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## The multi-disciplinary approach in native american studies

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That Western science and technology have brought so many benefits to humanity is indubitable, but what was the price? And who were the scapegoats? The answer is also clear, and its ramifications are studied by a growing number of postgraduates, particularly those who work on postcolonial literatures. In this paper, however, I focus on Native Americans, who are often overlooked in their own country and abroad, while they have for centuries been living in kinds of “internal colonies” on “the sweet land of liberty.” I rely on a multidisciplinary analysis, which merges postcolonial, ecological, and narrative approaches, to understand their trauma and its healing.

Native Americans lived freely on their lands, practised their own religions, and spoke their own vernaculars, before the invasion of Europeans. The settlers survived the first winters with the help of the Natives, who provided shelter, food, and medicine. The settlers, however, tried to annihilate or assimilate the Natives as scapegoats for their own progress. Genocide took place on what Europeans called “the New World,” but history books rarely describe it as such. To argue for the truthfulness of this claim, I refer to Article 2 of the “Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide,” which defines genocide as any of the “acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group,” like:

- (a) Killing members of the group,
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group,
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part,
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group,
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group (1).

The five measures cited above were used against Native Americans.

First, naming was a kind of genocidal weapon used against them to confuse their ethnic identity and shatter their communal solidarity. For instance, when Christopher Columbus landed on a Caribbean island, he called it “San Salvador,” and its inhabitants “Los Indios,” regardless of the original name of the land and its inhabitants. As a result, the appellations “Indians,” “Amerindians” and “American Indians” are controversial today. They have been replaced by “Native Americans” in the United States of America and “First Nations” in Canada. However, the term used in Australia, “aborigines” (“from the origin” in the Latin language), seems to be the most appropriate to designate such populations, who were originally living on their own lands before European settlement.

Besides, a great number of Native Americans vanished by what scientists call the “virgin soil epidemics” brought by European settlers, like measles, smallpox, influenza, cholera, and typhus. Being isolated from the rest of the world for thousands of years has weakened the resistance of their immune system to dangerous germs. Many Native Americans also vanished by the European extermination of the animals and plants on which their sustenance was based. Their children were taken by force to far-off boarding schools and forbidden to visit their community for years, particularly to forget their language and religion.

The oppressive policies of settler governments make it appropriate to talk about colonialism despite the ideological eschewal of the term in history books. The situation is presently described as “internal colonialism,” a phrase used by Marxists like Antonio Gramsci and Vladimir Lenin to denounce the capitalistic foundation of ethnic oppression, and to decry unequal opportunities between masses and elites. In his article, “Internal Colonialism and Ghetto Revolt,” sociologist Robert Blauner identifies four similarities between external and internal forms of colonialism:

- (a) Both start with a “*forced involuntary entry,*”
- b) Both have “*an impact on the culture and social organization of the colonized people*” through “*a policy which constrains, transforms, or destroys indigenous values, orientations, and ways of life,*”
- c) Both involve “*a relationship by which members of the colonized group tend to be administered [...] and manipulated by outsiders,*”
- (d) Both entail racism, “*a principle of social domination by which a group seen as inferior or different in terms of alleged biological characteristics is exploited, controlled, and oppressed socially and physically by a superordinate group*” (396).

The reservations in which indigenous peoples live are sometimes similar to colonies or outdoor jails, whose dwellers are culturally persecuted, politically dominated, and economically exploited. They live at the margin of mainstream society; they are deliberately placed in national “sacrifice zones,” where natural resources are mined, bombs are tested, and waste is dumped. “Environmental racism” and “environmental justice” are hence other conceptual tools to understand their predicament. Since the 1980s, environmental justice activists started denouncing the global environmental depredation of the habitats in which indigenous peoples live. They decried the progress of Western civilization, which altered the natural and cultural landscapes of colonized societies, depredated their flora and fauna, together with the traditional subsistence resources on which traditional life rests.

Native American relations with the land are characterized by land conservation ethics. As opposed to Euro-Americans who fight to possess the land, the Natives believe that they belong to it, and that their cultural survival is only possible through the preservation of the ecosystem. Winona LaDuke, a Native American environmental activist, writes, “*wherever Indigenous peoples still remain, there is also a corresponding enclave of biodiversity*” (1). International organizations are equally recognizing the direct relationship between the preservation of cultural diversity and that of biodiversity.

Raising the readers’ awareness about the environment is becoming an important literary concern since ecological catastrophes are presently threatening humanity. Cheryl Glotfelty explains that “*ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies,*” because “*literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether, but rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system, in which energy, matter, and*

*ideas interact*” (xix, emphasis in the original). Native American literary works are appropriately read through the lens of ecocriticism, in order to understand the destruction of tribal lands and the dislocation of Native protagonists from their erstwhile borderless space into the bordered space of the reservation. Laurence Buell thinks that Native American literature rests on a biocentric view of the world that, as opposed to the Western anthropocentric one, stems from an “*understanding of the human-nature relation as a continuum or a monism rather than as a binary schism*” (211). Central to the cultures of Native communities, as it appears in their literatures, is a sustainable use of resources that emanates from a profound respect for the land and all its inhabitants, human and nonhuman. In an age of environmental catastrophes, ecologists and economists are incidentally calling for sustainable development, which meets the needs of human beings in the present without compromising those of the future generations.

As Native American authors describe the massive destruction of tribal lands and the traumatic dislocation of native protagonists, they attribute healing to the storytelling tradition. Native Americans need to tell their traumatic stories, still vivid within collective memories centuries after European settlement. The concept of “trauma” moved in the 1980s from medicine to the humanities in order to describe the psychic wounds of individuals who suffered from tragic historical circumstances. In this regard, forgetting traumatic events is impossible; they keep haunting the minds of survivors, who continually relive the past through fragmented memories, hallucinations, and nightmares.

Native Americans hence seek healing and wholeness from physical, emotional, and spiritual balance, from harmonious relationships with the family, community, and nature. They believe that storytelling, in particular, can heal their psychic wounds. According to philosopher Daniel Dennett, “*no matter what atrocities are being narrated, the act of storytelling offers us an implicit narrative of survival to cling to, a post-trauma perspective with which to identify, and an absolute distinction between ‘now’ and ‘then’ which cordons off the narrated suffering*” (418). Significantly, narrative therapy and narrative medicine are two new disciples that seek to cure human beings by paying a greater attention to their life stories. Courses in literature and medicine are consequently gaining popularity, in an attempt to stress the emotional aspect of medicine, and the therapeutic aspect of literature.

Native American writers, therefore, are producing a wealth of literary works, in the forms of diaries, memoirs, testimonials, and novels, because literature has the ability to transmit, often through metaphors, messages that cannot be communicated directly. For Cathy Caruth, “*trauma creates a speechless inner fight beyond direct representation, but literature, with its indirectness, figurative language, and linguistic particularities, can transmit the force of a traumatic experience*”(17). Metaphors, in particular, have a healing potential that lies in their capacity to transcend logic, to help human beings “*perceive subtle and unusual connections, show relationships between outer experience and inner feeling, enable a sense of psychological and spiritual balance, open communication between known and unknown parts of [their] lives*” (Burns and McKane 303). In medicine and psychology, it is common among victims of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder to use metaphors to express their traumatic experiences since they provide alternative frames of reference that help victims recall painful events without much suffering.

Despite the cumulative traumas of colonization, extermination, assimilation, and relocation, many Native Americans live in “nations within a nation.” They are recognized as

internally sovereign peoples within the United States of America, but they remain on the sidelines of decision-making, and they still endure the duplicity of State and Federal Governments, as well as the exploitation of multinational corporations. These are the major concerns of Native American literary works, in which the authors become historical revisionists, by telling the (his)story of their communities from their own perspective, with a major intention of deconstructing everlasting stereotypes about their race.

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