'Does Indians Have Feelings?': A Reverse Chronology of Indigenous Stereotypes

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Abstract: Over 50 years have now passed since the publication of George Manuel and Michael Posluns' groundbreaking text *The Fourth World: An Indian Reality* (1974) and the political and philosophical ideas presented prove to be just as important as ever. In the introduction, Manuel recounts the story of a settler co-worker asking him the question "Does Indians have feelings?" This question ties directly into the many myths perpetuated about Indigenous peoples, and reveals the denial of humanity that many Indigenous people experience. This article will trace philosophical ideas of the soul in a reverse chronology beginning with contemporary stereotypes and finding connections with seventeenth century ideas about Indigenous people, the soul, and animals.

Keywords: Indigenous, feelings, soul, 1492, George Manuel.

Introduction

In George Manuel and Micheal Poslun's groundbreaking text *The Fourth World: An Indian Reality* (1974), they discuss the justifications used by colonizers to excuse land theft and genocide. They write: "A cornerstone of the mythical structure that has stood in the way of the Indian reality has been a belief that an Indian way of life meant something barbaric and savage, frozen in time and incapable of meeting the test of changing social conditions brought about by new technology."[1] Manuel reflects on how this myth has changed very little over the course of his own lifetime (1921-1989), and demonstrates this by recounting the story of his coworker asking him "does Indians have feelings?" After telling some more anecdotes, Manuel reflects: "Perhaps neither of these conversations would be so likely to take place today."[2] Over 50 years after that was written, I've written "wrong" in the marginalia of my copy of Manuel's book. I've been teaching this text in my introductory level philosophy class for three years now and in every class I have students who give me hope because they are shocked and surprised to hear this question which Manuel is asked by his coworker. But as an Indigenous woman I feel this question deep inside of me whenever I read this text. I am a member of the Oneida Nation of the Thames, located just outside of London, Ontario, Canada, and also of Polish and British ancestry. My family has a long history of colonial disconnection. My mother was adopted and spent most of her adult life not knowing her biological family until my sister and I were able to find and reunite her with her three brothers. Within our family, my mother's generation has been heavily impacted by these kinds of stories, and her grandmother was also a survivor of the Mount Elgin Residential School. When I'm in spaces with settlers, because I'm white passing, I often hear comments and stories that echo the very question which was asked of Manuel. I have been at parties where Black Lives Matter comes up in conversation and everyone agrees that racism is bad,

[1] Manuel and Posluns 1974/2019, 2.

[2] Ibid., 3-4.

except that one person who went to school with Indigenous people and thinks we are the exception. I have been at the doctor's office and when the assistant heard that the topic of my doctoral dissertation was Indigenous women's writing she commented: "those people are hard to read." It took me a moment to realize she didn't think reading stories about Indigenous disconnection or stories of residential schools is hard, but rather that Indigenous people don't show any emotions. These experiences inspired me to write this article and are the first step in the reverse chronology which traces stereotypes about Indigenous people from the present day back through history.

I will connect the question posed to Manuel, "does Indians have feelings?", which sits at the heart of the myth of Indigenous peoples as savages, to Western conceptions of the soul, and, importantly, beliefs about who has a soul. First, I will expand upon the myth that Indigenous people are savages by showing how pervasive this idea is and the significance of its role in the colonization of North America. The experiences of people such as Manuel, as well as Lee Maracle, whom I discuss below, show how the underlying myths about Indigenous peoples have also permeated the lives of colonized people. I will trace the philosophical framework within which these ideas emerge in a reverse chronology from the present-day instantiations of the myth of the unfeeling Indian back to Western beliefs about the soul. Following the work of Sylvia Wynter, I establish how the ideas about Indigenous peoples that emerged following 1492 and the colonization of the Americas create a dehumanized image of Indigenous people within the European imagination. During this period, a philosophical framework for these types of ideas can be understood to emerge from Enlightenment ideas about the soul through philosophers such as Descartes, who believed that the Rational Soul was what differentiated humans from animals. Finally, these Enlightenment ideas coupled together with concepts inherited from classical philosophy and thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle show how the notion of feeling is interconnected with rationality, and how the dehumanization of Indigenous peoples has denied them both the right to rational thought and feeling.

Does Indians Have Feelings?

Manuel relates the anecdote about being asked the question "does Indians have feelings?" by his coworker in the introduction to *The Fourth World*. This serves as both the title of the introduction and a pivotal question for introducing the concept of "fourth world" politics, which can be understood as both a process of decolonization which centers revitalizing Indigenous ways of being, while also hinging on the right to self-determination due to the unique geographic situation that fourth world nations find themselves in, in that they are landlocked within other independent states. Manuel then connects this question to the myths that were invented and spread by colonizers. Manuel recounts the conversation with his coworker and reveals much more about this myth than appears at face value. He recalls:

> Another worker with whom I often sat at coffee breaks said to me as he sat down, "can I ask you a question that's been on my mind for some time?"
>
> "Sure," I said.
>
> "Does Indians have feelings?" he asked.
>
> "Yes, Indians have feelings," I told him.

> "You know, my wife and I often talked about this, and since you're my friend I felt you wouldn't be offended if I asked you. We actually feel Indians is no different from dogs, no feelings at all for kinship."[3]

This interaction reveals both the myth that Indigenous people do not have feelings, and also the hierarchy which has been established in colonial countries with settlers on top and Indigenous people at the bottom, perceived to be on the same level as animals. This idea is reiterated by Sto:lo scholar Lee Maracle in *I am Woman* (1996) when she explains, "The denial of Native womanhood is the reduction of the whole people to a sub-human level. Animals beget animals. The dictates of patriarchy demand that beneath the Native male comes the Native female. The dictates of racism are that Native men are beneath white women and Native females are not fit to be referred to as women."[4] Although her work frames this racial hierarchy in terms of the feminist issues facing Indigenous women, she nonetheless discusses the same systems of colonialism in Canada, and the same underlying philosophical views which influence the beliefs of settlers. Maracle continues to explain the experience of Indigenous women under colonialism in Canada:

> Whereas Native men have been victims of the age-old racist remark "lazy drunken Indians," about Native women white folks ask, "Do they have feelings?" How many times do you hear from our own brothers, "Indian women don't whine and cry around, nag or complain." At least not "real" or "true" Indian women. Embodied in that kind of language is the negation of our femininity—the denial of our womanhood.[5]

Here, Maracle connects the dehumanization of Indigenous peoples directly to the abuse of Indigenous women and the internalization, by some members of our communities, of these colonial myths. Many Indigenous writers have discussed the connection between people and land, but Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson puts it best when she writes:

> [F]eminist scholars have argued that Native women's bodies were to the settler eye, like land, and as such in the settler mind, the Native woman is rendered "unrapeable" (or, "highly rapeable") because she was like land, matter to be extracted from, used, sullied, taken from, over and over again, something that is already violated and violatable in a great march to accumulate surplus, to so called production.[6]

When Indigenous peoples are located on the side of nature, and thus land, we become a commodity to be extracted in much the same way Columbus sought gold, or settler colonial governments seek oil and minerals. As Anishinaabe scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson writes:

> A great deal of the colonizers' energy has gone into breaking the intimate connection of Nishnaabeg bodies (and minds and spirits) to each other and to the practices and associated knowledges that connect us to land, because this is the base of our power. This means land and bodies are commodified as capital under settler colonialism and are naturalized as objects for exploitation. This has always been extremely clear to Indigenous women and

[3] Manuel and Posluns 1974/2019, 3.

[4] Maracle 1996, 17-18.

[5] Ibid., 17.

[6] Simpson 2014, 7.

> 2SQ people, and it's why sexual and gender violence has to be theorized and analyzed as vital, not supplemental, to discussions of colonial dispossession.[7]

Both Leanne Simpson and Audra Simpson theorize the ways in which colonization has used Indigenous peoples' connection to the land in order to assimilate Indigenous people with nature and thus able to be dispossessed of land. As I show below, the development of these colonial myths dates back to the fifteenth century and the beginning of colonial contact with Europeans, as seen in the writings about African and Indigenous peoples from writers such as the Italian explorer Amerigo Vespucci.

Manuel also explains these myths as being part of "a theory that would justify the theft of land." He writes: "The result of the collected work of these many minds was a series of racial and cultural myths: that we were savage and uncivilized; that we were unworthy of respect; that our lives are not European lives, and our property is not to be valued in the same way that Europeans value property until it is firmly held in European hands."[8] These types of beliefs date back to the very beginning of colonization and can be seen in the legal decisions and laws upon which both Canada and the United States are built. In the 1810 legal decision by Chief Justice Marshall of the United States Supreme Court, he outlines what Manuel describes as "the ultimate expression of the theory of our inherent savagery and racial inferiority," stating that "the tribes of Indians inhabiting this country were fierce savages, whose occupation was war, and whose subsistence was drawn chiefly from the forest. To leave them in possession of their country was to leave the country in a wilderness; to govern them as a distinct people, was impossible, because they were as brave and as high spirited as they were fierce, and were ready to repel by arms every attempt on their independence."[9] This 1810 statement is a reiteration of the 1776 Declaration of Independence which infamously states that "[the King] has excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions."

These statements by American figures such as Thomas Jefferson and Justice Marshall are echoed by sentiments from Canadian politicians and law makers, who likewise associated Indigenous peoples with the natural world, and especially land to be managed and exploited. Manuel provides the example of the case of R. v. Bob and White (1965) in which Mr. Justice Norris, although finding in favour of Indigenous hunting rights on Vancouver Island, quotes Marshall in his decision. While the ruling was beneficial to Indigenous peoples, it is made within the context of Section 87 of the Indian Act, which "stated that treaties were paramount to provincial laws of general application."[10] Following Marshall's 1810 decision, Manuel explains that the policy at this time was to give rights such as property rights with the goal "to secure the 'confidence [of the conquered peoples] in their security' under the new regime."[11] The denial of property rights or ownership to Indigenous people is an exception to what Marshall describes as a general rule for humanity. As outlined in this particular case, the 1854 agreement between James Douglas, the Hudson's Bay chief actor, and the Nanaimo Nation, stated that the land "becomes the entire property of the white

[7] Simpson 2017, 41.

[8] Manuel and Posluns 1974/2019, 56.

[9] Ibid., 57.

[10] Borrows 2017, 118.

[11] Manuel and Posluns 1974/2019, 56.

people forever" and only allowed for hunting and fishing on unoccupied lands.[12] This policy of denying ownership rights and control of land to Indigenous peoples is one example of the Canadian government's denial of equal rights to Indigenous peoples. This lack of rights is described by Manuel as an exception to the rules which normally apply to the conquered, outlined by Marshall as follows: "the conquered shall not be wantonly oppressed, and that their condition shall remain as eligible...Most usually, they are incorporated with the victorious nations, and become subjects or citizens of the government with which they are connected...and a wise policy requires that the rights of the conquered to property should remain unimpaired." However, under settler colonialism in North America it became the policy to disregard this rule because Indigenous peoples are an "exception to this general consideration of humanity because we are 'fierce savages, whose occupation was war.'"[13]

This exclusion from the human race is consistently established throughout both United States and Canadian law. In the Declaration of Independence it is declared that "all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." However, we can understand this equality and the rights that go with it to exclude Indigenous peoples, since they are later singled out as "merciless Indian savages."[14] In Canada, laws to control Indigenous peoples began to be passed by John A. MacDonald's government in 1868, just one year after Canadian confederation. These laws would eventually come to be known as the Indian Act, with the first of the laws under that name narrowing the definition of who was an Indian. The Act would come to define "a person as 'any individual other than an Indian.'"[15] At the same time, however, under "An Act respecting the civilization and enfranchisement of certain Indians" and "An Act for the gradual enfranchisement of certain Indians" (1869), there existed a pathway for Indigenous peoples to "become civilized and enfranchised by ceasing to be an Indian" and thus become a person in the eyes of the settler state. This was politically advantageous for Canada because enfranchisement meant the political assimilation of Indigenous people into the Canadian body politic. These types of policies remained in place until the Citizenship Act of 1956, which granted citizenship to Status Indians without having to go through the process of enfranchisement and losing legal status as an Indian.[16]

1492

The contradiction in the dehumanization of Indigenous peoples has always been present within the system of colonization. That the process of dehumanization hinges on the concept of conversion or assimilation is outlined by Pope Alexander VI in the *Inter Caetera* (1493), which appeared the year after Columbus' voyage in 1492. This papal declaration begins with the statement that Christianity (particularly Catholicism) must be spread, and that Christian souls should be cared for while "barbarous nations" must be overthrown and assimilated. This proclamation created a divide between Christian and non-Christian nations while simultaneously offering a potential path of inclusion within a Western concept of humanity. When Sylvia Wynter analysed the philosophical underpinnings upholding Columbus' 1492 voyage, she demonstrated that Columbus was following the model established by the

[12] Borrows 2017, 118.

[13] Manuel and Posluns 1974/2019, 57.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid., 22.

[16] Ibid., 21.

Portuguese slave trade in 1441, by which Christian Europeans were granted the right to engage in colonial actions precisely by the Pope's authority. For Columbus, Wynter writes, the motivation behind colonizing the Indies was threefold: to expand the power of Spain as a state, to repay his Spanish financiers, and "to help accelerate the spread of Christianity all over the world, in time for the Second Coming of Christ, which he fervently believed to be imminent." In order to repay his financial backers, Columbus extorted gold from Indigenous people and made "some into cabezas de indios y indias (heads of Indian men and women), who could be sold as slaves."[17] Thus, while Columbus was a fervent believer in the apocalyptic millenarian movement, which worked for the good of all souls on earth–those souls did not include non-Christians. Wynter writes that "all non-Christian peoples and cultures became perceivable only in terms of their usefulness to the European states in securing their this-worldly goal of power and wealth."[18]

It is this transition point which causes the contradiction for the status of Indigenous peoples under colonization. Wynter writes elsewhere that "the medieval world's idea of order as based upon degrees of spiritual perfection/imperfection, an idea of order centered on the Church, was now to be replaced by a new one based upon degrees of rational perfection/imperfection."[19] This would come to the fore in the Valladolid debates (1550-1551) between the Dominican Friar Bartolomé de Las Casas and humanist scholar Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda where, as Wynter explains, the debate centres on the issue of whether identity emerges through "Las Casas's theocentric Christian, or that of the newly invented Man of the humanists, as the rational (or ratiocentric) political subject of the state."[20] The emphasis on rationality points to the mind-body dualism that would be popularized in the seventeenth century, which will be discussed later in this article.

This transitional point in the change from exploration as a divine mission to exploration for mercantile profit was led by men such as Columbus, whose mission challenged the Christian Church's orthodoxy of the earth's geography.[21] Although Wynter frames Columbus as a rebel in this sense of the geography of the known world, the concept of "discovery" now held a place both within the Catholic Church and also the "statal order," which came with rewards that included specific privileges given to individuals who could prove they were the first to exploit land in non-Christian territory. The Church would legitimize exploration for mercantile profit through papal bulls like the *Inter Caetera*, and granted the authority to "divide up the territories of the non-Christian parts of the globe, according to *which* the Christian state had first *arrived* at a part of the world hitherto unknown to Europeans and therefore 'discovered' it."[22] This notion of "discovery" is supported by the concept of *Terra Nullius*, or nobody's land, and, as Sai Englert outlines in *Settler Colonialism* (2022), it is "a key justifying narrative for settler expansion around the globe. The claim of non-existing occupancy before 'discovery' was a central aspect when claiming ownership over land and removing the Indigenous people who inhabited it."[23] This concept therefore implies that Indigenous peoples around the world are nobody, and have been treated as such.

[17] Wynter 1995, 16.

[18] Ibid., 17.

[19] Wynter 2003, 287.

[20] Ibid., 288.

[21] Wynter 1995, 20.

[22] Ibid., 24.

[23] Englert 2022, 63.

Of course, the apocalyptic millenarian beliefs that drove Columbus' mission create a contradiction which still exists in theory today. Wynter explains that with "the imminent Second Coming of Christ, and therefore of *all* the peoples of the world having to be converted to the Christian faith, Columbus put forward the hypothesis of an earth that had been intended for 'life and the creation of souls.'"[24] Therefore, Indigenous peoples were at once nobody, not people, not able to hold land, but also potential converts to Christianity. The conversion of Indigenous peoples has remained important to settler colonialism since 1492, whether as the mission of Jesuit missionaries or as a means of assimilation through church-run residential schools. In Canada, Indigenous people have been dehumanized to the point that the federal-provincial reserve commission in British Columbia claimed to own the land, and that the federal government "owned the Indians."[25] The idea that a group of people can be owned because of the land they live on follows the long existing logic of placing Indigenous peoples on the side of nature. Although First Nations peoples in Canada were not considered persons under the Indian Act, and did not receive Canadian citizenship without simultaneously losing their Indian Status until 1956, there is a long history of assimilationist policies within Canada. These take the attitude that Indigenous people are a problem to be dealt with, and the solution is to politically and culturally assimilate them in order to gain unfettered access to the land.

As with the conversion of souls to the Catholic Church following Columbus' "discovery" of the New World, Canadian assimilation involved the Christian churches, which helped to run the residential school system in Canada. The efforts to force enfranchisement upon Indigenous people are described by Mary-Ellen Kelm and Keith D. Smith in *Talking Back to the Indian Act* (2018), who discuss Canada's introduction of several amendments to the Indian Act prior to 1920 which were designed to restrict conditions in which Indigenous nations could resist assimilation.[26] These efforts removed the need to gain consent from both individuals and communities to enfranchise Indigenous peoples. It is also important to note that the 1920 amendment also includes the new provision for mandatory attendance at residential schools, in order to "further expedite assimilation."[27] The othering and exclusion of Indigenous peoples under colonization and the efforts to assimilate both contribute to the furthering of settler colonialism because both result in the acquisition of land, be it through expropriating land and confining Indigenous peoples on reserves or through cultural genocide and the political assimilation of Indigenous peoples.

Colonization and the Enlightenment

In the century following 1492, texts and images of Indigenous peoples spread throughout Europe. As Sylvia Wynter has shown, these European representations of "a new image of the earth" relied upon a revival of Greek and Roman systems of knowledge which had previously been stigmatized as pagan learning.[28] Amerigo Vespucci published his ethnography of the New World (*Mundus Novus*) in 1504, which was based on his experiences of the voyages that took place in 1499-1500 and 1501-02. In Janice Acoose-Miswonigeesikokwe's book *Iskwewak Kah'Ki Ya Ni Wahkomakanak: Neither Indian Princesses nor Easy Squaws* (2016), she locates the

[24] Wynter 1995, 25.

[25] Manuel and Posluns 1974/2019, 30.

[26] Kelm and Smith 2018, 119.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Wynter 1995, 17.

origin of the sexist and racist stereotypes Indigenous women face within Vespucci's work, where he "wrote that when Indigenous women 'had the opportunity of copulating with Christians, urged by excessive lust, they defiled and prostituted themselves.'"[29] Vespucci's letters also include ethnographic descriptions of the Indigenous peoples he encountered, which likewise influenced the way Europeans understood and thought about Indigenous peoples. In the "Letter of Amerigo Vespucci to a 'Magnificent Lord'" he writes: "Their mode of life is very barbarous, for they have no regular time for their meals, but they eat at any time that they have the wish, as often as night as in the day—indeed, they eat at all hours."[30] He continues to describe the Indigenous peoples that he encountered on these voyages, stating: "They have none of the riches which are looked upon as such in our Europe and in other parts, such as gold, pearls, or precious stones: and even if they have them in their country, they do not work to get them."[31] This statement shows the underlying judgment against Indigenous peoples for failing to exploit the natural resources of their land to its full monetary potential, and it is this attitude which is at the root of Manuel's statement earlier in this article that "our property is not to be valued in the same way that Europeans value property until it is firmly held in European hands."[32]

Vespucci continues his descriptions of their manners and customs, writing that "[t]hey do not practise matrimony among them, each man taking as many women as he likes, and when he is tired of a woman he repudiates her without either injury to himself or shame to the woman, for in this matter the woman has the same liberty as the man."[33] Throughout his descriptions Vespucci makes several moral judgements, describing how women who are angry at their husbands will often abort their children "with certain poisonous herbs or roots, and destroy the child" and he claims "many infants perish in this way." He continues by comparing the laws and religion of Indigenous peoples to those he is already familiar with: "We did not find that these people had any laws; they cannot be called Moors nor Jews, but worse than Gentiles. For we did not see that they offered any sacrifices, nor have they any place of worship. I judge their lives to be Epicurean."[34] Similar depictions were used to justify the enslavement of Indigenous peoples from Africa. An example of this comes from the writings of Gomes Eanes de Zurara in 1444. He wrote that in Africa "[t]hey live like beasts, without any custom of civilized beings...They were without covering of clothes, or the lodgment of houses; and worst of all, they had no understanding of good, but only knew how to live in bestial sloth."[35]

[29] Acoose-Miswonigeesikokwe 2016, 33.

[30] Vespucci, translated by Markham 2012, 7-8.

[31] Ibid., 9-10.

[32] Manuel and Posluns 1974/2019, 56.

[33] Vespucci, translated by Markham 2012, 7-8.

[34] Ibid., 8-9.

[35] Sartwell 2019.

Fig. 1: "Allegory of America," Jan van der Straet (Stradanus), c. 1587-89.
Metropolitan Museum, New York. Public Domain.
https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/343845; link accessed Jan. 15, 2026.

These moralistic ethnographic descriptions of Indigenous people spread throughout Europe following 1492, and inspired artwork and images based on descriptions from writers such as Vespucci. One such image, "Allegory of America" (1587-89) by Jan van der Straet, who was otherwise known as Stradanus, depicts Vespucci naming the allegorical woman in the image "America," the feminized version of his name. She is described as "[wearing] only a feathered headdress and skirt, her club abandoned against the tree at the right, where an anteater is shown feasting. Set behind her in the rolling landscape is a horse and a bear and a scene of cannibalism."[36] This is one of several allegorical images of America, and the other continents, that were produced during the early modern period, and which depict America as a woman. In Maria Lugones' analysis of this image, she emphasizes how this encounter between Vespucci and America is heavily eroticized and depicts the underlying ideas for a gendered hierarchy centred on sexual purity. Lugones turns to the analysis of this image by Anne McClintock, who writes, "the indigenous woman extends an inviting hand, insinuating sex and submission....Vespucci, the godlike arrival, is destined to inseminate her with his male seeds of civilization, fructify the wilderness and quell the riotous scenes of cannibalism in the background."[37] The combination of cannibalism and eroticized sexuality conveys to the late sixteenth-century European viewer the animalistic nature of Indigenous peoples, especially in comparison to Europeans. This is also the type of image Crispin Sartwell refers

[36] This text description accompanies the Met Museum's image online: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/343845; link accessed Jan. 15, 2026.

[37] Lugones 2007, 205.

to in his article "Western Philosophy as White Supremacism" when he describes how, during the Enlightenment period, "Sub-Saharan African peoples, as well as the indigenous peoples of the Americas, were pictured relentlessly, even in the Enlightenment philosophical texts themselves, as sheer bodies, while the European thinkers were, in their own view, minds." Sartwell continues his discussion by saying that "Indigenous peoples were understood to still be part of nature (and were devalued in that identification), whereas Europe had supposedly emerged from nature into culture."[38]

The juxtaposition that is happening here identifies Indigenous peoples as non-thinking bodies who are found in an undeveloped nature, while Europeans possess the ability to think and are separated from nature by their culture. These ideas were coming to the forefront of European thought following the events of 1492 and emerged in public discourse through academic debate in Spain where professors, such as Melchor Cano and Domingo de Soto, left their positions in the university to become councilors and diplomats and to participate in debate between what had become the three branches of learning relating to moral problems: theology, civil, law, and canon law.[39] In 1548, Sepúlveda produced *Democrates secundus sive de justis causis belli apud Indos*, described by Anthony Pagden as "the most virulent and uncompromising argument for the inferiority of the American Indian ever written."[40] This text was rejected by the universities of Alcalá and Salamanca and condemned by them. When Sepúlveda responded to critiques, he defended himself by stating that his argument derived from the first book of Aristotle's *Politics*, in which the ancient philosopher had laid out his theory of natural slavery.[41] Sepúlveda's text incited Las Casas, who attempted to show that "preconquest Indian communities fulfilled all of Aristotle's requirements for a true civil society"[42] during the Valladolid debates of 1550-51. According to Wynter, this debate is a clash between the two different conceptions of humanity: "one for which the expansion of the Spanish state was envisaged as a function of the Christian evangelizing mission, the Other for which the latter mission was seen as a function of the imperial expansion of the state; a dispute, then, between the theocentric conception of the human, Christian, and the new humanist and ratiocentric conception of the human, Man."[43] The idea that Indigenous peoples could be natural slaves was what Pagden describes as a "solution to a political dilemma: by what right had the crown of Castile occupied and enslaved the inhabitants of territories to which it could make no prior claims based on history?"[44] This line of thinking established through public discourse and debate continued throughout the Enlightenment and helped to create a framework which allows for the dehumanization of Indigenous peoples. This framework and these ideas about Indigenous peoples, which have emerged in stereotypes such as the savage or the squaw, are still present in Western culture today and remain the underlying principles upon which settler colonialism is based both philosophically and legally.[45]

[38] Sartwell 2019.

[39] Pagden 1982, 27.

[40] Ibid., 109.

[41] Ibid., 111.

[42] Ibid., 121.

[43] Wynter 2003, 287.

[44] Pagden 1982, 27.

[45] The legal ramifications of settler colonialism can be found in the Declaration of Independence, the Marshall Decision, and the Indian Act.

Sartwell concludes that "white supremacy lurks at the heart of Western metaphysics. This structure is formulated with crystal clarity by Descartes, who separates mind and body as two fundamentally different sorts of things and arranges them in a hierarchy of value." Nevertheless, he makes clear that he does not believe that Descartes and other philosophers such as Kant, Fischer, and Korsgaard were white supremacists but rather that the "metaphysics and ethics they endorse grew up in connection with white supremacism and helped shape it."[46] Descartes' own education benefitted from Europe's return to a Greco-Roman system of knowledge and his metaphysics is shaped by thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle. Sartwell establishes this connection when he quotes Descartes' statement that "reason alone makes us men and distinguishes us from the beasts," pointing out that Descartes here echoes Plato and Pythagoras. Descartes continues: "on this point to adopt the common opinion of philosophers, who say that the difference of greater and less hold only among the *accidents*, and not among the *forms or natures of individuals* of the same *species*."[47] Thus, Descartes only differentiates the level or ability of one's reason based on the accidents of one's life, such as level of formal education, but explicitly states that those of the same species are more or less the same. In the accounts of Indigenous peoples in Africa and the Americas, the dialogue at the time distinguishes them as beasts and describes them as barbarous, therefore differentiating Indigenous peoples as not part of the same species as Europeans. In turning to beasts, Descartes says of animals: "the animals void of Reason may be said wholly to resemble us; but among which I could not discover any of those that, as dependent on thought alone, belong to us as men, while, on the other hand, I did afterwards discover these as soon as I supposed God to have created a Rational Soul, and to have annexed it to this body in a particular manner which I described."[48] Thus, he acknowledges that animals may have a resemblance to humans, but man is alone in possessing a Rational Soul. The divide which is established between the animals which appear to be human and Man as a rational being is part of the Western framework which dehumanizes Indigenous people and, at the same time, justifies colonial actions.

In order to differentiate between "men and brutes," Descartes conceived of two tests. The first "is that they [i.e., brutes] could never use words or other signs arranged in such a manner as is competent to us in order to declare our thoughts to others." The second is "that although such machines might execute many things with equal or perhaps greater perfection than any of us, they would, without doubt, fail in certain others from which it could be discovered that they did not act from knowledge, but solely from the disposition of their organs."[49] Descartes believed that any human could pass these two tests, and that an animal would fail. Interestingly, one of the earliest criteria in the Indian Act for enfranchisement, and thus assimilation, was for Indians who were admitted to universities. The Indian Act of 1876 states:

> Any Indian who may be admitted to the degree of Doctor of Medicine, or to any other degree by any University of Learning, or who may be admitted in any Province of the Dominion to practice law either as an Advocate or as a Barrister or Counsellor or Solicitor or Attorney or to be a Notary Public, or who may enter Holy Orders or who may be licensed by any denomination of

[46] Sartwell 2019.

[47] Descartes 1637/1850, 44.

[48] Ibid., 88.

[49] Descartes 1637/1850, 97-98.

> Christians as a Minister of the Gospel, shall *ipso facto* become and be enfranchised under this Act.[50]

This caveat for becoming a citizen of Canada and earning the right to vote appears to be contingent on the ability to pass the tests which Descartes has laid out for reason. Those unable to meet this qualification in 1876 would remain an Indian under the Act, and thus a 'brute' in the eyes of the West.

Cartesian thought in relation to animals developed into the idea that animals are non-thinking automata who lack the ability to both think and feel. Complicating matters is the story of Descartes kicking his own dog and claiming that it could not feel. This story has been challenged by many philosophers, who instead attribute it to one of Descartes' followers, Nicolas Malebranche. According to Francis Lecompte's article "Animals: from mechanical objects to sentient subjects," Malebranche compared the "cries of the animal to the sounds made by a bell being struck [and] his excuse was that he was simply applying the ideas of his mentor René Descartes." [51] Although who is responsible for the notion of animals as mechanical automata is still being debated, the notion of "the Cartesian model of an animal that does nothing more than respond mechanically to stimuli remained alive and kicking right up to the dawn of the twentieth century."[52] Lecompte explains that the popular understanding of animals as automata began to change around this time when scientists began to study behavior in animals.

The Greco-Roman Return

Descartes' formulation of the soul was influenced by philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle. In Plato's Socratic dialogue in Book Four of *The Republic*, Socrates poses questions about the nature of the soul: "Do we do each of these things with the same part of ourselves? Or, since there are three elements, do we do different things with different elements? Is there one element in us for learning, another for feeling spirited, and yet a third for our desire for the pleasures of food, sex, and things like that? Or do we do each of these things, when we embark upon them, with our entire soul?"[53] After much debate with Glaucon, Socrates declares, "'It will be a reasonable inference, then...that they are two completely different things. The part of the soul with which we think rationally we can call the rational element. The part with which we feel sexual desire, hunger, thirst, and the turmoil of the other desires can be called the irrational and desiring element, the companion of indulgence and pleasure."[54]

Plato continues the dialogue with an analogy comparing the soul to the city: "is the soul like the city? The city was held together by three classes, commercial, auxiliary and decision making. Does the soul also contain this third, spirited, element, which is auxiliary to the rational element by nature, provided it is not corrupted by a poor upbringing?"[55] After convincing Glaucon of the tripartite nature of the soul, Socrates also acknowledges that some human children do not develop rationality as they mature, thus implying that not all humans have the rational part of the soul. In addition, through Socrates, Plato states that

[50] Kelm and Smith 2018, 96.

[51] Lecompte 2023.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Plato, *The Republic*, translated by Griffith 2000, 436b.

[54] Ibid., 439d.

[55] Ibid., 441a.

"Even in animals you can see that what you are talking about applies," using the example from Homer's *Odyssey*, "He smote his chest, and thus rebuked his heart."[56] This passage compares the spirit to a dog; however, this example only uses two elements of the soul, implying that animals lack something which humans may possess.

Although Aristotle conceptualizes the soul differently than Plato, there are still some important similarities between their theories. Abraham Bos explains that "Aristotle divides the realm of (sublunary) living creatures into three subrealms, plants, animals, and human beings. To each subrealm he assigns a different soul-principle. Plants have a vegetative or nutritive soul; animals have a sensitive soul; and human beings have a rational soul."[57] Aristotle categorizes the soul into three types and only assigns the designation of having a rational soul to humans. However, the main difference between Aristotle and Plato's theories on the soul emerges with the body/soul divide. Unlike Plato, Aristotle does not follow the same soul/body distinction but instead, as is summarized by Thomas Olshewsky: "'Soul is an actuality or formulable essence of something that possesses a potentiality of being besouled' ([*On the Soul*] 414a27). In the course of coming to this conclusion he treats soul as an instance of form and of actuality, and in parallel fashion he treats body as an instance of matter and of potentiality."[58] In comparison, for Plato "the soul is conceived as substantial, personal and separable. As substantial, it is a stuff or entity distinguishable from the body; as personal, it has individual characteristics that distinguish it from the souls of others; as separable, it is not dependent upon the body for its existence."[59] While Aristotle discerns three separate types of soul for plants, animals, and humans, for Plato, who focused on the human soul, the soul exists as a tripartite soul with the third element, rationality, being limited to human beings. Both see humans as the only beings capable of rational thought, however, and this is what distinguishes humans from other non-human animals. While both serve as influences on Descartes' work, as Sartwell points out, the *Cogito* is more closely related to Plato's conception of the soul.

As mentioned earlier in this article, Aristotle's *Politics*, and debates involving arguments about natural slavery, had already proven important in the discourse surrounding the humanity of Indigenous peoples. Aristotelian thought had already permeated European universities prior to colonization, with "the universities and colleges of Muslim Spain...already infused with the thought of Aristotle from the 12th century onwards"[60] and professors from the University of Paris, who "would go on to be the first philosophers in New Spain, had already absorbed Aristotle from Latin as well as Eastern sources." The interpretations of Aristotle by Averröes (1126-1198) outline how "some individuals have an abundance of rationality by nature and are capable of attaining the ultimate truths of science and faith. In contrast, common folk are better off being obedient to the wise" which would, according to the work of Virgina Aspe Armella, have an influence on the formation of "a colonial order of castes" justified by Aristotle and Averröes' theories on the soul and natural slavery.[61]

[56] Plato, *The Republic*, translated by Griffith 2000, 441b (quoting *Odyssey* 20.17).

[57] Bos 2010, 821-822.

[58] Olshewsky 1976, 397.

[59] Ibid., 392.

[60] Aspe Armella 2025, 49.

[61] Ibid., 49-50.

In Aristotle's discussion of slavery in Book I of *Politics*, he states that "among barbarians no distinction is made between women and slaves, because there is no natural ruler among them: they are a community of slaves, male and female. That is why the poets say, 'It is meet that Hellenes should rule over barbarians;' as if they thought that the barbarian and the slave were by nature one."[62] Aristotle goes on to explain that "in the arrangement of the family, a slave is a living possession"[63] and later, "The master is only the master of the slave; he does not belong to him, whereas the slave is not only the slave of his master, but wholly belongs to him."[64]

The infamous description of the slave as a living possession is discussed by Emily Greenwood, who focuses in particular on the translation offered by C.D.C. Reeve: "the slave is a sort of animate piece of property." She points out that, in contrast, the Jowett translation leaves out the important detail "a sort of," which she explains "connotes vagueness and indicates the oddity of what Aristotle is claiming: how can a person be a thing or an object (*ktēma*), and how can a piece of property be animate/possess a soul (*empyschon*)?" [65] Greenwood contends that behind this metaphoric description of the slave is "a legal definition that itself relies on a metaphor in which the law's addressees are encouraged to think of one thing (a person) as something else (an item of property)" and explains how this connects to "tensions and intellectual evasions inherent in the institution of chattel slavery."[66] While Greenwood is clear that Aristotle's use of the term "barbarians" does not map directly onto modern slavery, she explains that "Aristotle's ready use of chauvinistic binary contrasts between Greeks and Barbarians shares kinship with the use of binary polarization in modern racial theories."[67] This makes Aristotle's work easy justification for the enslavement of Indigenous peoples following 1492, and the establishment of chattel slavery and the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Greenwood compares the metaphorical language of Aristotle to the method Hortense Spillers deploys to analyze the language of race laws in the American South to reveal the way they dehumanize those who are enslaved. She draws on the example Spillers examines from an 1806 Louisiana statue which states: "Slaves shall always be reputed and considered real estate; shall, as such, be subject to be mortgaged, according to the rules prescribed by law, and they shall be seized and sold as real estate." Spillers points out the words 'reputed' and 'considered' here are predicate adjectives which "denote a contrivance, not an intransitive 'is'." Greenwood explains that this language is used to "normalize non-obvious relations and to camouflage exclusive categories of the human."[68] While language may be used to debate and define the Other who is a slave, it is always experienced in the bodily for Black and Indigenous peoples. This is how settler colonialism has designed it to be experienced because, following Aristotle, "slaves have the bodies of freemen and freemen the souls only."[69] Thus, the subjection of those considered to be lacking rationality and, in turn, humanity, is normalized through Western thought.

[62] Aristotle, *Politics*, translated by Barnes 2016, 1252b5 (quoting Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis* 1400).

[63] Ibid., 1253b32.

[64] Ibid., 1254a11.

[65] Greenwood 2022, 343.

[66] Ibid., 345.

[67] Ibid., 350.

[68] Greenwood 2022, 337.

[69] Ibid., 342.

Conclusion

"Does Indians have feelings?"[70] is a question which is entangled with Western philosophy all the way back to Plato and Aristotle and their conceptualizations of the soul. Only humans have a rational component to the soul, but within this framing, the idea of feeling is not relegated only to humans. In the debate between Socrates and Glaucon, Socrates explains: "The part with which we feel sexual desire, hunger, thirst, and the turmoil of the other desires can be called the irrational and desiring element, the companion of indulgence and pleasure."[71] Thus, we can understand the oversexualization of Indigenous women as being related to the dehumanization of Indigenous peoples overall, but also an expression of this Platonic overindulgence in pleasure. At the same time, however, within the colonial construct of Indigenous people, human emotions and feeling are not afforded to Indigenous peoples. Although Vespucci references hundreds of thousands of souls that he encounters during his voyages to the New World, Indigenous people soon became subject to systemic dehumanization through the writing of people such as Vespucci, along with artists who were inspired by his work. The images and texts showing and describing Indigenous peoples from Africa and the Americas proliferated in the centuries following 1492 and, as Sartwell emphasizes, metaphysics developed alongside white supremacy and helped to shape it. It is during this time period that animals begin to be thought of in terms of non-feeling automata, and due to the racist depictions of Indigenous peoples, they too get classified in this way. The hierarchy of body and mind established during the Enlightenment is reflected in the racial, class, and gender-based hierarchies that Indigenous scholars have been challenging for decades, and which place Indigenous women at the bottom, at the same level as animals.

The situating of Indigenous peoples on the side of nature and as sub-human has permeated every facet of Western society and can be found in philosophy and literature, but is also present in healthcare disparities and discrimination, environmental racism, education inequalities, racial disparities in the criminal justice system, and housing inequities. These injustices are part of the system of settler colonialism the West has built and are justified using the same types of excuses and myths that Manuel dealt with over 50 years ago, which are carried on through stereotypes of Indigenous peoples as "dirty, squaw, bad mothers, lazy, promiscuous, irresponsible, addicts, criminals, prostitutes, easy, bad with money, bad wives, dumb, stupid, hysterical, angry, wild in bed, useless, drunks, worthless, without feeling, violent, weak, partiers, [and] alcoholics."[72] Even as an Indigenous scholar, these stereotypes are felt by myself every day and present themselves in a variety of ways, from the anecdotes discussed in the introduction, to the epidemic of sexual and physical violence that presents itself through the epidemic of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls across North America. Indigenous scholars continue to challenge the legacy and violence of colonialism that began over 500 years ago and remind us that we have to work to rid ourselves of the many different forms of violence that continue to be committed against Indigenous peoples today.

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[70] Manuel and Posluns 1974/2019, 2.

[71] Plato, *The Republic*, translated by Griffith 2000, 439d.

[72] Simpson 2017, 84.

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