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

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Stellingen

Behorende bij het proefschrift van Cui Chen

The Savage as Living Ghost: Representations of Native Americans and Scholarly Failures to Dismantle the Notion of the Savage

1. In the last seventy years, there have been four pivotal scholarly attempts to dismantle the oppositional notion of the savage: the structuralist, the poststructuralist, the postcolonial or multiculturalist, and, most recently, the decolonial one.
2. The structuralist attempt to dismantle the notion of the savage (e.g. in works by Claude Lévi-Strauss) replaces the binary opposition between savage and civilized by making the terms epistemologically equal, but cannot move beyond the opposition. The poststructuralist attempt (e.g. in works by Hayden White) aims to dismantle the notion of the savage through modes of deconstruction on the basis of a “difference within,” but here the savage remains captive *within* the same world. The postcolonial or multiculturalist attempt (e.g. in works by Ella Shohat and Robert Stam) tries to amplify hidden and marginalized voices next to the culturally dominant voice, yet cannot serve to dismantle the notion of the savage either. The decolonial attempt (e.g. in works by Walter D. Mignolo), the latest in this chain, foregrounds alternative ways of knowing and understanding, yet this one remains haunted by Western modernity in its intrinsic relation to coloniality.
3. Artistic works (e.g. novels and films) provide a fertile ground to explore the implications and potential of the scholarly attempts mentioned above, or to test them. They thereby also contribute to revealing the limits of these attempts and accounting for their failure.
4. Language can be easily used, or rather abused, to justify atrocities. The notion of the savage was part and parcel of such uses or abuses. If the notion cannot be dismantled critically or rationally, the attempts to move beyond it are still worthy of consideration for their potential to open up to something

new, or for their crucial contribution to creating awareness of the uses made of the “savage.”

5. It is more productive to tease out the critical potential of traditional terms such as savage, barbarian and the civilized, than to lock them up in their conventional contexts, or to invent new terms or theories.
6. Etymologically speaking, the savage belongs to the woods, outside society, but in the contemporary situation, it resides in the world as living ghost. As such, it has a haunting force that manifests itself everywhere (here, there, inside, outside) and transcends the temporal boundaries between history, the present and the future.
7. For centuries, in Eurocentric discourses, Native Americans constituted the paradigmatic figuration of the savage. Both scholars and the general public should delve into this stereotype and come to terms with the ghostly image of Native Americans rather than exorcising that image.
8. In Western discourse, it is difficult to move beyond Eurocentrism. Still, we should keep on unpacking Eurocentrism to explore how the cultural hierarchy between Europe and its others has been established and still persists in various forms in the present.
9. The experience of cultural untranslatability is helpful in cultural critique in the sense that it propels us to critically investigate, without appropriating them, the way untranslatable objects, images, and texts *work*, thus opening up other possibilities of meaning-making.
10. In the research field of the humanities, close reading—involving both critical distance and critical intimacy—is never out of fashion.
11. “No man ever looks at the world with pristine eyes” (Ruth Benedict).