

The Indigenous Extinction Narrative

Where does it come from?

- The Indigenous extinction or “doomed Indian” is a European romantic literature narrative that appeared during the 18th century and peaked during the 19th century
- Romantic literature in the early 18th century depicted Indigenous people as the “natural man” who possessed a superior philosophy, governance, and social order (Example - Benjamin West’s painting, *The Death of General Wolfe*)
- During the same period, the codification of human rights occurred
 - Indigenous peoples were excluded the codification of human rights on the basis that their virtues doomed them. This rhetoric, originating within romantic literature, would only increase as time progressed
- The popularization of tropes such as the “Indian Death Song” in 19th-century European literature where Indigenous characters performed a “death-song” before their exit from a story subliminally endorsed the image of a “dying race”. More detrimental than individual Indigenous deaths in a story was the symbolic death of one to represent the entire people (Example - James Fenimore Cooper’s novel *The Last of the Mohicans*)



Why is it important/problematic?

1. The literary narrative works as a component to *terra nullius*. Thefts of Indigenous land in North America would/could progress much faster if Native claim to land was "disappearing" with Indigenous peoples (as European literature depicted it)
2. It diverts responsibility and attention from the real reasons Indigenous people were “disappearing” - the colonial government and white settlers' actions of displacing, starving, and murdering Indigenous peoples for the expansion of the colonial state
3. The birth of this narrative occurred alongside an increasing interest in antiquarianism and archaeology – the European fascination/obsession with the disappearance of a supposedly “savage” culture was profitable for both European literary writers and wealthy collectors

A Rebuke to the Extinction Narrative: The Beothuk & Shawnawdithit...

The Beothuk & Shawnawdithit

Background: The Beothuk were an Indigenous nation with a seafaring culture that thrived on the coast of Newfoundland for centuries. Between the 17th century and early 19th century, the Beothuk were actively displaced and met with violence by white European settlers

What happened between 1600-1800?

- During the 17th century, English settlers began making permanent residence on Newfoundland's coastal region; expanding into the traditional territory of the Beothuk people (Avalon and Burin Peninsulas, and Trinity and Placentia Bays)
- With the loss of their territory, violence broke between the Beothuk and settlers. The Beothuk would become reclusive to the colonists over the course of the 18th century and venture into the interior of Newfoundland
- It was encouraged/idealized by Newfoundland and England's elite during the 18th century that so-called friendly relations and gradual "civilization" of the Beothuk would occur. In reality, the Beothuk were frequently met with violence from colonial settlers
- Violence was so brutal the British government issued a royal proclamation issued in 1769 requesting colonist violence to stop. This proclamation was reissued **twice**: once in 1775 and again in 1776 - presumably because murdering the Beothuk did not end
- By 1781, after previous attempts to "negotiate" peace between the two peoples, an expedition was led by John Peyton with the explicit purpose of violence. The "Peyton raid" led to the death of an unknown amount of Beothuk people
 - Peyton's actions and that of other colonists were never penalized for the violence and genocide they inflicted on the Beothuk people

The "last" Beothuk - Shawnawdithit

- Shawnawdithit, her mother, and sister were captured by English colonists in 1823. Her mother and sister did not live long as they were all taken in a starved and weak state
- Shawnawdithit initially lived under one of her captors' John Peyton Jr. - leader of the infamous "Peyton raid" among other raids
- She was later removed in 1827 without her consent from the household and moved to the recently established Beothuk Institution which was dedicated to ethno-graphizing and eulogizing the remaining Beothuk peoples. There while ill and under duress she was requested by William Cormack of the Institute to record and perform her culture so it may be documented by them.
- Shawnawdithit would remain there until near death in 1829 in which she would be transferred to another home for her final months

The events in Newfoundland do not fit the extinction narrative that populated Romantic European literature of the 17th to 19th centuries. Contrary to the image of peaceful disappearance as the extinction narrative suggests, the Beothuk people did not disappear, they were murdered, and Shawnawdithit was essentially incarcerated in a museum for her final years. The Beothuk did not passively disappear, they were actively displaced and met with violence by European colonial settlers

The Beothuk are not extinct: In 1910, Santu Toney, a self-proclaimed Beothuk woman was recorded by anthropologist Frank Speck. Most importantly, the Mi'kmaq continue to maintain today that the Beothuk are not extinct...

Bibliography

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