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

Chen, C.

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Summary

The Savage as Living Ghost is a study about four scholarly failures to dismantle the notion of the savage in Western discourse. These scholarly attempts are, broadly, structuralist, poststructuralist, postcolonial or multiculturalist, and decolonial. This study examines these four scholarly attempts by confronting them with close-readings of literary works or films in which the notion of the savage is attached to or associated with Native Americans.

As Native Americans constitute the paradigmatic figuration of the savage since the European conquest of America, I focus particularly on the ways the West has constructed Native Americans as savages in this study. In Western discourse, the terms “savage” and “civilized” appear quite frequently in political speeches, the media, academic works, and daily conversation. This study looks critically at the rhetoric of civilization which designates Native Americans as savages and Europeans as civilized, and traces how the notion of the savage serves as a moral and cultural term to establish a hierarchy between Native Americans and the Europeans. Studying this process of othering reveals the dark side of European modernity.

As the counterparts of civilization, terms such as “savages” and “barbarians” are often used interchangeably. Their meanings are equally often taken for granted and understandings of them as two earlier stages of societal development in humanity’s evolutionary course towards civilization still persist in both Western and Chinese contexts. Instead of strengthening the hierarchical relationship between savage, barbarian and civilized, I argue that the scholarly efforts to dislodge them from their conventional contexts can contribute to revealing the critical potential of these traditional concepts and guide us to rethink the concept of the savage in other than oppositional terms.

As a changeable, unsettled and unpredictable figure in the Western imagination, the savage can be both frightening and fascinating. It can be either violent, brutal, and fierce, as the trope of the ignoble savage suggests, or humane, gentle, and innocent, following the trope of the noble savage. Its ambiguous uses make it both an enigma and a threat and have propelled intense explorations of its force and potential in Western literature and theory. In this study, I argue that it is impossible to eradicate the notion of the savage, which keeps coming back and imposes itself whenever it appears.

In this study, I contend that the notion of the savage can both enhance and disturb dominant civilizational discourse in its various guises. Taking as an initial hypothesis that it might be impossible to eradicate the notion of the savage in Western discourse, the central question of this study is how four very influential philosophical and methodological approaches have tried to dismantle the Eurocentric notion of the savage, how these efforts lead to one another, and why they are still unsuccessful today. Specifically, my research questions are: what constitutes the structuralist, the poststructuralist, the postcolonial or multiculturalist, and, most recently, the decolonial attempts to question and unsettle the hierarchical opposition between the civilized and

savage and do away with the Eurocentric connotations and implications of the notion of the savage? How do these attempts lead to one another and where do they differ? Why is the oppositional concept of savage so persistent in Western discourse? Does it only function in rigid oppositional schemes, or can it also help us imagine other ways of getting along with Native Americans, opening up to their different worldviews and dealing with the violent past of their colonization without erasing it?

In order to answer these questions, I turn to literature and film, making them my testing grounds for the above approaches; novels and films help me tease out the implications, interrelation, and, ultimately, failures of the above scholarly attempts to dismantle the “savage.” My argument takes shape through close readings that unravel in the form of a dialogue between theoretical texts that exemplify the above scholarly approaches and literary and cinematographic texts—four cultural objects in which Native Americans as “savages” appear both implicitly and explicitly. These novels and films, situated in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, are *Lord of the Flies* (1954) by William Golding, *Brave New World* (1932) by Aldous Huxley, *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) directed by Quentin Tarantino and *The Revenant* (2015) directed by Alejandro G. Iñárritu. This study brings literature and film, the textual and the visual, together. What these cases have in common is a critical representation of Native Americans as savages. Although Native Americans as actual characters only appear in *Brave New World* and *The Revenant*, in *Lord of the Flies* and *Inglourious Basterds* we can also see how Native Americans as savages function in the Western imagination.

Each chapter introduces a different attempt to dislodge the figure of the savage from its conventional contexts. In other words, each chapter deals with (1) an artistic work which thematizes different aspects of Native Americans as savages and (2) a theoretical work which seeks to move beyond the conventional notion of the savage. By rubbing theory and art, we can see the limits of the theoretical works and the critical potential of artistic works.

In **Chapter one**, I discuss the structural attempt to eradicate the oppositional notion of the savage by bringing Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* and Claude Lévi-Strauss’s *The Savage Mind* together. In *The Savage Mind*, Lévi-Strauss argues that savage thinking is not inferior to modern thinking, but forms the substrate to it. Although the way Lévi-Strauss deals with mythical knowledge and modern science can be regarded as part of a structuralist attempt to break the hierarchical opposition between civilization and savagery, I relate the failure of this attempt to structuralist effects—specifically *vraisemblance*—as discussed by Jonathan Culler. We can see how different levels of *vraisemblance* work in *Lord of the Flies*. In this chapter I also discuss how conventional tropes that involve the savage, such as the noble savage, the ignoble savage and the animal-like savage, are represented in the novel. In my exploration of these tropes, I focus particularly on the role of the older boys in the novel, who seem to play a double role both as ignoble savages and colonizers. The simultaneity of savagery and civilization, as it takes place in the novel, dislodges the savage from its conventional positioning as a figure that belongs to a faraway place and time (in the past). However, I argue that the structuralist attempt to cast the savage as simultaneous with and equal to the civilized can reframe the opposition between the civilized and the savage, but cannot do away

with it: both the theorist, Lévi-Strauss, and the novelist, Golding, work as “bricoleurs” and cannot move beyond the conventional contexts they try to unsettle. This dialogue between theoretical texts and the novel leads to the idea of “difference within” which brings me to the poststructuralist attempt to move beyond the oppositional concept of the savage.

In **Chapter two**, I introduce the poststructuralist attempt to eliminate the oppositional notion of the savage by delving into Huxley’s *Brave New World*, which can be read both as a satire in the literary sense and a Satire in the sense Hayden White defines it when he argues that Satire offers a history in which people remain captured and confined in the world. Although poststructuralists try to move away from the binary opposition of savagery a civilization by foregrounding the notion of the “difference within,” they cannot escape from it, because the poststructuralist critique depends on the very opposition it seeks to break apart. It remains within the same world that is. By arguing that deconstruction is also generically satirical in nature, I trace how this approach, just like the protagonist John the Savage in the novel, is still trapped in Eurocentric discourse. This is also the reason why it is impossible to eradicate the notion of the savage through deconstruction. This failure leads me to the postcolonial or the multiculturalist attempt to move beyond the notion of the savage through an amplification of twisted and hidden voices.

In **Chapter three**, I introduce another attempt to eliminate the notion of the savage, which consists in dismantling the opposition to which the savage belongs by pluralizing the “savage.” Here, I center on the work of postcolonial thinkers Ella Shohat and Robert Stam. In their work, they propose the idea of amplifying the hidden and distorted voices of others, so that plural voices can be heard rather than simply one dominant voice. Unlike the previous two chapters which study literary texts, this chapter focuses on the representation of Native Americans as savages through an analysis of the film *Inglourious Basterds*. As a postmodern work of art, the film brings different histories together through parody. By amplifying these different histories, stereotypical representations of Native Americans become visible as well. However, these stereotypical representations, even when they are parodied and criticized, keep renewing themselves through repetition, which may be one reason for the impossibility of eradicating the notion of the savage through pluralism.

In the previous chapters, the figures of Native Americans as savages are mainly depicted from a Eurocentric perspective. **Chapter four** turns to the actual presence and visual representations of Native Americans, taking the film *The Revenant* as a case study. I here introduce the ideas of decolonial thinkers who argue that coloniality and modernity are two sides of the same coin. Instead of pluralizing voices, the decolonial attempt consists in multiplying voices and seeking to break away from Eurocentric perspectives through the establishment of alternative ways of understanding and knowing. The representations of Native Americans in the film question the binary opposition between Native American “savages” and “civilized” European settlers, between “good” and “bad” Indians, and simultaneously suggest alternative ways of knowing and understanding. Testing decolonial perspectives in my analysis of the film, I show that the film’s critique of colonial reason does not stop at undoing the

savage/civilized opposition. The film projects Eurocentric modes of knowing alongside alternative worldviews and conceptualizations of the relation of self and other. Specifically, I focus on what I call “decolonial moments” that showcase the film’s delinking from Eurocentric perspectives and from the function of the savage therein. Nevertheless, this “delinking” is never complete, as the figure of the savage persists in haunting way. Ghosts of savages in the film are not only conceptual metaphors for the unfinished workings of colonialism in the present, but also parts of reality—in accordance with beliefs shared by Native American societies—that embody multiple histories and perspectives.

In my **Conclusion**, I argue that as a living ghost, the savage keeps haunting Western discourse. As living ghost, the haunting effect of the savage is so powerful that it becomes impossible to do away with it. Nevertheless, I propose to explore the ghostly status of Native Americans, the haunting presence of their past, but also their material presence today in our world, and the different worldviews they introduce. This amounts to a practice of learning to live with ghosts rather than denying or trying to overcome them.