



ELOHI

Peuples indigènes et environnement

4 | 2013

L'invention de l'indigène écologiste

Introduction

The invention of the ecological Indian

Laurence Machet, Lionel Larré and Antoine Ventura



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/elohi/527>

DOI: 10.4000/elohi.527

ISSN: 2268-5243

Publisher

Presses universitaires de Bordeaux

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 July 2013

Number of pages: 5-7

ISBN: 978-2-86781-927-8

ISSN: 2431-8175

Electronic reference

Laurence Machet, Lionel Larré and Antoine Ventura, « Introduction », *ELOHI* [Online], 4 | 2013, Online since 01 July 2014, connection on 25 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/elohi/527> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/elohi.527>

This text was automatically generated on 25 September 2020.

© PUB-CLIMAS

Introduction

The invention of the ecological Indian

Laurence Machet, Lionel Larré and Antoine Ventura

- 1 Is it possible to talk of the invention of the ecological Indian in the same way as one talks of the invention of the noble or ignoble savage in so far as all these representations were invented, created by colonizers sometimes in contradiction to the reality they observed and imposed on the colonized peoples? This is the question linking the essays in this fourth issue of *Elohi*.
- 2 When used by colonial powers, language itself becomes a part of the colonizing force. Basing arguments on the writings of Michel Foucault, scholars have already long explored issues of the power of language in this context. Thus we need not dwell on it here, except to say that the authors of the essays in this issue all focus on ways in which those in power have used and even continue to use language and imposed definitions as means of colonization and subjection.
- 3 Indeed we realize that these definitions don't all pertain to the colonial past. They can also be seen as pertaining to what can be called the neo-colonial present. Such is the case with the phrase "the ecological Indian," according to Shepard Krech III, who focuses on North American Indians. He deconstructs the cliché of the ecological Indian, deeming it unmerited.
- 4 Within recent popular culture the oppressive dimension of this cliché is nowhere more present in terms of the power of such discourse to impact the public than in James Cameron's 2009 film *Avatar*. The film hyperbolically develops the romantic notion of a people living in harmony with nature. The indigenous peoples on Pandora, their way of life and the story of their encounter with the colonizers constitute a pale (or should one write "a blue"), thinly disguised representation of the popularly conceived life and history of American Indians themselves. The film plays on the cliché that Indigenous peoples maintain a relationship with the forest they inhabit that one can call osmotic.
- 5 Whereas the previous issue of *Elohi* focused on the endogenous representations of the relationship the indigenous peoples have with their environment, that is, on representations presented by authors who are themselves Indigenous, the current issue

examines exogenous representations, i.e. the representations that have been devised by authors who are outsiders to the life they describe.

- 6 In our paper, entitled “Has William Bartram invented the ecological Indian?” we examine the work of this 18th century botanist and explorer. In the 1770s, as he was exploring the Southeast of what was soon to become the USA, William Bartram described the Indians whose territories he was journeying through. At the time, the predominant rhetoric among colonizers was that the Indians left no trace on nature. This could be interpreted in two contradictory ways: either it idealized the relationship Indians had with their environment, or it reduced them to wild animals (Bradford 160). In both cases, the Indians were dehumanized and ahistoricized the better to justify the colonization of both land and souls. William Bartram, however, gives us a scientifically forthright testimony of the ways the Indians interacted with their environment, and of the impact they had on nature. To echo the title of the previous issue of *Elohi*, it can be said that Bartram observes and reports the meaning of the life of indigenous peoples and, as a consequence, historicizes the Native Americans.
- 7 If Bertrand Guest argues that Henry David Thoreau and Elisée Reclus follow in Alexander von Humboldt’s footsteps, there are common features between the authors he is dealing with and William Bartram. Guest observes, in these 19th century authors, an attempt to reach beyond the myth of the Noble Savage. The question he asks sums up one founding the questions of our journal: “How do these two philosophers (Thoreau and Reclus) trade the ‘good savage’ myth for a protoanthropology that manages to avoid both positivism and the simple idealization of American Indian civilizations (Guest)?” Just like Bartram, these authors (especially the scientifically-minded Reclus) provide, according to Guest, an “empirical description of the world” that softens their idealization of indigenous peoples.
- 8 In his essay, Frank Usbeck, who deals with the idealized representation of North American Indians in German popular culture and political rhetoric, focuses primarily on the way the Nazis used imagery stemming from a long-term enthusiasm for American Indian culture (“German Indianthusiasm”). They used this imagery in order to promote the notion of German indigenusness in 20th century Europe and more particularly to define the Germans’ own relationship with their environment, most notably with the forest, which acquired a mythical and symbolical value.
- 9 This *Elohi* issue essentially focuses on American Indians, but one of the authors, N. Jaëck, widens the notion of indigenusness in a highly challenging and unexpected way. The “savages” who are colonized are in fact the Scottish inhabitants of the Highlands, in R. L. Stevenson’s novel, *Kidnapped*. Jaëck explains that in the 18th century, when the story takes place, the same language and the same rhetoric were used by the English settlers and the Lowlanders to speak of the Highlanders as was being used to speak of the Indigenous peoples who were being colonized overseas. However, under the condescending tone of his Lowland narrator, Stevenson showcases a Highlander who has an intimate knowledge of his environment, a knowledge which enables him to claim his land from its legal owner, an Englishman. Stevenson presents the Highlands, which, to the English, look like a desert, as a real habitat.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Avatar. Dir. James Cameron. 20th Century Fox, 2009. Film.

BRADFORD, William. *Of Plymouth Plantation. 1630-1651 & 1856. The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Sixth edition, Vol. 1. Nina Baym & al, dir. New York : W. W. Norton & Company, 2003. 157-196.

Elohi. *La vie signifiante*. 2.1 (janvier-juin 2013).

Krech III, Shepard. *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History*. New York, London, Norton. 1999.

ULLOA, Astrid. *La construcción del nativo ecológico*, Bogotá, Instituto Colombiano de Antropología e Historia/Colciencias, 2004.

AUTHORS

LAURENCE MACHET

Université Bordeaux Montaigne

LIONEL LARRÉ

Université Bordeaux Montaigne

ANTOINE VENTURA

Université Bordeaux Montaigne