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From White vs. Native to White and Native — Going Indian, Playing Indian and Identifying with First Nations Values

Abstract

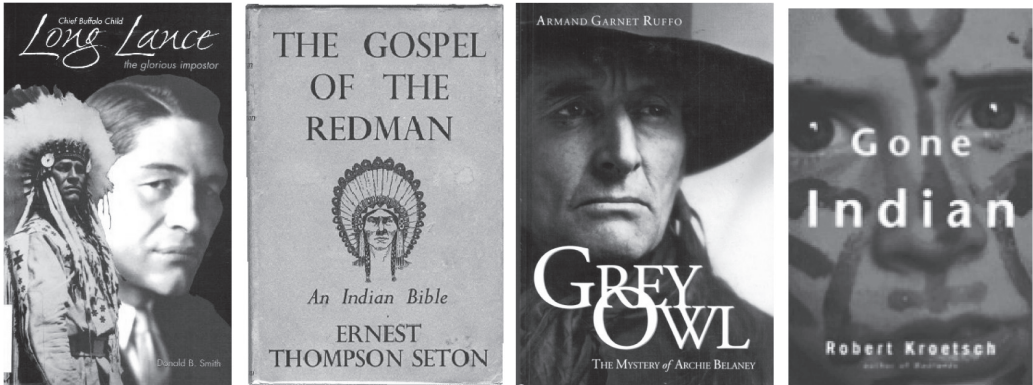
The present paper explores an interesting aspect of trans-Atlantic and cross-cultural studies: the Native vs. white disparity in some stories of indigenization and its alleged replacement with the Native and white paradigm symbolically signified by ethno-cultural hybrids. However, unlike captives and other involuntary shifters, who create a genuine hybrid identity with authentic ethno-cultural markers, the Indian “wannabes” sustain the opposition between the two cultures, the barriers, and consequently the racial divides they intend to diminish. The overall implication is that since only the selected features of Native culture are seen as worth copying and assuming as part of one’s identity, evidently “white” is still better; it just needs embellishment with a few “added Indian traits.” Thus many artists continue to demonstrate the Native vs. white paradigm. More critical attention should be devoted to notions and nature of whiteness in order to further a subtle understanding of the cultural strongholds of colonialism and to acquire cultural sensitivity possessed by more authentic shifters.

Résumé

La présente étude traite d’un aspect intéressant des études transatlantiques et multiculturelles, c’est-à-dire la disparité blanche vs. autochtone dans quelques histoires du devenir indien et son remplaçant présumé avec le paradigme autochtone et blanc symboliquement signifié par des hybrides ethnoculturels. Cependant, à la différence des captifs et d’autres transmutations involontaires qui créent une identité hybride véritable avec des marqueurs ethnoculturels authentiques, les prétendus connaisseurs des Indiens supportent l’opposition entre les deux cultures, les barrières et, par conséquent, les fossés raciaux qui sont enclins à diminuer. L’implication complète est que, puisqu’on voit les caractéristiques choisies de la culture autochtone comme valant la reproduction, et l’imitation comme la partie de son identité, évidemment le “blanc” est toujours meilleur, il a juste besoin de l’embellissement avec quelques-uns “des traits indiens supplémentaires.” Ainsi, beaucoup d’artistes continuent à démontrer le paradigme blanc vs. autochtone. L’attention plus critique devrait être consacrée aux notions de blancheur pour une compréhension plus subtile des bastions culturels du colonialisme et acquérir la sensibilité culturelle possédée par des sujets de transmutation plus authentiques.

Recently several scholars (e.g. Deloria, Wernitznig, Berkhofer, Francis) have called attention to the special Central European interest in the North American Indian, its stereotypical image and the lingering racism implied paradoxically by the superficial inclination to play, go, and even study Indians. The same scholars call for a more realistic understanding of the First Nations of Canada and the U.S., and focus on Native and white and even Trans-Atlantic relations in the view of encounter experiences and some unique bridging figures, i.e. culture brokers, shape shifters and hobby Indians.

American and Canadian Studies have already thoroughly discussed the broader challenges of pluralism, such as ethnic tolerance, racism, discrimination or xenophobia. Furthermore, the critical paradigm has shifted from colonial to post-colonial discourses, where the colonial is based on the artificially set opposition of white Eurocentric culture and indigenous/ethnic or racial Other, while the post-colonial is based on the dissolution of racial lines and a black-and-white world view, giving voice to minorities, exploring blurred lines, and acknowledging the constructed nature of race, hybridity as an enriching cultural experience, the process of Othering and the racialization of discourses previously considered color-blind. However, more recently a new observation has emerged concerning the falsity of the assumption that Cooperian and Karl Mayian fiction, “new line” Hollywood movies, pseudo-scientific perspectives and Indian wannabes, celebrities or white shamans may bring us closer to North American Natives and their reality or could dissolve the colonial color line.



On the contrary, they tend not to challenge but to reconstruct stereotypical images. Moreover, they write off real native culture by presenting fake Indian figures who merge some of the supposedly positive features of both Native and Anglo-Protestant/mainstream white culture.¹ Therefore, they ultimately function to advance the claim that while there may be a great deal to criticize about mainstream culture, real contemporary Native Americans are still less interesting and valuable than the Natives of the past (depicted as the Noble Savage or the Vanishing

1) Images chosen for book covers also show this – including even recent editions of Robert Kroetsch's *Gone Indian* (1999), as well as critical studies such as Donald B. Smith's *Long Lance, the Glorious Impostor* (2000) and Armand Garnet Ruffo's *Grey Owl: the Mystery of Archibald Belaney* (1996).

Indian). Thus primarily the notion of whiteness and mainstream discourses on First Nations cultures should be subjected to further critical scrutiny, as should the aspects of artworks that reflect a so-called critical Indianness, in order to understand the cultural strongholds of colonialism implied by seemingly antiracist artworks and the reasons underlying the difficulty of resisting their centripetal influence.

In addition, I believe that in order to understand the trickster and his audience, as well as other ethnic shape shifters who long for an indigenous identity, we should study possible correlated aspects of indigenization stories, such as the notion of Indianness vs. First Nations realities; “wilderness within,” i.e. romanticized Indianness and its history; the difference between “wannabes” and cultural mediators; the individual and the Other, de/reconstructing the borderline between the two; the motivations and phases of identity dislocation (cross-cultural psychology) and the difference between passing and shifting; the set of values contrasted; “out-Indianing” (Wernitznig, 52) and dressing in feathers; and all these questions in the context of the literary text. Besides, further and broader interdisciplinary studies may expand our understanding, too, as trans-Atlantic studies on commercializing Native cultures in Europe; visual arts and literature serving cultural imperialism; post-colonial studies on primitivism and the Noble Savage/Vanishing Indian images and their imperialist implications; and last but not least social, cultural, and cross-cultural psychology related to indigenization and the correlated psychological changes.

The critical discussion of shape shifters (both Indian wannabes and captivity shifters) is limited, but a few telling titles reveal the focus of our investigations and suggest exciting aspects of white/Indian relations: Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture* (1994); Philip Deloria’s *Playing Indian* (1998), which includes chapter titles like “Hobby Indians, Authenticity, and Race in Cold War America” and “Counterculture Indians and the New Age;” Robert Berkhofer’s *The White Man’s Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (1979); Dagmar Wernitznig’s *Europe’s Indians, Indians in Europe: European Perceptions and Appropriations of Native American Cultures from Pocahontas to the Present* (2007); Daniel Francis’s *The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture* (1993). These works address the process of writing off the Indian, that is, manipulating the image of the natives and replacing the realistic one with an imaginary (mostly vanishing) Indian preferred by Europeans and white North Americans. A distinction is drawn between “Indians of Childhood,” “Celebrity Indians and Plastic Shamans,” while the economic utility of “Marketing the Imaginary Indians” is asserted. Finally, it is worth considering an interdisciplinary correlation: the newest findings of psychology can be utilized to understand shape shifters, culture brokers and mediators on the border between western Eurocentric and Native cultures. *Cross-Cultural Psychology*, edited by John Berry et al, and *The Cambridge Handbook of Acculturation Psychology* provide “Culture Learning Approaches to Acculturation” (A-M. Iasgaret-C. Ward), analyze “Ethnic Identity and Acculturation” (R. Liebkind), and explore the “Personality and Individual Factors in Acculturation” (A. Kusic). Interestingly, the more one reads the primary and secondary sources, the more apparent it becomes that they reflect and investigate not native peoples and cultures so much as whiteness as a cultural barrier and the dynamics of cultural transfer and exchange, with special regards to the mediators and culture brokers who live between two cultures and use their distinct intercultural experiences and knowledge.

As for indigenous passing in general, there are some relative factors to consider: what is the time span of the ethno-cultural transfer? Is it a passing or shape shifting? Is it conscious? Is it voluntary? Is it real or fictive/fictional? That may mean two different things: firstly, is it a real (historical) person or a fictional character? Secondly, is the shape shifting authentic, based on real Native American traits, or is it grounded primarily in indirect contact, impressions, stereotypes and fake Indianness?

On the basis of these approaches, as well as readings of indigenization narratives, several subtypes seem to emerge:

1. **captives, semi-voluntary ethnic shifters**, those who “find themselves” immersed in a Native community – real, primarily non-voluntary shifters whose passing becomes a de-victimization process. They then refuse to repatriate or return and undergo a profound change of personality, coming to identify deeply with some aspects of Native culture and acquiring a new sense of inter-cultural understanding (e.g. Mary Jemison/Two-Falling-Voices, May Dodd/Mesoke);
2. **mediators of the Frontier, part-time Indians**, who understand and utilize the power and commercial value of Indianness (e.g. The Girty brothers, Pauline Johnson, William Johnson/Warraghiyagey). They switch back and forth between the two cultures and indicate their affiliations with external markers of ethnicity;
3. **Indian wannabes, fake lifelong Indians, tricksters**, who use and confuse ethnicity, or mostly their stereotypically attuned image of the Indian (e.g. Archibald Belaney/Grey Owl, Sylvester Long Lance), primarily out of escapist and then materialistic motivations, achieving popular fame and success but at the same time losing ground in their personal lives and psyche;
4. **hobby and powwow Indians**, whose escapism is a “critical Indianness” against the pitfalls of Western civilization. White Eurocentric culture makes them spend short periods of time playing Indian in the natural environment of their native land (e.g. German, Danish or Czech Indians, Bakony *Apaches*, Tamás Cseh, Earnest Thompson Seton). Their ethnographic knowledge of First Nation lifestyles is extensive, but mostly lacks real contact and experiences. The point for them is more a refusal of their original culture or some aspects of it, for instance a political regime or materialistic lifestyle, and at the same time identification with Native American spirituality.

Another possible subdivision is based on the nature and extent of personality transformation, which acculturation psychology can explore in depth. In this sense, Sylvester Long (1890-1932), Archibald Belaney (1888-1938), William Johnson (1715-1774), Mary Jemison (1743-1833) and May Dodd (1850-1876) are real shifters with permanent, profound alteration of identity and distinct phases of passing, while the group of hobby and powwow Indians embraces fictional shape shifters who temporarily go Indian. Their composite white identities are affected but not negated or altered significantly, and their new Indian persona is con-



sciously constructed, primarily on the basis of positive stereotypes. A detailed analysis of the above classification, with special regards to the cross-cultural approach to the process variables and the dynamics of ethnic passing is provided in a longer treatise that incorporates the findings of the current broader research project (“Going Indian: Cultural Appropriation in the Narrative De/Re-Construction of Ethnic Identity in Recent North-American Literature.”).

In the following, specific examples of indigenous passing are analyzed according to three main thematic foci:

1. The **motivations, passing strategies, and impact of indigenization**, adding a post-colonial, mostly interdisciplinary approach to these cultural mediators;
2. The **value transfer**: by going/playing Indian one actually learns about his/her own culture (“Native vs. white”), for we can understand ourselves in the Other, can reshape our identify, projecting negative/positive features we wish to attribute to or refuse ourselves. For instance, by playing the savage, one can separate oneself from brutal inclinations, by enacting as the stereotype of the noble savage one can attribute wisdom or even primitive sexuality to oneself, while environmentalism can counteract the lack of simplicity and humanity perceived in white Western culture;
3. Oppositional white/native disparity replaced by a complementary aspect of cultures: **hybridity** and its value (detailed in Isernhagen: “Hybridity’: The Play of Loss and Gain in (inter)cultural production—A Preliminary Statement.” and Vivan: “Hybridity and Aesthetics in the Era of Postcolonial Literatures.”).

Analyses

Wa-Sha-Quon-Asin?
Archibald Stansfeld Belaney?
Whiteman? Redman?
Who’s speaking? You tell
as you now break your pledge and stand and rush
to the mirror and make your Indian face.
Who are you speaking as? Who are you
speaking for? You rip the nose
from your neck and fling it into the corner. (GO, 68-9)

Of the above mentioned subtypes of indigenous passing, we leave captivity and other authentic passing experiences for another occasion and now focus on the second group: part-time Indians, mediators and chameleons, through the example of Fintan O’Toole: *White Savage* (2003). William Johnson/ Warraghiyagey, the “forest superman,” is the representative of the British Empire, imperialist adventurer, mediator, freelance general and a semi-integrated Mohawk *sachem*, an honorary Indian who became indispensable for both the Crown and the Iro-

quois Six Nations because of the mediation, protection and control he provided. His personal aspirations to obtain land and wealth fitted nicely with the colonial agenda of Manifest Destiny, while he had the “ability to submit to the realities of his time and accommodate himself to the prevailing climate” (WS 303), thus functioning as a superb culture broker. His passing was voluntary, deliberate and carefully planned, for he studied Native lifestyles, languages and rituals, forging familiar bonds with members of Native communities. He represents a dynamic chameleon-like ethnic swinger shifter, as O’Toole interprets him: “his combination of cultures in not a promiscuous miscegenation but an accumulation of graces [with the] ability to marry whiteness with the best aspect of Indian culture” (WS, 345). In fact he constitutes an embodiment of soft colonialism that is ideologically based on the idea of selecting values instead of rejecting or assimilating the ethno-cultural Other. His lifestyle was a merge of sexual and colonial politics, while his cultural sensitivity enabled him to recognize the complexities of Indian culture and the encounter experiences, underlining the relevance of trust, alliance and common humanity.

The latter reference to Johnson’s unique hybridity leads us to what Terry Goldie calls the “defamiliarization of common aspects of white culture” (16). Johnson embodies and at the same time counteracts some negative features, such as snobbery, inferiority complexes, imperialist attitudes, greed, a profit and wealth-oriented, speculative nature, widespread moral erosion, violence, pretention in both religion and ethnic identity (i.e. conversion for survival and success), and last but not least the application of camouflage and manipulation to achieve aims. His ‘Critical Indianness’ emphasized the positive features of the Mohawks. As a partial shift to indigene, however, it also implied a typical colonial attitude. He is an ambiguous chameleon, with a profound talent for cultural transition, while he seems morally free, possessing some mythic features and unique emplotting strategies and aware of his own discursive passing.

Compared to the success of William Johnson as an ethnic swinger shifter, Belaney, the hero of Armand Ruffo’s *Grey Owl: The Mystery of Archibald Belaney* (1996), has proven successful only in his public career, which he pursued in shadow of his failed private life and psychic breakdown. He represents the group of Indian wannabes, fake lifelong Indians, who use and confuse ethnicity. As for his passing strategies and impact, Belaney’s transformation is voluntary and deliberate and his ethnic change is partial. He truly longed for a surrogate Indian identity, becoming a devoted actor lost to the world of illusions with his mythic transformation, a Native Canadian Ambassador and a well-known public speaker and self-made man. However, when he realized the power of “Indian marketability,” he became an escapist showman, a commodity himself, an epistemological trickster, a celebrity writer, a larger-than-life figure and “illustration Indian” of his books and movie (*Silent Enemy* 1930). Since his transformation and activities were based on his audience’s craving for romantic primitivism, the white lies of Indianness, he ended up in conflict with his environment and himself, entrapped and estranged and no longer possessing any ability to control his own story and myth. The epistemological trickster has turned an impostor, a victim of his own manipulations, who in his afterlife was only praised for his environmentalism.

The other example of Indian wannabes, fake lifelong Indians for whom ethnicity is an escape and commodity is Sylvester Long Lance, the so called party time Indian belongs to what we may call the victims of the Grey Owl Syndrome. He was a trans-racial crosser, passing from



Afro-American to supposedly Cherokee Indian, and then as a “professional Indian” he became addicted to fame and the attention of the public.

He kept reinventing himself, seeking to pass through the intermediate stage of being an Indian “who could measure up to white man” (Smith, 110). So he actually created a negotiated identity, which made him quite successful in the first half of his career, but he then suffered a tragic fall. Long Lance’s relationship with the Native Americans reflects the fundamental disparity between the Grey Owl Syndrome characters: the Natives did not deny him in public, they even respected his courage to challenge the color barrier and hoped that his “services” might be helpful in improving Indian-white relations, for he seemed to be able to achieve considerably more than his real Native contemporaries. Nevertheless, he lost the first-hand touch with the Cherokees. As a journalist, ethnologist and party time Indian in New York, he enjoyed his fast-track social mobility, which was due for instance to his 1926 *Cosmopolitan* article entitled “My Trail Upward,” where he admits that he wants to live like the white man, for that means social elevation. Nevertheless, he seems to have overdone his role: he posed in pictures, told lies that became increasingly far-fetched, and came to believe in his own heroism. In addition, he kept escaping real human relationships, clinging instead to the safer fake ones, which gradually made him feel insecure and constantly anxious. Finally he lost control; then he had nervous breakdowns, and eventually attempted and later succeeded in committing suicide, tragically, symbolically and literally signifying the confusion and inevitable end of such a life. We can clearly see here the central problem of authentication that these passing persons have to face, an issue that Philip Deloria discusses thoroughly. Smith explains it as follows: “In him burnt two fires: one the desire for boundless celebrity, the other the genuine urge to employ that celebrity in the service of Indian rights. He had first invented himself as the model of the red man that the dominant society was clamouring to see: the noble savage who had been tamed” (Smith, 313).

In addition to having to stand on shaky grounds of authentication, Indian wannabes essentially face problems of value transfer, which they pose as broader ethno-cultural questions, i.e. the survival of some racist practices and the negation of a valuable, strong and rich Native American presence. William Johnson, Archibald Belaney and Sylvester Long, as well as the movie heroes of similar stories, selected aspects of Native Indian lifestyle that constituted little more than a projection of Native imagery by an Other, ignoring other aspects (e.g. spiritualism) as well as any claim to have significant direct contact with the First Nations. Apart from the seemingly anti-racial implication of these stories and lives, they recreate traditional stereotypes, further reinforcing the racial divides. However, as among others Brendan Edwards remarks, these cultural misrepresentations and literary misconceptions are not the prerogative of the literary texts and movies but unfortunately have been accepted as a norm by the academia as well (Edwards, 3, 5) and only recently can we see Native American intellectuals regaining control some control over the image of the Indian.

As another consequence of constantly confusing ethnic identification traits, they necessarily face a growing sense of ambiguity. While those who, like Johnson, sustain direct contact with the Natives internalize and ritually reinforce old and new loyalties and enjoy respect in both cultures, others often become paranoid about authenticity and the credibility of their make-believe Indian personas. The inevitable white lies of the Grey Owl-like illustration In-

dians, who cannot afford to pass up publicity out of fear of losing their income, cause schizophrenic mental disorders, as do the solitude of being a mediator lost in an in-between vacuum without a strong sense of belonging and the disparity between the internalized imaginary Indian and their inner egos. Their mental and moral fall comes to seem inevitable. In a nutshell, their overall impact underlines their validity and caters to the ideological opportunism of romantic primitivism. Furthermore, perhaps the most harmful impact of the illustration Indians is what Ruffo describes as follows: Belaney “successfully managed to out-Indian his native contemporaries, perpetuating a post-colonially problematic symbiosis of natives and nature in white, foremost European, perception” (*GO*, 105).

Conclusion – Contemporary Gone Indian Literature and Movies: *White and Native? No, Still White vs. Native*

In the indigenization narratives discussed above, the Native vs. white disparity is seemingly resolved in the characters that live between cultures and merge both. However, unlike captives and other involuntary shifters, who create a genuinely hybrid identity with authentic ethno-cultural markers, the wannabes sustain the opposition of the two cultures, the barriers, and consequently the racial divides they inclined to diminish. While the real shifters of the first group present deeper identification with significant adjustment, acculturation, integration and hybridization, fictional shifters and wannabes mostly proclaim a superficial identification, including mockery, masking and the selection of exclusively representative features and refusal of some aspects of mainstream European or North American culture of the day. Berkhofer has explored the latter, i.e. the criticism of mainstream social institutions, authority and social inequality in the framework of the passing narratives, as well as the virtues and values colliding in modernist/post-colonial discourses (76). My aim here is simply to emphasize the overall implication of these stories. Since only the selected features of Native culture are seen as worth copying and assuming as part of one’s identity, evidently “white” is still better, it just needs a few “added Indian traits.” Consequently, the stories depict and foster a peculiar escapism over significant interest in real First Nations culture, corroborating the view that the Indian of the past is more valuable and interesting than the rather problematic Indian of the present, which further adds to the historical continuation of the Vanishing Indian ideology. I agree with Wernitznig, who claims that, “for late-twentieth-century Western societies Indians are neo-noble loincloth bearers with additional spiritual qualities, which, naturally, they only retain to enlighten non-native wisdom seekers” (115).

Two important realizations concerning indigenous passing stories are particularly worth further critical attention. One is the observation that concepts of whiteness and mainstream discourses on First Nations cultures must be analyzed in order to further a more subtle understanding of the cultural strongholds of colonialism implied by seemingly antiracist artworks and the reasons underlying the difficulty of ridding ourselves of these facets of the colonial mindset. The other is the insight that more authentic and successful passing experiences and ethno-cultural hybrids possess profound cultural sensitivity and call for recognition of the complexities of Indian culture and the encounter.



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