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Frances Wright's America: A 19th-Century Utopia

ABSTRACT

Frances Wright, a British social reformer and feminist, published an account of her American travels: *Views of Society and Manners in America* in 1821. Wright founded an experimental community in Nashoba, Tennessee, whose aim was to buy black slaves, educate them, and then liberate them. Even though the enterprise turned out to be a failure, the author continued to fight for the cause of black emancipation.

My paper examines Wright's portrayal of America in *Views*, which, compared to most other early 19th-century British travel accounts, is surprisingly enthusiastic. Wright idealizes the young republic, seeing it as a perfect embodiment of her ideals. I argue that Wright's vision of the young republic is utopian, and it prevents her from seeing any flaws in the American system. This is especially pronounced in the case of the central problem posed by British travelogues of the era, slavery, which troubles her not so much on moral grounds, but as a blemish on the character of the country of freedom and equality.

Keywords: antebellum USA, utopia, slavery, travel writing.

19TH-CENTURY BRITISH TRAVELERS ON AMERICA

The 19th century was a time when travel writing became an extremely popular genre in Europe, as the Industrial Revolution introduced new means of transport allowing fast and cheap locomotion (Blanton 19). The USA was one of the most interesting destinations for British travelers in that period: first, as a former colony, and second, as a laboratory of democracy, showing Europeans its potential threats or promises, depending on the author's political views. Remarks recorded in British travelogues on America share the peculiar features of the genre of travel writing, being suspended between fact and fiction, or the objective and the subjective. On the one hand, travel texts describe events which really happened and one of their professed purposes is conveying to the readers factual information about a foreign country. On the other hand, as Thompson argues, travel writers do not reconstruct but rather construct their experiences, as well as their personas, creating an illusion of factuality (27–30). Moreover, no matter how objective the authors attempt to be, travel-writing is also a highly personal genre, often revealing more about the traveler than about the visited country. As Laurie Langbauer puts it, “[t]ravelers don’t really see the countries they visit but bring instead expectations about them, like so much extra baggage” (5). A particularly important bias is the ideological or political one, as the travelogue reflects the traveler’s conditions (Youngs 2), as well as prior opinions.

19th-century British travelers visiting America were in most cases quite critical of the young republic, especially at the beginning of the 1800s. This attitude stemmed from a few factors: first, it was a matter of literary convention. A critical description of the Americans’ apparent lack of refinement was what travelogue readers expected; what at the time they considered entertaining (Wheately 63, 75). Second, anti-Americanism was an intellectual trend popular all over 19th-century Europe, not only in Britain, helping the Old Continent to forge a sense of common identity by fashioning itself as the opposite of America (Gulddal 494). Then, there were political reasons: for instance, Frances Trollope, whose *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832) was one of the most critical and at the same time the most popular British books about America, was encouraged by her publisher and by Basil Hall (another famous and conservative author of an American travelogue) to make the message of her book support the Tory cause against the British Reform Act of 1832 (Kisiel 66). The idea did work to the extent that Tories used Trollope’s account of the supposed dangers of democracy as a proof of their arguments against the reform (Deis and Frye 131).

British travelers criticized everything about America, from its landscapes to its political system. In early 19th-century Britain “democracy” was not

a positive term; it evoked French terror and mob rule (Campbell 91). Thus, also in travel writing it was a target of mockery, as a system propagating equality beyond reason. Captain Basil Hall writes of a judge who, “by bringing the heels on a level with, or rather higher than, the head, affords not a bad illustration of the principle as well as the practice of Democracy” (Hall 408). For Hall the system is a topsy-turvy political arrangement, which not only brings “naturally” unequal people on par, but apparently makes superior those who should be inferior. The result of democracy is an array of minor evils experienced by conservative travelers: they complain about American materialism, pointing out that, since Americans have no other way to feel better than their neighbors, they seek distinction through wealth (Mesick 66, 309–10). Travel writers look down upon American art and literature: Frances Trollope declares that an “obvious cause of inferiority in the national literature, is the very slight acquaintance with the best models of composition, which is thought necessary for persons called well educated” (Trollope 244), while Frances Kemble exclaims:

where are the picture-galleries—the sculptures—the works of art and science—the countless wonders of human ingenuity and skill—the cultivated and refined society—the intercourse with men of genius, literature, scientific knowledge—where are all the sources from which I am to draw my recreation? (85)

One important problem generated by democracy, according to the travelers, is a chronic lack of good servants. Most British authors complain about Americans’ disdaining the very name of “servants,” as they associate it with slavery. Instead, they want to be called “help” and insist on being treated as equals. For conservatives such as Trollope this is as comical as it is tedious.

However, the most famous, and most amusing, critical passages of the said travelogues refer to American manners: Americans eat their meals hastily and in complete silence, they rigidly separate men and women at social events, talk too much or too little, always about business and without the slightest shade of wit. The habit that seems to annoy British travelers most and whose descriptions appear over and over again in subsequent books is one of tobacco chewing and spitting. This is how Charles Dickens describes his experience of American manners:

In the courts of law, the judge has his spittoon, the crier his, the witness his, and the prisoner his; while the jurymen and spectators are provided for, as so many men who in the course of nature must desire to spit incessantly. In the hospitals, the students of medicine are requested, by notices upon the wall, to eject their tobacco juice into the boxes provided

for that purpose, and not to discolour the stairs. In public buildings, visitors are implored, through the same agency, to squirt the essence of their quids, or "plugs," as I have heard them called by gentlemen learned in this kind of sweetmeat, into the national spittoons, and not about the bases of the marble columns. (273)

The passage goes on; the feeling is as if British authors tried to outdo one another in this peculiar sub-genre of spitting descriptions.

Finally, what British travelers are particularly critical of is American slavery. This was especially the case after 1833 when slavery was abolished in the British Empire—thus, British visitors exhibited a strong sense of moral superiority and felt obliged, regardless of their degree of sympathy for the US as a whole, to express unequivocal criticism of the South's "peculiar institution."

Seen against this background, Frances Wright's *Views of Society and Manners in America* (1821) seems surprisingly enthusiastic about American democracy, even given her reformist views. She is far from being the only British traveler to have appreciated America: progressives such as Harriet Martineau, James Silk Buckingham and George Combe were quite in favor of American democracy (Berger 107); in general, travelers coming from the middle class were far more open to the American political system (Berger 21). Yet, few of these writers were as enthusiastic about the young republic as Wright. Dickens, while placing great hopes in America's political system and praising the country's prisons, insane asylums and facilities for the blind, was appalled not only by the lack of manners, but mostly by slavery and the treatment of Native Americans. Harriet Martineau too found a lot to criticize in the New World: above all the situation of people of color, but also American imitateness in art, the country's expansionist appetites on the eve of the War with Mexico, and the "political non-existence of women" (I.102). Wright, on the other hand, seemed to praise exactly the things other travelers tended to criticize, finding absolutely no fault in her beloved republic. Even given the abovementioned subjective and fictitious elements characteristic for travel writing, Wright was quite unique in not trying to come across as unbiased, but rather consistently building her utopia.

WRIGHT'S AMERICA

Frances Wright (1795–1852) was a social reformer, feminist and abolitionist, the first Englishwoman to have written a travel account of America (Mesick 12). She was born in Dundee, Scotland, and she traveled to America for the first time in 1818. After her return to Britain in 1821 she wrote the book that brought her renown (even though by that time

she had already been a published author): *Views of Society and Manners in America*—the travelogue this essay discusses. Upon her second visit to America in 1825, Wright founded a settlement in Nashoba, Tennessee, the idea behind which was buying out slaves, educating them and finally letting them earn their freedom. Her “experiment” was designed to show that, given the chance, blacks could attain the same level of intellectual cultivation as whites—a view seen at the time as quite progressive. Moreover, Nashoba was supposed to be a transition point for former slaves to other territories: Haiti, Texas, or beyond the Rocky Mountains. As critical as Wright was of colonization, she knew it was a necessary condition of her plan’s gaining wider (most importantly financial) support (Kisiel 58). The enterprise ended up a complete fiasco, with Wright being absent for a long time from Nashoba, and the commune becoming too controversial due to allegedly allowing interracial marriages.

As highlighted by Bederman, “[a]lthough Nashoba, as Wright originally planned it, was grandiose in scope, it was not itself a utopia. Rather, Nashoba was a scheme to abolish all US slavery in order to save Wright’s true utopia, the United States” (447).¹ The traveler’s vision of America is utopian in both senses of the word “utopia”: as *ou topos*—no place, as well as *eu topos*—good place (Elliott 85). Wright’s America is an ideal space, the “good” country where human institutions have achieved near perfection. But it is also a non-existent place, since the America she describes has never been, and probably never will be. Her enthusiasm makes her blind to everything that is less than perfect in the young democracy. Additionally, her book shares one more common feature with all literary utopias; as Robert C. Elliott points out, one of the goals of texts belonging to the genre is criticizing current society by comparing it with an ideal (22). This also seems to be one of the purposes behind Wright’s *Views of Society and Manners in America*: by showing what is wonderful about the US, she at the same time points to what, in her opinion, is wrong with England.

Wright is so enthusiastic about the US that she praises everything other travelers criticize: society, art, political life. She believes the image most Europeans have of Americans, as “in a sort of middle state between barbarism and refinement,” is completely mistaken (Wright 162). When she does agree with popular British charges against America, she quickly

¹ Wright was by no means the only one to create a utopian vision of America; rather, “Early America was both eutopia and dystopia, and became the site for any utopian dreams. As a result, the USA has been the source of more utopias and communitarian experiments (once called utopian societies or utopian experiments) than any other country” (Sargent 94). Immigrants from Europe treated the country as an empty space where humanity could begin anew, while American authors believed in the utopian vision of their homeland’s greatness, in the style of Manifest Destiny.

offers excuses or explanations. Thus she admits that American literature is inferior to its European counterpart, but she believes this to be the result of America's finest minds being employed as statesmen (166). In other words, what could be seen as a disadvantage and sign of cultural paucity is turned by her into an asset: America knows how to use its most talented intellectuals who, in their turn, choose their patriotic duty over aesthetic pleasures.

Part of Wright's delight with America seems to be rooted in her seeing the New World as a perfect habitat of the Rousseauvian "noble savage," a view going back to Locke's description of America as close to the "state of nature" (Brooks 8). She criticizes civilization, claiming that in the Old World most of education "consists of unlearning": one needs to forget "the false notions which had been implanted in our young minds" (Wright 217). Americans are superior to Europeans, since they do not have to "unlearn" the harmful and distorting lessons of their culture—not yet having produced any substantial lessons. Where other British travelers perceive an American lack of manners and cultivation, she sees people unspoiled by the stale habits of Europe. But Wright does not stop at this; she also states that in America, one is bound to discover with surprise that ordinary people have "that intelligence and those sentiments which he [the foreigner] had been accustomed to seek in the writings of philosophers and the conversation of the most enlightened" (217). Americans seem to have an innate wisdom rivalling the one found in European books. Had we read this in Transcendentalist essays, such as Emerson's poetically phrased writings, the claim would have sounded acceptable. However, in Wright's case, as she authors a travel account stylistically aspiring to factuality, this level of praise seems unintentionally absurd and bordering on the ridiculous.

As has been mentioned before, one of the most common criticisms levelled at America by British travelers is the impossibility of finding good servants. Here again Wright's opinion differs from those of many of her countrymen and women: she claims that the reports of other travelers must be unjust, and that probably both parties must be responsible for conflicts between masters and servants. Instead of focusing on native-born American servants, she chooses to warn her readers against bringing servants from Europe as they soon become a burden, refusing to work on the same terms as they did in the Old World. She believes that this shows "how an uneducated mind is likely to misconstrue the nature of that equality which a democracy imparts to all men" (237), implying that Americans are better prepared for equality, as they understand that it does not necessarily mean anarchy. The real problem are immigrants who believe in a degree of equality not attainable and not expected by Americans.

Wright's idealism extends also to her understanding of American foreign policy. She strongly believes that democracy is by nature a pacifist

system, which means that there is no chance of America waging a war other than a defensive one: "All here breathes of peace, as well as freedom. American freedom, founded upon the broad basis of the rights of man, is friendly to the freedom of all nations" (82). This, according to her, stems from the fact that "[t]he army is the people, and the people must be at home" (83). She realizes that other countries' histories testify to the contrary, but she believes America to be unique: "It has no ambitious rulers, no distinguished classes . . . no colonies, no foreign possessions" (83). In a way she believes that the conditions she describes are eternal, that they originate from the very system, and that America, being a democracy, can never have ambitious rulers or foreign possessions. Her optimism might be justified by the historical moment in which her book was written: this is still before the annexation of Texas, so before American expansionist ambitions became evident. Yet it may be argued that she could have referred to the Louisiana Purchase—a controversial move from the British point of view, which will be criticized by, for example, Thomas Colley Grattan in his 1859 *Civilized America*. In that travelogue, Grattan sees the Louisiana Purchase as a testimony of American greed and expansionism, stressing the fact that Jefferson had no legal power to effect it, and criticizing the ideological explanation of the territory having once been American and of Americans possessing some sort of historical right to it (II.283). Even though Grattan's travelogue was written over thirty years after Wright's, the events he writes about could have been as known to her as they were to him. It seems that Wright simply does not see the Louisiana Purchase as a fact possibly auguring American expansionism of the second half of the 19th century.

Her view of American foreign policy may also be explained through a reference to two further typical features of the utopia. Firstly, as Elliott shows, utopia eliminates all conflict, aiming towards a static state of full bliss (104); the second feature follows from the first one: utopia is "necessarily transhistoric" (9), as this static state of perfection may exist only outside the normal conflicting forces of history. Wright's vision bears strong resemblance to this idea: for her, the US has attained its perfection, which makes international conflicts impossible. It is her early version of an "end of history": the final stage of human development.

WRIGHT'S VIEW ON SLAVERY

As can be seen by now, Wright often glorifies America so much that she becomes unable to perceive it as anything other than perfect. However, the most interesting part of Wright's description of America is the issue of slavery. Being a reformist, she has strongly abolitionist views; therefore,

the existence of slavery in the American South could be expected to be a major challenge to her rosy view of the republic. And this is certainly the case: Wright struggles to keep her vision of America unblemished while she realizes how far from perfection it is with regards to the professed ideals of liberty and equality for all. In fact, during her travels she never goes South of Virginia, presenting it as a conscious decision: "The sight of slavery is revolting everywhere, but to inhale the impure breath of its pestilence in the free winds of America is odious beyond all that the imagination can conceive" (267). Thus she decides not to witness the face of America that contradicts her idealized preconceptions.

Moreover, Wright's problem with slavery does not seem to be mainly a question of compassion or empathy for slaves themselves. Rather, slavery makes her image of America less perfect;² it is a "stain" on the American character (270)—it is not an inherent characteristic of the system, or a large portion of America's social construction, but just a blemish that the country should eliminate as soon as possible. Unlike other travelers, Wright believes that slavery is not peculiar to the US, but that it is shared with most "civilized" countries (when she writes the book, published in 1821, slavery has not yet been abolished in the British Empire, as the Abolition Act was passed in 1833). Thus, in her view, the "disgrace" of slavery is widespread, while the "honor" of abolitionism is typically American: Wright stresses that America was the first country to abolish the slave trade (38), failing to mention the economic reasons behind this abolition—the fact that it resulted in an increase in the price of slaves, actually working out to the benefit of slaveholders. Also, while speaking of American history she presents an image of American colonists before the Revolutionary War as craving the end of slavery but being forbidden from abolishing it by the evil British crown (39). The fact that in the 1820s, way into America's self-rule, slavery still existed in the South is presented as a negligible detail and a simple question of time: "the evil needs years of patience, the more perfect understanding of the mischief to the master, or the more universal feeling of the injustice to the slave" (39). It looks like the problem is going to solve itself on its own; the "understanding" will simply and inevitably come, proceeding naturally from the good of the American character.

Besides presenting America as an ardently abolitionist country, Wright defends and justifies Southern slaveholders, pointing to their patriotism and zeal in fighting for America's independence, ignoring the fact that there is no logical connection between one problem and the other (42). As Bederman points out, "Wright seems to have taken literally planters'

² This is an impression shared by Caroline M. Kisiel (57).

hyperbolic protestations that they wished slavery would disappear,” and “convinced herself that Southerners longed desperately for a plan to abolish slavery before race war broke out and their slave property became worthless” (447). She portrays them as “cursed with [the] institution”, that is, victims of the system and of circumstance rather than its perpetrators. She adds that the free states have a responsibility to “relieve their sister states from this crime and calamity” (42); thus, slavery is presented as a burden or a disease—something that one gets against one’s will and that apparently does not yield any profit to the party involved. According to her portrayal, the South must be saved rather than judged.

It is surprising to what lengths the self-professed reformist and abolitionist goes in order to excuse America for the existence of slavery. Given the fact that Wright is seriously invested in ameliorating the fate of black slaves, the amount of empathy she has for their masters is rather unexpected. She also downplays the difficulties blacks face in the North, painting an idyllic (and false) picture of their lives: “Everywhere are schools open for his [the black’s] instruction. In small towns, we will find him taught by the same master and attending the same church with the white population” (42).³ On the one hand, that she needs to stress and praise the fact that in some places, when forced by circumstances, whites do not introduce segregation, tells a lot about the unequal situation of the two races. On the other hand, when in cities “Africans have churches as well as preachers of their own,” in Wright’s opinion it testifies to “their rapid advance in situation and knowledge” (42). In other words, anything that happens in America is a positive phenomenon: where there is no segregation, this supposedly shows the lack of prejudice of whites towards blacks; where there is one, it is a proof of blacks being educated enough to serve as ministers.

According to her, Northern blacks enjoy equal protection by the law, and have the same political rights as whites (44)—claims obviously untrue in the 1820s, given that even those Northern states which granted blacks the right to vote after the Revolutionary War were taking it away throughout the early 19th century (see Litwack 5, 65–66). The fact that they do not participate in political life is attributed by her to their deficiency in “political ambition” that needs to be “awakened” (44). At the same time, using a self-contradictory logic she admits that in some Northern states blacks do not have the right to vote, but, according to her, this is the right decision, since they are “ill fitted to exercise it” (44). Once again, it turns

³ In reality, in the first half of the 19th century, “[i]n most . . . parts of the North and the West, black children attended segregated schools when schools for them existed at all” and tended to be self-educated (Painter 73).

out that whatever America is doing must be good, regardless of whether it decides to grant voting rights or withdraw them from blacks. Moreover, she claims that if blacks are discriminated against, it is not because of their skin color but of “the greater laxity of their morals” (43–44)—so her glorification of Northern tolerance is supported by her own prejudice. Here Wright does not differ from American 19th-century intellectuals who, observing free blacks in the North, believed them to be “degraded,” suggesting that “there was some ideal of manhood from which the Negro had fallen” (Fredrickson 5).

Wright often defends American racism, blaming it on the country's history and adding that Europeans are just as unwilling to treat blacks as equals. She seems to believe that a discriminatory reaction against blacks is something natural in whites: “Nature has stamped a mark upon the unhappy African which, though the more cultivated and liberal will account an accidental distinction, the vulgar will regard as a symbol of inferiority” (42). On the one hand, she points to the fact that skin color is accidental; on the other, she employs the rhetoric associated with the “mark of Cain.” That blacks are “unhappy” stems from “nature,” so it is apparently hard to blame some whites for seeing in their skin color a symbol of inferiority. One needs to be “cultivated and liberal” to be able to rise above such distinctions; this is almost like saying that the natural reaction of a white person is a feeling of disdain for blacks, and those whose intellect allows them to counter this visceral response should be praised for their magnanimity—but that it cannot be expected from everyone. Ostensibly, given Wright's plans for Nashoba and her ability to phrase the question as she does, she would have counted herself among those more “cultivated and liberal.”

NATIVE AMERICANS AS SEEN BY WRIGHT

Wright's opinions about Native Americans are a broad subject, deserving its own separate study.⁴ For the purpose of this essay, let us focus on her vision of Native American history, which once again shows her idealizing

⁴ In general, Wright tends to express a belief in Indian inferiority to a much greater extent than other progressive writers, such as Martineau or Dickens. This is one more technique which allows her to praise the moral character of white Americans, who come across in her text as simply keeping in check a degenerate race rather than exploiting the native inhabitants of the continent. At the same time, it must be stressed that Wright is not the only thinker denigrating Native Americans in order to extol whites; already in the 18th century British Whigs who sympathized with the revolting colonies spread stories of Indians as “savage beasts” to justify the colonists' violence against them (Fulford 58).

attitude towards (white) Americans. She admits that Native Americans have been historically mistreated by whites; however, she believes the colonists' only fault was forcing Indians⁵ to sell them land. She does not speak of pushing Native Americans westwards and of expropriating them, but simply of peaceful (albeit coerced) commerce.

In Wright's opinion, problems between the settlers and Indians started when the latter became jealous of the colonists' prosperity and superiority (107)—this in itself is a racist and very biased version of history. Because of this "jealousy" Indians began attacking white settlers and taking against them "savage measures." In response, whites started to feel hostile, as well; the way Wright presents this sequence of events suggests that the wars between whites and Indians were the Indians' fault. She even comments that in this early history of settlement one would "find more cause to charge the natives with cruelty and treachery than the European settlers with injustice," were it not for the extenuating circumstance of jealousy being a feeling common to all men, and "wild passions"—typical of all "savages" (107). At the same time, Wright uses this opportunity to praise the settlers who were ready to bravely confront animals and Indians—the latter getting enumerated in the same breath with the fauna.

After the Revolutionary war, Wright continues, "the Indians soon felt the effect of the wise and humane system of policy adopted by the federal government. The treaties entered into with the natives have never been violated by her sanction or connivance" (108).⁶ In her opinion, even though Indians did not deserve it, the American government decided to protect them. All circumstances of whites treating Native Americans fairly seem to testify to white Americans' generosity. Wright believes it to be a token of their mercy rather than their duty towards fellow human beings. Her logic is that Americans could profit economically from the Indians' destruction, and yet they choose not to wipe them out completely. She believes "it is highly to the credit of their government" to do anything for Native Americans (108), as it testifies to their "humane policy" (109).

Finally, in Wright's vision it is the Native Americans themselves who are chiefly responsible for their demise: the wars they wage among themselves decimate them, "massacring whole families of women, children, and infants at the breast" (109). She does partially acknowledge the role

⁵ I use the terms "Native Americans" and "Indians" interchangeably, the former reflecting current terminology, the latter being the word widely used in the 19th century. It seems justifiable to accept this as a linguistic habit of Wright and her contemporaries, reflecting also to an extent their state of consciousness and policy towards ethnic Others.

⁶ A claim that is obviously untrue, since for example in 1783 the US went back on its promise not to settle beyond the Ohio River (Fulford 55), while the treaties with the Creek had been violated by 1813, which resulted in the outbreak of the Creek War.

of whites in this process of Native Americans' gradual disappearance,⁷ especially through the sale of alcohol, but she attributes it to Canadians, not to Americans (108). Moreover, when she writes about the alcohol problem affecting the Native American population, she adds: "Intoxication has proved a yet worse scourge to the wild natives than the smallpox. It not only whets their ferocity, but hurries them into the worst vices, and consequently the worst diseases" (108). Thus it is hard to tell whether she really presents Native Americans as victims of alcohol addiction, as it rather seems that alcohol intensifies their natural "wildness" and vices; it exposes what has already been present in their character. This makes whites selling alcohol to Native Americans seem less culpable, as the focus of Wright's discussion is transferred from white responsibility onto Indian "savagery."⁸ Additionally, the division into "good Americans" and "bad Canadians" allows her to retain her idealized vision of the United States and shift the blame of white imperialist policies onto a people loyal to the British. Thus Americans are described as trading with Indians mostly in blankets and clothes, whereas Canadians sell them alcohol and weapons, which provokes unsuccessful and decimating wars with whites and with other tribes. Wright quite unequivocally declares that Indian wars are never provoked by Americans but always by "the machinations of Florida or Canadian traders, or of European emissaries" (109).

CONCLUSION

Seen against the background of most 19th-century British travel accounts, Frances Wright's *Views of Society and Manners in America* appears as exceedingly optimistic, and in fact quite naïve and unrealistic. She idealizes America to the point of not being able to see any drawbacks of its system. She paints a vision of a transhistoric utopia, suspended in history thanks to its inherently pacifist character. One could argue that factual precision is not a feature characteristic of and necessary in utopian writing; it makes use of "demonstration rather than . . . reasoned argument" which gets replaced by "symbols, inversions, and the all-powerful *reductio ad absurdum*" (Goodwin 5). Yet Wright's book, belonging to the genre of travel writing, does not have the literary freedom that typical utopias possess. Suspended between subjectivity and objectivity, as has been argued above, the travelogue is still expected to be factual and does not

⁷ The 19th-century vision of Native Americans as a "vanishing race" has been fascinatingly discussed by Brian W. Dippie in his *Vanishing American*.

⁸ The belief that alcoholism was simply a manifestation of Native Americans being doomed to extinction was a popular opinion in the early 19th century (Dippie 35).

allow a great degree of exaggeration. What is more, typical utopias may constitute a source of political hope, being prescriptive and presenting a “hypothetical society” (Goodwin 11). Wright’s *Views* is indeed prescriptive in the sense of presenting a model for Great Britain to emulate, but at the same time claims to describe a real place. The utopian energies contained in the book are at odds with its genre, resulting in a narrative which seems more untrustworthy than travel writing by necessity already is.

Wright’s enthusiasm is particularly puzzling when it comes to her treatment of black slaves. On the one hand, she is a fervent abolitionist not only in theory but also in practice, later establishing the Nashoba commune in order to contribute to the liberation of at least a number of slaves. On the other hand, she paints a picture of Northern blacks living a perfectly happy existence, which testifies to either lack of information or of empathy on her part. She portrays America as a strongly abolitionist country, while exhibiting compassion for rather than criticism of slaveholders. Moreover, she describes the white-Indian relations in a distorted manner, making Native Americans responsible for their own demise and picturing the American government as a benevolent institution, taking under its parental wing all of its ethnic children. It seems that her desire to see America as a fulfilled utopia overshadows her other ideals and makes her see the American system as she would want it to be rather than as it truly is.

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