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Native Americans and speculative fiction: what popular literature tells us about stereotyping and cultural biases

Dr. Weronika Łaszkiewicz is assistant professor at the University of Białystok (Poland). She has written a number of articles on different aspects of Euro-American fantasy fiction. She is the author of *Fantasy Literature and Christianity* (2018) and *Exploring Fantasy Literature* (2019). Together with Tereza Dědinová, PhD and Sylwia Borowska-Szerszun, PhD she has recently coedited *Images of the Anthropocene in Speculative Fiction* (2021).

If you are interested in learning more about her work, visit https://uwb.academia.edu/Weronika%C5%81aszkiewicz.

Weronika spent the spring of this year on a research fellowship at the Department of Czech Literature at the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University in Brno, where she focused on her latest project: exploring the stereotyping of Native Americans in speculative fiction. With several chapters still to go before the completion of her planned book, Weronika shares some of her findings in the following interview.

I will get straight to the point: What are the typical stereotypes of Native Americans in art?

Native stereotyping is a complex phenomenon and the very first thing that needs to be acknowledged is that even the word "Indian," popularly accepted as denoting an indigenous inhabitant of America, is a mistake made by Christopher Columbus and later reinforced by subsequent colonists. It was these colonists who then judged Native people according to their own values and goals, and found them to be an obstacle on their path to the riches offered by the New World.

Thus, on the one hand, the Indian became the object of negative stereotyping which cast him in the role of the ignoble savage. The ignoble savage was

generally regarded as inferior to the colonists, ignorant of the achievements of the civilized European world, spiteful, ruthless, and vengeful. Such stereotyping allowed to present the Indian as an enemy, legitimizing colonial violence against indigenous peoples, cultures, and territories. Today, the ignoble savage is understood to be an uneducated lazy Indian who survives on the reservation only thanks to governmental welfare and has hardly any prospects for improving his situation. Such negative stereotyping conveniently ignores the fact that centuries of genocide, land theft, and residential schools have successfully diminished Native agency and sovereignty, offering in exchange insufficient access to education, jobs, and healthcare.

On the other hand, once the Indian was defeated and relegated to the margins, he could become the object of nostalgic sentiments. The noble savage is an embodiment of natural virtues, survival skills, and innocence stemming from life in the wilderness. In the past, he was immortalized by American literature as a loyal companion of the white protagonist, handsome and brave, and doomed to disappear with the rest of his people and their culture once they were absorbed by the dominant group. Today, this positive stereotype is still recycled by works which depict all Native people as invariably knowledgeable about life in the wilderness, dedicated to their ancestral traditions, and highly spiritual.

Of course, this division into the noble and ignoble savage should be treated as just a starting point for further research on Native stereotyping, since over the centuries various features and behaviors have been ascribed to Native men and women, depending on the current attitudes and goals of the dominant group.

Why is speculative fiction a valuable source for the analysis of these stereotypes?

Speculative fiction has the potential to challenge and subvert things that are taken for granted by pushing the boundaries of the familiar, often daring its readers to face things that do not conform to the reality as they know it or things they would rather pretend not to notice so that they do not need to act upon that knowledge. Of course, speculative fiction is by no means free of stereotyping. So, on the one hand, the study of Native stereotypes in speculative narratives —and there are plenty—can confirm their ubiquity in the dominant culture, which is indicative of the scale of the problem of racial misrepresentation in general. On the other hand, speculative narratives can confront readers with characters and scenarios that not only refuse to reinforce stereotypes, but instead cast Native Americans in the roles of credible and though-provoking pro-

tagonists, experiment with the possible futures of indigenous societies, and explore the intersections of white and indigenous cultures. Speculative fiction, be it fantasy, sf or dystopia, is not interested in the *status quo* of the existing world, but in the possibilities offered by other worlds, one of them being the chance to criticize and ridicule current economic and socio-political issues through the means of fantastic societies and alien cultures, which demand that the reader opens themselves to new perspectives. Hopefully, this new awareness of the diversity and complexity of socio-political relations can be then transferred back onto the reader's own world, allowing them to realize how mechanism such as racial stereotyping are deeply and covertly ingrained in the dominant culture.

Do you see a significant difference between mimetic and speculative fiction in stereotyping of Native Americans?

Speculative fiction has, unfortunately, added a new dimension to many of the stereotypes present in mimetic fiction. In fantasy fiction, for instance, readers can encounter Native-inspired inhabitants of secondary (i.e., imaginary) worlds, who often turn out to be a bizarre combination of magical elements inherent to the genre and features recognized by the dominant culture as "typically" Native (e.g., headdresses, tepees, vision quests). A case in point are the Dalrei from Guy Gavriel Kay's *Fionavar Tapestry*, who inhabit the fantastic world of Fionavar and are clearly modelled on the indigenous tribes of the Great Plains, even though most of the neighboring countries are medieval-like kingdoms. This discrepancy stems from Kay's intention for Fionavar to be "the first of all worlds," which means it needs to reflect different cultures from the world as we know it. Yet the end result is far from satisfactory since the Dalrei are not much more than fantastic noble savages portrayed as skilled hunters and horse-riders. In science fiction, Native stereotypes and the belief in (white) man's progress might serve as the default framework for thinking about coming in contact with alien races that then need to be overpowered and controlled. Yet there are also works such as Andre Norton's *The Beast Master*, which places its Native character in the role of a galactic explorer, thus reversing colonial patterns. In horror fiction, Native traditions and forces, be it a cursed Native burial ground or malevolent shaman, are often the main threat which the protagonists need to defeat to survive. Each of these cases can be read as indicative of a deep fascination with or fear of Native peoples and traditions, which needs to be investigated in the wider context of Native (dis)empowerment in the modern world.

The harmfulness of negative stereotypes is obvious, but it is less evident in the case of positive stereotypes. Can you illustrate why and how positive stereotypes of Native Americans are damaging?

Some of the most enduring positive stereotypes are the figures of the noble savage, beautiful Indian princess, and wise shaman, which date back to the period of colonialism and yet still resurface in modern works. The Native as the noble savage is typically associated with the wilderness and excellent survival skills – he is a child of the forest, unspoiled by civilization, but also ignorant of its finer achievements. The Indian maiden, often called a princess since she is the daughter to the chief, is invariably beautiful, kind, gentle, and doomed to suffer because of her tragic love for the white man. The wise shaman is a convenient secondary character, always available to offer cryptic advice and consult the spirits. The main problem of positive stereotyping lies in its deceptiveness, because if the images are so flattering, what harm can they do? Well, they are rooted in the past and fail to acknowledge Native Americans as modern citizens, they lump them all together without paying attention to the cultural differences between individual tribes, and they hide all of that and more under the guise of romance and nostalgia. Positive stereotyping is still stereotyping.

And let's be specific: how is, say, Avatar problematic from this perspective?

Visually, *Avatar* is stunning, but the vibrant colors, exotic species, and alien landscapes might blind the viewer to the movie's problematic representation of the Other. What is the storyline of *Avatar*? A group of humans comes in contact with the Na'vi, the indigenous population of a foreign planet, and one of them – a white man ordered to obtain information necessary for the extraction of the planet's valuable natural resources – is soon recognized by the chief's daughter as the chosen one and introduced to her culture. Initial hostility and suspicion are gradually substituted by mutual respect due to the protagonist's growing fascination with the alien culture, which finally leads to his physical and mental transformation as he discards his previous identity in order to become a full member of the indigenous society and protect its well-being against his own people. Not only do the ecologically enlightened Na'vi offer the protagonist a more wholesome way of life, but he also successfully develops a romantic relationship with the beautiful Na'vi "princess" and becomes a warrior at least as good as the Na'vi men. This storyline, replete with racial stereotypes, is almost

identical to the one found in many Westerns and American romances set in the Wild West, in which the white man, captivated by the authenticity of noble, though savage, life in the wilderness and the charm of the "Indian maiden" rejects his own people and culture to join and protect the indigenous community. In this respect, for all of its science fictional elements, *Avatar* is quite similar to movies such as the epic Western *Dances with Wolves* which celebrates the white protagonist's rediscovery of his identity among the Sioux. Both are examples of positive stereotyping at its best, because the nostalgic sentiment of the protagonist's return to a more natural and spiritual way of life thanks to the help of an indigenous community successfully overshadows the instrumental role that this community plays in the narrative.

If there is a work situated in the past, perhaps in some historical fantasy, is a positively stereotyped representation of Native Americans less harmful?

So far in my research I have focused mostly on high/epic fantasy and urban fantasy. The former, especially if it is written in a Tolkienian manner, tends to focus on white protagonists and any indigenous characters (or generally non-white characters) present in the narrative are very often members of an exotic nature-wise and combat-skilled community that has a specific role to play in the protagonist's development. The latter frequently resorts to such stereotypical figures as a shaman/detective or ancient Native monster that needs to be defeated since it is the main antagonist. Historical fantasy is something I plan to pay more attention to in the future, though I can already tell that the genre is fraught with its own set of problems, positive stereotyping being only one of them. The author's sympathy for Native plight might all to easily result in the image of Natives as noble savages whose place is in America's distant past or in the image of Native people as victims, doomed to lose freedom and agency, and then completely disappear. The horrors of Native genocide and ethnocide might also become secondary to the nostalgic sentiments often associated with the birth of the US and Canada, which further stress the inevitable doom of indigenous communities in the face of white progress. Or, revisionist historical fantasy, in which Native people manage to repel the threat of colonization, might become a fantasy of bloody revenge. None of these scenarios is less harmful than the other, because they all strengthen racial stereotypes that undermine the position of modern Native people. The only historical fantasy that I have, so far, studied in depth is Orson Scott Card's *The Alvin Maker* series set on the

American frontier in the 19th century. Card's series tries to navigate across all of these potential traps with considerable, though not complete, success, and it can serve as a good starting point for further research in the genre.

There are many examples of cultural appropriation, can you think about some shining instances of cultural appreciation in speculative fiction representing Native Americans?

Of course, the best place to look for sensitive, rich, and thought-provoking portrayals of Native peoples and cultures is speculative fiction written by Native authors who have received approval from indigenous readers and critics. Owl Goingback and Daniel Heath Justice are just two names in a long list of prominent indigenous authors.

The non-Native writer that immediately comes to my mind is Charles de Lint – not because his works have always offered a flawless portrayal of Native Americans, but because his approach to indigeneity has undergone a visible evolution. Some of de Lint's early works, e.g., *Moonheart* (1984), offer rather stereotypical images of Natives as fantastic inhabitants of a different reality, who need to be saved by white protagonists schooled in shamanic arts. However, in his more recent novels, e.g., *The Wind in His Heart* (2017), de Lint deliberately focuses on modern Native Americans as citizens of the US and Canada, and incorporates many references to the socio-political problems which their communities experience on a daily basis. While this does not mean that his works are now a model example of cultural appreciation since some problems are still present, de Lint has clearly improved his sensitivity as a non-Native writer and now pays considerably more attention to indigenous concerns than many other fantasists. I am constantly on the lookout for other non-Native fantasists whose works successfully move beyond racial stereotyping.

Do you think that attitudes towards the representation of Native Americans are changing for the better?

Definitely. The recent years have witnessed a growing awareness within the US, Canadian, and European societies regarding racial matters, stereotyping in popular culture being one of them. Thanks to the continuous emergence of accomplished Native artists, non-Native audiences can now appreciate works offered by members of specific indigenous groups, and thus develop their sensitivity to and knowledge of these cultures to the point that they will be able to

challenge acts of racial misrepresentation in mainstream products. Thanks to social media, it is now easier to call out an artist or company on their failed depiction of indigenous or, in general, non-white communities. How these artists and companies then respond to such criticism (or fail to respond at all) can have serious impact on their future work. I'd like to believe that, for all of the problems associated with social media, they are a tool of empowerment for people of color by making their voices widely heard and acknowledged.

How should authors who want to write about Native Americans proceed? What would be your advice?

They should first ask themselves what they wish to achieve by including a Native character in the narrative. If the answer is simply "to have some racial diversity," chances are this is not going to work out well and readers will quickly notice the flaws. But if the Native character is indispensable for the plot, they should be believable, convincing, and well-rounded. Naturally, it might be difficult for a non-Native writer to achieve such a result if their exposition to indigeneity has been limited to the stereotypical images ingrained in the dominant popular culture. And even a well-meaning non-Native author can make serious mistakes in their portrayal of a Native character simply due to the fact that they lack experience of what it really means to be a Native citizen of the US and Canada. The best course of action is to develop one's cultural sensitivity by research and discussion. The wealth of easily available materials, the presence of tribal spokespeople ready to clarify how their community wishes to be approached by outsiders, and the help of regular members of indigenous communities who are often very proactive online means that a writer satisfied with recycling old stereotypes is being deliberately lazy and ignorant. Of course, developing one's cultural sensitivity is not an easy task, but that is the whole purpose of writing and reading books – to challenge oneself and learn something valuable from that experience.

That is a great conclusion. Thanks so much for the interview and good luck with the book!

Tereza Dědinová