

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Tropic Trappings in Mel Gibson's Apocalypto and Joseph Nicolar's The Life and Traditions of the Red Man

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0jm3f6hn>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 32(1)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Kolodny, Annette

Publication Date

2008

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Tropic Trappings in Mel Gibson's *Apocalypto* and Joseph Nicolar's *The Life and Traditions of the Red Man*

ANNETTE KOLODNY

With its roots in ancient rhetoric and medieval liturgy, the term *trope* now refers to a figure of speech that organizes a set of complex ideas into a kind of linguistic shorthand. A trope is thus a phrase or image that conveys more than its literal meaning. Those of us trained in the Western literary canon have learned to recognize a myriad of repeated tropes that underpin the major stories in that canon. For the purposes of the analysis to follow, two tropes are pertinent: the *pastoral* and the *fortunate fall*. The word *pastoral* comes out of the classical tradition and functions as a trope by conjuring up images of happy peasants peacefully herding their flocks in some bucolic countryside. But *pastoral* thereby also suggests itself as the antithesis of (or even refuge from) the ills of the crowded and hectic city. It is thus a kind of imaginative shorthand for an inherent tension between the urban and the rural. The second familiar trope comes from Christian sources. Originally, the *fortunate fall* referred to the idea that the sin of Adam and Eve—their disobedience to God, which resulted in the expulsion from Eden and the entry of death into the world—nonetheless set in motion a chain of events that ultimately led to the resurrection's promise of salvation and eternal life. Over the centuries, moreover, the meaning of the trope expanded to connote any circumstance in which good eventually emanates from evil or error.

Thus, as scholars trained in literary studies come to understand, literary artifacts—or imaginative texts of any kind—are inevitably structured by one or more of the tropes available within the reservoir of tropes that circulate in any culture. But as students of literature also understand, tropes are not

Annette Kolodny is Professor Emerita of American Literature and Culture at the University of Arizona in Tucson. She has worked closely with members of the Penobscot Nation—and especially with family members and descendants of Joseph Nicolar—in a collaborative effort to reissue Nicolar's *The Life and Traditions of the Red Man* in a new edition. She is currently at work on a new book, *In Search of First Contact: The Vikings of Vinland, the Peoples of the Dawnland, and American Popular Culture*.

universal. Non-Western cultures have their own unique and very different tropes, some of which may even have developed in direct opposition to the sometimes hegemonic tropes of the West.

This article's central argument is relatively simple: Whatever our culture or cultural background, we inhabit realities organized by tropes. The problem is that we don't always recognize the presence of tropes, even when—perhaps most especially when—they trap us in misunderstandings or outright delusions. What is even more problematic is that tropes are too often the sites of cross-cultural misunderstandings or even cross-cultural incompatibilities. In order to flesh out that argument, I will examine two texts that, at first glance, seem to have nothing in common: Mel Gibson's 2006 film *Apocalypto* and Joseph Nicolar's self-published 1893 book, *The Life and Traditions of the Red Man*.¹ In the former, a non-Native purports to have depicted an authentic moment of Mayan history. In the latter, a Penobscot elder attempts to preserve the traditions of his people for future generations. What they share is a historically grounded response to the specter of societies that they perceive as threatened.

MISREPRESENTING THE MAYA

The 8 December 2006 release of Mel Gibson's film, *Apocalypto*, was accompanied by weeks of hype and endless publicity. According to some early notices, all the dialogue was spoken in an ancient Mayan language (thus requiring English subtitles), a sure mark of the film's implied historical accuracy. Gibson appeared on one television talk show after another and touted the film's importance as a study of how a powerful civilization, in his words, "deolves into chaos." What had led to the downfall of the Classic period Maya, he averred, could be seen as an allegory for our own times: the overuse of resources, the despoliation of the natural environment, the increasing resort to violence, and the corruption of a ruling elite. Gibson thus saw himself as the author of a powerful warning against what he perceived to be the current decline of the United States. But despite its claims to historical accuracy and allegorical import, in its depiction of the Classic Maya, the film got almost everything wrong.

To begin with, the film confuses and conflates social and political upheavals from a ninth-century crisis in the southern lowlands (often called the Classic Maya "collapse") with a much-theorized period of decay and decadence some four to five hundred years later.² The construction of Classic Mayan cities—like the one depicted by Gibson—had ceased by about AD 800. And most of the great Mayan cities were largely abandoned only two hundred years later. The Spanish did not arrive in Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula until the sixteenth century. The Spaniards who sail in at the end of Gibson's film, therefore, could hardly have witnessed a Classic Mayan city under construction. Gibson's historical timeline is all wrong. Moreover, the Classic Maya flourished for a far longer time span than Gibson hints (some archaeologists date the beginnings of the Classic period as early as AD 200), and the causes of the eventual collapse were many and complex. These certainly

include overuse of resources and deforestation (which Gibson rather clumsily portrays) and intersite and intercity warfare (which Gibson does not portray). But the wholesale slaughter of sacrificial victims has never been cited as a component of Classic Maya culture or as a contributor to its collapse. Most anthropologists now agree that “mass sacrifices”—if they occurred at all—were “exceptional.”³

To be sure, the Maya were warriors and engaged in some ritualized human sacrifice, albeit never on the scale of the Aztecs, whose influence crept into Mayan culture during the later post-Classic period. On screen Gibson turns his Mayans into the worst stereotypes of bloodthirsty Aztecs, who tear the hearts out of their victims’ living bodies. Minutely followed by the camera, blood pours from the altar and runs in rivers down the temple steps. “Blood! More blood!” Gibson is said to have shouted as these scenes were filmed.⁴ Later we see an entire hillside strewn with body parts.

Nowhere is there a hint of the culture whose glyphs represented one of the earliest systems of phonetic writing, a culture familiar with the concept of zero long before it was known in Europe, or a culture whose cities and towns regularly raised abundant harvests of corn, beans, and squash in raised beds surrounded by water-conserving ditches for irrigation. Instead, we see a parched cornfield at the end of a ball court where, rather than honoring the sacred and highly ritualized function of the Mayan ball court, the film shows us Mayan warriors using the ball court for target practice against captives who futilely try to outrun the rain of arrows. The Mayans’ well-known advanced knowledge of astronomy is turned into a kind of parlor trick as a priest pretends to interpret a message from the gods in a solar eclipse. Gibson invented a variety of grotesque facial piercings for his Mayan warriors to make them appear fierce.⁵ Not even the supposedly authentic ancient Mayan language spoken by the (many non-Mayan) actors measures up to the hype.⁶ The actors speak a modern Mayan Yucatecan dialect, no doubt with ancient roots, but a dialect much changed over the centuries—in part forced to change by its long contact with the Spanish language.

What this brief catalog of missteps and misrepresentations should underscore is that, whatever his claim to authenticity, Gibson was never really capable of making an honest and historically accurate film about the Classic Maya. What prevented him wasn’t Gibson’s often-stated commitment to producing an allegory about great civilizations “devolving into chaos.” What prevented Gibson from accurately portraying the Classic period Maya was his own cultural assimilation of two of the most ingrained and familiar tropes of Western civilization: the old pastoral trope of the evil and corrupt city in contrast to the peaceful innocence of the countryside, and that latter-day version of the fortunate fall, the postcontact trope of beneficent Europeans who brought Christianity and civilization to the benighted savages of the Americas. It is these tropes that actually structure *Apocalypto*’s narrative line.

The film opens in the jungle with a small group of men hunting edible game. Their camaraderie and good-humored mutual teasing is interrupted by another group of jungle-dwellers who explain that they are fleeing from strange violent warriors who, entirely unprovoked, had attacked and

destroyed their village. Only these few traumatized survivors remain; and they seek safety in the jungle's deepest recesses. The hunters allow the refugees safe passage through their territory and, with the spoils of their hunt, return to their own village. In that village, we witness a communal feast, family intimacies, and more good-humored teasing and practical jokes. Clearly, these people are hunter-gathers, contentedly settled in their little village in the midst of lush jungle. But that night their peaceful village suffers the same fate described by the fleeing refugees.⁷ After everyone is asleep, a group of warriors invades, kills indiscriminately, destroys everything, and eventually takes male and female captives.

The captives are bound together in a brutal manner, their captors ceaselessly cruel throughout a long, arduous trek. En route, the captive villagers are brought together with other captives, including those same fleeing refugees earlier encountered by the hunters in the jungle. There are whispers from the refugees about some mysterious great city. As they approach the outskirts of that city, the captives glimpse blighted landscapes denuded of trees or vegetation. The captives are brought into the precincts of Mel Gibson's apocalyptic vision of a sprawling Mayan city, complete with slums, slave markets, beggars in the streets, workers covered with white limestone dust, and steaming vats in which limestone is being burned to make plaster for the huge temples that are under construction. (The surrounding forests, we are meant to understand, have been cut and burned to produce the charcoal needed for heating the vats of limestone.) The captives gaze in awe and amazement at this scene, presumably because they have never seen or heard of such a place.⁸

The female captives are handed over to a slave market, while the men are painted blue (another Gibson invention) and marched up to the altar level of an ornate and imposing temple. Seated around the central altar are the even more ornately garbed royal ruler, his consort—both with drooping eyelids, seemingly on drugs, and only semiconscious—and the high priest. The carnage begins with a signal from the ruler. One by one, the Mayan warriors drag their terrified captives to the raised altar and hold them down so that the priest, with his ceremonial blade, can cut open the chest cavity and rip out the beating heart. The crowd of onlookers massed at the temple's base cheers mightily as the captives are then decapitated, their heads thrown down the temple steps that already run with blood. The onset of a solar eclipse interrupts the steady stream of sacrifices and silences the now frightened crowd. The priest addresses incantations to the disappearing sun disk and then, after a moment of darkness, the sun's bright orb begins to reemerge from the moon's shadow. The priest declares that the gods are satisfied, and this day's bloodletting may now cease. The crowd cheers as the sun comes back into full view.

Thus the movie's central character (and hero) is spared from becoming another sacrificial victim. Instead, he and the remaining villagers are taken by their warrior captors to an empty ball court and told to run for their lives. Those who make it across the ball court, past the adjoining cornfield, and into the jungle beyond will be spared—or so they are promised. But the warriors shoot at the villagers with arrows; and only the hero, though wounded and

bleeding, actually manages to cross the ball court alive, run through the cornfield, and disappear into the dense jungle. His goal is to return to the site of his village and there rejoin his young son and pregnant wife whom he had left hiding in an underground cave during the initial assault on the village. He hopes they are still alive. In hot pursuit, however, are the relentless Mayan warriors. And here begins one of Gibson's favorite formats: a chase movie.⁹

In what seems like an endless chase through dense jungle, our hero outwits his pursuers and kills them all either by luck or stratagem. He returns to the underground cave just in time to save his son and wife (now in labor) from drowning. Seasonal rains flood the cave floor. Happily, the little family survives, including the newborn infant. As the film ends, the family has made its way to the coast with the intention to travel inland and join "the people of the forest."¹⁰ But as they look out on the vast expanse of the Caribbean Sea, they see a three-masted Spanish galleon anchored in the distance. Being rowed toward shore from the galleon is a large dinghy that carries the oarsman (a common sailor), a man in sixteenth-century elegant gentleman's attire (presumably the captain), a man in armor, and a velvet-robed priest who holds the large imperial cross of the Church of Rome. Our hero and his family do not linger to meet the strange newcomers but, all unseen, turn and make their way back into the jungle. As the film closes, all we see is the dinghy as it quietly and steadily moves toward shore.

TRAPPED BY TROPES

The many absurdities and improbabilities of *Apocalypto* notwithstanding, the film is instructive in its misguided historical reconstructions. On the one hand, the film demonstrates how the two dominant tropes discussed still remain powerfully at work in the Euro-American construction of reality. On the other hand, the film provides a touchstone against which to measure how alternative historical reconstructions created by Native peoples resist and undermine those very same tropes.

Gibson's narrative turns on the distinction between innocent jungle-dwelling villagers and a corrupt and evil city, with the two groups living wholly independent of one another until the city invades and destroys the villages. Historically, this was not the case in the Yucatán. Classic period Mayan cities, with their temple precincts, were part of a large empire and far-flung trade networks that embraced not only other Mayan cities but also the surrounding towns. Most Mayans were peasant-farmers and lived in towns, not in the small jungle hamlets depicted by Gibson. These town-dwellers would have visited the cities for ceremonial occasions and for trade. Similarly, traders from the cities would have frequented the towns. In this way, ancient Mayans participated in a complex ceremonial life and in a deeply interconnected exchange economy.

But Gibson has to play out the pastoral trope for his movie to work. He needs sympathetic innocent villagers worthy of salvation who can be ministered to by the priests who will accompany the conquering Spaniards. And even more so, he needs the Mayan city's chaos, cruelty, and barbarity in order

to justify the conquest. Despite the well-documented atrocities perpetrated by the conquistadores, Gibson presents the arrival of the Spanish galleon as the unspoken solution to his Mayan apocalypse. The Spaniard in armor will defeat and destroy the evil city, and thereby avenge and put a stop to the incursions against the innocent jungle villages. The Catholic priest will bring a true religion to replace the trickery and bloodlust of the Mayan gods and their high priest. The gentleman-captain will bring social order and civilization. Thus the pastoral trope of city-versus-country neatly prepares the way for the postcontact trope of a conquest that ultimately benefits the conquered. In short, in Gibson's reconstruction, the Europeans bring curative remedies to a sick society that will otherwise devolve into chaos.

REPRESENTING THE PENOBSCOT

Although Gibson displaced his anxieties about his own society's decline onto a culture he really knew nothing about, Penobscot elder and political leader Joseph Nicolar faced squarely the prevailing view of most nineteenth-century Euro-Americans that Native cultures were in a state of steady and inevitable decline. At the time Nicolar wrote—following decades of factional political conflict within the tribe, out-migration, and repeated cholera outbreaks—the Penobscots found themselves at the nadir of a thirty-year population decline. By 1890, what had once been the most populous and powerful tribe in Maine now numbered fewer than four hundred, its diminished and impoverished population confined to a few small island reservations in the Penobscot River. As Nicolar acknowledged, his people were “now on the descending slide scale to a point not yet settled” (195). Despite all this, Nicolar builds his narrative on the strengths of Penobscot culture—not the culture's demise. In so doing, he reveals a Native reality in which Gibson's governing tropes can have no place.

The Life and Traditions of the Red Man, a newly recovered 1893 text, tells the story of the Penobscot people from the first moments of the world's creation by the Great Spirit through various periods of intertribal warfare to the first arrivals and eventual permanent settlement of “the white man.” As does Gibson, Nicolar also details attacks by one Indian group on another and portrays the coming of the Europeans. In contrast to Gibson's scenario, however, Nicolar's depiction of Indian-on-Indian violence has nothing to do with any tension between the urban and the rural. All of Nicolar's combatants belong to hunter-gatherer societies with only marginal horticulture. And no outside intervention is required to avenge the cruelties of this warfare or put an end to it. On their own, the warring tribes find a way to make and sustain a peace—without either priests or the white man's imposed civilization. In short, even when they recount events similar to those in Gibson's film, Nicolar's text makes it clear that Native peoples have always told very different stories about themselves.

As Nicolar explains it, long before the settlement of Europeans, a once-cohesive northeastern Algonquian-speaking people were “thrown into different bands,” and each band followed one or another of several

competing “spiritual men” (or shaman-warrior leaders) (170). This initial warfare between different tribes of Eastern Algonquian-speakers then blends almost seamlessly into the later wars between newly allied Algonquian groups and the May-Quays (or Mohawks) and their Iroquois League allies. But the point of this warfare, according to Nicolar, is not to take captives for blood sacrifice or even to gain territory. “The object in all the wars,” he states, “was only to subdue one another. The conqueror never takes possession [of] any part of the country that he conquers, nor require any indemnity from the conquered; will not even take away things belonging to them, though in some instances some useful things were destroyed” (172).

To be sure, Nicolar’s central subject is his own people, the Penobscot Nation of Maine, and the related neighboring Eastern Algonquian-speaking peoples of northeastern New England and the Maritime Provinces of Canada. He didn’t write about the Maya of the Yucatán or their warfare practices. Nonetheless, what is significant about Nicolar’s depiction of the wars among “the red men” is his abiding assumption that peoples who share a common language, speak related dialects, and inhabit contiguous geographical territories (like Mel Gibson’s Mayans) will necessarily know of and interact with one another. They do not and cannot live as isolates (like Gibson’s very separate city-dwelling and jungle-dwelling Mayans). Even the May-Quays, an Iroquoian-speaking people originally from upstate New York, are not unknown or wholly foreign to the Algonquians. The Mohawks are simply rivals and enemies. The point is that unlike Gibson’s faulty grasp of Mayan history, Nicolar quite well understands the complex and deeply interconnected relationships between Eastern Algonquian-speaking peoples and between Algonquians and the more distant Iroquoians. In that pan-Indian imaginary, there is no room for anything like Gibson’s overelaborated pastoral trope.

That said, Nicolar never minces words about the brutality of intertribal warfare. “[I]n time of war no mercy was shown to the defenseless, old people and women were dispatched to eternity when found, even the little babes were slain, no prisoners of war taken, only such one the enemy knows to be most beloved and esteemed, such persons are taken alive only to be cruelly tortured; this is done to irritate the feelings of the prisoners friends.” And, Nicolar continues, “Burning at the stake was the principal measure meted out to the unfortunate captives. Exchange of prisoners was never entered into nor practiced” (171). Despite this brutality, the arrival of Europeans—whether in armor or bearing a Christian cross—is not the means to end all the warfare. In Nicolar’s text, the end of the Indian wars is a wholly Indian affair.

A large confederacy of Algonquian tribes is allied against the May-Quay and their Iroquoian allies in Nicolar’s retelling of the termination of “all the wars among the red people” (194). After years of warfare, the Algonquians gain the upper hand. In what is to be a decisive battle, two opposing war chiefs—and their warriors—confront one another in fierce combat “up the mountain” (189). The war chiefs “both get exasperated” as the battle drags on without a clear victor. In consequence, “both at the same moment determined to bring the matters to a close by making one great and last effort.” Invoking traditional beliefs that many old leaders became leaders because they

possessed shamanic powers, Nicolar has the two war chiefs “decid[ing] to use the spiritual power that was in them, which both had been hesitating to bring to bear upon their fellowmen; knowing that when they use it in that way, it will depart from them forever” (189–90). But use it they do. “Both at the same moment, unbeknown to each, . . . gave the earth a violent stamp with the right foot, at the same time throwing his war weapons savagely on the earth,” and, together, brought on “a severe earthquake [that] . . . not only shook things, but the earth itself parted and swallowed up both forces. . . . Only the two leaders on both sides [are left] standing. . . . Listening to the screeches . . . issuing from under the earth where [their] poor men are forever shut up,” the two war chiefs are forced to acknowledge “what they had done.” They now know “that by using and abusing the spiritual power in the manner they did, was a sufficient cause for them to lose the art, so they both advanced to each other, shook hands, and made peace over the chasm” (190). They then become the catalysts for what Nicolar portrays as a lasting peace between the warring tribes—a peace secured by uniquely Native devices: a wampum treaty belt and the rituals of a grand council fire.¹¹

In effect, with the two war chiefs having recognized the transgressive nature of their actions, a kind of moral (or spiritual) balance is also restored. With that balance restored—and the warfare terminated—the brutalities depicted earlier demand no additional external intercession. Nicolar’s is not an apocalyptic vision of a world “devolving into chaos.” As a result, the arrival of Europeans and the conversion of the Indians take on meanings radically different from those in Gibson’s *Apocalypse*. For in Nicolar’s understanding of history, it is not “the red man” who needs to be saved but “the white man.”

This becomes clear in the prophetic teachings of Klose-kur-beh (also spelled Gluscap, Gluskabe, and so forth by neighboring tribes), the Penobscots’ great culture-hero. In traditional lore, Klose-kur-beh exhibits many traits of a trickster figure, but he is also the great transformer (he reduces the size of giant animals), the great culture-bringer (he introduces everything from spiritual truths to canoe making), and, most important of all, the instructor who exhorts the people to “keep within the bounds of my teaching” (115). Nicolar emphasizes these last three characteristics.

As Nicolar’s version of Klose-kur-beh’s teaching unfolds in the first chapter, Nicolar interweaves the story of Klose-kur-beh’s creation by the Great Spirit with what Klose-kur-beh “learned from the Great Spirit” about the creation of “another man like me.” This second creation is “the white man” (110–11).¹² What Klose-kur-beh says he learns from the Great Spirit about the white man’s future fate combines elements from the Old and New Testaments. Klose-kur-beh alludes to the Garden of Eden (“the first woman shall disobey the Great Spirit, and bring death unto mankind”); the Cain and Abel story (“the first born shall slay the next kindred to himself for the want of power and possession”); Noah’s flood (“the Great Spirit . . . will send a great rush of water, and all the bad shall be drowned,—but a few saved”); the Crucifixion (“the Great Spirit will come among them in the form of a man like themselves, and . . . they will slay the great spirit unto death”); and the resurrection (“he shall arise before them”) (111–12). Although there is

nothing remarkable in any of this, in the second chapter Nicolai begins a revision of Christian theology that invests the Crucifixion and the coming of the white man with a wholly new set of meanings.

In chapter 2 Klose-kur-beh reassures his people that “you will not have a hand in taking the life of the Great Spirit” (114). “All these bad things will come to pass across the big water,” and so Klose-kur-beh’s people—“the red men”—“will escape His wrath.” Yet, as Klose-kur-beh prophesies, because “the white man . . . will not rest until he finds the land the Great Spirit gave unto you,” Native peoples will one day be beset by “many temptations.” The most dangerous of these will be the temptation to take a “hand in their fights” over land possession. Klose-kur-beh sternly warns against this “because the Great Spirit did not make the land for brothers to fight for; He made it for love’s sake.” Unfortunately, the whites’ greed and cupidity will not allow for sharing. “The first that come,” says Klose-kur-beh, “shall not want to allow his own kind to share [the land] with him; they shall slay one another for the possession of it” (115). And despite all his prophetic warnings, in the closing paragraph of his teaching, Klose-kur-beh predicts precisely what will—and did—ensue:

Woe unto you when the temptation overpowers you and you take hand in his fights, because he shall have the way that he can put you in front of him, and you shall receive all the blows and be slain for his gain; and the two brothers shall make peace between themselves over your body that has been slain for the land because you have forgotten my teaching. I must say to you, watch him closely, because the repentance he is to undergo is great, and he will ask you to help him repent, and he will say to you that the “Great Spirit died for him,” he will show you the things that caused the death of the Great Spirit and he will teach you to bow down to these things; and bow you may; but never forget that the Great Spirit is in the air, in the sun, moon, and in all things which your eyes can see.—Here the teaching of Klose-kur-beh ended. (115)

To be sure, Native readers well understood how their tribes had been used as proxies or employed as convenient ethnic mercenaries in the white men’s wars (“the way that he can put you in front of him”) only to “receive all the blows and be slain for his gain.” It was a scenario particularly familiar to the Penobscot, first during the colonial wars, and then as allies of the rebellious colonists during the Revolutionary War. They had been “slain for [the white man’s] gain” over and over only to lose more of their territories as “the two brothers”—first the French and the English, later the Americans and the English—made “peace between themselves” by dividing up Native lands in their treaty agreements (usually without the tribes’ knowledge or consent). As a result, despite the fact that Penobscot warriors had served in George Washington’s army, the tribe came out of the Revolutionary War with little means to protect its traditional territories.

What Nicolai added to that well-worn history was a slant that refigured the Indian as a kind of Christ figure. Just as the white man, for “love of

power,” once killed the Great Spirit in a land across the waters, so now he is guilty of having “slain [Native peoples] for his gain” and then “mak[ing] peace between themselves over your body that has been slain for the land.” The Indian thus becomes a surrogate for the body of Christ (a phrase the Penobscots heard each Sunday) and another innocent sacrifice to the white man’s greed and power lust. And all this happened “because you [that is, Klose-kur-beh’s people] have forgotten my teaching” about refraining from involvement in the wars between European powers on American soil.

Then, in what is perhaps the most remarkable statement in the paragraph, Nicolar has Klose-kur-beh assert that the white man will “ask you to help him repent” the killing of the Great Spirit. The white man will do this by teaching “the things that caused the death of the Great Spirit” and by introducing new symbols among the Indians—that is, the Bible and the cross—to which they will be taught to “bow down.” The culture-hero thereby reframes the postcontact conversion of Native peoples into the means by which whites will enact their repentance for the Crucifixion. In addition to being the sacrificial Christ figure, the Indian thus stands also as a Christ-like redeemer figure, necessary to the white man’s ultimate salvation. The popular Euro-American trope of the Europeans bringing a civilizing Christianity to the godless savages of the Americas is turned on its head here.

By largely ignoring the story of original sin in the Garden of Eden, Nicolar positioned the Crucifixion as the central sin of Christian doctrine; and it is for this sin that the white man seeks redemption. As the passage emphasizes, the white man will “say to you that the ‘Great Spirit died for *him*.’”¹³ Rather than invoking the Euro-American trope that missionaries had magnanimously “saved” the Indian by bringing Christianity to the savages, Klose-kur-beh makes clear that the red man was never in need of salvation because the Indian remained forever innocent of what had transpired “across the big water.” Instead, the red man emerges as instrumental to securing the white man’s salvation.

This redeemer role tacitly justifies the Indians’ allowing the white man “to teach you to bow down to these things” and gives a kind of conditional permission to the conversion process: “and bow you may.” That tacit permission was demanded by a history that had already transpired. French missionary priests had long ago converted the Penobscot to Catholicism, along with the other Eastern Algonquian-speaking tribes of Maine and Canada. But for Nicolar, these facts did not necessarily mean the end of indigenous belief systems. Quite the opposite. As Nicolar further explains, the Indians “were ready to receive and believe [the missionaries’ teaching] . . . because the teaching was similar to the one the spiritual men of the people had been teaching” (194). Thus, he asserts, Native belief systems were never extinguished but rather continued in a different form. Not an entirely different form, however.

Although the people may eventually “bow down” before imported religious symbols, nonetheless, admonishes Klose-kur-beh, “never forget that the Great Spirit is in the air, in the sun, moon, and in all things which your eyes can see.—Here the teaching of Klose-kur-beh ended.” Klose-kur-beh’s words express what is, essentially, a syncretic vision. By having Klose-kur-beh locate

“the Great Spirit . . . in the air, in the sun, moon, and in all things which your eyes can see,” Nicolai masterfully fuses the Christian notion of a divinely created universe with the traditional Algonquian belief in a numinous world everywhere alive with kin-beings and imbued everywhere with spirit and power. As the grandson of a fabled Penobscot shaman and subchief, Nicolai found this a means of resisting Christianity’s otherwise hegemonic cast, just as he had also resisted the hegemonic cast of those Western literary tropes he had encountered in the white man’s grammar schools.¹⁴

READING TROPES WITHIN CULTURAL CONTEXTS

This is not to say that Nicolai’s text, any more than Gibson’s movie, is free of tropes. On the contrary, it is simply governed by a very different trope—the overarching trope of what Nicolai called “traditions” (95). By this term he meant not only the story cycles about Klose-kur-beh, memories of ancient shamanic practices, and the details of precontact material culture but also those crucial elements of the abiding belief systems that had (Nicolai contended) always informed Penobscot culture. In his text, these include trust in “the simple and natural state of life” that marked the Indians’ world before the coming of the white man; certainty that the Indians’ precontact world had its own means to right itself and maintain moral balance; confidence that “some of their [old] prophecies are [still] very significant and important”; and the conviction that the white man selfishly “wants all the world” for himself (95, 112). All of these fall within the trope of “traditions” and organize and give coherence to the Penobscot world, as Nicolai knew it. Whether any or all of these tropic elements encapsulate verifiable historical fact is beside the point. Unlike Gibson, Nicolai never claimed to be composing authentic history in the common Euro-American understanding of that term.¹⁵ Instead, “after forty years of search and study,” Nicolai understood himself to be preserving “all the traditions as I have gathered them from my people” (96).

That assertion notwithstanding, Nicolai clearly selected from among all the traditions available to him, and he emphasized some while he deemphasized or even eliminated others. For example, he honors Klose-kur-beh as a teacher and culture-bringer but never depicts him in a disruptive trickster role.¹⁶ Nor does he depict Klose-kur-beh in his abode in the North-land, fashioning arrowheads for the future extirpation of the whites—a version of Klose-kur-beh lore then common among the Penobscots.¹⁷ These omissions derive from the fact that, writing for non-Native and Native readers alike, Nicolai purposefully evaded those aspects of traditional stories that Euro-Americans find distasteful or even threatening while he preserved what he could of cultural traditions that he saw threatened by the nation’s unrelenting assimilationist policies. He hoped thereby to pass along to future generations of Penobscots some valorized continuity of their unique cultural heritage and to resist Euro-American rationales for repressing that heritage through enforced education in boarding schools and missionary schools. Anchored in a particular historical moment, with his people’s cultural future imperiled, Nicolai’s selection of traditions was neither random nor accidental.

Similar to *The Life and Traditions of the Red Man*, *Apocalypto* is anchored in what Gibson sees as a moment of national peril: the United States poised on the brink of “devolving into chaos.” But rather than explore the culture that he seeks to save, as does Nicolar, Gibson resorts to allegory and projects contemporary problems onto a seriously flawed historical reconstruction of precontact Mexico. With that choice—and whether or not he was consciously aware of what he was about—Gibson effectively reflected and reified some of the more vicious aspects of the current debates over immigration and our “open” southern border. His corrupt Mayan city, after all, stands as a precursor to today’s rhetoric about Mexico as a failed state: the site of slums, crime, and drug cartels. Given his public statements about *Apocalypto*’s attention to historical details, however, Gibson would probably deny these connections—just as he would probably resist any suggestion that, by deploying a version of the fortunate fall trope, his film reflects and reifies his own complicated relationship to the Catholic Church. Yet this is precisely the power of tropes: they act on our imaginations even when we are not conscious of their presence.

The point is that whether we call them tropes or traditions, these are the organizing devices around which societies cohere. As key elements of belief systems, tropes act as powerful mediators between the world and how we experience the world’s meaning. They help structure a shared reality and thereby create culture. But as I have tried to demonstrate, tropes can also structure incompatible realities across cultures and distort our ability to understand cultures different from our own. After all, for Native Americans, the invasions of Europeans hardly constituted a fortunate fall. And even if we might wish it otherwise, for most Euro-Americans, Native prophecies are neither significant nor important, while Native peoples are hardly regarded as redeemers who might yet save the white man from his own folly. For critics and scholars the challenge is to recognize the presence of these tropic devices, especially where they may not be openly identified, and understand how the tropes function in the texts that employ them. Among other things, this means recognizing the imposition of one society’s tropes on the meaning of another, as in Gibson’s *Apocalypto* or, conversely, recognizing a society’s resistance to the hegemonic tropic imperatives of a conquering culture, as in Nicolar’s *The Life and Traditions of the Red Man*. In sum, as figures of speech that organize complex ideas and provide a kind of shorthand reference to those ideas, tropes are culture specific. The Mayan and the Penobscot worlds can only be fully understood on the basis of their own unique internal logics—or, for the Penobscots, traditions.

Acknowledgment

My excellent and always reliable graduate-student research assistant, Ms. Randi Lynn Tanglen, helped prepare the final manuscript for publication; I thank her for her care and attention to details.

NOTES

1. *Apocalypto*, directed by Mel Gibson (Burbank, CA: Touchstone Pictures, 2006).

Joseph Nicolai, *The Life and Traditions of the Red Man* (Bangor, ME: C. H. Glass, 1893; repr., Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007). The reprint is edited, annotated, and contains a history of the Penobscot Nation and an introduction by Annette Kolodny. The original 1893 edition was self-published, and the print run was relatively small because Nicolai had limited financial means. Nicolai died in February 1894, just months after this original edition appeared; and most copies were subsequently lost in a warehouse fire. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically in text. All citations to the Nicolai text refer to the 2007 edition.

2. In David Freidel, "Betraying the Maya," *Archaeology* 60, no. 2 (2007): 39–40. Maya expert David Freidel, University Distinguished Professor of Anthropology at Southern Methodist University, argues that "*Apocalypto* juxtaposes ideas about social and political failure from the ninth-century crisis in the southern lowlands—the Classic Maya 'collapse'—with the posited 'decadence' of the period of the Spanish arrival five centuries later. These periods may have some links, but they are as distinct as the periods of the Magna Carta and the U.S. Constitution." Freidel goes on to question the ascription of "decadence" to "the late Postclassic period," but he acknowledges that theories about such a "collapse" remain much "contested by experts."

3. *Ibid.*, 40.

4. Earl Shorris, "Mad Mel and the Maya," *The Nation* 18 (2006): 24, 26.

5. Field archaeologist Richard Hansen has studied the ancient Maya in Guatemala's Mirador Basin; Gibson's *Apocalypto* is set near the coast of Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula, quite a different region. Even so, Hansen served as a technical advisor on *Apocalypto*. In "Conversation: Mel Gibson's Maya," *Archaeology* 60, no. 1 (2007): 16, Hansen admitted that the elaborate body paint and gruesome facial piercings depicted in Gibson's film were wholly "artistic license." Further, Hansen said, "There is a little doohickey that comes down from the ear through the nose into the septum—that was entirely their artistic innovation."

6. According to Shorris, "Mad Mel and the Maya," 26, "The lead [actor] is a . . . dancer from Oklahoma named Rudy Youngblood. He has indigenous ancestors, but he is not Maya, and like most of the other featured players he is not a professional actor. None of the four other major parts went to Maya either." In short, says Shorris, "Mel Gibson cast no Maya to work on his project, except in the most minor roles." Shorris has worked with several Mayan communities in the Yucatán.

7. Freidel, "Betraying the Maya," 39, notes that "Gibson's hunter-gatherers are pure fantasy: Ordinary Maya were peasant maize farmers and craftspeople from 1000 B.C."

8. Such a city seems to have existed only in Gibson's imagination. Freidel, "Betraying the Maya," 38, calls it "a bizarre computer-generated pastiche of Maya styles from different places and times."

9. Shorris, "Mad Mel and the Maya," 26.

10. This may be a veiled reference to today's Lacandón Maya, because *Lacandón* is also the name of a forest and a river in Chiapas, Mexico.

11. A “grand council fire” is not literally a fire or flame, but rather a place that functions as a symbolic hearth where delegates from different tribes may regularly congregate and engage in ceremonies that reinforce or renew the “flame” of their friendship and alliance.

12. Klose-kur-beh also mentions the creation of “the black man,” but this figure then disappears from the story.

13. Emphasis added.

14. Annette Kolodny, “Introduction to Joseph Nicolar’s 1893 *The Life and Traditions of the Red Man*,” 39, notes that Nicolar probably attained something close to an eighth-grade education; he attended primary and secondary schools in Rockland, Brewer, Warren, and Old Town, ME. He was generally considered the best-educated Penobscot of his day.

15. In George H. Hunt, *Report of the Agent of the Penobscot Tribe of Indians for the Year 1894* (Augusta, ME: Burleigh and Flint, 1894), 10, the Indian agent who knew Nicolar well reported that “at the time of his death,” having previously published *The Life and Traditions of the Red Man*, Nicolar “was engaged in writing a history of the Penobscot Tribe.” This statement strongly suggests that Nicolar knew how to compose a more orthodox historical text—and was in the process of doing so—and, more importantly, that Nicolar understood *The Life and Traditions of the Red Man* as something other than the conventional history text he had encountered in school. Regrettably, that unfinished history manuscript has not survived.

16. Kolodny, “Introduction to Joseph Nicolar’s 1893 *The Life and Traditions of the Red Man*,” 47–48.

17. Anthropologist Frank G. Speck lived with and studied the Penobscots during the twentieth century’s early decades, and later reported in *Penobscot Man: The Life History of a Forest Tribe in Maine* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1940), 4, that it was still “common belief in the tribe that . . . *Gluska’be* was still manufacturing stone arrowpoints in his mythical abode, for the day when he should return and expel the whites from the country.” Nicolar had to have known this fact.