Romantic Rhetoric and Appropriation in William Apess’s A Son of the Forest

Courtney Hilden
University of New Orleans, hildenco@yahoo.co.uk

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td

Part of the Literature in English, North America, Ethnic and Cultural Minority Commons

Recommended Citation
Hilden, Courtney, "Romantic Rhetoric and Appropriation in William Apess’s A Son of the Forest" (2014). University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations. 1872.
https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/1872

This Thesis is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by ScholarWorks@UNO with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Thesis in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uno.edu.
Romantic Rhetoric and Appropriation in William Apess’s *A Son of the Forest*

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the University of New Orleans in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
In
English

Courtney Hilden
B.A. Michigan State University, 2010
M.A. University of New Orleans, 2014

August, 2014
For Christopher, the first New Englander in my life. With you, all things are possible.
Acknowledgments

No one gets through graduate school alone, despite what it might feel like.
I would like to thank my committee, Drs. John Hazlett, Peter Schock, and Anne Boyd-Rioux for their support during this process. Dr. Hazlett provided some of the early inspiration for this project. I would also like to thank Dr. Nancy Easterlin for her encouragement and discussions of all things Rhode Island, including King Philip and Roger Williams. I would also like to thank Rachael Smith, who gave me the emotional pick-me-ups I needed. Without you, Rachael, I am not certain this project would have survived. Thank you to Elizabeth Lynch for the editorial advice. And to Ashley Hemm, who had some of the best suggestions about post-colonial theory. And to my parents, David and Kathleen, who believed in me before anyone else did. And to Christopher O’Brien, who was eager to hear about this project, and always was there to lend a listening ear.
Thank you.
Table of Contents

I. Abstract .......................................................................................................................... v
II. Introduction .................................................................................................................. 1
III. How Apess Uses Romantic Ideas in His Text ............................................................. 8
IV. Why Apess Uses Romantic Ideas in His Text ............................................................. 17
V. Conclusion .................................................................................................................... 19
VI. Works Cited ............................................................................................................... 21
VII. Vita ........................................................................................................................... 23
Abstract

Since the 1992 republication of *On Our Own Ground: The Complete Writings of William Apess, a Pequot*, most academic work on Apess has focused on his Methodism, his Native American identity, or the intersection between these two parts of his life and work. Dr. Tim Fulford is the only scholar to have written about Apess and Romanticism. In his book *Romantic Indians: Native Americans, British Literature, and Transatlantic Culture, 1756-1830*, Fulford illustrates the elegiac modes often present in the work of Apess. This thesis will examine William Apess’ *Son of the Forest* as an expression of early nineteenth century American Romanticism from a post-colonial standpoint. Apess uses Romantic rhetoric to define Native American identity and through that identity, argue for Native American political agency.
Introduction

Native Americans were frequently a part of white nineteenth century fiction and rhetoric. According to Adriana Rissetto, white writers rarely depicted Native Americans realistically; instead, “the author often encoded in the American Indian caricature…racial stereotypes.” Many of these writers sentimentalized Native Americans, depicting them as “naturalistic saints” (Rissetto). James Fenimore Cooper is perhaps the most famous example. In Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans*, Native Americans are depicted as a threat to white American rugged individualism and Manifest Destiny. Lydia Maria Child’s *Hobomok* was a direct response to Cooper’s novels. Child’s novel is about the titular Native American, who is forced to navigate between unhappy white settlers and the on-going internecine wars among Native American nations. Since Hobomok is the intermediary between these groups, he never completely belongs to any of them. While white fiction did not automatically become federal policy when it came to Native Americans, fictional depictions of Native Americans often reinforced stereotypes about Native Americans. At approximately the same time as Cooper and Child, the Jackson administration was implementing its policy to remove Native Americans from the eastern portion of the United States and relocate them west of the Mississippi River in what was then called Indian Territory.

In response to the Jackson administration and white depictions of Native Americans, William Apess, a Pequot, published one of the first Native American autobiographies, *A Son of the Forest*, in 1829. He was a Methodist preacher, and most academic work on Apess has focused on his Methodism, his conflicted Native American identity, or the intersection between
these two important aspects of his life and work. Scholars like Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, Jean Miller Schmidt, and Dickson D. Bruce Jr. have noted the connections between Methodism and Romanticism, both of which arose in Europe at the end of the eighteenth century. Additionally, scholars like Mark J. Miller and Karim Tiro have studied Methodism’s relationship to Apess’s work. Although this is useful work, few scholars, with the exception of Tim Fulford, have explored the connections between Apess’s Methodism and the aesthetics and politics of Romanticism. In *Romantic Indians: Native Americans, British Literature, and Transatlantic Culture, 1756-1830*, Fulford demonstrates that Apess utilizes Romantic motifs in his work, including “archaic” language and “sublime” scenery (227). Fulford’s chapter on Apess is a general overview of Apess’s Romanticism. Fulford believes that Apess, in using Romantic imagery, “takes control…of the language that might assimilate him” (235). Moreover, Fulford writes that Apess “appropriates the colonist’s language, imaginatively creating a new radical discourse that contests colonial assumptions in the colonists’ medium” (235). I agree with Fulford that Apess’s Romanticism is tied to Apess’s other identities, including his race and religious identity, and, because of the possibly fractured nature of those identities, it allowed Apess to make sense of those identities. Apess’s autobiography, *A Son of the Forest*, exemplifies the Methodist and Romantic concerns for individual liberty, particularly for marginalized groups; adopts and employs the common Romantic trope of the Noble Savage; and embodies Romanticism’s emphasis on emotional responses to Nature.

Other Apess scholars, like O’Connell and Konkle, have noted that Apess cleverly borrows rhetorical images of Native Americans from Euro-American culture to manipulate his readers. That said, rhetorical images of Native Americans were—and still are—complicated both within Apess’s text and in the world at large. At the time, Euro-Americans held two
competing theories about Native Americans, Salvationism and Savagism. Salvationist ideology asserted that Native Americans could be saved. Christian missionaries, who adhered to this Salvationist ideology, believed Native Americans could slowly assimilate to civilized life, which included “literacy, written laws, [and] a settled, agricultural existence” (Ashwill). Savagist ideology, on the other hand, claimed that Native Americans were radically different from Whites. Savagists believed that Native Americans were dangerous and evil. Savagists viewed Native Americans as uncivilized, violent, drunk, stupid, and lazy. Savagists considered Native Americans “as ‘lower on the scale of social development’ to the point where they were ‘hopelessly unequal’” to white Americans (Ashwill). Savagists considered Native Americans “as ‘uncivilized’” and “lower on the scale of social development” to the point where they were “hopelessly unequal” (Ashwill). Apess was aware of Savagism, writing that “great objections have been raised against efforts to civilize the natives” (33). Apess embraced Salvationism and believed that the only way to civilize Native Americans was through conversion--“nothing short of the power of God” (33). Savagist ideology had constructed images of Native Americans as uncivilized. Apess redefined civilization in terms of conversion to Christianity, which he ascribes to Christians who specifically do God’s work, not necessarily everyone who identifies as such.

Additionally, Savagism, which defined white Americans as inherently superior to Native Americans, affirmed that several parts of Apess’s identity, such as his race and his religion, were so drastically different from one another that they could not be combined in a single person (Ashwill). According to Gayatri Spivak, the colonial subject is “divided and dislocated” with “parts [that] are not continuous or coherent with each other” (A Critique of Postcolonial Reason 276). Double consciousness is when a person of color sees him or herself as having two selves:
the socially-constructed version of who they are and who they believe they actually are. People of color with double consciousness are constantly forced into to address the gap between the stereotypes of their collective affiliation and who they believe him or herself to be. Apess, as a Native American, was aware of the dissonance between his self-constructed identity and the identity that white America constructed for him. On top of this double consciousness, he was a Christian, and therefore, because of Savagist ideology that argued that “Praying Indians” were not true Christians, Apess’s identity was further splintered. The discourse of the Romantic Indians, on the other hand, allowed Apess to make a cohesive whole out of his different affiliations. Romanticism allowed him to be an “authentic” Native American with ties to the land, yet also Christian and educated.

Apess chose the autobiographical form because he was required to write about his conversion to Christianity as part of the Methodist ordination process, but his goals with this story were not solely religious in nature; he was interested in a form that would serve as a political outlet to explore multiplied identities and quintessentially American and Romantic. Autobiographic writing is often Romantic. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who wrote what many literary historians consider the first subjective modern autobiography, emphasized his emotions, which would later become a central feature of Romanticism. Many Romantics wrote autobiographies or infused their work with autobiographical elements. Additionally, scholars have long contended that autobiography has resonated with Americans because its emergence as a literary form coincided with the American search for a national identity. Moreover, American autobiographers have often used the form for political ends—including the politics of identity. Autobiography allows a writer to bear witness to his or her own experience, while simultaneously making the connection between one’s personal experience and politics. Apess
wanted to use the autobiographical form to convey his personal experiences and to show how race politics contributed to those experiences. Apess turned his conversion narrative into a tool that served his identity politics.

*A Son of the Forest* tells Apess’s life story up until 1829. Apess was of mixed ancestry. His father’s father was “a white man and his mother was a native” (4). According to Apess, his mother was a “full-blooded” Pequot, though O’Connell believes that she may have been African American (xxvii). After Apess establishes his genealogy, where he claims to be a descendent of King Philip, he discusses his early life. When Apess was a child, his parents quarreled, and left him and his siblings, “two brothers and sisters,” in the care of his relatives, including an alcoholic, abusive grandmother (5). When Apess was four, his intoxicated grandmother broke his arm in three places. It was clear that Apess could no longer stay with relatives, so like many abused children at this time, Apess became an indentured servant of the Furnams, a local white family. During his time with the Furnams, Apess believed that he was white. Apess even gives readers a telling episode that illustrated white perceptions of Native Americans. While he and his adopted family were in the woods, they came across a group of white women whose “complexion was, to say the least, as dark as that of the natives” (10; italics are Apess’s).

Although the women were not belligerent, Apess ran from the woods, terrified. Apess connects this incident to his own education about race, explaining that he believed at the time that Native Americans were dangerous. Six years later, at the age of twelve, he and another little boy ran away together, only to be caught and returned to the Furnams. Afterwards, Apess began attending Methodist religious meetings, much to the chagrin of Mr. Furnam’s, who disapproved of Apess’s religious expression. Apess’s religious activities and behavior as a servant angered Mr. Furnam, who sold him to a man referred to only as “the judge” (15). The judge became
unhappy with Apess as well, and so he sold Apess to General William Williams. Himself unhappy, Apess ran away for good with another young man. They went to New York, and after a brief stay, Apess heard that Williams was looking for him, so Apess joined the army. Although initially trained as a musician, he was forced into the ranks and served briefly in the War of 1812. After the war, Apess lived with another group of Native Americans. Although Apess does not indicate which Native Americans he lives with, O’Connell believes that they were most likely a branch of the Mohawks (31 note 24). Apess eventually moved on, spending brief periods of time working as an agricultural laborer wherever he could find work. He began attending Methodist religious meetings again. In 1819, while in Colrain, Massachusetts, Apess claims that God moved upon his heart “in a peculiarly powerful manner” to begin preaching, which he did (43). Soon after, he met a young woman, Mary Wood, whom he married. Apess was a candidate for ordination in the Methodist Episcopal church, but was rejected, possibly because he was a Native American. Refusing to stop preaching, he was finally ordained as a Protestant Methodist. As was typical for Methodist preachers, he begins traveling to preach to as many people as possible, working odd jobs to provide for himself and his family. At the end of the autobiography, there is an appendix in which Apess explains that Native Americans are, in fact, one of the lost Tribes of Israel. O’Connell notes in the 1992 republication of Apess’s works, On Our Own Ground, that so much of the Appendix is lifted from another source that it was easier for O’Connell to mark the few paragraphs that do appear to be solely Apess’s.

Although Apess was pro-Native American, his specific sense of cultural heritage was muddled by the complicated relationship between hegemonic discourse and marginalized depictions of Native Americans. Noor Al-Abbood writes that when colonized subjects attempt to discover their own cultural heritage, one that exists outside of the dominant culture, they
engage the “rhetoric of ancestral purity” (128). To find this cultural heritage “the native artist turns his back on foreign culture, disavows it and sets out to look for a ‘true’ national culture” (128). Confusingly, Al-Abbood also observes that colonized individuals who write “in the colonial language” do not necessarily have “pro-colonial attitudes and sensibility” because the colonized subject might have a variety of reasons for using colonial language (123). And yet in renouncing a hegemonic culture, the colonized subject “ends up unwittingly embracing a Western influence of a different sort – Western stereotypes of the other” (128). While it is true that Apess’s uses these “Western stereotypes of the other,” he does so in a conscious manner; he is not attempting to find an authentic Native American culture. Apess’s invocation of Romanticism does cleverly manipulate white readers by emphasizing the positive stereotypes associated with Native Americans. Although it is easy to misread Apess’s use of Romantic ideas as purely mimicking the dominant discourse, and Apess himself struggles to maintain a consistent ideology in A Son of the Forest, he used the Romantic notion that Native Americans are more deeply connected to the natural world as evidence that Native Americans and their culture were equal to, if not superior to, their Euro-American equivalents.
How Apess Uses Romantic Ideas in His Text

Apess constructed Native Americans out of ideas and images available to him in the Romantic milieu of his time, but he sometimes inverted and subverted those ideas and images. While we have no evidence that he was directly influenced by Romantics or any one particular Romantic, it is possible to trace similarities between his writing and canonized Romantics. In Romanticism, solitude is considered the ideal way to spiritually interact with Nature. For example, Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey” emphasizes a natural setting as the perfect place to emotionally recuperate after the disappointment of the French Revolution. Similarly, Apess was disillusioned after an unsuccessful stint in the army that resulted in poverty and alcoholism. Despite his service, Apess had not been paid the “forty dollars bounty money and one hundred and sixty acres of land” and “fifteen months’ pay” he had been promised (30). He did not have a “shilling in [his] pocket” and became “addicted to drinking rum” (31). Wordsworth worked through his disenchantment with the French revolution in “Tintern Abbey.” Haines observes that “Tintern Abbey” developed “a philosophy of withdrawal as a cure for political disillusionment” and is a “public celebration of the private restoration of a self” (135, 37). Although Apess did not withdraw completely from politics as Wordsworth did, he believed that Native Americans had to be isolated in the wilderness to be at the peak of their strength. Apess describes an ideal, isolated Native American, who “traverses vast wilderness, exposed to the hazards of lonely sickness…lurking enemies…[and] pining famine” (66). Apess wrote that “this wanderer in the wilderness” courageously encounters everything, and therefore “[n]o hero of ancient or modern days can surpass the Indian” (66). Without anywhere to go and without steady employment,
Apess wandered through the woods. While there, Apess discovered “a large pond of water” that he found “[o]n the top of a mountaintop” and a “rock that had the appearance of being hollowed out by the hand of a skillful artificer” (32). Apess was similar to Wordsworth: they both retreated to Nature when the encountered disappointment in their lives.

Another key difference between Romanticism and Apess is that Romanticism often highlighted the loss of a former self, while Apess depicted his connection to nature as simple and without nostalgic yearning, and instead mourns what he perceives as his impending loss of nature at the hands of white Americans, again drawing a connection between Nature and politics. “Tintern Abbey” is a good example of how Romanticism focused on mourning the loss of self in a natural environment. Throughout the poem, Wordsworth mourned the loss of his “former heart” and “former pleasures” (lines 118, 119). Wordsworth focused on the contrast between his past self and his present self. Conversely, Apess did not make his time with the natural landscape exclusively about him and his emotions. Instead, Apess connected the natural landscape to race politics. First and foremost, Apess connects his misery to the federal government’s actions. After his time in the armed services, he writes that he could “never think that the government acted right towards the ‘Natives’ not merely in refusing to pay us but in claiming our services” (31; italics are Apess’s). Apess blames his misery on institutional inequality. Moreover, Apess believed that it would be better if “the whites would act like civilized people” (33). Although many white readers would consider their own communities to be civilized, Apess flips this, implying that the Native American communities in the forest civilized in a way the American government is not.

Additionally, Apess also drew from the Noble Savage trope, a specific set of ideas that were part of the Romantic milieu within which he was writing. Apess’s version of the Noble
Savage was a revision of the trope that was also used, somewhat paradoxically, in tandem with the Lost Tribe theory, in Elias Boudinot’s *A Star in the West*, a treatise about Native Americans. Boudinot was a white missionary in New England. Boudinot’s Lost Tribe theory was motivated by a Salvationist desire to educate and convert Native Americans. Yet since his Lost Tribe theory is juxtaposed with the Noble Savage trope, his book is paradoxical. The Noble Savage trope implies Native Americans are superior to Whites, but the Lost Tribe theory implies that Native Americans and Whites are equal. According to O’Connell, much of Apress’s Appendix to *A Son of the Forest* is an unacknowledged paraphrasing and rearrangement of content found in *A Star in the West* (52-53, note 1). Apress appropriates much of Boudinot’s ideology as part of what Spivak would call “strategic essentialism,” which she defines as a “*strategic* use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously political interest” (205, italics are Spivak’s). Apress essentializes Native American identity not because he is mimicking racist ideology but because he wants to appeal to his white readers and maneuver them to be more sympathetic towards Native Americans.

Apress inherited Boudinot’s synthesis of two somewhat incompatible contemporary ideas about Native Americans. The first of these ideas was that Native Americans are Noble Savages—an idea which suggests that they are inherently better than Whites, an idea which contests Savagist’s belief that Whites are superior. The second idea, or theory, was that Native Americans are members of a Lost Tribe of Israel—an idea that suggests that they are merely equal to Whites, which refutes Savagist’s belief that Native Americans and Whites were intrinsically different. Apress’s use of that synthesis would also appear to be contradictory, but it is likely that his use of idea of the Noble Savage is simply a reaction to Savagism. Savagism argued that Native Americans and Whites are inherently different and that Whites are better than
Native Americans. In short, Savagism is both a binary and a hierarchy. Apess’s Lost Tribe theory undoes Savagism’s binary, and his Noble Savage reverses its hierarchy.

Even though these ideas originated as distinct ideas within distinct ideologies, Boudinot and Apess synthesized them, albeit differently. Because Apess essentializes Native American identity for political purposes, his versions of the Noble Savage and the Lost Tribe theory are more complicated than Boudinot’s. Apess, like Boudinot, believed that Native Americans can and should be saved, but unlike Boudinot, Apess ties this salvation to politics. For example, as a way to directly refute Savagism’s assumption that races are inherently different, Apess, like Boudinot, argued that Native Americans and white Americans had a common ancestor. The Biblical Adam appears several times in *A Son of the Forest*. Apess writes that America should keep “the original complexion of our common father, Adam” (34). After speaking about his mixed lineage, he writes that one’s direct ancestors does not matter because humans “are in fact but one family; we are all descendants of one great progenitor -- Adam” (4). Apess only does one thing differently than Boudinot: he connects the section in the autobiography’s narrative where he discusses his family tree to the Appendix. After explaining part of King Philip’s history and the history of imperialism, Apess simply tells readers to “See Appendix” (4). In linking the narrative’s family tree to conquest, Apess links the personal to the political, and directs white readers to consider his experience in the context of his larger political ideology. Boudinot does not have a personal stake in Native American identity like Apess does; Apess connects this ideas about identity to his own family history.

Apess’s strategic essentialism also used the Noble Savage trope to codify Native American identity for white readers. The Noble Savage trope, according to Celia Britton, focuses on those traits in ancient peoples that are constructed as “the instinctual, the supernatural,
the irrational, closeness to Nature and the spontaneous expression of untrammeled emotion rather than intellectual subtlety or sophisticated literary form” (169). For example, Apess lifted Boudinot’s claim that the “solitary savage feels silently but acutely; his sensibilities are not diffused over so wide a surface as those of the white man, but they run in steadier and deeper channels” (62). Apess sentimentalizes Native Americans by portraying them as sensitive.

Towards this end, Apess invokes aspects of the Noble Savage trope in A Son of the Forest. The Noble Savage trope was used by white writers to compare Native Americans and Whites. Roy Harvey Pearce, in his seminal Savagism and Civilization: A Study of the Indian and the American Mind, writes that “[t]he Indian…and was, more than anything else, a creature whose way of life showed Englishmen what they might be were they not civilized and Christian” (4). Moreover, “American thinking about the Indian was based, at the very least, on an implicit comparison of savage and civilized life” (135). The Noble Savage, then, is not a person who stands on his or her own, but in direct comparison with Whites. Apess compared Native Americans and Whites throughout his text. Apess evaluated Native Americans and White moralities, appropriating Boudinot’s idea that “[t]he moral laws that govern [Native Americans], to be sure, are but few, but then he conforms to them all. The white man abounds in laws of religion, morals, and manners; but how many does he violate?” (62). Apess assessed the comparative morality of Native Americans and Whites, noting that “[i]t has been considered as a trifling thing for the whites to make war on the Indians for the purpose of driving them from their country and taking possession thereof” (31). Yet if other people perpetrated similar acts of war on Whites, Apess rhetorically asks his audience “how quick would [Whites] fly to arms, gather in multitudes around the tree of liberty, and contend for their rights with the last drop of their
blood” (31). Like white thinkers who used the Noble Savage trope to measure Whites, Apess uses the Noble Savage trope to judge white behavior.

Part of the reason that Apess used the Noble Savage tropes to compare Native Americans and Whites was because Noble Savages were constructed as more virtuous than their white counterparts. Pearce writes that Native Americans were imagined as “the picture of men who, living under wild circumstances apart from civilization, have developed specifically noncivilized virtues” (122). Ray Allen Billington concurs with Pearce’s characterization, writing that Native Americans were always held up as possessing “the highest sense of morality” (22). Apess depicted Native Americans as being honorable and good, borrowing Boudinot’s belief that Native Americans had “a degree of prudence, faithfulness, and generosity, exceeding that of nations who would be offended at being compared with them” (60). Apess’s portrayal of Native Americans here sounds more like ethnocentrism than anthropology or history. Apess depicts Native Americans as morally perfect.

Pearce writes that Native Americans were depicted as “above and beyond the vices of civilized men,” again implicitly comparing Native Americans to Whites (169). Billington adds that “[o]nly a few” Native Americans converted “to Christianity, an unhappy fact that image-makers bemoaned” even though Native Americans “all were unquestionably pious” (114). Apess was in many ways the perfectly moral Noble Savage: he had converted to Christianity and frequently invokes the conversion narrative in A Son of the Forest. He felt so strongly about Christianity that he became a preacher. Apess writes that when missionaries preach to Native Americans, Native Americans “naturally reply, ‘Your doctrine is very good, but the whole course of your conduct is decidedly in variance with your profession – we think whites need fully as much religious instruction as we do’” (33). Here, Apess uses a Native American
perspective to compare Native Americans and Whites, and finds Whites wanting. Furthermore, instead of merely comparing Native Americans and Whites, Apess evaluates each group in terms of its religious practices. Apess represents Native Americans as superior in religious practice, even when they are uneducated about Christianity. It was not just that the Noble Savage was always in opposition to the corrupt, civilized Whites, it is that the Noble Savage trope defined Native Americans as more virtuous than Whites.

The Noble Savage trope defined Native Americans in opposition to Whites on the basis of their superior morality, and it also portrayed them as living simple lives in idealized spaces. Pearce writes that Americans, inheriting this idea from Western Europe, believed that “the simpler life of the savage was a good devoutly to be wished for” (135). Apess, borrowing from Boudinot again, writes that Native American “life is […] void of care” (62) and paints a picture of the ideal life that Native Americans have achieved. Native Americans “are so loving” because “they make use of those things they enjoy as common good” (62). Thus, Native Americans “pass their time merrily,” living “in the pride and energy of primitive simplicity” (62). Native Americans “resemble those wild plants that thrive best in the shade of the forest, but shrink from the hand of civilization, and perish beneath the influence of the sun” (62). In addition to the aforementioned moral superiority to Whites, Apess describes Native Americans as having uncomplicated, joyful lives that allow them to love one another. Like forest fauna, Native Americans are uncivilized, and that is what makes them capable of a morality that is unattainable for Whites.

Although the Noble Savage lives in a spiritually-rich environment that sounds only beautiful, it is actually harsh enough that only the Noble Savage could live there. This environment is an essential part of the Noble Savage’s education. Pearce writes that Whites
believed Native Americans had “not progressed to high civilization as had Europeans” because of “isolation and the overpowering effect of environment” (86). Native Americans are “the product of a rude social state necessitated by the exigencies of crude, isolated living” (Pearce 87). Apess wrote that Native Americans were “rising superior to the white man” because of their “peculiar education” (66). Apess defined this education as one that happens in natural environments, like the “trackless wastes of snow, [the] rugged mountains, [and] the glooms of swamps and morasses” (66). In these spaces, Native Americans encountered things like the “poisonous reptiles [that] curl among the rank vegetation” (66). Despite this rugged environment, Native Americans have the skills to procure “food by the hardships and dangers of the chase,” clothing from “the spoils of the bear, the panther, and the buffalo,” and shelter, even though they are “among the thunders of the cataract” (66). According to Apess, Native Americans have “the fortitude” to face “all the varied torments” Nature “frequently inflicted” on them (66). Apess idolized Native Americans as hardy, independent people who could survive and thrive in harsh environments. Given Apess’s painful life experiences, he probably found this construction of Native Americans particularly inspiring.

Furthermore, this environmental education and lifestyle made Native Americans more egalitarian. Billington writes that because Native Americans were “a people sheltered from oppression” their “compassion and respect for others came naturally” (22). Because the Noble Savage trope portrayed Native Americans as morally superior individuals, Native American communities were more equal than white societies. Pearce agrees with Billington, writing that “at [the] bottom primitivistic thinking in America was always radical. It protested social injustice and imbalance” (14-5). Apess, borrowing from Boudinot, writes that Native Americans’ “wants are few, and the means of gratifying them within their reach. They saw
everyone around them sharing the same lot, enduring the same hardships, living in the same cabins, feeding on the same aliments, arrayed in the same rude garments” (62). In Apess’s estimation, Native Americans were egalitarian, unlike Whites.
Why Apess Uses Romantic Ideas in His Text

Apess’s identity as a Methodist sheds light on one of the reasons why he would have been drawn to Romanticism: politics.

Apess’s Methodism and Romanticism are not intrinsically separate, because Methodism and Romanticism were part of a cultural matrix that privileged personal liberty, especially for groups that often lacked liberty, like the working class and Native Americans. British Romanticism and Methodism developed during the late-eighteenth century in Britain and then versions of both were exported to America. Methodists and Romantics shared particular political ideas about learning and race. John Wesley, one of the founders of Methodism, was famous for riding around the English countryside, teaching and preaching to the working class (Burton 66-67). Like Wesley, Apess traveled around, going “to all surrounding villages preaching the word of eternal life and exhorting sinners to repentance” (51). Apess went “as far as Utica, holding meetings by the way” (51). Becoming a Methodist preacher allowed Apess to express himself in public, even when some members of that public were angered that a Native American was preaching without a license. When another, licensed preacher criticized him for this, Apess responded sarcastically: “I was such a blind Indian that I could not see how I was in error in preaching Christ Jesus, and Him crucified” (46; italics are Apess’s). Apess believed that preaching to people, regardless of their level of education, allowed him to be part of a larger movement that emphasized personal liberty.

Liberty was obviously about religious freedom, but Methodists recognized that religious liberty was often tied to other political freedoms. Methodists defined liberty as a “radical
egalitarianism and a moral individualism” (Haynes 33). Apess makes this connection between liberty and Methodism. When a group of Methodists came to preach in Apess’s community, many of the townspeople reacted badly. However, Apess wrote that he did not care what anti-Methodists had to say, because “they had possession of the red man’s inheritance and had deprived me of liberty; with this they were satisfied and could do as they pleased; therefore, I thought I could do as I pleased…therefore, I went to hear the noisy Methodists” (18; italics are Apess’s). Here, Apess makes liberty, or the lack thereof, his reason for attending Methodist services. Apess associates white non-Methodists, especially those who voiced anti-Methodist sentiment, with depriving Native Americans of their land. Additionally, Apess implies that going to Methodists meetings was a liberating act.

In addition to working with poor Whites, white Methodists were involved with converting and liberating Native Americans. These missionaries often made the connection between conversion and political agency. Apess was aware of the “religious reports” that proved “the strong faith of the...Indian” (34). Additionally, Apess himself wrote that Methodist missionaries were so successful that “[t]he forests of Canada and the West are vocal with the praises of God,” to the point that converted Native Americans will die “in the triumphs of faith” (34). In fact, Apess believed that Methodists had “done...more toward enlightening the poor Indians and bringing them to a knowledge of truth than all other societies together” (34). Apess gave white missionaries credit for cultivating good citizens in Native American communities.
Conclusion

Apess, a Native American Methodist who wrote one of the first Native American autobiographies, was clearly influenced by Romantic ideas. Scholars have long noted the connection between Methodism and Romanticism in addition to the connection between Apess and Methodism, but no scholars have made the connection between the three. Methodism and Romanticism were both concerned with political liberty. Both Methodism and Romanticism were interested in helping politically marginalized groups, such as the poor and Native Americans, gain real political power and have the agency to run their own communities. Methodists allowed these marginalized groups membership both within their churches and in leadership positions, regardless of formal education. Apess was initially drawn to Methodism because he believed that the church would treat him more equitably than other denominations.

Given Apess’s need to appeal to white readers, it is not surprising that he would have gravitated towards Romantic ideas. For someone like Apess, who had been socialized in white culture yet later fought against patently negative stereotypes, Romantic Indians were far more appealing than the irredeemable Savagist image. Romantic Indians conformed to Apess’s belief that Native Americans were not savages. Moreover, Apess, always rhetorically shrewd, used Romantic Indians and Romantic imagery to appeal to the white readers to whom his text is clearly directed.

Rex has observed that

[t]he colonizer seeks to create compliant subjects who willingly accept and reproduce—"mimic"—the cultural identity of the colonizing force, but who do so
without exact replication; perfect copies of the colonizing culture in the darker, more "savage" bodies of the colonized would simply be too threatening to imperial hierarchy. (66)

White Americans expected Native Americans to replicate racist stereotypes, but to do so imperfectly. What white Americans did not expect was that Apess would use this replication model to copy selectively and thoughtfully.

It would be easy to assume that because Apess used white Romantic ideology that he had internalized a colonial mindset. However, although Apess was indirectly influenced by Romanticism, he does not blindly imitate Romanticism. Apess offered his white readers ideas with which they would have been familiar, but he used these ideas as part of a larger project that was explicitly pro-Native American. Hegemonic forces have often appropriated other cultures, including Native American cultures. Apess appropriated a white literary movement to wield as a weapon against a dominant discourse.
Works Cited


The author received her Bachelor’s Degree in English and history from Michigan State University in 2010. She joined the graduate school at the University of New Orleans in 2012. She currently serves as a poetry reader for *Bayou Magazine* and a contributor to *Drunk Austen*. 