# The savage as living ghost: representations of Native Americans and scholarly failures to dismantle the notion of the savage

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## Conclusion

In Western colonial discourses since the sixteenth and especially the eighteenth century, Westerners and non-Westerners, such as Native Americans, Africans, Australians, and Asians, have been distinguished and hierarchized through binary oppositions, in which Westerners were regarded as civilized, progressive, rational, emancipatory beings, while most non-Westerners came to be idealized or demonized as savages. In its different guises, the figure of the savage propelled Western fantasies, desires, and anxieties. Native Americans, particularly, were the people to which the tag "savage" was most systematically applied—whether they were constructed as "noble" or "ignoble" savages. When demonized or considered less civilized, savage peoples were ideologically framed in such a way that they "deserved" to be oppressed, exploited, Christianized, or simply removed. In this thesis I have dealt with four paradigmatic ways in which people in the West, in the last seven decades, have tried to dismantle the very opposition between savage and civilized in an attempt not only to show that the opposition is false, but to counter or avoid the negative consequences of the oppositional dynamic. As I have delineated them, these four attempts to move beyond the oppositional concept of the savage were (1) the structuralist attempt, (2) the post-structuralist attempt, (3) the post-colonial or multicultural attempt, and (4) the decolonial attempt.

I can now also briefly define these approaches which scholars tried to propose or *state* in order to dismantle the oppositional relation between the civilized and the savage. They did so by means of what I want to call: (1) the equality option; (2) the inclusion option; (3) the multiplicity option; and (4) the autonomy option. Lévi-Strauss, for (1), proposed that there is a distinction to be made between civilized and savage, but that they should be considered as of equal value. White, for (2), proposed that there is a distinction to be made between civilized and savage but the two should be seen as internal to each other, or included in one another. Shohat and Stam, for (3), proposed that there is a distinction to be made between civilized and savage but the two should be considered as multiple in themselves, providing us with a pallet of possibilities instead of a binary opposition. Mignolo, for (4), proposed that there is a distinction to be made between civilized and savage, but the savage part should be seen as independent from the so-called civilized, with a sovereign and autonomous position. Although these four options have all been fruitful in different ways, my conclusion is that all four attempts have failed in dismantling the concept of the savage as an oppositional one. My contention is that they fail, not only because of the strength of their opposition, and certainly not because of the ontological validity of this opposition, but because enormous numbers of ideologically colored representations, produced throughout centuries, have helped create a figure that is unreal (i.e. discursively constructed) and yet very real at the same time: the savage as a ghost. As a figure that has acquired a reality of its own, the ghost of the savage cannot simply be controlled, discarded, dismantled, or conjured away at will: and most certainly it cannot be reasoned away. Its comings and goings remain unpredictable and to a certain extent uncontrollable.

The ghostly nature of the savage became especially evident in my analyses of works of art. In my four "rubbing" exercises—i.e. rubbing works of art (two novels and two films) with the theoretical attempts that I spoke of above—the common thread was my focus on the Native American as a paradigm of the savage. As was explained in the Introduction, Native Americans have a unique relationship with Europeans since the European conquest of America in 1492. Because of this unique relation, my thesis focused on implicit evocations or descriptions of Native Americans in particular works of art as paradigmatic examples of how cultural representations in general have managed to make Native Americans appear as savages in Western discourse. The resulting images of the savage were framed predominantly by the traditional tropes of "good" versus "bad Indians" or, more specifically, tropes such as the noble savage, ignoble savage, or animal-like savage. Beginning with Lévi-Strauss's *The Savage Mind* and the metaphor of the "shadow: in chapter one, it became more and more clear that the image of the savage, as embodied in representations of Native Americans, is ghost-like. This ghostly presence is haunting not only Western scholarship and science but also literature and films.[1]

In *The Spectral Metaphor: Living Ghosts and the Agency of Invisibility*, Esther Peeren gives us a detailed history of, and distinction between, comparable terms such as *specter*, *phantom,* and *spook.* She justifies her choice to use *living ghosts* to refer to her objects—undocumented migrants, servants, or domestic workers, mediums, and missing persons—as such:

> 'Specter', for example, strongly invokes something visible, even spectacular, through its etymology (from Latin *specere*, 'to look, see') and tends, in everyday speech, to refer to something terrifying and horrific, while 'phantom' is primarily associated with the illusionary and ineffectual, and 'spook' seems archaic and rather innocuous when used as a noun to describe literal ghosts, but, as an adjective, conjures discomfort and fear. … However, with 'ghost' being both the most common and most figuratively fruitful term, I have chosen to designate the subjects of my research, in general, as *living ghosts*. (4-5)

Peeren's distinction is of relevance to this thesis. Following her reasoning, the savage is not so much alive as spectral. That is to say: the savage is not only the visual appearance of something terrifying or horrific, as the savage also has the potential of being noble and good, and, instead of being a visual phenomenon only, the savage appeals to all the senses. As all my examples show, the savage is not a phantom either. It is not an illusion, and surely not an ineffectual one. As for the last option, *spook*, this is not adequate either. Savages surely appear in *spook* stories or *spooky* circumstances (as, for instance, in the so-called haunted houses in fun fairs), yet the presence of the savage extends far beyond the fun fair or the horror story. The savage appears as a *living ghost* throughout Western cultures and theories.

The savage as a living ghost can be clearly detected in the four cases studied in this thesis. In *Lord of the Flies*, there is no actual presence of Native Americans, but the image

[1] Here "science" is used in the same sense as Lévi-Strauss did in *The Savage Mind*.

of savage Native Americans is intrinsically related to English school children, who paint themselves as Native Americans and play the savage. The fiction of savage children carrying the mask of Native Americans is just one example of how the figure of savage Native Americans is prevailing in the Western world and, like a ghost, keeps haunting the European imagination. Similarly, in *Inglourious Basterds*, Native Americans are not actually present, but their image is prominent and can be easily traced in characters' conversations, practices (such as scalping), or games, such as the card game which made a participant guess he was *Winnetou*. Through the film, in this case, the history of the colonization and extermination of Native Americans comes to be fused with the history of the Holocaust and of Nazism. This, as well, can be read as an example of how the ghosts of Native Americans as 'savages' have a live force that allows them to travel beyond the domain to which they seem to belong.

Unlike the two previously mentioned cases, *Brave New World* does present Native Americans explicitly. These representations are cast, from a Eurocentric perspective, as exotic and inferior. Even John the Savage, a grotesque figure first living in and then taken out of the Savage Reservation to the so-called civilized world, keeps connoting the wild world where he is from in his inability to adapt to the civilized world. Native Americans are most explicitly present in *The Revenant*. Here, they even appear explicitly as ghosts, as when Glass' wife, after having been killed by European settlers, comes back to the living world through Glass' dream and hallucinations. As a ghost, she keeps reminding him of certain Pawnee sayings and encourages him to live on. Still, here, different from the representation in the previous three cases, Native Americans are no longer confined within the Eurocentric gaze as objects to be *looked at*, but have their own agency and begin to *look at* Europeans. This is shown in the final scene through Powaqa's indifferent gaze upon Glass. As these examples make clear, the savage does not appear as one type of ghost. Peeren's idea of the living ghost, applied to the savage, implies that the savage can appear in many different situations and in many different guises. This thesis does not wish to construct a typology of all the different forms that the ghosts of Native Americans take, but rather to register some of the unpredictable workings of this ghost in Western culture, workings which escape such attempts at classification and control.

In the context of my topic, one irony is that considering Native Americans as living ghosts that connote the savage may seem closely related to belief systems of Native Americans themselves. As there are so many different Native American cultures, it is impossible to generalize their beliefs about ghosts, but one thing that stands out clearly is that most Native Americans do not follow the binary opposition between life and death, materiality and immateriality, body and soul, death and life, as most Europeans do. For them, ghosts are not restricted to a different and unknown world, but can be parts of the living world. At the same time, the ghostly image of Native Americans is the ultimate result of continuous violent practices and ideological construction by European settlers. "When European Americans speak of Native Americans," Bergland writes, "they always use the language of ghostliness" (1). In order to occupy their land and justify the oppression of Native Americans, European settlers demonized Native Americans as ghosts, who had no right over the land where they lived. Yet, this very strategy came with a price. The ghostly image of Native Americans proves to be a persistent figure in

Western discourse that, as such, cannot be simply framed, demonized, and dispelled but has its own force.

As ghostly figures, Native Americans provoke both fear and fascination among Europeans and European Americans. On the one hand, haunted Europeans and European Americans carry the guilt of possessing Native American land and of the massive violence and the genocide towards Native Americans. In a sense, they, and those coming after them, are still afraid that Native Americans might come back to take revenge. Here, the ghostly image of Native Americans is a threat and a nightmare. On the other hand, Europeans and European Americans were, and *remain,* fascinated by or curious to learn more about these ghostly Native Americans, who come from a different and unknown world. They seek to understand them and find out what they want. At the same time, ghostly Native Americans allow them to discuss the aporia of civilization, in the sense that Native Americans "unfortunately" had to become ghostly to allow for the progress of civilization.

Approaching the savage as a living ghost may explain why it is so difficult to eradicate the oppositional concept of the savage. As the example of Native Americans shows, and despite the fact that their appearance is changeable, unpredictable, and unsettled, they keep haunting Western discourse. Why is this haunting force of living ghosts so effective? Peeren writes that the living ghost's "haunting force is effective precisely because of its undecidable nature and origin, its blurring of the active-passive dichotomy. It promises an agency separate from acting out ('*without doing anything*') that still has a profound impact" (emphasis in the original, 20). That is to say, a ghost's uncertain and ambiguous nature and origin endow it with the potential to exert a profound impact "without doing anything." And, indeed, one could claim that the ghostly savage, as defined in colonial discourse, is the promise of an action that will not be acted out, and cannot be acted out. Still, it is very much alive, or rather "living," with ambiguous agency *as a ghost*.

As Peeren notes, the ghost and the haunted may transform and exchange roles. It is possible that one is the ghost at one moment and changes into the haunted at the next moment, or one is both the ghost and the haunted at the same time (27). In fact, this very description may serve to illustrate what poststructuralists define as a "difference within." In Western discourse, Peeren contends, the "haunted self tends to be western and privileged, the ghostly other non-western or otherwise marginalized" (29). As non-Western and marginalized, Native Americans tend to be the ghostly other, haunting the Western subject. Yet, they can also become the haunted, since they are under continuous construction from Eurocentric perspectives. Their capacity to be haunting and at the same time haunted makes the ghostly image of Native Americans as 'savages' more disturbing, impossible to ignore or eradicate.

Finally, the effective haunting force of living ghosts involves their transcendence in terms of time. For Derrida, ghosts keep hovering over the past, the present, and the future. For Spivak, the Derridian ghost is "not only a *revenant* (a returner, the French for 'ghost'), but also an *arrivant*, one who arrives" (1995, 71). As a *revenant,* the ghost provokes and reintroduces historical memory, while as an *arrivant* the ghost suggests an unanticipated future. As for the savage as a living ghost, on one hand, it comes from the

past and its ghostly image calls upon the history of colonization and oppression by European settlers. On the other hand, it keeps arriving, as if from a future that entails an alternative history and an open future-to-come. Much like the Derridian ghost, the ghostly image of Native Americans contains both the past and the future and is thus impossible to eliminate.

Transcending the boundary between life and death, presence and absence, body and soul, the ghostly image of the savage exerts a conceptual force. As scholars of spectrality (such as Antonio Negri and Derrida) suggest, "exploiting one's ghostly status might be more productive than trying to deny or overcome it" (Peeren 23).[2] This is why Derrida suggests that we *learn to live* with ghosts, which is further explained by Peeren; instead of "assimilating otherness or exorcizing it, the idea is to live *with* it … to allow it to persist as an enigma and, crucially, a potential threat" (26).[3] Her reasoning here is that removing the ghost might be precisely the ultimate colonial desire: to exorcize the colonial fear in destroying the last living, if ghostly, part of the subjects mistreated under colonialism. Derrida's and Peeren's suggestion is that we should, rather, try to find out what the living ghost is and does. To that order, we need to learn to *live with* the ghost, regardless of whether it seems to be an enigma or even a threat. As Peeren wants it: "A true being *with* would surely entail a certain reciprocity, an attempt to acknowledge the ghost's own vision, a willingness to look at the word, and at oneself, through its eyes" (26-27). That is to say, to *live with* ghosts requires not only looking at them in a new way, but also learning to look through their eyes. In this context, to *live with* the ghost does not mean that the ghost is all-powerful and authoritative. It "may appear as a dominant, even sovereign being," Peeren writes, "but can also manifest as a figure of compromised agency" (3). With regards to this, the savage can indeed be seen as a "figure of compromised agency."

In the specific case of Native Americans, it is more productive to learn to explore their ghostly status and to *live with* them, rather than denying or trying to overcome them. As a ghostly figure, the Native American can function both as an independent being with its own agency and as a compromised figure within Eurocentric discourse. Here, the ambiguous relationship of the ghostly Native Americans to *power* hints at the main conflict between decolonial thinkers and poststructuralists. The former thinkers focus on the sovereignty, or autonomy, of indigenous peoples, such as Native Americans. The latter emphasize the co-existence of Native Americans and Europeans *in* one another. The idea of *living with* the ghosts of Native Americans suggests that neither the attempt to assimilate and exorcize them, nor the attempt to give them complete sovereignty and freedom, is perfect. In this sense, I want to conclude that the failure of the four attempts to dismantle the notion of the savage can, paradoxically, be seen as a success.[4]

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[2] For the study of ghost by Negri, see his article "The Specter's Smile."

[3] Derrida specifies the notion of *learning to live* as "to learn to live *with* ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company, or the companionship, the commence without commence of ghosts. To live otherwise, and better. No, not better, but more justly. But *with* them. No *being-with* the other, no *socius* without this *with* that makes *being-with* in general more enigmatic than ever for us" (emphasis in the original, 1994, xvii-xviii).

[4] Here I situates the failure within the performative. More discussion about the paradoxical relation between success and failure can be found in Shoshana Felman's *The Scandal of the Speaking Body: Don Juan with J. L. Austin, or Seduction in Two languages* (2003).

The savage is a living ghost. As a living thing, it asks us how we want to live with it, both artistically and in a scholarly sense. In consideration of this "living together," my conclusion is shifting into a suggestion; I come to an end by saying that the critical potential embodied in the four approaches I discussed should not be forgotten but could be revitalized in terms of critical intimacy. The notion of critical intimacy, as opposed to critical distance, is coined by Spivak in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999).[5] As a postcolonial feminist, Spivak calls for a rereading of imperialism's foundational texts in terms of critical intimacy, which is "not to excuse, but to suspend accusation to examine … if the protocols of [a] text can produce something that will generate a new and useful reading" (1999, 98). For her, to read a text with critical intimacy invites a reading which may be "a 'mistake,' inappropriate to the text" and "in a certain way, falls prey to its own critique, perhaps" (153). Critical intimacy may be better understood if we look at how she explains *deconstruction* in a recent interview:

> It's not just destruction. It's also construction. It's critical intimacy, not critical distance. So you actually speak from inside. That's deconstruction. My teacher Paul de Man once said to another very great critic, Fredric Jameson, "Fred, you can only deconstruct what you love." Because you are doing it from the inside, with real intimacy. You're kind of turning it around. It's that kind of critique.[6]

Here, we can see that intimacy for Spivak is a deconstructive practice that tries to settle the discourse from inside, not so much from a critical and distanced perspective but with a close, loving, intimate connection. This does not mean that all will be fine. One scholar has argued that intimacy, for Spivak, "produces upheaval, if not deliberate error; we might say that reading with critical intimacy produces a reading estranged from itself" (Steigman 110). That is to say, to read with critical intimacy is a disfiguring and estranging practice, which reframes and retakes earlier texts from within. Our being intimate with the living ghost of savages suggests refigurations and reconstructions of them. And this might be of as much relevance as critical distance, if only for the reason that the Western relation with these figures is "a job never quite done."[7]

[5] Taking up Spivak's idea of critical intimacy, Mieke Bal further discusses it in her book *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*. She argues: "Through my critical intimacy with it, I hope to … persuade my readers that critical intimacy is a productive – perhaps the most productive – mode or attitude for reading scholarly texts" (2002, 292).

[6] See <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/critical-intimacy-interview-gayatri-chakravorty-spivak/>.

[7] Here, I use the phrase "a job never quite done" in the same sense as Spivak, when she discusses Derrida's attention to detail. "Derrida's attention to detail does not mean giving up. It means persistence, repetition, circling back, for the job is never quite done" (Spivak 2005, 16).