

English

Native American Sinners in the Hands of an Angry, Cultivated European World: The Role of Native American Folktales in the European Conflict

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It all started with a clash of color: the red faces versus the pale ones. Once the Europeans started exploring the New World they ran into some “different” sort of natives, and it was the differences—the skin tint, clothing, and food choices—that separated the two peoples. However, as soon as winter struck and those of both races started dying out (whether by starvation, small pox, or weather-induced sickness) everyone came together to fight through the cold and feed each other to later join as a unified group and give thanks for a God-sent alliance and racial survival. From then on Indians and Europeans accepted each other’s differences and went down in history as the poster-children for “best unlikely friends”—or at least that’s what the average North American history book claims. Even present-day immigrant students are taught that we celebrate Thanksgiving merely “because the Pilgrims and Indians became friends. The Pilgrims made a big dinner to celebrate and give thanks to God because they were in the land of the free and living in the United States” (Blanco 22). This idea of freedom, however, has been drastically skewed.

Not all characters in the Thanksgiving story had personal rights. This fallacy covers up the mistreatment of Native Americans through “Hollywood image of the past that had relegated them to a half-mythical existence” (Deloria 140). Just as a true definition of the Native American has yet to exist, true harmony between the two has never existed either, and it most certainly didn’t four centuries ago, immediately following what most North American students know as the first Thanksgiving. It’s as if the history books forgot the rest of the story beyond that one big meal everyone shared that one time. They made a sweeping generalization, neglecting the remaining Indian tribes and European colonies outside of the Thanksgiving party (who subsequently represent a majority of the Native American population of that time). They forgot the part where the clash of the peoples continued on with The Trail of Tears, an event that hardly blossomed out of friendship as it was masked behind a simple definition of the “designation...of Civilized Tribes” (Jahoda 123). Rather, The Trail of Tears rose out of a hidden, selfish agenda that choked out freedom from a native race

in attempts for the white man to pursue his Manifest Destiny. Native American reservations weren't created to provide the natives with "special" land they could call their own. Instead, they were created to mark rigid boundaries to shelter Europeans from a way of life that was too strange for anyone to adapt to and claim.

The Native Americans tried to adapt to the Europeans' idea of culture—but consequently the idea of nature and the role of culture became a cornerstone of frustration and misunderstanding that Native Americans and Europeans ran into. However, this conflict between the relationships of these two peoples wasn't always filled with vicious wars of slinging tomahawks and blasting guns. It wasn't the surface-level idea of skin color, daily attire, or food preferences that created a strong barrier between the two peoples. No, the internal friction dug much deeper than that. The Native Americans believed that nature was meant to be respected and treated as an equal with humans, but the Europeans' nature was something worth domineering and ruling over. For Native American people (of all colors and cultures), animals, spirits, and even the trees and plants possessed an equally special purpose. This harmony and unification are both best presented through Native American folklore from tribes scattered throughout the North American continent that best portray motifs of universal harmony and nature's right to preserve the natural earth, the spiritual world, and mortal man (of all groups and nationalities) in a tight bond.

The Native Americans' literature, their folktales, do more than list a set of holy rules that supposedly change with society. They even do more than merely group people, spiritual realms, and animals into a general category as pieces of the universe that have certain rights and a particularly pleasant harmony; rather, they give each individual piece an identity and story. Thomas King, a present-day Native American photographer, writer, and college professor, says in his book *The Truth about Stories*, "Stories are wondrous things. And they are dangerous....The truth about stories is that that's all we are" (2). Their stories not only defined who they were, but they also best embody the main cultural misunderstandings between the Native Americans and European settlers: the idea of social structure as it pertains to the concept of what it means to be human (spiritually and physically).

With Native Americans and Europeans believing in differing definitions of what it means to be alive, to be human, came a struggle of ownership (including land, animals, and all living creatures). The Native Americans saw nature as something that had always existed to unify and connect everyone and everything as equals. The Europeans saw nature as something that was created to be cultivated, conquered and governed by a hierarchy (better known as themselves).

This misunderstanding that shaped the foundation of their relationship led to Native American removal (from their land) and European expansion that still plays a role in current-day America. Even with a tragic history, the stories of the Native Americans continue to fulfill a modern-day hope that people will learn to respect the earth, the people in it, and the spiritual world surrounding it—a hope that Native Americans still take great pride in. So the misunderstanding encompassed the Native American way of life that European settlers simply could not comprehend—it was a way of life that didn't require a rulebook.

In fact, the term “culture” comes from the Latin word *cultura*. Culture is a concept that was birthed in the very center of Europe, so it became a concept consisting of an elite culture with its own day-to-day agenda and its own set of mutable, suitable, socially preferred rules that can in no way be properly defined by outsiders. A big part of Europe, even today, holds fast to its Catholic Church. So even with a fast-paced, ever-changing society, many Europeans still hold to the traditional sixteenth and seventeenth century “Catholic Church’s position... which remain[s] essentially the same as that proposed by Aquinas more than 700 years ago” (Serpell 46). Aquinas, an Italian priest and philosopher whose ideas support modern philosophy, supported Aristotle’s belief that the Earth was the center of the universe, which made him believe that God placed man in the center of the universe, giving him total domination over all of forms of nature (Serpell 46).

For the Native Americans “elite” meant little; nothing was elite in their eyes. Outsiders didn't exist because outsiders wouldn't survive. This belief came out of a form of humility because Native Americans understood that they were dependent on not only each other but on nature too. In fact, they had been dependent on each other since the very beginning. The European idea of an elite life is justified by their biblical account of creation in which the first few chapters of Genesis highlight man's creation mandate. However, the Native Americans' story of the beginning of life, most popularly retold through the original story of the Iroquois tribe but just as popular in other tribes including the less popular Huron tribe, removes any idea of man's dominion over nature.

The story even entirely excludes an ultimate deity creating all things. According to the Iroquois folktale (as recorded at the “Native American Indian Legends and Folklore” website), in the beginning of this sort of world land didn't exist: humans lived in the sky and flying creatures and sea animals lived below, flying above the water or swimming in it—quite different from the way the world starts off in Genesis 1:1. However, this story does include a Tree of Life similar to the tree mentioned in Genesis 2:17. This tree lived in the sky with the humans and was to be left alone (just like the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil), but

one curious woman had the tree dug up so she could examine its roots; she fell through its hole and had to be rescued by the animals from below. With no land below, she would have drowned, but a turtle found her and allowed her to rest on his back. The sea animals took the mud from the bottom of the sea to make land for the woman to live on. From there, she gave birth to twins and animals and plants made their way to land.

The woman overstepped her bounds when she tried to dig up the tree. The tree had its own special purpose and had every right not to be touched, so when the woman tried to manipulate it, she was quickly put in her place by falling to the earth below where she almost died. Even then, after trying to control different aspects of nature, the animals (like the turtle and sea creatures) went out of their way to create land for her to make sure she would remain safe. No particular plant, animal, or human usurped another's authority or claimed supreme rule over all in the Native American Creation story. Humans didn't own land nor did they outrank each other because they depended on each other for survival. Through the eyes of the Native Americans, nature is to be nurtured, not conquered. All of creation took care of each other and even created other parts of the earth (like land for the woman) to help each other out. It was understood that life had to sustain life—it was a harmonious balance in the beginning of the world, a balance that the Native Americans attempted to create and sustain when they tried to comply with European culture. Unfortunately, Native Americans had a difficult time adjusting when the Europeans decided it was time to introduce them to a more structured, ladder-driven society.

According to the Europeans' Christian idea of creation, God created all things to be subjected to His authority (with European humans following closely behind). It was a belief that "man can advantageously use other beings... to satisfy his needs; man can use and manipulate nature ruthlessly" (Montuschi 12). So Europeans didn't see all of nature as a flat, equal balance as the Native Americans did—nature had a lateral order and different pieces of nature fell on different levels of importance. The Europeans liked the level of importance they were given regarding the biblical Creation Mandate that placed them over all other living creatures and plants. However, they overlooked the part of the mandate that explained that they were to care for and tend the land, not just plow it over and destroy it for personal use. When they weren't overlooking parts of their order, they were subconsciously adding their own ideas to it as well, like the idea that white men weren't over only animals and plants, but over all other "less-blessed" peoples.

This concept is best described and artistically depicted through a religious, European drawing dating back to the late 1500s entitled *The Great Chain of Being*.

C. Hugh Holman describes it as a “system extending upward from inanimate matter to things that have life but do not have reason, to the rational human being” (239). The artists of this time firmly believed this religious drawing displayed God’s Creation Mandate. This idea began with the “European thinking from twelfth to the seventeenth centuries [that had]... the vision of an order—natural, moral, salvational, political... ground... in the very nature of things” (Oakley 98). God reigns supreme over all beings, spiritual and not. But his spiritual beings, like the angels, fall directly underneath Him. The next step below the angels closes out the spiritual realm and enters the ordinary world where humans take their place over all other natural things. Following people are a variety of air animals, sea animals, land animals, and finally, vegetation. So Europeans saw themselves as such important beings because, though they were natural beings, they fell right under God’s angels. Everything else was subject to their rightful authority, and if animals and land fell under them, animals and land meant less to God (especially land since it was at the very bottom of the ladder).

Scott Lyons, a modern-day Native American author, explains in his book *X-Marks* that once the Europeans saw the Native Americans owning nothing and claiming authority nowhere, they believed that the Indians’ inherent nature needed some cultivating (77-78). After all, they couldn’t even write; most of their treaties were signed with a simple “X.” They were savage warriors, “heathens” even, who needed to be shown the warm, peaceful light of God. But their “evangelism” served as a tool for a cultivation that was more so “a manipulation of nature to produce [their] desirable outcome” (78). There was always a better (more European) way to grow food, build homes, educate children, wear clothes, and worship the Creator. To adapt to the pinnacle of proper culture meant that Native Americans would have to alter the core of their people’s existence. They would have to let go of what it meant to be alive.

Europeans explained to their ignorant, heathenish “friends” that changing their lifestyle would be nothing more than a valiant attempt to broaden their cultural horizons and enhance their identity, but underneath the surface, this change would do more than educate the Native Americans. It would change their identity and challenge their convictions for centuries to come. The idea of man’s unity within all things, the idea that stated all living creatures help all living

creatures, would be compromised. Compromise came from the Europeans’ contradictions. As they continued to change trends, redefine social perfection, and ignore the true morals buried in the pages of the Bible, they continued to believe that their current way was the correct way, the way Native Americans had to adapt to in order to rise above their ignorance and lack of cultivated civilization.

As a result of the Europeans' strong belief in a hierarchal structure, their medieval-based, centuries-old idea of social class continued to define the entire lifespan of each individual. A person in their culture had no escape from the idea of rankings and class systems. People were born into a "justification" system that included "empirically derived categories" (Montague 193). Their culture took social status to an extreme, automatically labeling the worth of a person by his family's last name and their financial status. The kind of social claim that status gave them would determine what kind of person they were—as if Europeans too could be placed on a scale of importance. Along with social order, even their God, the God of Christianity, gave them their own Bible: a book they interpreted as a list of rules that were meant to be strictly followed. Its rules and rulers dominated the European world.

Still, this idea of domination, rulers, and class systems meant nothing to them. Native Americans were Native Americans and everyone was standing in the core of equality on level ground. In fact, the white faces could be accepted not only into their community as welcomed guests, but as Native Americans just like them. On the other European-hand, to be considered a Native American one must have a certain percentage of true Native American blood in his or her genealogy. This percentage of blood is considered a "quantum." This blood quantum of a specified percentage of Native American Indian descent is the criterion most... invoked and imposed by the U.S. federal government, not a form of self-identification arising out of Native lifeways (Madsen 2). Many Native Americans have adopted their own form of Native American identification, and it's open to those "practicing... traditional lifeways and active engagement in tribal affairs... in place of blood quantum (Madsen 2). Outward appearance means little to nothing for them.

However, their natural roles as Native Americans and humans were completely compromised when the Europeans presented an ultimatum: with little regard and no respect for natural land, the Europeans told the Native Americans that they could stay on their land and have it preserved if they adhered to a particular set of rules. Wanting to stay on the land that they believed gave them a sense of their identity as Native Americans, they complied to the European list of rules. However, the rules became a little more than a list with a few "do's and don'ts"—they became a 180-degree cultural shift as hunters and warriors were made to be men of the fields: gatherers and farmers. And the gatherers and farmers were told to be domestic housewives. Gender roles were jumbled: masculinity was stripped from the men as they were given the women's jobs and women's understanding of what it meant to be a woman was contorted and shoved into a small, cabin-like box. Their natural instincts and gender roles had to be compromised for the sake of land preservation. They tried to give

up their inherent, natural roles as Native Americans to preserve the physical nature of their land (Miles 87).

Tiya Miles explains in her book *The House on Diamond Hill: A Cherokee Plantation Story* that although “the Cherokee Nation in this period knew a large farm or plantation experience,” it wasn’t quite a European slave-owning typical experience. She goes on to explain how the Europeans not only told them to own farms, but to own slaves as well. This idea shattered the equality and unity Native Americans prided themselves in; consequently, to restore what little unity they could with the Europeans, they attempted to own a few African slaves each. The Europeans forced consistent ultimatums on the Native Americans through their entire cultivation process. To make an attempt at creating a harmonious community with the white men would demand that they give up their definition of existence. Attempt serves a key purpose here—because the Native Americans’ slaves weren’t treated quite the same way that the European slaves were treated.

It was different because “most Cherokee-owned slaves resided on smaller farms where daily contact with their owners was common and relative integration into Cherokee familial and social affairs was likely” (Miles 87). Since people, land, and animals depended on each other from the very beginning of their creation, the Native Americans treated each other with the respect a person would give to his provider. Once again, there was no issue between the Native Americans and African slaves; the Native Americans didn’t see themselves as dominant, red-faced individuals with the inherent right to conquer and possess the black-faced ones. African slaves found themselves in a more agreeable, community-like atmosphere where they were even allowed to come into the Native Americans’ houses and eat dinner and drink with them. This sort of plantation experience was more like an amiable community—a community the Europeans didn’t approve of. They quickly came to the rescue of their little heathenistic projects and explained to them that the African slaves were meant to be separate; they were meant to be owned and controlled by them (the Native Americans). But this concept was never grasped or respected, and it was made clear that the project failed because the Native Americans couldn’t and wouldn’t understand why any part of nature should be subject to another; consequently, they found themselves in a compromising situation because owning slaves was a price they would have to pay to keep their land.

This looming stipulation induced a conflict between immoral cooperation and conserving culture for the Native Americans; it was hard for them to understand that they were still Native Americans even if they didn’t live in a particular land area. They believed that relocating from their land meant disconnecting

from who they truly were. Land held a holy place in the heart of this race—land was a part of their identity. So even though they preferred harmony and balance between all creatures, land was something worth fighting for, which in turn, supported their core beliefs: that preserving the raw, natural Native American, a person who found worth and unity in all living things, is what mattered the most.

The Shoshoni tribe best represents the importance of this respect for land and nature (and the disregard for the idea of possessing land) in their folktale “The Wolf, the Fox, the Bobcat, and the Cougar” (as recorded at the “Native American Indian Legends and Folklore” website). The story begins by describing this beautiful land that the Shoshonis lived in, a forested area with bountiful resources. But vicious dwarves spied this land and wanted it as their own; they began shooting arrows at the Shoshonis, trying to drive them away from their land so it could be overtaken—but the Shoshonis weren’t leaving their land. After holding a council meeting to discuss what to do, the leaders sent the medicine man to commune with the spirits for an answer. The medicine man ran into four spirits in the form of a wolf, fox, bobcat, and cougar. The spirits told the medicine man that as long as his people wouldn’t hunt their kind, they would solve the dwarf problem. Once the medicine man told this news to the tribe, all of the Shoshonis gathered together in the woods to promise to the spirits that they would keep their word, and immediately, the spirits struck the land the dwarves were trying to overtake with lightning and burned them up. Consequently, according to folklore, the alliance between the Shoshoni people and the wolf, fox, bobcat, and cougar continues to this day—Shoshonis refuse to harm these animals and always keep their promise of thanks.

Not only do man and nature join forces out of personal need and gain, but man and nature have a respect for each other—a mutual understanding that all of life has rights and is worthy of that respect. This bond is well depicted through the Cherokee tale “How the Cherokee Learned the Rattlesnake Prayer Song.” A Native American woman heard her children screaming outside. She quickly ran to them and discovered a rattlesnake at their feet; without thinking of anything other than her children, she killed the rattlesnake. Unfortunately, it wasn’t just any rattlesnake; it was the tribal chief rattlesnake. It didn’t take long for a member of the rattlesnake clan to find the woman’s husband to explain what happened, but the snake didn’t just bring the man a recount of the story; he brought a warning too.

The black rattlesnake of the tribe was seeking revenge on the woman for killing their leader—and instantly, her husband took responsibility for her sin. It was a life for a life. Out of fear that the rattlesnakes might hurt his children and oth-

ers, the husband told his wife to draw fresh water from the river where he knew the black rattlesnake would be waiting for her. As she went to fetch water, the snake killed her. Once the wife died, the debt was paid. The rattlesnakes then taught the husband a special prayer song. They told the husband that anytime he crossed paths with one of their snakes if he would sing the song he would not be harmed. Man and animal made an equal agreement. To this day, the Cherokee people who claim this story reverence this song and continue to sing it.

However, the Native Americans' concept of giving up a human life for a rattlesnake's life wasn't something that the Europeans understood or even wanted to understand. They couldn't grasp how the Native Americans saw a rattlesnake as their equal. In fact, they were deeply

disgusted, taken aback, and even offended by the relationships that the savage-like Native Americans had with all sorts of creatures scattered throughout the animal kingdom. In the 17th century in Europe the church had begun making specific rules about the roles animals played in the grand scheme of life. And any time a rule seemed to show sympathy for animals, it had a hidden motive for the well-being of the human. Even Scripture is twisted to support the hidden motive by implying that "If in Holy Scripture there are found some injunctions forbidding the infliction of some cruelty towards brute animals... this is...for removing a man's mind for exercising cruelty towards other men... people had no direct moral duties toward animals" (Serpell 46).

Native Americans saw no need for a ladder of importance or special privileges for more special species of creation because grouping things into categories wasn't conceptual for the Native Americans. If everything from people to rattlesnakes to trees was interchangeable, nothing could stand alone. Nature defined nature; all living creatures defined each other. So no one and nothing was on top. This is where a major sham is revealed in the European masquerade of creating Native American Europeans. The European hierarchy system demanded that someone be on top. God clearly took the ultimate seat, but humans (and a specific race of humans) fell closely under. If white Europeans already had supremacy over the Native American culture, they should have no desire to share the pedestal with somewhat tamed, somewhat cultivated savages. They had a hidden motive that outweighed "saving" a savage culture.

This Native American concept challenged European identity—not just its natural identity but its spiritual identity as well. Their Christianity separated them from animals and plants (and all things below them according to *The Great Chain of Being*) because everything underneath them was considered soulless.

Jesus came as a human to save humans because, though humans are natural creatures, within them are spiritual, eternal souls that need saving. For life to have an eternal meaning for the Europeans they had to completely dismiss any overlapping similarities that might exist between humans and animals. To accept all living things as equal beings would tear their rulebook apart and force them to reconsider not only the meaning of their existence but the meaning of their Gospel as well.

The ideology behind the European's Christian values was a gray area. They ruled themselves out as equal with animals, but they still treated Native Americans as though they were savages. Truth be told, while all Europeans were supposedly teaching the Native Americans to dress properly, act properly, and worship properly all in the name of Jesus, it was more of a self-glorified service project meant to display the Europeans' hearts for God but conceal their need to reign supreme. If their service project and selfless mission succeeded, they would have to share their ranking of importance with the Native Americans. Rights would be shared. Associations would be shared, and the Native American concept of unity would finish on top. But that wasn't going to happen. Cultivating was frustrating, but taking pictures of the Native Americans in their tribal guard to show others what fierce savages they were saving wasn't quite as difficult.

Yet, the Native Americans weren't ignorant people: they understood that the Europeans were trying to manipulate their culture for a list of selfish reasons. The white people threatened to take their land unless they changed. The good, white, Christian people (who wanted to appear to be selfless and Gospel-driven) condemned them to hell unless they converted. All of the "help" the Europeans tried to give to the Native Americans somehow turned into a direct benefit for themselves. So though the Native Americans made an honest attempt to work with the Europeans, a few side stories poking at their own ignorance floated around—one story in particular, told by the White Mountain Apaches, known as "Coyote Gets Rich off the White Men."

One day Coyote and Bobcat stole some moonshine from a group of white men, but they were caught after Bobcat drank too much and caused a ruckus in the woods. The white men found Coyote and Bobcat and threw them in jail. Untamed horses were in a corral outside the jail, and one of the white men heard Coyote say that he could tame those wild horses. Not believing him, the white men allowed Coyote outside with the horses (not knowing Coyote possessed horse powers). He quickly mounted one of the horses and pretended like he wasn't able to make the horse cooperate. Coyote kept telling the white men that the horse wouldn't budge because it needed a silver saddle, and food, and the rider needed a radiant riding outfit. The white men stupidly listened to

Coyote and put a silver encrusted saddle on the horse, loaded the saddle down with bags of food, and dressed Coyote to the nines. And with that, the horse was instantly tamed and took Coyote right out of the corral and past the men who were supposed to make sure Coyote didn't escape (as recorded at the "Native American Indian Legends and Folklore" website).

The story pokes holes in the educated European man's hypocrisy as well as its intellect. The Europeans claimed intellect, an understanding of advancing civilization, and the answer to eternal life, but "Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and clever in their own sight... [and] deny justice to the innocent... for they have rejected the law of the Lord Almighty... (Isaiah 5:21-24). The Bible (the European book for all of life's answers) and Native American folktales join forces to point out the destruction and decay that follows pride—a sort of pride they justified by claiming all of their actions in the name of Jesus. Yet, the Native Americans saw through the hypocrisy; the Europeans weren't smart enough to cover it all up. It was evident that they weren't seeking peace and unification with the Native Americans. In fact, it was obvious that "They were less concerned about fouling the land, water, and air than they were in fighting...their fellow man" (Martinez 94). The Native Americans never claimed an upper hand on anyone or anything because they never found a need to be on top. All pieces of nature had their place in life, and if the Native Americans respected that idea, they wouldn't stumble into destruction the way the Europeans did.

Ignoring particular pieces of the Bible and dismissing the values of the Native American culture put blinders over their eyes. The European settlers continued to see a need for a hierarchal structure—a structure that put them on top and defied and twisted every mandate their Bible gave them. Their ignorance and hypocrisy gave them an assumed authority to take away the meaning of Native American life into their own hands. It was such an extreme belief that it eventually led to the removal of the Native Americans from their land. Trying to cultivate themselves towards a more European way of life by owning farms and dressing differently hadn't satisfied the white men. During the 1800s countless tribes were relocated to European-invented reservations: places they justified by claiming Native Americans could live out their culture there. However, these peoples weren't just relocated.

Vicki Rozema, a modern-day Native American History writer, created her book *Voices from The Trail of Tears* to piece together countless journal entries from doctors, missionaries, and other European men who were part of The Trail of Tears. The stories she found through these men's experiences were summed up as "collecting and marching to distant points...men, women and children of

all ages and conditions, changing suddenly, and very materially all their habits of life" (129). No amount of pity these journalists had could save the Native American population that drastically decreased, and for the fewer "Cherokees who had escaped...made their way back to the East and told of the sickness, deaths, and unhealthy food they had witnessed or experienced" (116). Though few Native Americans had hope of physical survival, much less social survival, their folktales and stories didn't stop. Legend has it that the Cherokee Rose sprung up from the tears the Native American mothers cried for the loss of their little ones. Even through their history's darkest time, their oral tradition continued to blossom.

Today's twenty-first century Native Americans still hold fast to the stories told by their ancestors centuries ago, but they do more than simply retell the stories. The Native Americans have taken a stand in the modern ego versus eco fight that has become a prominent, debated topic in the United States. Our cultural walks a fine line of manufacturing shoes, school supplies, and water bottles made of recycled, environmentally friendly materials, yet our country continues to suffer with the lingering problem of global warming, drilling for oil, and preserving nature while growing industry. As a result of these issues, Native Americans face a fight stimulated by the problem that "much of North America's remaining forests are found on Native American land, all of which appear to be up for grabs" (LaDuke). The conservation problem serves as the foundation for the Native Americans' modern-day history as their people continue to fight for the equal rights of land and nature. Sometimes the non-natives are more than the industrialists who abuse, manipulate, and tear down the land; rather, it's the modern-day environmentalists.

This is the group of people who glorify the Native American land conservation beliefs only to elevate their own cause by appealing to the pitied, mistreated Native Americans who could create a subconscious sympathy appeal for their eco-friendly side. Even though "It is undoubtedly true that these indigenous peoples were more sympathetic to environmental concerns compared with their European brethren," today's Native Americans find themselves in a modern battle of the ego versus eco (a fight to conquer or nurture all of life) as people on both sides attempt to use their historical stance on what it means for nature and land to live (Martinez 94).

With issue of land conservation and Native American rights escalating in the early 1990s, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) did little to protect the reservation land that many logging companies were taking advantage of. Native Americans like Leroy Jackson, a Navajo native, made plans to speak with the BIA after recognizing that a logging company was making plans to secretly un-

dercut reservation rules and plow through their land to steal their timber. Jackson had had enough after countless situations like this that proved his people are viewed as nothing more than a “raw product” and to plead for someone within the government to take a stand for not only the Native American people, but the land, the animals, and most important, the culture they were trying to protect on their reservations. Oddly enough, Leroy Jackson mysteriously disappeared while on his way to Washington to speak with the bureau, and his body was never found.

The lack of help from government organizations in the United States isn't the only enemy the Native Americans face. Every day, self-proclaimed environmentalists view the Native Americans as their natural resources as a threat to their movement, and, consequently, the reasons behind the Native Americans' environmental beliefs are overlooked while environmentalists appear to adopt their beliefs for the same purpose. However, “America's environmentalists have embraced America's native people, or so it may seem. As environmentalism has moved from conservation through preservation to biocentrism, it has assumed the mantle of the American Indian” (Huffman 901). The fight between conforming to another race's version of preserving nature still threatens to do away with their culture because when people aren't fighting the Native Americans' way of nurturing nature, they are using their idea of land and animal preservation to serve as a glorified example of modern-day biocentrism: the belief that not one living thing is more important than the other. It's a manipulation game.

White men have always had a social agenda that they believe should never be destroyed by an uncivilized, savage community, but even Native American folktales from centuries past saw through the way white men continuously cushion their hidden efforts to change or take away Native American culture with deceit and broken promises. One of these transparent folktales, unique to the Cherokee tribe, is known as “Why the Opossum's Tail is Bare.” The story, as recorded at the “Native American Indian Legends and Folklore” website, represents the true, deceptive relationship between the Native Americans and Europeans through the tale's two main animals: the opossum and the rabbit.

Opossum has a beautiful tail but rabbit doesn't. Jealous of opossum, rabbit convinces opossum that since his tail is so beautiful, he should let turtle groom it. Opossum listens to rabbit and is surprised when the truth comes out that rabbit had actually told turtle to cut opossum's tail down to its roots so it would never grow again. This folktale sheds light on the keen insight the Native Americans had regarding the way the Europeans were trying to manipulate them. The Europeans put Native American culture on an unsteady pedestal, just as rabbit elevated the beauty of opossum's tail. But the Native Americans, unlike

opossum, weren't naïve. They quickly recognized the rocky relationship that would lead the Europeans to cut away at Native American culture for their personal benefit, just as rabbit cut away opossum's tail for personal pleasure and gain. Rabbit wanted opossum to be his "equal," but equality required sacrifice only from opossum, just as all of the sacrifice has been placed on the Native American people.

The unbalanced, abused relationship between these cultures continues today and remains evident in the eyes of the Native Americans. Native American folktales created this idea that modern environmentalists have recently cultivated themselves, but using Native Americans as posterchildren for the newest version of biocentrism would pull a historical, earthy appeal to the people that today's environmentalists are trying to win over. They visualize Native Americans as amiable, earthy nomads who care for the earth better than they care for themselves, which sums up their environmental evolution from a more anthropocentric idea of the earth to this new bio-centric approach they are taking (Martinez 92-95). Once again, non-natives are using Native Americans as examples of a savage people that have been cultivated and saved by a higher, more modernly advanced people. From Europe's colonial settlers to today's culture of environmentalists, culture continues to change while remaining hypocritical towards the meaning of land and life. The early Europeans thought people should cut down trees and build cities. Modern-day industrialists believe the same thing, but today's environmentalists combat that idea while continuing to manipulate Native American culture.

Whether non-natives are fighting for or against preserving plants, animals, and land, the true spiritual significance behind it all is overlooked while Native Americans continue their fight to preserve what it means to be human. It's a meaning their folktales carry on as well. The Native Americans must keep fighting because in the modern-day United States society, their values aren't treated like human values. Their culture's rights are manipulated as different groups, like the environmentalists and industrialists, try to gain their loyalty to better themselves economically and socially: "Two basic philosophies compete to attract Indian allegiance: development according to traditional means with royalty income and futuristic agricultural products that create minimum disruption and exploitation. Indians stand at the crossroads in identifying and establishing their relationship to the institutions of the larger society" (Deloria 139). Even today, ladder-driven members of society use the image of the pitied, uncultured, banshee Native Americans as pawns to improve their hierarchical group's amiable Savior image. The Native Americans are treated as mythical characters that are to play the role the Europeans mandated for them in order to teach their valuable lessons.

With so much culture, so many lessons, and so many rules, what does it even mean to be a European even now? It seems hard to take everything they use to define themselves and sum it up into one single definition. Perhaps they could still define their divine existence through the Bible, but even with such a well-known, lengthy text, there's a possibility its words could be used for selfish gain. What does it mean to be a modern-day environmentalist or industrialist in the United States? Is this group of people an authentic society that cares more about nature or the benefits they can reap from nature? It seems that these different groups, though their members may overlap sometimes, both have fates that rest on the power of the natural law of the land that no human created. Everyone continues to place themselves in a group, to force themselves to have a unique definition, to belong somewhere, but the power of the natural definition of nature and humanity has a foundation that can't be unearthed or overthrown. The more rules and explanations they make seem to pile on more confusion and more separation from the true definition of what it means to not only be European or an environmentalist, but to simply be a human being.

So what does it mean to be Native American? The Native Americans have always known the answer to this question, even though Europeans continue to struggle with the definition. They've never had to second guess who they are, what they believe, or where they stand in the meaning of life, and it's because they've never forced themselves to be anything other than alive, anything other than human by affirming that life, in all forms, has inherent rights that can never be taken away by another. The respect they want for themselves they give to all living things, and they continue to build on this legacy, continue to guarantee its preservation through the beautiful, lighthearted art of oral tradition. The Native Americans' folktales provide so much more than creative, lighthearted entertainment; they sustain their people's pure definition of the right of life.

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