The decolonizing responsibility of a “White” girl

An autoethnographic deconstruction of Indigenous (mis)representations

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Abstract

None of us are immune to the heritage of colonialism. Intersecting hierarchies of dominance and oppression are perpetuated every day, from top institutions down to personal interactions. This study argues that White, Western scholars working for social justice have a decolonizing responsibility to locate themselves in this hierarchy in order to avoid reproducing it with their research.

The author of this thesis uncovers her own subjectivity by using autoethnography when attempting to deconstruct colonialist Indigenous stereotypes and misrepresentations that have been embraced by Swedish society. The purpose is to find an appropriate role for a Western scholar to play in the decolonizing project. The process is informed by Native American voices of different ages and backgrounds.

White researchers working with Natives is a controversial topic, but it is maintained that the main object of observation is the White Self as a product of dominant Western society. The study shows that colonialist expression through stereotyping and cultural appropriation holds both nostalgic and political value to the privileged, reproduced at the expense of the peoples historically disadvantaged by colonialism. In other words, there is a clear reluctance in both the U.S. and Sweden to let the reality interfere with the fantasy.

Key words: autoethnography, decolonizing, colonialism, Native, Indigenous, Western, representation
dekolonialiseringsprojekt. Processen är informerad av amerikan-Indianska röster av olika åldrar och bakgrunder.

Vita forskares samarbeten med ursprungsbefolkningar är ett kontroversiellt ämne, men här läggs tyngdpunkten på att det huvudsakliga studieobjektet är det Vita Jaget som produkt av ett dominerande västerländskt samhälle. Studien visar att koloniala uttryck genom stereotypisering och kulturellt beslagtagande är av både nostalgiskt och politiskt värde för de privilegierade, reproducerat på bekostnad av de folk som genom historien blivit försatta i underläge av kolonialismen. Med andra ord, det finns en klar motvilja i både Sverige och USA till att låta verkligheten inkräcka på fantasibilden.

Nyckelbegrepp: autoetnografi, dekolonialisering, kolonialism, Indian, ursprungsbefolkning, västerländsk, representation
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1. Introduction

*I’d love to be more morally and philosophically consistent, but I’m a flailing half-assed human being. Just like you.*¹

- Sherman Alexie

*Det är genom våra sprickor som omvärlden kan sippra in.*

*(It is through our cracks the world can trickle in.)*²

- Jonas Gardell

1.1. Prologue

It was late. After an eight-hour drive through cornfields, small towns, and Midwestern plains, we arrived at the Indian reservation. We are a funny looking trio: an Iraqi photojournalist, an African American professor and a White Swedish human rights student. Our trunk is packed with twenty space heaters and I am resting my head on the heap of woolen blankets piled up next to me in the backseat. I am exhausted, apprehensive and excited – all at the same time.

“Be prepared for what you will see here”, my Iraqi friend who does social justice activism at the reservation tells me and drops a couple of outrageously high regional poverty levels, crime rates and drug abuse stats on me. I did not know how to respond to these ungraspable facts so I remained quiet. I had given up on trying to figure out what to expect from this visit a long time ago. The place we are heading to is one of the poorest in the country. What does a middle-class Swedish girl know about poverty?

Unlike many of my friends and classmates in the Human Rights program, I had never travelled to Africa or Asia to work, volunteer and gain hands-on exposure to societies less privileged than my own. However, it would soon be confirmed that I did not have to go to a country deemed “underdeveloped” to be faced with a similar reality. It was also to be found hidden and forgotten at the heart of Western civilization.

Quote freely translated by author.
After sundown, there is a certain chill in the air reminding us of the approaching winter as we just a few moments later drive through the community to hand out space heaters and blankets to those who have been deemed in most need of them by a local Native activist who assisted with the distribution. My friend and the local activist would get out of their cars, knock on doors on rundown houses and trailers, hand over the heaters and exchange a few words with the residents. Someone is in his or her pajamas, someone in a wheelchair; someone has lost his fingers to diabetes. Someone takes their heater without a word, someone gives a hug and says “God bless you.”

When half the space heaters were handed out, my friend leaned back from the front seat and said, “Okay, now you go, Selma.” I froze. “Me? I can’t do that! I can’t walk up there as some kind of strange, White charity worker!”

“Come on, they don’t care. Go.”

I looked up at the trailer we were parked in front of and then kicked the car door open and went to the back to get a space heater. I had not come all this way to hide in a corner. However, I soon realized that I had probably overestimated the impact my appearance would have on the reservation inhabitants, since most of them paid little attention to me at this late hour. As I handed over the space heater, the person receiving it was most likely more worried about winter than the color of my skin.

When dropping off my second or third space heater, I was invited to come inside the house since – partly because my Iraqi friend insisted on me seeing the poverty of the interior as well as the exterior, and partly because the man living there had difficulty stepping outside due to a disability. I quietly remained in the background while the Native activist chatted with the resident, an older man with long grey streaked hair sitting bare chested in a wheelchair. Not wanting to disturb, I was on my way out when he yelled, “Wait! Where are you from?”

“From Sweden”, I responded in happy surprise.

“Oh really? I have a cousin who married a Sami from Finland!” We laughed and shared our rather limited knowledge of Sami life and tradition with one another as our worlds had somehow moved closer to each other - almost into one so called small world. Before it was time to leave he said with a smile, “I might come visit you some day!”
For a split second, I was instantly reminded of the unforgiving actuality. I was here on a scholarship as a student from a prestigious university, for which I received state funding to attend. It was my fourth time overseas at the young age of 21. I enjoyed free healthcare and a nice apartment all to myself, much bigger than most students my age have. This man needed a space heater to make winter bearable. How would he ever afford the luxury of a trip overseas? It was a small world but also two excruciatingly separate ones.

“You are very welcome!”, I replied with an even bigger smile. Something that could be described as an inner crisis had started brewing inside me.

1.2. Storytelling
As I start writing the first sentences of this thesis, I am about to do something a big part of me strongly resists: placing myself in a long line of Western scholars producing academic work based on their experiences with Native Americans.

The witty and poignant scholar Vine Deloria Jr describes the outsider anthropologists or “anthros” as ridiculous know-it-alls coming to the reservation to make half-baked observations in order to verify what he already thinks he knows about Indians. This so-called academic tradition has produced a massive amount of useless knowledge as the White anthropologist is trying to figure out the nature of the Native American and new ways of approaching “the Indian problem”. Throughout history, abusive research has rendered tribes largely defenseless and invisible.³

According to Linda Tuhiwai Smith, the very word “research” is one of the dirtiest known to Indigenous communities worldwide, loaded with bad memories, grief and suspicion. Smith writes, “It galls us that Western researchers and intellectuals can assume to know all that is possible to know of us, on the basis of their brief encounters with some of us.”⁴

To put it lightly, Deloria and Smith’s sharp critique makes my pale face turn red in shame of what colonialist crimes previous Western academics have committed before me. With this legacy (no matter how unwanted), it is safe to say that a big piece of humble pie is in order for any White person who is even considering

approaching American Indians - even if it is for human rights activism purposes and even if she is from Sweden and not the U.S.

Still, it may well be argued that Western scholars such as myself have a certain responsibility to take part in disrupting this imperialist tradition that our predecessors have laid down. But in order to do this without causing any further damage to persons and groups who suffer from the legacies of colonialization, I need to carefully consider what role is the most appropriate to play for a person in my position wanting to contribute to a decolonizing process. My research question may consequently be formulated as: What space is there for a White Western scholar to contribute to decolonizing work, particularly pertaining to Indigenous peoples?

I have no business studying Native Americans, nor do I feel the need to. As we shall see, the stories told today about the Indigenous are still rarely told by the Indigenous, and it is certainly not for me to take part in this tradition of silencing and “invisible-making”. Rather, the purpose of this thesis is to reveal and deconstruct examples of Native cultural appropriation and White narratives of Native life still seen in my Western society, in order to contribute to an improvement of my part of the world – by starting with myself. The only story I can tell is the one about my own social context and my own transformation through interactions with people who have knowledge to share. By starting with myself and my surroundings, perhaps I will be able to contribute to a change. Step number one: Listen and learn. I am not going to lie – I myself have a thing or two to own up to in this matter.

2. Methodologies and procedure
2.1. Collected data and stories shared
As will be more elaborated on in the section below, I have decided to lend myself to the research process by describing my transformation through collisions and interactions in another sociocultural setting, in a rather personal narrative. The Self will serve as a lens through which the subject matters will be analyzed and discussed. It may well be argued that this is inevitably always the case when conducting social justice studies of any sort, and the phenomenon is often considered an obstacle to be worked against. Here, I would like to go in the opposite direction. Instead of hiding behind scientific anonymity, I will use the I-word. I will uncover my subjectivity and
my subconscious prejudice in order to use it as a tool to develop greater understandings for issues beyond my sociocultural comfort zone.

I aim to question hegemonic and colonialist interpretations of knowledge visible in the society I live in – as well as in myself as a product of that society. I try to divorce myself from the influence of dominant, White narratives about Native life by asking Native individuals to share another story with me, told by someone who has the right to. In other words, I as a White researcher find myself at an intersection between a colonialist, Western tradition of false Native portrayals and a thirst for a decolonizing academic practice that has a certain space for an individual socially categorized as “White”.

As we shall see, the diverse nature of the study has called for great reflexivity in terms of material collection. As it follows, the body of primary material put forward in the Findings section becomes a heterogenic mixture of subjective thought and perspective – some components formally generated and documented in field notes, recordings and pictures; some parts simply experienced and preserved as memories. Still, different types of findings remain useful since they all communicate something relevant about representations of Native Americans. Furthermore, it would be considered an overreach to attempt to incorporate all of my research experiences in this particular thesis. Instead, relevant themes have been identified and selected from my gathered material to be presented as my findings.

Apart from the personal stories I share about my encounters with questionable imagery and narrative visible in my Swedish society, the data includes two separate observational reflections made at two different American museums that both have exhibitions on Native American life. The observations are documented through personal field notes and snapshots. I make a brief comparison between the two in order to exemplify how Native representations in similar exhibits may differ greatly depending on who is telling the story.

These reflections are followed by an interview with a Native American professor and a focus group discussion held with four students of different tribal ancestries from a Native association at a Midwestern university. Part of my plan for going overseas was to have two focus group discussions – one with the student organization and one with a Native inmates group at a state penitentiary in the area. Unfortunately, the latter was cancelled due to new rule sets restricting ethnic group meetings within the prison. Instead, I got the opportunity to have a similar discussion
with Thomas Abercrombie, professor of Native American literature, who was involved with both the inmates group and the student group I was about to meet with.

Both conversations are rooted in three separate ten-minute video clips, two from the movies *Avatar* (2009) and one from *Twilight: Eclipse* (2010). The clips are chosen by me and then suggested to the focus group representative through email correspondence prior to our meeting, welcoming any feedback they would have cared to add.

This procedure was inspired by participatory research, a part of the Participatory Action Research family. The approach is described as an alternative philosophy of social research, often linked to social transformation in the so-called Third World. Unlike more conventional research strategies, the participatory researcher seeks to be inclusive and share ownership of the research project with the participants and the community in which it is conducted. Since the purpose of this type of inquiry is social, economic and political development, it entails responsiveness to the needs and opinions from “insiders”. By incorporating the Native input when possible, I may assume a less authoritative position and take the opportunity to learn about what problematic topics they would like to address without letting my own preconceived ideas dominate the discussion. However, I would like to underline that the social transformation we strive for in this case is the one of limited Western perspectives – not the “Third World”.

The first two movie clips from *Avatar* and the final one from *Twilight: Eclipse* touched upon three problematic elements: the first one exemplifies the White male alien being ignorant and disrespectful towards animals, forcing the Indigenous female to intervene and teach him about the divinity of all living things. It is conveyed that she has an inherent understanding as she lives in complete symbiosis with nature. The second clip is of the same White outsider exceeding the Indigenous in their own spiritual wisdom and awareness after having spent time with the tribe, becoming their respected leader and a unifying force in the war against evil. The final clip shows Native Americans, sitting around a fire, sharing allegedly Quilete tribal stories of magic blood and wolf ancestry with a White outsider. The legend is told about how

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the men of this particular tribe may shift into werewolves in order to defend the people against threats.

In addition to the movie clips, I show the focus group stereotypical images retrieved from the Internet, exemplifying how Native Americans are represented in Western society. The pictures show the Native werewolves of *Twilight*, White kids dressing up in headdresses at festivals parties, popularized Native t-shirt prints and Indian sports mascots. These stereotypes have all reached Swedish society and are examples of the imagery I have perceived as problematic from my standpoint but would like Native perspectives on. These discussions were recorded and selectively transcribed.

The final subsection under the Findings heading is devoted to the conversations I had the great privilege to have with five Elders at one of the Midwestern Indian reservations, where I spent a few days. The five individuals that I spoke to were all above 60 years of age and a majority of them had been active members of an Indigenous rights organization in younger years. In other words, these people were highly honored and respected individuals in their community.

These meetings were of another nature than the discussions I had with the Native Americans tied to the academic world, and therefore called for a different approach. I made the assessment that these quite intimate conversations where not suited for recordings nor continuous note-taking – they were not interviews nor observations, but cultural exchanges and stories shared with me that I then processed and preserved in field notes. The field notes were written within a few days after the held conversations and were made as detailed as my human memory allowed.

As mentioned in the Introduction, I had been invited to the reservation as a friend of a journalist who was doing a long-term project there in collaboration with the residents. He knew about me writing my Bachelor’s Honors thesis and arranged for me to meet the Elders. I was advised by him, my advisor and methodological readings to be restrictive with Euroamerican tainted terminology such as “research” or “interview”, especially in the reservation setting.

According to the ethical guidelines of good research practice described by the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet), the researcher is strongly advised to have a systematic and clear-cut strategy for data collection and must clearly convey her/his intentions and purposes to her/his participants. In addition, informants must formally be made aware of the extent to which their participation will be used and be
able to rest assured that the researcher will protect their integrity and anonymize their identities. Exploratory research is recognized but is advised not to stray too far from listed criteria.  

In my encounters with Native Americans of different ages and backgrounds, I found myself in an ethical dilemma. In alignment with my assumed Indigenous influenced approach, I attempt to move away from Western/Swedish standardized proceedings and embrace a more reflexive, decolonizing methodology. The disconnect between the two perspectives is a complex one to reconcile, but it must be made visible as I try to remain true and honest to my purpose. Some general academic guidelines, such as protecting my participants’ identities by giving them pseudonyms, are easily followed while others have proved lacking in reflexivity.

Lastly, I would like to address the issue of labels. The Native or Indigenous experience will always remain inherently obscure to me, since I am not living it. At this point, I deem myself unable to take a stand on which label or name, capitalized or not, is the most suitable to describe such an infinitely complex and diverse group of peoples and have therefore adhered to the different and shifting descriptions given in by the authors of my secondary material. Still, I have allowed myself the luxury of occasional synonymizing to nuance the text. For the sake of clarity, I emphasize that the term Indigenous is here generally used to describe a worldwide community while Native American or Indian refers to the American context. When the decision has been left to me while discussing my primary material and findings, I tend to use the term Native because that is how the majority of my participants referred to their ethnicity.

2.2. Theorizing the methodology
Since this study is largely based on a critical self-introspection and a personal exploration of the position a Western scholar might assume in decolonizing academic work, I have seen fit to make use of autoethnography as my main methodological tool and red thread throughout these pages. Notably, this tool is also a theoretical one that will overlap with the theoretical and empirical framework that will follow in sections below.

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Tami Spry describes the critically reflexive methodology of autoethnography as a performance that results in a “narrative of the researcher’s engagement with others in particular sociocultural contexts.” According to Sarah Wall, the autoethnographer acknowledges the personal as inherently cultural as s/he interprets knowledge as something subjective rather than objective, and therefore seeks to find a space for nontraditional forms of inquiry and expression.

Wall questions traditional, positivist approaches to science that tend to qualify only a small elitist group to fully conduct and understand research. We are socialized to view science and knowledge as something quantitative - measurable and tangible. Research methods that entail qualitative connections with real people and their lives are in this harsh light considered fluffy, vague and of lesser value.

However, this narrow definition of what constitutes “real” science is being challenged with the rise of postmodern philosophy in the 1980’s. According to many postmodern emancipatory theories dealing with inequalities within social categories such as race, gender and class, knowledge may very well be better obtained through alternative processes.

Very often, these approaches start with the researcher’s own experience. As we acknowledge that the studied world is always conceived by the researcher, we realize that we can only claim to represent ourselves in academic storytelling. Accepting this becomes of vital importance when trying to disrupt hegemonic and colonizing misrepresentations with our work. When giving voice both to researcher and participant in a mingling and nudging of experiences, we may very well reach a better vantage point for greater knowledge to be shared and developed. This part of the autoethnographic process is sometimes referred to as the phase of “illumination.”

This transformational process of autoethnography is often described as highly emotional journey. The researcher needs to rediscover and examine personal prejudice, questions and problems in order to awaken and sustain self-awareness in conversations with others. It forces us question what we know, how we know it and what use we make of our knowledge. Stacy Holman Jones refers to this as “crisis”,

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9 Wall 2006, p 147-150.
the turning point where we are forced to relent to destabilizing old structures and notions in order to enable creative uncertainty.

The researcher might feel anger or rage when being faced with such life changing experiences, and is then challenged to channel those feelings into movement and political action. Holman Jones reasserts that the acknowledgement of our emotions is important for understanding and theorizing the relationship between Self, power and culture. By telling and sharing our stories we have a better chance at interpreting, creating and ultimately changing our social, cultural, political and personal lives.10

The methodology is commonly used to illustrate how the personal struggles of the researcher collide with hegemonic concepts of History, Time and the Other. Spry states that Westernized terms such as Third World, developed and underdeveloped attempt to dominate the colonized as it puts the Others in a rigid place beyond modern conceptions of time and place, reduced to romanticized anecdotes. This has proved to be the case with the notion of the “Noble Savage” which is an essentialized and one-sided White illusion of the Indigenous, studied for the “richness of their past” rather than as contemporarily active agents of epistemology.

In order to question the colonized positioning of the Other, the performative autoethnographer uses one’s own performing body as raw data or finding in a critical cultural story. By doing so, one can confront deceptively neutral narratives and bias perceptions of who we are and how far we have come in terms of disrupting cultural oppression.11 In plain terms, exploring the situation of the Self becomes vital for understanding and deconstructing the situation of the Other.

The so called “deconstructive autoethnography” requires an “I” that is not set out to be the foundation of comfort, coherence and truth but rather an “I” that is prepared to confront experience as something questionable, problematic and incomplete. By being prepared to fail the cultural injunction of the Self as a unified, autonomous creature; a reflexive space is opened from where dominant cultural

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narratives may be contested. Spry describes her own process in terms of “giving in to rapture” and writes, “As I let myself fall apart, I let myself see the pieces.”

3. Literature review

The literature review consociates with the theoretical component of the methodology, as it is not in the nature of this fluent subject to be easily divided into rigid sections, nor would it benefit from it. In combination with the methodological component described above, the literature review serves as an exploration of the research strategies for decolonization of the Native Other, as I seek a space where I might enter my contribution – not only academically but also ethically.

Since few Western academic concepts can be considered unproblematic in this context, a brief overview of reclaimed Indigenous scholarship is necessarily provided. I then attempt to disrupt the binary between Indigenous and non-Indigenous research in order for me to present the theory that there is not only a space for a White scholar’s redress and responsibility, but also a need for it.

3.1. Navigating Nativity, research and theory

Smith defines Indigenous peoples as “the assembly of those who have witnessed, been excluded from, and have survived modernity and imperialism.” She continues by underlining the extreme diversity in terms of cultural distinction, belief systems, preserved or lost sovereignty, names and labels. The issue of Indigenous definitions is however a highly intricate one, since it is intimately intertwined with the colonizing “gaze” upon the Native Other. As constructed polarized opposites, the colonizer and oppressed play crucial roles in each other’s constitutions of identity.

Still, the fact is that the Native existed long before the settler painted the imperialist portrait of the colonized. Outsider attempts to nuance and complicate the Native experience have often resulted in a “fascination” that may not conform to reality. This, in conjunction with simplistic, “pure” definitions, has a colonizing effect. The counter-reaction is the process of Native self-definition, which Smith

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12 Spry 2011, p. 503.
13 Spry 2011, p. 504.
describes as a desire to be free from the implications of the “gaze” and consequently regarded as fully human.\textsuperscript{15}

Since the 70’s, Native American activism has gained increasing media attention. At that time, agents such as tribal Elders, reservation residents and the American Indian Movement (AIM) started to take serious political action against offenses historically and currently committed by the federal government. Much of the public commentary was characterized by Native stereotyping, portraying them as both unassimilated misfits of modern society as well as iconic heroes. However, Mary Lawlor argues the fact that Native political affairs became national demonstrates that the tribes involved had a certain control of their own representation in the public sphere.\textsuperscript{16}

Self-definition communicated through academia, scholarship and research has been a more ambiguous issue. Research as a tool not only for Western oppression and colonialization but also as an instrument for Indigenous resistance and decolonialization has gradually received more acceptance within Native communities. Critical theorists assert that research may entail a space for and a promise of counterhegemonic work and emancipation. Smith argues that the decolonizing project calls for research that does not settle for challenging and adjusting qualitative research traditions, but seeks to transform the power institution that is academia - shaking its old structures to the core and reclaiming the precedence of interpretation. Along with this come new and innovative strategies for methodology and research, reimagining the relationship between the researcher and text in deeper analysis, enriched by the Native experience.

This process is described by Smith as a communal and multidimensional effort between Indigenous scholars across borders, forming a communicative research community characterized by resistance, political integrity and privileging Native voices. By doing so, the Native researchers are seizing the opportunity to theorize their own lives, in connection to their pasts and futures.\textsuperscript{17}

In line with research, the relationship between Native American studies and theory is a complicated one. The very concept has often been experienced as Westernized, which has led to the general assumption that Indigenous authors resist

\textsuperscript{15} Smith 2005, p. 86-87.
\textsuperscript{17} Smith 2005, p. 87-90.
theorizing their work. However, Elvira Pulitano argues that there are many examples of an emerging Native American critical theory, as she discusses the creative and innovative works of six Native scholars.\(^\text{18}\)

Diverse approaches to Native American critical theory are characterized by a distancing from Western external methods and outsider critical voices when interpreting Native American text and culture as well as a development of an alternative set of tools for critical discourse and epistemology, largely originating from Indigenous rhetorics, experiences and worldviews. Even if divorced from West in standpoint, Native American critical theory stays married to Western analytical instruments and challenges the Western mind to broaden.

Native American critical theory maintains in written text the vitality of oral tradition and power of language, renouncing Western imaginations of the Native as a dying cultural artifact. Pulitano emphasizes the open form and creative structure of the text where the shifts between academic arguments and personal narratives results in an exchange between author and reader that morphs the writer’s role of an authoritative, objective scholar into the one of a subjective storyteller.\(^\text{19}\)

One of the writers Pulitano discusses is Gerald Vizenor, who she refers to as exceptionally revolutionary.\(^\text{20}\) Vizenor coins the term “postindian warrior”, describing a new Native identity, ready to fight extinction and domination with wit and the written word – through their stories. Hovering above both tribal and non-tribal representation, the postindian warrior is liberated from separatist and essentialist definitions. This approach makes for “survivance”\(^\text{21}\) – a progressive accomplishment greater than mere survival that has for example inspired the curators of the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), which can be read about in the Findings section. It might be added that incorporating Vizenor’s survivance into a museum context may be considered audacious, since Vizenor himself resists tribal representation confined within such walls.\(^\text{22}\)

According to Pulitano, Vizenor recognizes endless redefining and reinventing of Natives as “Indians” as a mean of domination, as it indicates that the Native

\(^{18}\) Pulitano, Elvira, *Toward a Native American critical theory*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 2003, p 188.
\(^{19}\) Pulitano 2003, p. 187-189.
\(^{20}\) Pulitano 2003, p. 186.
\(^{22}\) Pulitano 2003, p. 189.
identity as something that needs to be mended and confined in rigid spaces. His counteraction to this victimization is portrayals of Natives as survivors in his stories, empowered by comic relief. In summary, freedom and survivance is obtained through dialogue, humor and storytelling.²³

3.2. Decolonizing responsibilities

As we now have seen, there are a lot of connections and overlaps between the autoethnographical process and the decolonizing project. Still, one crucial gap remains to be bridged here, namely the relationship a non-Native researcher may enter into Native emancipatory struggles. In a strictly ethnic or racial regard, I may very well be considered a colonizer. However, I would like to think that my efforts and writings have decolonizing effects or contributions. In other words, my desire is to compensate for my colonizing noun by working against becoming a decolonizing verb.

Approaching the field of Indigenous research is not risk-free for a Westerner. Natives and Native scholars benefitting from both Western cultural tradition and Western research is a highly debated and controversial issue. It has been argued by Indigenous writers that Indigenous research is inherently exclusively conducted by and tending to Indigenous people. Others say that it is a transformative project that challenges unequal, imperialist power institutions to make room for indigenous knowledge.²⁴ Pulitano argues that too much of a separatist Nativist approach will risk widening the gap between Us and Them, defeating the purpose of deconstructing academic privilege of voice. She claims that she sees an ambiguity in the writings of even the most separatist of Native authors - hybridizations with critical Western tools and theories that have proven to forward and strengthen their work. This proves that there can be no “uncontaminated” or “authentic” Native American critical theory, she states.²⁵

Smith admits that there are examples of successful bicultural and collaborative research where projects have been mutually beneficial for both parties. However, she asserts there is often a lack of attention paid to Native input or commentary on dominant researcher’s work, allowing colonization and exploitation to continue.

²³ Pulitano 2003, p. 185.
²⁴ Smith 2005, p. 89.
²⁵ Pulitano 2003, p.189-190.
Smith explains that there is too little advice offered to Indigenous researchers developing their own subject matters and therefore explicitly addresses her decolonizing methodological writings to the Native community of which she is a part.26

This makes sense, as we must accept that the testimony of those living with the struggle of reclaiming their stories must be prioritized over the voices of their allies. Their contributions are of a slightly different nature, as the decolonizing project is best served by non-Native researcher’s support, humility and transparency rather than imposition, trespassing and sense of entitlement.

Smith advises non-Indigenous writers such as myself to have a clarified research aim and think carefully about both ethical and effective ways to conduct research with Native peoples.27 This is taken to heart as I assume my decolonizing responsibilities. I use this concept to describe the mindful approach a White scholar must take when s/he engages in work for social justice with people historically and currently disadvantaged by a dominant, Euroamerican society. We produce research from a position of power, and with that comes responsibility and even repent. As explained under the Collected data and stories shared heading, I make use of participatory research in order to follow Smith’s advice to a better extent and practice my decolonizing responsibility.

When attempting to conduct decolonizing academic work, one must consider the fact that none of us are set apart from postcolonial relations, values and beliefs. Amal Trecher describes this phenomenon as something that haunts us, a presence that influences our lived experiences, our minds and our relationships with each other in a globalized world. Trecher states that an important theoretical challenge lies in mapping people’s emotional and material responsibilities and investments in reproducing colonialist hierarchies. Perpetuation as well as deconstruction takes place on the subjective and individual level, affecting an international community for better or worse.28 “Facing up to the past, to responsibilities, to one has been formed, is never easy, nor straightforward […]”29 she writes.

The decolonizing project is in other words a struggle that includes a multidimensional exploration of obstacles and opportunities. Smith describes the

29 Trecher 2005, p. 50.
steps and layers of awakening, inspiring, organization and movement of the Maori as intersecting means of resistance and counter-hegemonic action. I would like to suggest that the ethnic colonizer (noun) needs to undergo a similar struggle in order to become a performative decolonizer (verb). This transformation may be accessed through autoethnography, as that tool holds challenges and instruments similar to those of the decolonizing project, for example the personal storytelling. By identifying my own position on the colonial map, I can get a better sense of where to go in order to grow – as a researcher and as a person.

I, along with others of my sociocultural background and academic field of human rights, may feel a certain calling to work for a better society, for everyone. I argue that it is of vital importance that this calling is transformed into a sense of responsibility, informed by the individuals we are trying to work for or with. Sometimes, this entails staying out of their business and leaving our White horse in the stable. And sometimes, we are lucky enough to be part of an exchange.

4. Findings
My findings constitute the various lessons I have learned from Native America throughout the research process. I would again like to emphasize that is not a study of Native America, but rather a theorized learning experience where I let imaginations collide or intersect with realities. These interactions are described in this section and are later used not only as primary material, but also as empirical tools to promote greater understandings.

4.1. A White awakening: the author’s retrospective
My childhood home was a big house that my handy father had built in the middle of two connected yards at the very end of our block. Surrounding our house was a fair amount of other buildings: shacks for storage, a greenhouse, a workshop, garages, a playhouse and a smaller house that we rented out. The yard was filled with greenery, everything from spruces to birches and during the summers, I could enjoy a broad variety of berries such as cherries, blueberries, gooseberries and blackcurrant. In other words, this place had a lot to offer a child with a vivid imagination. All the kids from

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30 Smith 2012, p. 200-201.
the neighborhood would come over to play in the attics, climb heaps of rocks or timber piles and build secret hiding places.

Our toys were first and foremost a mix of things made by my father and things found lying around. Among these bits and pieces were an old, half-broken tepee, a peace pipe and a raggedy feather headdress, that all went very well with the wooden trestles covered in sheepskin we imagined were horses. In addition, I recall an old picture of myself from when I was about five years old. I am sitting in the grass by a group of trees with my two friends, the brother and sister from across the street. My hand is raised to my mouth, mimicking some kind of war cry. Except for some face paint and a couple of colorful Easter feathers in our blonde hair, we are all totally naked. Well, apart from my slightly more civilized female friend who insisted on wearing panties.

Around this time in my life, I went to the U.S. for the first time. My mother had been an exchange student in the suburbs of Atlanta, Georgia in the 70’s and has kept in close contact with her host family ever since. I remember perceiving America as a completely different world. At the airport, I was hit by a heat hotter than any Swedish summer and the rest is a blur of delicious food, cartoons, enormous buildings, shiny toys and unlimited amounts of soda.

When our two-week stay was coming to an end, my American uncle’s wife gave me a gift: Walt Disney’s Pocahontas (1995) on VHS. On the chunky plastic cover, there she was in all her full-lipped, high-cheekboned, big-breasted beauty with her long black hair with blue streaks blowing in the wind. Pocahontas could not have looked any less like the five-year-old me, but I somehow instantly related to her as I watched the movie over and over again and learned all the lines in a language I did not even understand. As a result of me receiving this glorious present, my parents had been forced to buy a VHS player, and a fancy one that could play non-Swedish movies to boot.

Later, I was given my first CD: the Swedish soundtrack to Pocahontas, and soon learned how to sing along in both languages. When I went back to the States a second time a few years later, I bought Pocahontas II: Journey to the New World. In both movies it was the scenes where Pocahontas was aligned with nature, or even better, taught other people (or should I say men) to show appreciation for nature that I enjoyed the most. I envied how she could jump off of cliffs and swim under water and
I admired how she risked her life speaking up against abuses towards both humans and animals. That was the kind of woman I wanted to become.

The fact that this headstrong female character in reality was a simplistic, romanticized stereotype of how mainstream Western society would like to imagine American Indians would not occur to me until many years later. I was 19 years old and sitting in a movie theater watching a movie with a strikingly similar plot: *Avatar*. Despite the awesome, otherworldly elements of this impressive multimillion-dollar production, I was disturbed. Why did the macho White guy who called the Pandora animals “bitches” ultimately become the Omaticaya tribe leader and the hero that united the surrounding tribes in the war against the colonialist, capitalist humans? In *Pocahontas*, the Native woman remained the wise heroine at least!

About two years after I first saw *Avatar*, I wrote a Bachelor’s thesis on how the cross-cultural phenomenon of *Twilight* affected its audience’s romantic preferences and perceptions of gender roles. Gender studies and intersectionality had now become my particular fields of interest. In this story, I was yet again faced with Hollywood’s misrepresentation of the Indigenous: in this case half-naked Native Americans that could turn into werewolves because of their magic blood and wolf ancestry. This stereotype was however a bit different from the one I had seen before - unlike the respectful and enlightened Na’vi of *Avatar*, the *Twilight* wolf pack was a juvenile boys’ club with anger management difficulties.

Mainly because of my university based interdisciplinary training in human rights, I could now see these images from a more sober and critical perspective. I could see their seductive nature - literally see the goose bumps I would get as Jake Sully gives his speech to the People and they raise their fists and decide to fight for their land. As for *Twilight*, you do not have to look very far to find fans that are “seduced” by werewolf Jacob and his bare chest, to say the least.

However, this was not a topic I was prepared to write about without collaborations and conversations with Indigenous individuals. In fact, it was when I had completed my thesis about *Twilight* that my American advisor suggested that I would go to the Mid-West of the U.S. to meet Native Americans in order to learn more about the racial stereotypes I had briefly mentioned as I was primarily focused on the sexist elements of the story in question. I hesitated, but agreed after carefully constructing an appropriate approach. About six months later, I had a plane ticket and a plan - but no idea what to expect as I traveled overseas.
4.2. Culture on display: the two museums

My advisor and I arrived in Washington D.C. in early October of 2012. I had been to the U.S. three times before, but I had seen very little other than the Southern republican suburbs of Atlanta. Yet again, I felt like a child as I started to rediscover the country. Not only was I in a completely different place geographically this time around - but my outlook and worldview had also drastically developed as I had entered adulthood and university. Throughout my studies in human rights and social justice, I had kept a certain interest in the American context and I was now more eager than ever to take a good look with my own eyes at what lay beneath the surface of the American dream I remembered from my childhood visits.

The main reason for spending time in D.C. before heading west was to visit the NMAI. This museum had a reputation for having a substantial amount of Native and tribal influence in all aspects, including architecture, landscaping and exhibitions. Since I had personally never experienced Native Americans representing themselves before, I was very curious to see what it could look like in comparison. With one semester of cultural analysis at the back of my head, I still contemplated the fact that there was a definite limit to how such an infinitely diverse group of people could be portrayed through informative texts, installations and artifacts.

Yet, the high school art student in me could not help but to be amazed and seduced by the beautiful tribal aesthetics seen all around the entrance, from the woolen tribal patterned carpets hanging in the cafeteria to the exquisite beadwork I was dying to get my hands on. A bigger part of me than I liked to admit had a very strong urge to run to the gift shop before even visiting the exhibitions. Back home in Sweden, I had reluctantly resisted the ongoing romanticizing Americana/Native American trend seen in almost every clothing store and fashion blog – dream catchers, arrow tattoos, Navajo patterns, eagle and feather prints used by White hipster kids who had no connection to Native American life. I was ambivalent – attracted to the imagery for aesthetic reasons but disturbed by the ignorant, White usage of such symbols. I reminded myself to listen and learn.

As my advisor and I were getting coffee in the museum cafeteria, we heard the beating of a drum from the entrance hall. A Native American man in a ponytail and

patterned vest was standing in the center, playing and singing a traditional song. He welcomed the gathered visitors and presented the museum as a place for American Indians to share their stories and perspectives with the rest of the world. Despite my reservations against museums, I felt very grateful to be there and a great sense of respect for what I was about to see in the exhibitions.

The claim that the NMAI was a forum for true perspectives to be conveyed to the non-Native world was most clearly stated through one strikingly reoccurring word: “our”. The permanent exhibitions were named *Our Lives: Contemporary Life and Identities, Our Peoples: Giving Voice to Our Histories* and *Our Universes: Traditional Knowledge Shapes Our World.*

I was impressed by the general richness of the NMAI – both in terms of tasteful and creative execution as well as a rather vivid display of the diversity within the Native American world throughout the continent. This was achieved through a multifaceted storytelling in shapes of not only ancient sculptures, craftsmanship and traditional attire – but also video commentary, modern art and contemporary photography that moved away from stereotypical 19th century portrayals.

Along with my own beliefs, the tour guide underlined the fact that culture as well as history is a living, subjective concept. The tour guide herself was not Native and therefore used expressions such as “their stories” and “Native culture” when referring to the Native American experience. When she asked her audience what exhibits they were interested in, a minority raised their hands for the contemporary one mentioned earlier.

However, this exhibition could be considered one of the most innovative and refreshing elements of the NMAI, devoted to self-determination and survivance – here described as something more than survival, namely the non-defining process of the Native self, raising political and social awareness and the negotiation between honoring the ancient traditions and embracing change. The NMAI curators write:

“*Our Lives* is about who we are today. Native peoples are everywhere in the Americas. We number in tens of millions. We speak hundreds of languages. We live in the hemisphere’s remotest places and its biggest cities. We are still here. We are not just survivors; we are the architects of our survivance. We carry our ancient philosophies into an ever-changing modern world. We work hard to remain Native in circumstances that sometimes challenge or threaten
our survival. *Our Lives* is about our stories of survivance, but it belongs to anyone who has fought extermination, discrimination, or stereotypes.32

Reading this, it becomes obvious how the Native individuality is intimately linked to a greater heritage and sense of community. The final sentence strikes a note with me personally as it builds an inclusive bridge between struggles for social justice everywhere.

Contemporary Native America had its representation at the NMAI, but this seems to be an exception to a very deeply rooted rule. When I visited the museum in Washington D.C., I had never even had a real conversation with a Native American and had yet to experience an unpolished reality. Less than two weeks later, my mind would be overwhelmed with the realities of today’s Native American nation, which will be elaborated on in the subsections that follow. Before it was time to leave, I had one more museum to visit: the Nebraska History Museum and more specifically, its exhibition *The First Nebraskans*.

This exhibition was purely historical and claims on an opening sign to present “the story of Nebraska’s Indian past. Artifacts from several Indian groups, some of recent vintage and others of great antiquity, portray the richness and diversity of Indian life through the years.” Dimly lit and still, *The First Nebraskans* presented a sharp contrast to the light and lavished NMAI. *The First Nebraskans* was one out of nine exhibitions offering specific pieces of Nebraskan history, while the NMAI had four floors at their disposal – for Native representations only.

The gap between the two was partly a question of a substantial discrepancies in resources but also a difference in purpose, effort and heart. That this limited, demure display of old artifacts, portraits and costumes with a few more contemporary elements such as a beaded yellow pair of Chuck Taylor All Star sneakers did not quite live up to the “richness” and “diversity” that was promised. There was no sign of Native or tribal influence and all signs were written about the Nebraskan Indians in third person plural.

Furthermore, very little is mentioned of the horrors of White domination and abuse. Quite faintly it is conveyed that assimilative White ways were forced upon the Native Nebraskans through “settlements into reservations” and Indian children are

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said to have received “help” from missionary interpreters to learn English and religion in the 1830’s and onward. At the NMAI, Bibles and foreign government are mentioned as two of four forces of Contact that changed Native American life forever - along with disease and guns.

It seems as if these bloody chapters of American history are relatively sugarcoated when presented to the public. The NMAI tour guide only briefly indicated “no history book is complete” as a way of describing the deliberate exclusion of the horrible realities of colonization from contemporary American education. In the First Nebraskans guestbook, the positive reviews of the exhibitions are overwhelming. Visitors say that they “love” the exhibition and describe it as “awesome” and “interesting” but are mainly appreciative of the headdress on display and the other artifacts when it comes to the specifics.

There is no question about the inspiring nature of Native aesthetics, spirituality and crafts put on display in these two museums. It captivates the viewer as it represents a sphere that appears to be quite different from the capitalist society that White Westerners have turned America into. The question is: How does this romantic, exotic world coincide with Native reality?

4.3. Young Native perspectives: discussions at the university
As a human rights student devoted to social justice, I had started to take offence to the Indigenous stereotypes and romanticized imagery that I came across every now and then on my side of the Atlantic ocean. However, I realized that my critical understanding was limited by my non-Native ethnicity and lack of insight in actual Native life. In order to learn more about the complexities of Native representation, I sought to discover how examples of how the portrayals are perceived by Native Americans.

When showing the Native students in the focus group the pictures of the stereotypes I had brought from Sweden, a majority of them expressed their anger and frustration over the general ignorance and disregard of Native reality that they were faced with in everyday life and for as long as they could remember. This was not only misappropriations of a faceless, White privileged society but also by people they would have expected more from such as co-workers, classmates, members of other minorities and even close friends.
Petra remembers driving by a drunk Native man with her White friends, him giving inappropriate comments to the non-Native girls. One of the girls then said, “Tell him to go back to the rez.” When Petra got upset over what she felt was an insult on all Native Americans coming from one of her closes friends, her friend responded, “I’m not talking about you.” K.C. tells a similar story about disappointment and lack of sensitivity from someone who arguably could have been expected to show more sensitivity. His Asian American co-worker had decided to dress up as a Native American for Halloween and when K.C. tried to tell her “It is a culture, not a costume” she would not listen:

“[…] And the next day, there she is with her pigtails and fake leather dress and fake feathers and I was just… I left for a long lunch and I really almost didn’t come back to my job that day.”

Sandra describes her amazement over how uneducated people can be about the Native situation. She took a class in Native American history two years ago where her fellow students’ showed astonishing ignorance by asking the questions: “Are Native Americans still alive?” and “Are Native Americans allowed off the reservation?” “Like we’re still pinned in!” she exclaims. “Just from questions like that, it is obvious that they wouldn’t know that wearing headdresses would be obscenely offensive to a Native American.”

In school, Sandra and Petra have both had experiences with selective history teachings, either demonizing Natives or neglecting to tell the truth about what was done to them. Petra says:

“The argument is that kids, you know when you learn, you know in second grade, you in an area when you learn about Thanksgiving and stuff like that, I’ve read things where they would say that kids are too young to read or learn about you know this mass-genocide and all this stuff that people did but there is also a discussion where they say, well they learn about the Holocaust, in middle-school.”

Sandra learned about the genocide from her father. Growing up in a White mainstream community, it was not until later years in high school American history class that Petra learned about the full extent of the genocide. She asked her mother:

33 *Reservation*, author’s remark.
“Did this really happen?’ and she was shocked that I had not known about certain things in Native American history before then and I was about 15 or 16 years old. As I got older I started to think, in school you don’t learn certain things and it is romanticized. Like a fantasy. […] It’s almost giving the impression that this is what happened with Natives and now they are gone, it’s lost, the end.”

In order to cope with these exhausting reminders of colonialism, the young Native Americans are forced to find a way to set themselves aside from it. It is far from an easy task and it seems to take lifelong practice. Petra describes the feeling of constantly being torn between anger and resignation:

“We’ve seen them before. It’s pretty common to us. […] I’ve seen lot of things, I grew up round it, I’m Native. Maybe notice it more than other people probably. […] For me, it’s always going to be this way. You’re angry about it and you’re upset, but then you have to find a sense of peace in yourself when you’re not angry all the time, you can’t feel bad about who you are all the time so it’s almost a struggle. […] It almost comes naturally, to see people wear headdresses, to mock it and stuff like that, but I mean it bothers you, no matter what age you are, so… I’ve just came to terms with it, it’s going to be like this for a while.”

Sandra agrees and says: “You can’t be mad at it, because it’s everywhere, it really is. But I think that the peace that I found about it though is I really don’t think these people are trying to be racist or anything, they are just raised in ignorance.” It appears as if ignorance in the pure sense of the word may contain both the source of the problem as well as her peace of mind. However, the line between inner peace and resignation seems to be a fine one.

Sandra still takes comfort in the relative improvement of the ways Native Americans are being perceived by society in comparison to generations before her, and links it to an increasing popular representation:

“Pochahontas came out when I was really young. Thankfully in our time it was the cool thing to be Indian but during my parents time it wasn’t cool to be Native, no one liked you if you were. So I guess we’re progressing, or I don’t know.”

This connection made by Sandra leads us to the topic of Hollywood’s portrayals of Natives and Indigenous, in this case exemplified through selected clips from Avatar and Twilight: Eclipse. When discussing the Avatar scenes, both professor
Abercrombie and two of the students express mixed feelings towards the narrative. After watching the first clip, professor Abercrombie eloquently points out the stereotypical polarization between Outsider and Indigenous and their separate worldviews. At the same time, he cannot help but to be intrigued:

“In some ways I like this movie very much because the clip you just showed me, you know it shows this conflation, which is bad of course, the conflation of the Native, the Indigenous with nature in general, you know, Indians are close to the earth, Indians are conflated throughout history and Western discourse as animals. They are the wild, they are a part of the wilderness, they are the untamed. And so the shape of the Indigenous species here is very animalized with the long tails, the cat’s eyes etcetera. And she is in a tree, she is very much one with the environment. […] And in contrast, the Westener, even though he is in the body of this Indigenous person he shows up – automatically there is this hostile relationship between him and his environment. He has to start a fire, he has to react, strike out. And of course she tells him at the end, ‘No, it’s your fault that this other creature or being died.’ […] And when she is forced to kill the beast, of course she does so with ceremony and proper respect as most Indigenous people would, you can’t just say ‘I’m gonna kill that son of a bitch!’, ‘It’s me, human kind with my egoism against the rest of the rest of the ecosphere.’ […] And of course it’s totally overdone and stereotyped, some White guys version of, this is Indians being closer to nature and being like other animals and here are the White guys coming in, being complete humanistic assholes and… I like it. And it is a popular movie, can you do much better than that?”

Professor Abercrombie can clearly spot, elaborate on and deconstruct the problematic elements on an analytical level but in the next breath, he resigns to the seduction - not really being able to give a “rational” reason why. Sandra analyses the first scene along the same lines as professor Abercrombie but her first reaction to the Avatar clips remains “I remember that is why I really liked it, because the Natives won in this one!” Similarly, K.C. holds both the cut and extended version of Avatar on Blu-ray even though he compares Avatar to another misrepresentative movie series named A Man Called Horse from 1970, where the White man similarly get accepted and integrated in Indigenous culture only to ultimately supersede his Indian teachers and become their tribe leader. However, the Native misrepresentation is not the most protruding theme to K.C.:

“The Native aspect of it to me, it’s there but it’s because I’m Native. I think more prominent in it is its indictment of capitalism; it’s such a big machine. It’s hard to get rid of once it’s there.”
It seems as if both attractive elements and certain redeeming qualities overshadows or subdues the Indigenous stereotypes.

The same thing goes for Petra and her love for the *Twilight* movies. She ties back to what Sandra expressed about preferring romanticized misrepresentations to contempt and/or ignorance for Native Americans. Petra describes her initial reaction to *Twilight* after watching the clip from *Eclipse*:

“‘Hey, Natives are actually in a movie!’ That’s what I liked about it, it was like… I just liked the fact that Natives were in a major picture, you know when I was a teenager that was the cool thing, […] because you don’t see that very much and I just thought that hey, you know, even though it wasn’t the best way to show Natives in the best light but…we’re obviously not dead, you know like some people think we are!”

Both Sandra and Petra grew up reading the *Twilight* books by Stephenie Meyer, both experiencing mixed feelings and confusion as they get older. They both relate to and sympathize with the handsome Native character Jacob (played by actor Taylor Lautner in the cinematic productions) rather than female protagonist Bella, who they both call “stupid”. Sandra watched the first movie *Twilight* on TV the night before and remembers thinking, “This movie is so stupid, I don’t know why I like it, I hate this!” Similarly, Petra describes being reluctant to be a part of the “teen sensation” at first, but was immediately drawn in once she started reading, saying that she “couldn’t stop” and got “addicted”, as were her group of friends:

“We had to go see the movies at midnight, you know, we had to go see the movies and even though the movies sucked I still wanted to see them. Mainly for me it was because I wanted to see Jacob.”

Clearly, there is no cohesive or singular Native perspective on popular representations of Indigenous peoples. The only consistency to be found in these stories lies with the constant confusion, negotiation and ambivalent feelings expressed by the four students. It appears that frustration is not only directed towards ignorant non-Natives, but also towards the young, urban Indigenous self in negotiation Western socialization of which there is very little escape. However, romantization of Indigenous reality in popular culture is described as preferable to what previous generations have gone through in terms of more blatant, racial discrimination and
contempt. In order to be introduced to that reality, I travelled to a reservation to learn from the Elders.

4.4. The Elders: stories from the reservation

As described in the prologue, coming to the reservation was an overwhelming experience for me, to say the least. If first entering America 17 years ago had felt like setting foot on another planet, then this was a similar sensation – although completely reversed. I was well aware that my glossy childhood memories were far from the complex American truth, but the extreme poverty of the reservation shattered every illusion I still might have held on to. The small snapshots I had seen of underprivileged Black communities in the Washington D.C. area suddenly appeared well off in comparison to these dusty rural spaces with their modest housings scattered over the plains. The scenery was grimy and barren yet breathtaking with its blue sky, crisp air and vast panoramas. Like the land, the people I would meet here had an aura of integrity about them that I soon came to admire.

Being a cautious and slightly shy person in unfamiliar settings, I found myself somewhat intimidated about “performing” what I had set out to do, namely initiating conversations with the Elders. However, most of my concerns where valid since they stemmed from a developed mindfulness of the sociocultural dynamics of the situation as well as a sensitive receptiveness of how I would come across to the residents as a White visitor with a certain interest in the contemporary Native American experience.

It was our second day at the reservation and our Black-Brown-White trio had been invited to spend the evening at the local service center, the meeting spot for the reservation’s activists. At the heart of the small house was a combined kitchen and office area, where you could have a seat, hang out and chitchat about everything from local gossip to political events and developments affecting the community.

I was observing this very interesting and witty interaction, trying to pick a good opportunity to ease my way into it. I had briefly been introduced to the three Elders present, and we had nodded and smiled at one another from where we were sitting. In comparison to the loud, middle-aged women laughing and yelling to each other from across the room, the Elders all gave a very soft-spoken impression with hands resting in laps, gently smiling and commenting on the jokes that were thrown around. They had all been informed of my interest in talking to them and I felt increasingly awkward where I was sitting in a corner, like a strange foreigner.
“So, Selma wants to do interviews with the Elders!” a woman yelled on her way to the kitchen. An older woman sitting across from me responded in acted dismay: “Oh no, I don’t want to be interviewed!” Both my advisor and me where quick to exclaim: “Not interviews! Just conversations!” I now felt even more nervous and misplaced than before and resumed my silence. After a couple more minutes, I felt incredibly silly. I was stuck. When the same woman passed my seat for the second time, she commanded, “Here, talk to Isabella!”

Isabella became the first of the Elders that I had the privilege and opportunity to speak to. I forced myself to get off my butt and approached her shyly, carrying my foldable chair over to the couch where she was sitting. “Can I sit with you?”, I asked. Next to her was a young teenage girl, tall and slender with a long braid resting on her shoulder. I could not help but to think that this girl was the epitome of the Western imaginative “Indian”. She was Pochahontas in a pink velour tracksuit, fantasy meeting reality.

Isabella had wavy brown hair with grey streaks and a youthful smile. She was born and raised at the reservation but was then forced to leave for Catholic boarding school. She remembers the time where Native parents were threatened with jail if they refused to give up their children. When Isabella turned 15, her mother passed away. Isabella then left school and never came back. She does not go into detail about these events, but keeps her enigmatic smile.

I tell Isabella that I am here to learn more about Native life in order to spread awareness back in Sweden, since the Indigenous misrepresentations have reached as far as my country. I ask her how the stereotypes have affected her and she tells me about White people coming to the reservation, wanting to touch her skin and hair with a certain fascination, as if she was wild – a savage.

Isabella then turns to her granddaughter of 13 and introduces us. The girl gives me a quick smile and looks away. “I have been raising her all her life”, Isabella says. The pride shows in Isabella’s face as she tries to get her granddaughter to tell me about her plans for the future. “She wants to help people”, she explains. “Go to college.” The girl smiles to herself but keeps shying away. “You wanted to travel too, right?” Isabella persists. “To Africa? Yes. She wants to go to Africa to help the poor.”

“That is really great!” I say encouragement. I say a silent prayer that she somehow will receive the same quality of education that I have, that will provide her with the necessary tools and resources to work for a better society wherever that may
I rest assured that she would probably offer more insight in human rights issues than I ever will.

After thanking Isabella for sharing her story with me, I made my way over to a man sitting across the room with his hands folded in his lap. His name was Jim. Jim had a boyish look about him, with his grey short bangs and introverted smile. A prosthetic leg was visible through his blue jeans. Like Isabella, he grew up at the reservation but was soon sent to boarding school. He tells me about getting his mouth washed with soap as punishment for speaking his tribal tongue and then illustrates how he was slapped with rulers over the palms of his hands.

Jim then married and moved to Montana where he lived for 23 years before he divorced and moved back to the reservation. His face lights up in all subtlety as he talks about the horses he used to keep and it sounds like he has spent most of his life on the horseback. “You know, for transportation, before everyone had cars”, he explains. Something tells me that horses meant a lot more to him than transportation - not to mention a lot more than his failed marriage. “You miss it?” I ask. Jim nods. Nowadays, he spends his time helping his 90-year-old sister who lives on a farm and refuses to move to a home or sell her truck. “And I play solitaire”, he says with a faint smile. He looks down on his leg and pinches the denim. “I got run over by a wagon.”

Jim’s grandfather was killed by American troops in a well-known massacre during the American Indian wars of the 1800’s. “You should go see his name on the stone”, he says and refers to the monument raised nearby at the mass grave cemetery, which has some of the victim’s name engraved. “I will”, I said. Unfortunately, we did not make it there before it was time to leave the reservation.

Next day, I approached two ladies that seemed rather engaged in the activities at the center. Mary and Margaret were cousins. They grew up at the reservation and had both been working as teachers in the tribal language until very recently. It is clear that they both take pride in their heritage and are devoted towards passing it on to future generations – not everyone at the reservation speaks their Native language anymore. Like Isabella, Margaret has had experience with outsider ignorance. She tells me about a White person asking her if she was a real Indian, since she did not have any feathers. “The feathers come out at night when we take our clothes off”, she had answered and laughs at the memory.

Mary was the “first lady” of the tribe, being married to a prominent tribal chairman who died last year. Together they had four daughters and four sons, who
frequently would get into fights in younger years. Both Mary and Margaret have sons who dance, grass dance and traditional dance. Deaths in Mary’s family made her son lose most of his will to dance, but Mary made him a new dancing outfit for encouragement and he danced again on occasion. Yet he complains about being too old, being in his 40’s.

At this point, I cannot help but to show my enthusiastic interest in their beading skills and Native crafts. Mary calls her daughter who beads and sells and in the meantime, Margaret tells me about a woman who made beaded moccasins for her dog, which turned out to be a great advertisement for her business. When the dog died, she honored him by burying him in a small casket, wrapped in silk. She invited people to a little funeral, which took place right outside the center where we were sitting.

I can barely contain my delight - I am embarrassed about getting so excited over materialistic things when I probably should be more concerned with the serious components of the conversation and situation. When hearing about the ungraspable facts of Native American marginalization in the Elders’ stories, I frequently feel lost for words, stiff, empty and painfully privileged. Finally, I can relate and let loose. I try to forgive myself and embrace being myself in this space.

As it turned out, this was not a bad decision. By sharing our common creative and artistic interests, the conversation had now become an exchange. Mary comments on my Chuck Taylor All Star sneakers that I had picked up in Chicago a few days ago, and tells me that they were very popular at the reservation in the 70’s. Her son wanted them and so Mary drove to a nearby city and bought two pairs for him. “His friends would tease him about them, before they realized that they were in!” We laugh and I tell her about how popular they are among kids back in Sweden. “Are those the only shoes you brought here?” she asks and I say yes. “It’s a pity, otherwise my daughter could have them beaded for you. She is really good.” I literally gasp for air.

An old man in a cap and suspenders sitting a few feet away from us takes notice and says that he used to wear them in the 50’s. His name was Harold. During my conversation with him, I would learn that he had entered tribal government in the 60’s, and soon assumed leadership positions that allowed him to travel the world representing his tribe. He tells me about meeting Sami at an Indigenous conference in Geneva. I could tell by the way he was treated and spoken to by everyone in the room.
that this man has accomplished great things, of which I could only imagine at the time - and later on read about in amazement.

Having a conversation in a midst of other conversations in combination with his old age and my limited understanding of accented and unarticulated English, I struggle with understanding Harold’s stories in detail. Still, I can feel something strongly communicated in as he pauses in between his episodes, looks me in the eye and nods. I cannot tell if he nods at me for the message to sink in, or if he nods at the memory in introspect.

Harold shares with me the legendary stories of the tribe’s origin out of the sacred mountain as well as their four core values: Praying to the stars, consideration for future generations, keeping a big mind and respecting the natural law. “That is our culture” he says and nods again. “White people have no culture. Only consumption.” Harold looks away into the distance and I look down, contemplating whether that statement might be true or not. “We must keep our traditions” Harold mumbles. “It’s all we have left.”

5. Discussion
In this section, I use my theoretical framework in combination with lessons learned by Natives overseas and apply them to my sociocultural and national context. The broader theoretical tool of postcolonialism allows us to view Native American misrepresentation in a larger sense, connected to other cultural and racial stereotypes subject to White privilege of interpretation. By doing so, we might gain a more holistic understanding of the Swedish case in comparison to the American. Both Swedish appropriations of the colonized cultures as well as international American stereotypizations consumed in Sweden are discussed against the background of theoretical tools and empirical learnings. I am inspired by a Native scholarly style of writing where theoretical arguments are blended with personal narratives, as described in the literature review. By doing so, I also remain autoethnographical.

5.1. The bliss of ignorance?
I recall having lunch at a greasy Asian place in Copenhagen with my advisor and a couple of other students attending a summer course after my first year at university. As we walked over to our table, we passed a wooden sculpture made out to resemble
a Native American. It had exaggerated features such as a big red headdress; a
hooknose and a stern look on its face. “That’s offensive”, my advisor said as we sat
down. “What is?” I responded and looked around. “That”, she said and pointed to the
sculpture. “Oh, that. I didn’t even notice that. I’ve seen those before I think.” I
remember feeling bad about not taking initial notice of the stereotypical sculpture, but
I also failed to be deeply bothered by it even after my advisor explained it to me. It
was just a dead thing to me, misrepresenting a small group of people somewhere in a
country far, far away. I recognized it as stupid, but I was ignorant of the full length of
the extreme multidimensional discrimination it was just a small part of.

Two years later, I had just returned to Lund from my trip to the U.S. and I was
walking past the Academic Society building. Above the main entrance was a huge
banner featuring a half-naked man painted in red with a feather on his head and a
hatchet in his hand. He was standing at the shore in an animalistic crouching pose,
spotting a ship in the distance. In capital letters, the banner read “Lundaspexarna” and
“Columbus”. This time around with a whole other set of experiences, encounters and
personal interactions with Native America, the racial stereotype made me furious.

The banner was advertising the upcoming “spex”, a humoristic and musical
theatrical show written and performed by selective groups of students with singing
and acting talents. The spex phenomenon is intimately connected with Lund
University (LU) tradition and student culture, and to be a part of this particular spex
group is considered an honor. Founded in 1886 when the university only accepted
male students, Lundaspexarna remains the only spex formation at LU that still does
not allow women on stage nor in any position that involves writing or directing.
Instead, male students play female characters and female students are invited to work
behind the scenes, for example with makeup, props, costumes or cooking for the crew
during rehearsals.34

Lundaspexarna are frequently critiqued from both inside and outside LU for
cling to conservative and outdated student traditions, usually pertaining to gender
segregation. The response from the headman has been that this particular spex
concept calls for male acting and singing, referring to it as “our art form” that

http://lundagard.se/2009/05/04/ingen-rolig-tradition/ (Retrieved March 7, 2013)
Lundaspexarna have no intention of discontinuing. The fact that it is a group of predominantly - if not exclusively - White men frequently dressing up as not only women but other ethnic groups as well, seems to have received a little less attention. The manuscript of *Columbus* is an updated version of the original from 1946, but many things remain to be updated, including the poster. In a review of *Columbus* published by the online version of LU’s student newspaper Lundagård, there is no mentioning of the racial caricatures even though the review features snapshots of White men dancing in messy black wigs, headdresses and poorly tailored fringed loincloths.

According to Philip J. Deloria, Whites playing Indian or appropriating Native cultural attributes in an American context have throughout history served as a display of domination. It is a literal power play where the exercise of power is disguised, denied, qualified or mourned. In the search for a free America, playing Indian and projecting Indianness has become a symbol for creative, nationalist self-shaping, at the expense of the freedom and empowerment of the ethnic Indians. *Columbus* performed by Lundaspexarna is arguably lacking in the nationalist component as it is situated in Sweden, but it is definitely a projection of colonialist power disguised in qualified talent and wit. In the name of fun and creativity, it is perpetuating a silencing of Indigenous peoples.

Taking pride in preserving elements originating from a time before feminism, globalization and postcolonialism, Lundaspexarna exemplifies a persistent reluctance to leave the bliss of ignorance and take responsibility for colonialism. We may well make a comparison to K.C. from the focus group’s co-worker insisting on wearing a fake Native American outfit for Halloween, refusing to listen even though K.C. clearly conveyed to her that a culture should not be essentialized in a costume.

Playing Indian can be done in various degrees of blissful ignorance. There is a clear difference between children’s games and educated adults’ disregard. In the case of Lundaspexarna, it seems as if there is a romanticized tradition in preserving
colonialist expression, a nostalgia that overpowers the need for political correctness. I myself remember attending a spex during my first year at LU, laughing hard at well-constructed jokes and hilarious dance acts, getting goose bumps as I felt like I was a part of the same academic cultural tradition at the ancient LU as my parents. High on academic privilege, it was fairly easy to turn a blind eye to both men in dresses and racial or ethnic ridicule.

Colonial nostalgia in the Swedish context has also in 2012 been exemplified in the substantial amount of protest against Disney taking out the stereotypically Black and Jewish dolls from the Christmas special Santa’s Workshop (1932) shown every year on Swedish TV. In a poll at the Swedish online newspaper Metro.se, 84% out of 1228 votes wanted to keep the dolls. This imagery is referred to by some critics of Disney’s decision as something you “grew up with”, something resembling “religion”.

We recall how Trecher describes the “facing up” to one’s colonialist past and upbringing as something very difficult to do. I would like to argue that in the colonizer’s case, it requires sacrifice of familiar privilege and realizing that racist stereotypes are not ours to keep.

An important question about the bliss of ignorance becomes: What do we not know and what do we not want to know? My observations at the two museums, conversations with the Elders and my own behavior in these situations would suggest that Native costumes, attributes and artifacts are much easier for an ethnic colonizer to indulge in than the terrible truths of colonialism, discrimination and genocide. It may be something we do not know much about, but the responsibility to educate ourselves can be painful and difficult to assume.

Horrific examples of adult or adolescent ignorance of Native American history and reality are to be found in the witness of both the students at the Midwestern university and the Elders of the reservation, the worst example being a person asking if Native Americans are even alive. The students express that there are very few teachings about the genocide of colonialism even in the U.S. Columbus day is a nationally celebrated holiday and textbooks written with a critical or Indigenous perspective on his historical and current impact in the Americas have recently even

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been banned from a school district in Arizona. The literature is said to be “biased, political and emotionally charged”. Among these books is *Rethinking Columbus: The Next 500 Years*, a revolutionary collection of thought-provoking texts written by both Native and non-Native authors, which had been serving as educational material for 20 years.41

As we have seen examples of, there is a reluctance towards leaving the colonialist “bliss of ignorance” in both Sweden as well as in the U.S. Naturally, particular disregard of Native American life becomes a bigger issue on the American continent but this can hardly be considered a very mitigating circumstance for transnational cultural appropriation or embraced racial stereotypes. It seems as if colonial traditions are often either too politically dangerous or too sentimentally dear to us to let go of.

### 5.2. Stereotyped confinement

As written about in the Findings section, my very first encounter with Native Americans was in the form of a constructed stereotype, signed Western popular culture – Pochahontas. This Disney production was foregone by both *Aladdin* (1992) and *The Lion King* (1994), which had both received critique for featuring racist caricatures. This time around, the studio had been more mindful in their portrayals, hiring Native consultants and actors for the voices. Disney took pride in the movie’s huge success and the improvement from the blatant Native stereotypes Big Chief of the Red Man and Indian princess Tiger Lily featured in *Peter Pan* (1953), but the Native American community had varying opinions pertaining to the historical inaccuracies. Condoning Indian activists and actors were accused by other Native voices of being seduced and tamed by White Hollywood profit.42

When my friends and me were on our way out of the reservation, we picked up a hitchhiker who was walking to the hospital with an injured shoulder. He got in the backseat with me and we started talking about the purpose of our visit and my interest in Native representation in popular culture. He was proud to tell us that his

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relative appeared in *Dances with Wolves* (1990), a highly successful production that played on White romantization of Indians as noble people of nature, polarized from modern society and corrupt civilization. It was widely accepted as the first Hollywood movie to incorporate Native actors, authentic tribal language and sympathetic Native portrayals. Still, however groundbreaking *Dances with Wolves* was at the time, the issue of the White storytelling remained.\(^{43}\)

As the hitchhiker carefully explained what scene his relative was to be seen in, I made an effort to forget about my academic objections for a minute and be truly happy for this man. Who was I to give him a theoretical, postcolonialist lecture on what to like and what not to like? I was appalled by the notion of White Hollywood representatives scouting the reservation for Native actors, preying on the historically disadvantaged in a modern reproduction of colonialization. At the same time, I despised myself for the underlying arrogance of that sentiment as I subconsciously, but inevitably, pictured the Native participants as victims.

To portray Native Americans or Indigenous people as “noble savages” or “savage redmen” has often been done in Euroamerican popular culture. The narrative is usually communicated to the audience by a White voice, rendering Natives partially mute and lacking in cultural complexity.\(^{44}\) White attempts to recreate and update Native characters will always remain problematic – just because of the maintained predominately White construction. Stuart Hall discusses negative representations of the colonized being diluted with positive images as a strategy for diversifying and complexifying racial representation. However, he maintains that this approach is critiqued for evading the harsh realities of colonialist racism or for being constructed for commercial purposes.\(^{45}\)

In the Native case, both *Avatar* and *Twilight* can be considered examples of sexier, more appealing Indigenous representation. However, they both build on elements of the traditional Native stereotypes described above. In addition, they are still lacking in real connection to Native reality and are definitely making profit. The Indigenous in both narratives are “spiced up” with magic, otherworldly elements, such as supernatural powers and fluorescent habitats, creating a clear dichotomy to

\(^{43}\) Aleiss 2005, p. 141-146.
contemporary Western civilization that the movies’ audiences are a part of. The productions received critique but also a great deal of appreciation in the focus group discussion, as they put Indigenous people and Native Americans in the spotlight, portraying them as impressive and attractive. We recall Sandra expressing feeling lucky for living in a time when it is considered “cool” to be Indian in comparison to times of negative Native portrayals. Both her and Petra are critical of contemporary Hollywood representations, but cannot help but to appreciate aspects of them. It seems as if it is luxury to be purely critical, since the “positive” stereotypes are considered an improvement.

As we have seen, Native representation building on stereotypes frequently contributes to reproducing the Native as the Other of the past, detached from modern time and place as Spry suggested. Petra describes the perceptions of Native Americans as a “fantasy” about something that existed long ago, something finalized that is no longer relevant. Traditional museums featuring predominately antique Native attributes and artifacts risk falling into the Euroamerican anthropological habit of perpetuating hegemonic representation. The First Nebraskans poses as a clear example of this, as it portrays a predominately Native past using a non-Native voice.

Drawing upon Vizenor’s thoughts on Native representation, it may well be argued that all Indian stereotypes – sexy or dusty – are confining Native identity. If these stereotypes are romanticized White imaginations of the Native Other, then Native reality interferes with the fantasy, as it is less simplistic and less marketable. As award-winning author and poet Sherman Alexie puts it, “Yeah, like I started this career thinking, ‘You know what will sell big? Poems and stories about reservation Indians!’”

Harold’s statement about Whites not having any culture but only consumption seems partially valid in this light. Turning the Native experience into moneymaking Hollywood productions and commercialized cultural appropriation in the form of Halloween costumes and fashion interpretations have consequences beyond non-Native comprehension. There are just too many examples of Whites stealing Native culture and turning it into consumption. I can only assure Harold that I will not contribute to White cultural consumption. On an individual level, I will do my best to

46 Sleeper-Smith, Susan (red.), Contesting knowledge: museums and indigenous perspectives, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 2009, p. 69.
prove Harold wrong by assuming my decolonizing responsibility, resist and deconstruct this seductive trend. However, proving Harold wrong can only apply to the future, not the past. As I, as we move forward it is going to take more than one person facing up – it is going to take a structural change and a critical awareness at a global level. And it is going to take a lifelong time. This is only the beginning of my learning process.

6. Conclusions
Looking back at the introduction of this thesis, I recall taking the initial risk of venturing into the field of Indigenous research. I realize that for some people, I have crossed the line and trespassed into forbidden territory by writing on topics that pertain to Native Americans and Indigenous peoples worldwide, from a non-Native perspective. For that, I apologize and remain humble.

However, I would like to maintain that I have not taken a traditionalist Western approach where White privilege is concealed and hidden behind an illusion of objectivity. This study attempts to deconstruct a colonizing practice of stereotyping and misrepresenting Natives peoples by starting with the writer’s own subjectivity, shaped by her sociocultural background. Through autoethnography, I try to uncover my preconceived notions as well as colonialist traditions active in my society. This process is informed by Native voices, stories and exchanges from overseas.

My research has shown that there are a lot of examples of reproduced White domination over the Other taking place in both the U.S. and Sweden in the shape of colonialist nostalgia and disregard for the actuality of Native life. It is a destructive trend that in different disguises draws attention from the contemporary situation of the peoples who suffer from the long-lasting effects of imperialism. As we are all affected by colonialism in one way or another, we must all consider our personal positioning in order to take a stand in a decolonizing project. In other words, I take a look at my own lens as a mean of rethinking what I see through it.

It has been a balancing not to fall into the same pattern of behavior that I seek to disrupt. Many American writings on Native stereotypes and playing Indian offer little guidance for a transnational dialogue about exported and imported cultural appropriation. I would like to argue that in an increasingly globalized world, more studies need to be conducted to examine this phenomenon. Translating Indigenous
misrepresentation from one national context to another without substantial Native research input has contributed to make the research process a real struggle where I carefully weigh every word, going out on a limb without much to stand on.

However, I remain grounded in knowing my own story. The lodestar and conscience of this project is the responsibility, respect and gratitude I feel towards the people I have met who have contributed to my academic work and personal development. When I write I think of them.

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