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Research Paper

Autobiography as Autoethnography: Decolonizing the Self in George Copway's *Recollections of Native Life*

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Abstract
This paper explores Recollections of Native Life in George Copway's writings as an instance of autobiography functioning as autoethnography, positioning it as an Indigenous methodology that challenges colonial modes of knowledge. The study contextualizes Copway's work within the legacy of ethnographic and anthropological distortions that historically framed Indigenous peoples through Eurocentric lenses. Drawing upon Linda Tuhiwai Smith's Decolonizing Methodologies, Diane Lewis's critique of anthropology, and contemporary theories of autoethnography by Reed-Danahay, Jones, and Chang, the paper argues that Copway's texts—The Life, History and Travels of Kah-ge-ga-gah-bowh and Indian Life and Indian History—transcend mere personal narrative. They become dialogic spaces where the Indigenous self reclaims authorship, history, and epistemic agency. By blending myth, history, and personal experience, Copway articulates a counter-discursive model of self-writing that redefines the boundaries between ethnography and autobiography. Ultimately, the paper asserts that Copway's self-narratives embody a decolonial praxis that validates Indigenous sensibilities, spirituality, and moral codes as integral components of Native identity and knowledge.

Keywords: *Autoethnography, Indigenous methodologies, autobiography, decolonization, Ojibwa culture, colonial discourse.*

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I. Introduction

The nineteenth century marked a critical phase in the representation of Indigenous peoples within Western intellectual and literary traditions. European colonial expansion was accompanied by an equally pervasive "epistemic colonization," where Indigenous lives were studied, classified, and written about primarily through the lens of the Western ethnographer or missionary. These ethnographic accounts, though claiming scientific objectivity, often dehumanized Native peoples by reducing them to subjects of curiosity or moral instruction. Within this context of intellectual domination, the writings of George Copway (Kah-ge-ga-gah-bowh), an Ojibwa author, minister, and activist, stand as a remarkable counter-discourse. His works—particularly *The Life, History and Travels of Kah-ge-ga-gah-bowh* (1847) and *Indian Life and Indian History* (1858)—mark an important transition from being the "object" of ethnographic inquiry to becoming an author of Indigenous experience.

Copway's narratives offer a rare and powerful act of self-representation during a period when Indigenous voices were systematically excluded from the colonial archive. His writing combines autobiographical reflection with ethnographic observation, creating what modern scholars identify as autoethnography—a form of self-writing that situates personal experience within broader cultural, political, and historical frameworks. This approach not only challenges the Eurocentric monopoly on knowledge but also redefines the parameters of what constitutes valid ethnographic discourse. Copway's insistence on writing his own people's history transforms the colonial narrative of domination into a narrative of reclamation and survival.

The relevance of Copway's work extends beyond its historical significance; it anticipates contemporary Indigenous scholarship that seeks to "decolonize" research and reclaim narrative authority. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith observes in Decolonizing Methodologies, the colonial project was sustained not only by political domination but also by the "control over how Indigenous peoples are represented and understood." Copway's

autobiographical texts disrupt this control by reclaiming the representational space denied to Indigenous communities. In this way, his writings can be seen as early examples of decolonial praxis—an assertion of selfhood and cultural integrity through storytelling.

This paper examines Copway's Recollections of Native Life and related works through the lens of autoethnography and Indigenous epistemology. It argues that Copway's self-narratives blur the boundaries between autobiography, ethnography, and spiritual testimony to construct an Indigenous mode of knowing that resists colonial categorization. By reading his works alongside theoretical perspectives from scholars such as Diane Lewis, Reed-Danahay, and Smith, this study positions Copway not merely as a historical figure but as a proto-decolonial thinker whose writings articulate an early model of Indigenous intellectual resistance.

II. Colonial Knowledge and the Ethnographic Gaze

The relationship between colonialism and knowledge production has been one of the most enduring legacies of imperial history. European colonial powers justified their expansion not only through military conquest but also through systems of intellectual control that claimed authority over how Indigenous peoples were to be seen, studied, and understood. Anthropology and ethnography—disciplines that emerged during the height of colonial expansion—became instruments for constructing the "native" as an object of study rather than as a subject of history. This process established what Edward Said later described as the *"positional superiority"* of the colonizer, whereby Western scholars assumed the right to define and interpret non-Western cultures from a detached, supposedly objective perspective.

In the case of Indigenous peoples in North America, this ethnographic gaze operated through missionary reports, travel writings, and government documents that sought to catalogue and moralize Native lives. These representations often portrayed Indigenous communities as primitive, vanishing, or in need of Christian salvation—narratives that served to legitimize colonial domination. **As** Diane Lewis argues in her essay "Anthropology and Colonialism," anthropology's claim to neutrality concealed its complicity with colonial structures of power. The discipline, she notes, evolved as a "handmaiden of empire," organizing knowledge about colonized peoples to serve administrative and ideological ends. The result was an epistemic hierarchy in which the Indigenous person was rendered voiceless within the very discourse that claimed to describe them.

Against this backdrop, George Copway's intervention becomes profoundly significant. Writing in the mid-nineteenth century, Copway entered a literary and intellectual space dominated by colonial ethnographers and missionary chroniclers who presumed to speak *for* Indigenous peoples. However, his work *The Life, History and Travels of Kah-ge-ga-gah-bowh* transforms this dynamic by reversing the ethnographic gaze. Instead of being the subject of external scrutiny, Copway positions himself as both observer and participant within his culture. His narratives integrate lived experience, cultural memory, and moral reflection, presenting Indigenous life not as an anthropological curiosity but as a coherent moral and spiritual world.

In doing so, Copway redefines ethnography itself. The gaze that once objectified the Indigenous body is reclaimed as a self-reflexive lens through which the Native self speaks back to colonial authority. His descriptions of Ojibwa customs, kinship systems, and spiritual practices are not presented for the exotic pleasure of a Western audience, but as a form of cultural testimony—an assertion that Indigenous ways of knowing are intellectually and spiritually complete. This shift anticipates the later framework of autoethnography, where the boundaries between personal narrative and cultural analysis are deliberately blurred to challenge dominant epistemologies.

Moreover, Copway's reconfiguration of the ethnographic gaze resonates with Linda Tuhiwai Smith's critique of Western research paradigms. Smith argues that "research" in the colonial context often became a form of epistemic violence, transforming Indigenous lives into data stripped of context and agency. Copway's narratives resist this by restoring the spiritual and ethical dimensions of Indigenous identity, revealing how knowledge in Ojibwa culture is inseparable from land, community, and moral order. Through this act of narrative reclamation, Copway transforms the ethnographic act into a process of healing and resistance.

Thus, Copway's engagement with the colonial knowledge system does more than correct misrepresentations—it fundamentally reorients the act of knowing. By turning the ethnographic gaze inward and rendering it self-determined, Copway inaugurates a new epistemological position for Indigenous writers: one that challenges the colonial monopoly on truth and authorizes the Indigenous self as a producer of knowledge.

III. Reclaiming the Self: Autobiography as Autoethnography

The emergence of Indigenous autobiography in the nineteenth century marks a crucial turning point in the history of cultural self-representation. Within a colonial milieu that systematically denied Native peoples authorship and intellectual agency, autobiography became a radical act of self-assertion. For George Copway (Kah-ge-ga-gah-bowh), writing his life story was not merely a personal exercise in self-expression but a profound political and cultural intervention. His The Life, History and Travels of Kah-ge-ga-gah-bowh (1847) stands at the intersection of personal narrative and collective testimony, transforming autobiography into an

early form of autoethnography—a narrative mode that merges the subjective and the social, the individual and the communal.

Autoethnography, as defined by Deborah Reed-Danahay, refers to "a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context," allowing the writer to weave together personal experience and cultural identity (Reed-Danahay 9). In Copway's case, this narrative method serves both as a critique of colonial ethnography and as a restoration of Indigenous epistemology. His autobiographical voice does not seek validation from European ethnographic frameworks but instead situates Ojibwa experience within its own moral and cosmological order. By grounding his self-description in the values of kinship, spirituality, and communal responsibility, Copway's text challenges the Western ideal of the autonomous individual, replacing it with an Indigenous model of relational identity.

Throughout his autobiography, Copway reclaims the ethnographic vocabulary used to describe his people, transforming it from a language of domination into one of self-definition. When he writes about Ojibwa traditions, ceremonies, and the natural world, he does so as an insider interpreting his culture for both Native and non-Native audiences. This double consciousness—writing within the colonizer's language while preserving Indigenous modes of meaning—illustrates what Mary Louise Pratt terms the "contact zone," a space of negotiation where cultures meet under conditions of asymmetrical power (Pratt 7). Within this zone, Copway's narrative achieves an act of rhetorical inversion: the ethnographic gaze that once objectified the Native subject becomes a medium through which the Native voice articulates agency and continuity.

Moreover, Copway's autoethnography operates as a form of spiritual reclamation. His narrative consistently intertwines Christian ethics with Ojibwa cosmology, revealing a complex identity that refuses binary categorizations of "converted" versus "traditional." Rather than depicting Christianity as a colonial imposition, Copway reinterprets it through an Indigenous ethical lens, emphasizing compassion, humility, and communal harmony—values that resonate deeply with Ojibwa spiritual philosophy. This syncretic approach not only humanizes his people to a Western readership but also reclaims spiritual discourse from missionary control, asserting that Indigenous faith and moral reasoning are integral components of human civilization.

Copway's blending of personal and collective experience also anticipates the methodological concerns of modern Indigenous research. Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues that Indigenous methodologies must center storytelling as a legitimate mode of knowledge, one that bridges memory, experience, and theory. Copway's self-narrative embodies this principle long before it was theorized, demonstrating that storytelling can serve as both self-expression and social critique. His autobiography therefore performs dual functions: it documents the realities of nineteenth-century Native life under colonial pressure and simultaneously reconstructs a cultural identity rooted in Indigenous epistemic authority.

Seen through the lens of autoethnography, Copway's writing challenges the colonial archive not by denying its existence but by rewriting its terms of legitimacy. His life story transforms the anthropological impulse to describe the Indigenous into an Indigenous impulse to define the self. In doing so, Copway not only asserts his individuality but also reclaims narrative sovereignty for his people. His voice, emerging from the margins of empire, becomes both a historical document and an ethical manifesto—an act of writing that restores humanity to the colonized subject and intellectual dignity to Indigenous culture.

IV. Towards a Decolonial Discourse: Rereading Copway Today

Revisiting George Copway's works in the twenty-first century offers an opportunity to situate his narratives within the larger framework of decolonial thought and Indigenous resurgence. Although Copway wrote within the constraints of a colonial publishing system and a predominantly Euro-American readership, his texts transcend those boundaries to articulate a distinctly Indigenous form of knowledge-making. In the context of modern scholarship, Copway can be reinterpreted not merely as a historical figure or a "Native informant" but as an early decolonial intellectual who used narrative as a means to reclaim epistemic authority.

The decolonial framework, as advanced by scholars such as Walter Mignolo and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, calls for dismantling the hierarchies of power embedded in Western epistemologies and for re-centering Indigenous modes of knowing, being, and representing. Smith, in Decolonizing Methodologies, argues that "to decolonize is to recognize and reassert Indigenous presence within intellectual traditions from which it has been erased." Copway's writings anticipate this position by reclaiming storytelling, memory, and moral reflection as legitimate forms of knowledge production. His narrative practice—grounded in lived experience and community ethics—resists the positivist logic of colonial ethnography and instead affirms that knowledge must emerge from relationship, reciprocity, and respect for land and life.

When read through a decolonial lens, Copway's *The Life, History and Travels of Kah-ge-ga-gah-bowh and Indian Life and Indian History* reveal a dual strategy: they engage the colonial discourse externally, using the English language and Christian idiom familiar to European readers, while subverting it internally through Indigenous epistemological frameworks. This negotiation reflects what Homi Bhabha calls the "third space" of enunciation—a liminal zone where hybrid identities resist fixed colonial binaries (Bhabha 37). Within this

space, Copway's self-representation becomes a subversive act of cultural translation, one that simultaneously communicates across cultures and challenges the assumptions of the colonizer.

A decolonial rereading of Copway also compels us to reconsider his complex relationship with assimilationist discourse. On the surface, his embrace of Christian morality and his appeals for Indigenous "civilization" may seem to align with colonial ideologies. However, a closer reading reveals that Copway reinterprets these values through a communal rather than imperial lens. His invocation of Christian ethics is not an acceptance of European superiority but a moral appeal for equality and shared humanity. This strategic engagement with colonial rhetoric allowed Copway to speak to audiences otherwise closed to Indigenous testimony while preserving an underlying affirmation of Indigenous identity. In this sense, his narrative exemplifies strategic hybridity—a form of negotiation that transforms the tools of colonization into instruments of critique.

Furthermore, Copway's writings hold continued relevance for contemporary Indigenous scholarship. His life narrative foreshadows the principles of Indigenous methodologies later theorized by Smith and others, where knowledge is seen as relational, embodied, and accountable to community. Copway's blending of personal memory with cultural history anticipates the "storywork" methods developed by modern Indigenous scholars such as Jo-ann Archibald, who emphasize storytelling as a process of teaching, healing, and theorizing. By positioning himself as both author and custodian of collective wisdom, Copway extends the boundaries of what constitutes legitimate academic discourse.

Rereading Copway today, therefore, demands that we recognize his contribution not only as a writer but as a theorist of decolonization before the term existed. His work articulates an Indigenous epistemic resistance that challenges the colonial archive's authority and invites modern readers to rethink the categories through which Native life has been represented. In reclaiming his narrative voice, Copway performs an intellectual act that aligns with the central aims of decolonial discourse: the restoration of Indigenous self-determination, cultural continuity, and narrative sovereignty.

VI. Conclusion

George Copway's writings occupy a crucial yet often overlooked space in the continuum of Indigenous intellectual and literary history. Emerging from a nineteenth-century context dominated by colonial ethnography and missionary discourse, Copway's narratives offer one of the earliest and most compelling assertions of Indigenous self-representation. Through his The Life, History and Travels of Kah-ge-ga-gah-bowh and Indian Life and Indian History, Copway reclaims authorship over his culture's memory, ethics, and worldview—an act that transforms personal storytelling into a collective assertion of identity and agency. His works not only document Indigenous life under the shadow of colonization but also redefine what it means to know, remember, and narrate from within an Indigenous epistemology.

By situating his lived experience within broader cultural and spiritual frameworks, Copway achieves what contemporary scholars now recognize as autoethnography—a narrative mode that dissolves the colonial separation between observer and observed. His self-writing stands as both an intellectual critique of ethnographic authority and a moral restoration of Indigenous dignity. In doing so, Copway bridges two worlds: he speaks in the language of the colonizer while preserving the cosmology of his ancestors, transforming hybridity into a site of resistance rather than assimilation.

When reread through the lens of decolonial discourse, Copway's work transcends its historical moment to anticipate later theoretical developments in Indigenous methodologies and cultural resurgence. His emphasis on relational identity, spiritual balance, and communal ethics resonates with modern decolonial thinkers such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith, who advocate for the reclamation of Indigenous storytelling as both knowledge and resistance. Copway's blending of autobiography, ethnography, and theology prefigures this intellectual project by positioning narrative as an act of healing and reclamation.

Ultimately, George Copway must be recognized not merely as a participant in nineteenth-century missionary writing but as a forerunner of Indigenous decolonial thought. His writings exemplify how literature can become a space of epistemic freedom—where the silenced voice of the colonized subject reclaims the power to define truth, identity, and belonging. In bridging the historical with the theoretical, the personal with the collective, and the spiritual with the political, Copway transforms his life story into an enduring testament to the resilience of Indigenous consciousness. His legacy continues to remind us that decolonization begins not only with reclaiming land but also with reclaiming the power to tell one's own story.

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