficulty – considering the lack of model images in popular media – Native Americans have connecting their pre-America Nativeness to their contemporary-Native Americanness.

To be Native is, admittedly, not my wheelhouse. But to be American is. As long as I can provide some accurate historical representation or link between the two opposing identities inherent in a Native and American individual, I would be staying within the parameters of “writing what I know,” while also staunching the ongoing psychological colonization of indigenous peoples in North America.

Let’s revisit Treuer: “What I love about my cultural patrimony is the life it provides, not the material. What is priceless about my language is not what it means to speak Ojibwe, but what Ojibwe, in its beautiful, tricky turns, means.” (62). He goes on: “Instead of making language to jump across the chasm of culture, we should make our readers jump over the canyon of difference.”

There is, in other words, less of a difference between American and Indian as writers have hyperbolized in the past.

What can rescue me from falling into this chasm is taking on the perspective of a Native American, but instead of forcing that character, as Frazier and Brooks do, into a cultural role, allow them to be individuals within a larger framework than just their *Indianness*. An individual that is black, Christian, Indian or gay is, as Treuer would assert through his “canyon of difference” is also an individual who loves, hates, fears and joys. My answer, therefore, is on the individual level. Literature, after all, seeks universality in the individual and individual in the universality. What about being an Indian is also like being a white guy? What spaces, beyond Native American, do Native Americans occupy? It should be obvious now that most of us share most of those spaces.

The most successful author to do this also happens to be one of the more recent authors to do this. Adrienne Harun *published A Man Came Out of a Door in the Mountain* in 2014. A contemporary novel set on a contemporary reservation in British Columbia, it

follows the lives of five teenagers after one of them, a girl, goes missing. Its incredible strength is its multi-dimensionality: the plot doesn't hinge on the fact that they're all Native; they're human individuals (who, as most teenagers do, are obsessed with sex and danger and counterculture), they're poor, smart, sarcastic, mean and manipulative. Every Native character occupies a space both from within and without their Nativeness.

Harun describes Jackie, the ill-fated teen, thusly:

She was tough and stoic, but beneath it, her sense of fairness was acute, and her pain at every injustice became harder and harder to hide. We could see it in her rising color, her even more pronounced silence when men unrolled their car windows to spit out a few words about what “a big fucking squaw” could do for them. She'd beat up more than a few who had naively thought they could slap around her sisters or hurl insults toward her mother and aunts as they walked to the market. The law knew Jackie's address by heart. Warnings had been issued with at least one officer leaning in too closely to make his own declaration, his own deal, a few moments on her knees to buy her way out of trouble. Lucky man, that fellow...(12).

What Harun does here is masterful. Jackie occupies many spaces at once, as an individual life might. Jackie is, indeed a Native-American (although, more accurately, a Native-Canadian, but North American no less) but is also a sexual being, protective and strong, not in regards her Indian identity, but in regards her family, her friends and her sense of justice. At the same time, Harun layers all of that onto the fact that she is a “big fucking squaw.” Harun allows the trope to exist, but then unravels it to mean something more. The reader wonders if her Native identity made her strong or her individuality independent of that is the source of her stoic nature. In truth, it's probably a mix of both. She is an Indian, but she is also so much else.

I cannot speak for Harun, but I do know she is a woman and non-Native. As such, the plot of her book doesn't revolve around the *nativeness* of her characters – they are not being (traditionally) colonized (though, in many ways, psychologically colonized). They are not being pushed from their land, forced onto reservations, forced into missions, boarding schools or servitude. The plot has nothing to do with their tribe or band. The central conflict is simply that someone or something keeps kidnapping girls from a logging highway outside their reservation. The internal conflicts, meanwhile, pertain to Indian identities but also to what – as my reservation source would remind me – Harun, herself, knows. Many of the characters are females and, as such, the internal conflicts relate to that aspect of their female identity more than anything else.

In a tense scene in which a young, female friend of the main character is, seemingly, being prayed upon by an older man, Harun delivers a deft blow to Native tropes in fiction:

She looked then for herself, lost for a moment in the fluid music of his hands, each card turning and preening like a mask in a ceremonial dance. She thought of the river where she and her brother Bryan and their father fished, the way her eyes learned to scan the ripples and eddies and separate out the proud, fast shot that would be her fish. If Ursie harbored a secret vanity, it had to do with her quick eyes and even swifter reactions, that unnatural surety. Whenever boys praised her for her skills, their awe and envy made her flush as sure as if they'd openly admired her breasts or slipped a hand on her bum – events that had never happened despite a ferocious amount of quiet dreaming on her part (36).

In a single paragraph, Harun goes through different divergent identities in comparison and in opposition to Native identities. Ursie is a Native American character, and Harun starts, in the first sentence, with the traditional, stereotypical reference of a ceremonial dance in order to set the reader up to, first and foremost see her as an Indian.

But this is purposeful, because in the next sentence that Native identity is expanded to include one of self-sustenance and capability: she is fishing, herself, and, in fact, is good at it. Finally, and most powerfully, we are forced to see Ursie's nativeness in light of her budding sexuality and femininity when she fantasizes about boys touching her bum, while at the same time having not yet had that experience. We see Ursie, ultimately, as Native but also as a girl, a teenager and an autonomous individual. Harun is setting in motion a thought process by which either a Native American or white reader could see Native Americans not only as Native Americans, but as the human sum of all the other parts of an emotional existence.

...

In Montana, I visited Kim Azure, the director of the behavioral health clinic who's job, lately, has been to instill the concept of cultural trauma into her psychiatric practice. She would like to help the younger generation suffering from anxiety and depression and a suicide epidemic to understand that these symptoms are part of a larger disease.

"Most of these kids have no adult relationships in their lives," she told me. When the Europeans came to move the Salish onto a reservation, "they destroyed entire family systems."

She tells me the story of a hunting party in 1908. Both men and women were stalking a herd of elk. When they set up camp for an evening, a ranger, who patrolled the woods for the territorial governor, found them and was convinced they were off the reservation and poaching on private territory. A skirmish ensued and six Salish were murdered while a few of the women escaped.

This story came after Azure spent the better part of an hour explaining to me the concept of historical trauma. What solidified my understanding was this:

There is an elder who lived on the reservation until her recent death who was in utero when her mother escaped the massacre. Her grandkids go to the school from which the boys who died went missing. When the Missoulian reporter came to the reservation in 2004 after their deaths, he met with my source and explained that when he visited a classroom at the school, almost every kid raised their hand when he asked whether they knew someone who died on the reservation.

Almost every kid in the class raised their hand. Indeed, many people on a reservation are related to one another so when one person dies, almost the entire reservation is sent into mourning. Trauma, in this way, is always shared. But, with the Native American emphasis on spiritual lives and a psychological focus on postmemory, the elder who was still an embryo in his mother's stomach when she escaped the 1908 massacre would claim she knew the victims. In much the same way, today's Cherokee reservation youth weren't there when their ancestors died on the Trail of Tears or, in the Kootenai-Salish case, when they were moved to the lakeside reservation. Still, they remember it. They remember it in the way they're forced to live with the fallout. The boys who died on the reservation a decade ago weren't there when their tribe was moved to a reservation, but the effects of that loss lead to their own tragedy.

I will never know what it means to personally feel the loss from one generation to the next. But I do know what it means to lose, and to fear and to love. I don't know what it means to be a Native American. But I know what it means to be human.

"Literature," says Treuer "has reality, but not life to offer. And if we insist on asking our writers and demanding of our prose to give us stories that represent instead of create, we ignore the gifts our cultures and languages have left us..."(62).

Unbound to the demands of the same old, frozen representations I am able to *write what I know* and create a Native American character imbued with a more life-like depth. I have the opportunity to, in fact, create a new character model that is equally Native as he is American.

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