Anusandhanvallari
Vol 2026, No.1
May 2026
ISSN 2229-3388

Tracing Colonial Constructions of Collective Cognitive Illusions in Indigenous Cultures: A Study of Diane Glancy's Novels

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Abstract

Cognitive illusions are a pervasive psychological issue, causing judgemental problems. They are closely related to heuristics and biases in psychology and are considered systematic errors in thinking that can lead the human minds to misinterpret reality and form false beliefs. Similarly, as one's perception of the world is shaped by influences from history, literature, nature, and personal as well as shared experiences, all the influences may also have the potential to generate misconceptions that spread widely and eventually become collective cognitive illusions. It distorts beliefs that communities accept and repeatedly reinforce. Such misconceptions often enter narratives and further solidify these illusions. Writers influenced by these beliefs may unintentionally become carriers and ambassadors of the illusion through their literary works.This paper studies the collective cognitive illusions around Native American communities as framed by the European authors, historians and travelers. In contrast, the works of Native American writers function as a counter-discourse, challenging and dismantling these illusions that shape mainstream perceptions and realities. The study applies a cognitive narratology in a few works of a Native American author, Diane Glancy, to analyse how she has handled the cognitive illusion spun by the colonisers. Cognitive narratology, a subfield of postclassical narratology proposed by David Herman in the 1990s, further support to know how mainstream people buy the narrative of the colonisers and how they develop negative perceptions upon indigenous people.

Keywords: Cognitive Bias, evidence-based knowledge, cognitivism, illusion, reality, Native American literature, Euro-centricity

Introduction

The popular saying "Beauty lies in the eye of the beholder" was first phrased by the 19th-century Irish novelist Margaret Wolfe Hungerford in her 1878 novel *Molly Bawn*. This idea echoes Plato's earlier idea that beauty is subjective. David Hume, a Scottish philosopher and historian, says, "Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them." (Hume) These ideas also have relevance from the bible. In verses, "Vanity of vanities! says the Preacher… All is vanity." (Ecclesiastes 1:2) and "Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain." (Proverbs 31:30), the idea of beauty has been clearly stated as mere illusion. It is "an assumption rooted in external validation; and vanity, a deceptive appearance that collapses under reflection." (Mikell) Therefore, illusions are pervasive and needs to careful analysed.

This paper aims to explain the origins of collective cognitive illusions surrounding Indigenous people of America, particularly the misconceptions framed upon them. The major problems are the misrepresentations that European historians, travellers, and authors significantly framed, and allowed to construct narratives that portray Native Americans as 'barbaric,' thereby reinforcing deep-seated illusions. This discussion is further strengthened through the lens of postclassical narratology, especially David Herman's cognitive narratology (1990s), which provides a nuanced framework for understanding how such illusions are formed and sustained through narratives. For which, one aspect of his theory, "Mind-Narrative nexus" is applied. It argues narrative function as a "Scaffolding for consciousness," that storytelling, a cognitive practice enables environmental, social, and biological structures to shape human consciousness. (Caracciolo) The study intends to analyse how Diane Glancy, a native American author, deals with cognitive illusions in her novels, especially, her counter narrative in responding to the European representations of Native Americans and the colonial attitudes among the mainstream people. Indigenous authors' writings involve, breaking, challenging, or rewriting the illusions, that has led to revitalise the indigenous sprit, where Glancy's writings have also complimented.

Cognitive illusions are nothing but the psychological concepts similar to heuristics and biases, dual-process models of thinking. Contemporary studies analyse perception as an active, inference-driven process (Zavagno). Tversky and Kahneman's heuristics-and-biases theory states that people rely on mental shortcuts, that they pass on quick judgments which often lead to systematic errors known as biases, deviating from rational decision-making. These illusions also lead to the tendency of believing on the first and immediate answer or response of a person to be obviously correct. Amerigo Vespucci was association with calling of America as "Mundus novus" which means "New World," first articulated in his 1503 pamphlet. When Europeans flooded to this new found land with the awe of start a fresh life, it turned a nightmare. This connects directly to Glancy's statement in Glancy's novel *Designs of the Night Sky*, that mentions:

They called it the new World, but it was the old World they came to without knowing. America has multiple histories, multiple heritages. There's a lot about a lot it doesn't know. The Indian languages are the history of the continent, if language shapes. ….. They brought the Western thinking-upward-into-the-pinwheel-universe. They brought linearity and chronology … but these are the voices: in the beginning there was a voice. It spoke a language that bore the marks of ruin. Words began bursting into flame. The written words are the ashes of that old flame. (*Designs of the Night Sky* 73)

In these lines Glancy highlights European's ignorance of pre-existing Indigenous Civilizations, that they do have multiple histories and heritages before the colonial footfall. Vespucci's coinage of new world has erased the multiple histories and contributed for the creation of a collective illusion.

Similarly, dual-process theory popularized by Daniel Kahneman explains that illusions arise because fast, intuitive thinking (Type 1) dominates slower, analytical reasoning (Type 2) (Gorelik). Perception-based theories also consider perception as an inferential and predictive process. Because, the brain actively interprets sensory input, and create conflicts between external stimuli and internal hypotheses. This leads to the creation of cognitive illusions as "informative errors" (Cami).

Another relevant concept is the illusory truth effect, which suggests that repeated or incidental exposure to an idea increases the perception of its truthfulness due to feelings of fluency and familiarity (Mikell). In many societies, the first narrative encountered, regardless of its accuracy, tends to be accepted as true. In general, cognitive illusion refers to errors in thinking that do not deceive the senses but instead mislead reasoning and judgment.

In a positive sense, Glancy mentions about a Cherokee newspaper named Phonex, in the novel *Pushing the Bear*. It symbolises vitality, referring to a bird that rises from ashes, is compared with indigenous spirit. "We had known troubles since the white man came. Even the Cherokee newspaper, the Phonex, was named for the

bird that rises from ashes. Our villages had been burned so often by white settlers it seemed the right name. yet we always rebuilt." (*Pushing the Bear* 17) The lines suggest that the people's repeated confrontation with struggles, tortures, and their recovery have pictured them a resilient, but such spirits has not been noticed by the mainstream community.

Transcendental Illusion, a concept introduced by Immanuel Kant, refers to the natural and unavoidable tendency of human reason to believe in something beyond the limits of possible experience, beyond the world of appearances (Proops). Since human beings are part of nature, their understanding and responses are shaped by natural tendencies, many of which are influenced by deep-seated, collective illusions. Indigenous tradition sometime even breaks these notions, that even though they believe in the spiritual, a super power force, they identify themselves as practical human being. The following lines from the novel *Pushing the Bear* justify this idea: "The Basket maker: "But other think the idea of weaving baskets came from the sky. An upside-down holder of the rain. So it falls back to us. "But I say, the idea for baskets came from our stories."" (*Pushing the Bear* 153) The basket maker's statement contrast divine power regarding the origin of basket making, drawing a human-centred Indigenous Knowledge systems. She says that stories are the true source of cultural invention over supernatural powers.

In Jungian psychology, the concept of the collective unconscious proposes that every individual possesses shared transpersonal psychic layers beyond personal history. These inherited structures and patterns form archetypes common to all humans. In a comparable way, collective cognitive illusions take root across societies and are difficult to uproot. These illusions are often exploited by religious fanatics, racists, casteists, and those who adhere rigidly to social dogmas. In simple terms, a collective illusion is a universal false notion, misunderstanding, or a belief people accept because they assume others believe it too. This creates a herd or mob mind-set. Glancy kept an argument about "colour – Race" contrasting this in her novel *Stone Heart*. She tries to say that the idea of black discrimination is an illusion. The following lines confirm it: "They will dominate other even if they are not blacks, not poors, not outcast, they just find out reason to subjugate us." (*Stone Heart* 137) It is simply believed whites hate blacks but it is a myth or illusion. Glancy strongly says, whites find reason to discriminate.

In a rule-governed world, people formulate judgments based on moral principles or civic laws, but fail to recognise that nature has a law, particularly the principle of "survival of the fittest." In the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30), Jesus asserts that the servants who multiplied their master given talents were rewarded, a rule that echoes aspects of nature's law. Likewise, the Parable of the sower (Mathew 13) and Parable of the workers in the vineyard (Mathew 20:1-6) told by Jesus, present a set of principles that differ from human legal systems, but aligns closely with the nature's law. Biblically, believers consider it as Almighty's law. In contrary, human judgments about actions in the physical world are frequently shaped only by legal or moral rules, socially accepted by all. These frameworks can become illusions when applied rigidly to complex realities which are found in indigenous communities. Such premises illustrate how collective illusions persist within human discourse and belief systems, shaping perceptions of objective reality.

A similar notion can be found in the minds of non-Native observers who cannot understand Indigenous people's way of lives, how harmoniously they live with nature. Indigenous people believe they are part of nature, following dynamic, sustainable, and deeply rooted systems of life. They don't see nature – land, trees, or any natural resources as objects of possession, owing a non-materialistic attitude. Instead, these lifestyles have often been looked down as innocent/uncivilized by the main stream people who see everything in materialistic or capitalistic attitudes. This indifferent attitude is itself a collective illusion, that was seeded and perpetuated by historians, writers, and travellers.

Whites often have developed negative ideas about Indigenous people, and it is evident in the lines:

"Maritole: Sometimes I believed the spirits of my mother and baby were with the Great Spirit. They were waiting in the afterlife for us….. the spirit collected Grandmother's cotton cards, her thimble shell beads, butter ladle, so they seemed to disappear. The white people would think there were thieves among them. Or they'd look for our things and say they'd been misplaced." (*Pushing the Bear* 112)

Glancy shows how white people disregard Indigenous people and remain skeptical of them, often viewing them as thieves/Savages. The passage below also highlights this notion: Maritole says,

"Didn't they have anything to do but stare at us? A ragged band of Indians. Half frozen. Hated. Sent from our land. They called us savages. Then it was all right to drive us from our land….. what was wrong with me? How could I talk to the soldier whose job it was to push us from our land?" (*Pushing the Bear* 112)

When Christopher Columbus found the land of red Indians, he wrote a letter to Ferdinand and Isabella (1593), stating that Native Americans "have no arms and are without warlike instruments… They are so artless and free with all they possess that no one would believe it without having seen it" (Major). Likewise, Amerigo Vespucci in Mundus Novus (1503) records in history that the natives as "naked savages," portraying them as cannibalistic barbarians who "eat human flesh," have no religion, and live "bestially" without law or government (Martens). Such accounts reveal how Europeans generalized isolated observations. The early persons to contact the Native American failed to notice and recognize the highly organised and civilised tribes that existed across the continent.

In reality, numerous Indigenous societies, including the Iroquois Confederacy, the Pueblo peoples, the Natchez, Mesoamerican civilizations, and Andean cultures, developed agricultural villages, towns, urban centres, monumental architecture, hierarchical structures, writing-like systems, trade networks, and governance models. Over twenty polities in North America were recognized by Europeans themselves as "civilized" due to large-scale agriculture and sophisticated social organization (Thomas). Yet the dominant European narrative generalized the unknown as barbaric, an unmistakable collective illusion.

Tanner says, "The men grumble as they camped that night. Thirty-five men signed away land that belonged to seventeen thousand Cherokee…. We farmed to prove to them we were civilized, then they took our farms…. We emulated the white man. Established a capital. Took power from the women. Made a two-party government. You. The Removal Act. We didn't believe it." (*Pushing the Bear* 75) The line highlights Cherokee people's rich cultural and ecological understanding which is neglected by the colonizers.

Such illusions can also be seen in the works of popular British writers. Shakespeare's The Tempest (1611) describes Caliban with lines such as "A devil, a born devil, on whose nature / Nurture can never stick" (Act I, Scene 2) and "You taught me language, and my profit on't / Is I know how to curse" (Act I, Scene 2), reinforcing racialized ideas of innate savagery. Similarly, Richard Steele's essay "The Spectator" No. 11 (1711), Inkle and Yarico, portrays Indigenous women as lascivious and savage, echoing the same Eurocentric misconceptions.

In a world ruled by the lively interplay of light and darkness – the binary, prioritizing one side over the other cannot be possible. For the earth to run smoothly, both elements are essential to maintain the balance. Taking on one side often requires justifying that position - eventually leading to reshaping reality for suitability. This results in the distortion or erasure of the other end of the binary, giving rise to illusions. The process operates in both directions, and illusions continue to accumulate. More than mere ignorance, it is the psychological and emotional restriction of reality and obscures truth. As truth is often painful, people prefer to live in comforting fantasies, many of which grow into collective illusions.

To explain this, the stereotypes - when Europeans were perceived as dominant, all the others were immediately considered as vulnerable or submissive. When Europeans were imagined as perfectly civilized,

Aboriginal and Native people were simultaneously seen as barbaric. This tendency to "take a side", civilized versus savage, is itself a collective illusion. James Fenimore Cooper's The Last of the Mohicans (1826) contrasts "civilized" Europeans with "savage" Indians, while also idealizing certain Native characters as "noble savages" (O'Connor). Similarly, Washington Irving's A History of New York portrays Indigenous people through stock images of indolence, treachery, or picturesque simplicity, while Europeans are depicted as industrious and orderly (Linares). The white's collective cognitive attitude is revealed in this line "I remarked. "I don't believe no God. The white men. Mehpush. They come. Take the land. Say we don't have the truth. Well, put their God on a cross. Leave him there." (*Pushing the Bear* 25) Glancy points out the binary attitude present in the Europeans that Natives have no truth and unfaithful, which implies, whites are trustworthy. On contrary, the afflicted or the victims wish to live in an illusion to escape pain. Maritole express her wish to entre an illusion or fantasy just for the sake of escaping harsh reality. "I would like to think so. But I see a lot of Indians suffering without any magic lake to go to," (*Pushing the Bear* 126) The painful truth can also be transformed into an illusion or comforting ignorance which is evident in this line: "But we didn't know we were naked until the white man showed us… 'Yes, the great spirit allowed the white man to show us what we were.'" (*Pushing the Bear* 181), where Tanner make a positive remark despite the loss.

Even the concept of God, an unseen being believed in with absolute certainty and allotted innumerable powers, which illustrates how humans naturally accept as a powerful factor, what they have not witnessed. In the same way, people have long ago believed the exaggerated and often false narratives about Indigenous people, and pin them as uncivilized.

Historically, when scientific knowledge had not reached the common persons, beliefs emerged from stories, oral traditions, and inherited myths. During this time, the "willing suspension of disbelief" had little influence. People accepted widely repeated claims without a question; that till 18th century, even England believed in religion and rituals. Literature which was greatly shaped by the oral stories and cultural myths, carried the misconceptions strongly to the later generations. This widespread ignorance paved the way for collective illusions, a systematic misunderstanding of reality. Therefore, collective cognitive illusion is not merely ignorance or lack of knowledge whereas it also involves the misinterpretation of beliefs and the distortion of reality.

The long-standing idea that Native peoples were inherently barbaric created a powerful and lasting illusion. Today, many indigenous practices are recognized as self-sustaining and are increasingly adopted in modern environmental science and conservation (Enioluwa). Indigenous knowledge systems, developed over generations through close observation of ecological changes, have resulted in highly sustainable practices such as crop rotation, agroforestry, rotational farming, and controlled burns, all of which contribute to biodiversity and ecosystem resilience (Mehrdad).

Hesitant to acknowledge the biodiversity-rich cultures of Indigenous people, is itself an illusion, what heuristics call the illusion of knowledge. As Stephen Hawking observed, overconfidence often creates the illusion of understanding. European attitudes of cultural supremacy cultivated such illusions, preventing recognition of Indigenous ecological wisdom. "The white men had divided our land among their states and called most of our places by English names." (*Pushing the Bear* 9) The renaming reveals a disregard for Indigenous biodiversity knowledge embedded in place names. Further, the superior attitude of the white is revealed in these lines: "Lacey Woodard: Who were these white men who only saw things in their own way? Didn't they know the land was not bought and sold? Would they be arguing over the sun next? The stars? Didn't they know they belonged with the earth and animals to the Great Spirit?" (*Pushing the Bear* 95)

Collective cognitive illusion also arises when people deliberately remain silent about certain issues, either because those issues do not affect them or because they wish to conceal historical facts. Such silence contributes to the creation and reinforcement of illusions. Bias, in this sense, is a deliberate act, and collective

cognitive illusion represents a later stage in which biases are inherited unconsciously and even perceived as positive or natural traits. Yet for personal benefit or political convenience, people cannot simply ignore or hide realities. European powers, as Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz argues in An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States, engaged in this practice intentionally:

Settler colonialism is inherently genocidal in terms of the genocide convention. In the case of the British North American colonies and the United States, not only extermination and removal were practiced but also the disappearing of the prior existence of Indigenous peoples, and this continues to be perpetuated in local histories. Anishinaabe (Ojibwe) historian Jean O'Brien names this practice of writing Indians out of existence 'firsting and lasting.' All over the continent, local histories, monuments, and signage narrate the story of first settlement: the founder(s), the first school, first dwelling, first everything, as if there had never been occupants who thrived in those places before Euro-Americans." (Dunbar-Ortiz 9)

In this way, Europeans constructed the illusion that Indigenous peoples were "vanishing primitives," erasing their sophisticated pre-Columbian societies, achievements, and continuing presence.

Advertising operates on similar principles. It creates illusions or hyper-realities that alter people's perceptions of the world. Advertisements shape attitudes toward products or services by promoting belief in a brand rather than in authentic quality. Different appeals are crafted for different audiences. Once a brand is established and trusted, companies introduce new products under the same brand name, and despite being unfamiliar, these new products gain immediate acceptance because of inherited trust, a form of cognitive illusion affecting consumer judgment. People become conditioned, much like in Pavlovian conditioning, to place faith in artificial constructs over natural realities.

Ever since the start of the colonial period, European advertisements and media have repeatedly degraded Native Americans, depicting them as savage, ignorant, lazy, or drunken, even when selling products. There were advertisements with lines such as "How funny it would be if Indians wore coats!", "How funny it would be if Indians drove cars!", and "The 'Red Skins' are here" (ictnews.org). These mockeries exemplify how such portrayals reinforce stereotypes and implant strong collective cognitive illusions in the minds of the mass.

The "rule of thirds" in photography, is a psychological concept that people tend to focus only on one event or one corner of a photograph or picture, while ignoring the rest. Problems faced by one group, whether humans or animals, often go unnoticed by those who are unaffected. The rich fail to understand the struggles of the poor, and the poor may not fully grasp the burdens of the rich. This becomes a collective illusion, unless a person has personally experienced a hardship, they often cannot understand those who are suffering. Every challenge or incident has the potential to break such illusions.

For instance, Europeans and others who have never undergone collective cultural or historical trauma cannot fully comprehend the struggles of Native peoples, who continue to experience the effects of centuries of genocide, forced relocation, and cultural erasure. These historical wounds have resulted in depression, substance abuse, suicide, and family disruption among Native American communities (Brown-Rice). "Specifically, the traumatic events suffered during previous generations create a pathway that results in the current generation being at an increased risk of experiencing mental and physical distress, leaving them unable to gain strength from their Indigenous culture or utilize their natural familial and tribal support system" (BigFoot & Braden). The collective illusion of mainstream society lies in its failure to recognize, react to, or even acknowledge these persistent social issues.

Why do we perceive the lion as the "king of the forest"? Why not the tiger, the bear, or any other powerful creature? The association arises from certain convenient traits, strength, majesty, dignity, that are culturally linked to kingship. Yet in reality, a king need not be majestic. Beyond physical appearance, qualities such as wisdom,

leadership, and charisma matter more. However, once convinced by one trait, humans tend to generalize indiscriminately. One may like or dislike a person based on a single characteristic. Similarly, the label unchristian was weaponized to identify indigenous culture as inferior. Maritole says, "They called us savages without rights of our own." … "Call us unchristian so it's even easier to take our land," a friend offered." (*Pushing the Bear* 20)

In the same way, when mainland people observe Aboriginal groups wearing ornaments made from animal bones, feathers, or natural elements, they may instantly label them "barbaric." Conversely, modern accessories and fashions are seen as marks of superiority. Identifying an entire culture based on one or two features is itself a collective cognitive illusion.

Human beings often glorify people only after they die, while developing hostility or indifference toward them when they are alive. This reflects an illusion of distance: we tend to trust or idealize something when it is far away, just as we believe in an unseen God. Children exhibit proximity illusions as well: they believe their father is the strongest and their mother is the best in the world. Proximity and distance both shape cognitive illusions. Similarly, because Western culture is globally dominant and Indigenous cultures appear distant from mainstream society, people develop collective illusions about Indigenous communities.

Conclusion

It is evident in the works of Diane Glancy that she has strived to dismantle the collective cognitive illusions through her works. By reimagining the lost knowledge systems, cultural philosophies, and lived experiences, she helps readers understand the depth and resilience of her community. Their richness of culture, physical and mental strength, and continued presence are revealed through the concept of survivance which they inherently had in practice. Postclassical narratology elements found in the novels revealed that how collective illusions, reinforced by literature, history, essays, advertisements, and media, significantly shape readers' perception. Notably, the active presence and self-representation of Indigenous people alone have challenged and collapsed these illusions, and restored a more truthful understanding of their identity and heritage.

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