NATIVE AMERICANS

The Denial of Humanity

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If you are among the 99 percent of Americans who are not Native American, and know Indians mostly through media representations, who do you think they are? Savages? Squaws? Princesses? Children of Nature? If you are Native, the few messages you do receive via the mass media and popular culture are either that you exist only in the past (Dances with Wolves, 500 Nations) or, if shown more contemporarily, work almost exclusively in casinos (The Killing, Big Love) or in law enforcement (Banshee). The symbolic annihilation of Indian peoples is an ethical issue for communication scholars and practitioners. Stereotypical representations not only reinforce dehumanizing and limiting views of the capabilities, appearances, and cultures of Native people to themselves (internalized oppression) and to non-Indians, but also support “structural exclusions and cultural imagining [that] leave minority members vulnerable to a system of violence,” both symbolically and actually (Perry 2002: 232). This chapter provides an overview of media portrayals of Native Americans. The first section contextualizes these representations by briefly discussing contemporary conditions of being Native in America. This is followed by a description of the history of representations of American Indians in several mass media forms (cinema, newspapers, television) and a discussion of debates related to research in this area, concluding with critical perspectives and debates in scholarship.

Setting the Stage

What does it mean to be Native American in the twenty-first century? On one hand, there is the numerical designation and on the other, the symbolic. In the first case, if you are among the 5.2 million individuals who, according to the U.S. Census, self-identify as American Indian/Alaska Native or almost half of that number who indicate they are fully American Indian/Alaska Native, you likely belong to one of the more than 560 federally recognized tribes. The largest tribes are Navajo (Diné), Cherokee, Sioux, and Chippewa. Many (approximately 40 percent) people claiming American Indian/Alaska Native as race live in the Western region of the United States, followed by the South (33 percent), Midwest (17 percent), or North East (10 percent). The cities with the largest populations of American Indian and Alaska Native alone or in combination are New York and Los Angeles. The greatest concentration of an Indian population is in Anchorage, Alaska. In terms of lived experiences, Indians are subjects of higher rates of violence and higher
incarceration rates than the general population (Freng 2007). The suicide rate among American Indian/Alaska Natives is more than double that of other groups, particularly during adolescence and young adulthood (Frieden 2011). There is more binge drinking, higher alcohol and tobacco use, and the highest poverty rates of any racial group. Long enduring, inaccurately informed, and poorly conceived representations of Native people also contribute to the way they are treated by the criminal justice system (Ross 1998). As Jackson (1992, cited in Ross: 184) points out: “The . . . stereotypical view of Native people . . . being drunk and in prison . . . influence[s] decisions of the police, prosecutors, judges, and prison officials.”

Relative to other U.S. minority groups, however, Indians are under 1 percent of the total U.S. population. Typically, because of small sample sizes, statistics about this group result in their being made invisible by assignment to the “Other” category of research findings (Frieden 2011). This means that they do not represent a significant target audience for advertisers in terms of numbers and spending power. In addition, although tribal gaming has economically helped, Native people living on reservations are among the poorest of all minority groups. Therefore, in terms of population, numbers of significance don’t speak to advertisers and activism is often misconstrued as violent due in part to the very stereotypes that define them.

The other way of thinking about Native Americans is that being Indian is also a mediated representation. In North America, for more than 500 years, the symbolic construction of Indian-ness that has taken place in the minds and imaginations of outsiders is largely a result of media and popular press representations, the subject of the next section. As Berkhofer (1979) observed, “The idea and the image of the Indian must be a White conception. Native Americans were and are real, but the Indian was a White invention and remains largely a White image” (3).

Smoke and Shadows

You know the only thing more pathetic than Indians on TV? Indians watching Indians on TV.

(Thomas in Smoke Signals)

How are Native Americans characterized in the contemporary, mainstream, popular imagination? Stereotypes, defined as over-generalized, one-dimensional “reductionist beliefs, are collections of traits or characteristics that present members of a group as being all the same” (Merskin 2011a: 142). These signifying mental practices persist today; their origins are in fear-based constructions of the past.

Images of Indians can be traced at least as far back as the arrival of Europeans on the North American continent. Excerpts from Columbus’ 1492 journal present Native peoples as childlike, easily impressed, and naïve. At the time, “there were approximately ten to twelve million people” already living in the land that would become the United States (Ross 1998: 11). These were politically strong, independent, culturally complex peoples with distinctive histories and cultures. During days of Colonial America, a few accounts spoke positively about Native people and the sophistication of their cultures. For example, Francis Daniel Pastorius3 wrote in 1700, “The natives, the so-called savages . . . have never in their lives heard the teaching of Jesus concerning temperance and contentment, yet they far excel the Christians in carrying it out” (contributing to the child-of-nature image). Most writings, however, were fueled by fears of the wilderness as
a dark, unknown, dangerous, even demonic place (to which Native people belonged). Many white colonists and explorers saw First Nations people as less than human and as impediments to taking land they believed they were naturally entitled to. To justify removal, relocation, and eventually, extermination, it was therefore necessary to construct propagandist versions of Indian-ness. Captivity narratives, stories of abduction and assimilation of whites (usually women) by Indians, published in America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, drew on an old English tradition. These tales were an essential part of the construction of Indians as thieves, marauders, and rapists. While hostage-taking is a usual part of war, captivity narratives such as The History of Maria Kittle (Bleeker 1793) mixed actual events with fictional fillers to create tales of trial, tribulation, and sometimes redemptions, but more times than not, depictions of Native masculinity were created specifically as threats to white womanhood.

In the 1800s, stereotypical images of Native Americans were constructed in children’s games, magazines, and newspaper stories, on the covers of sheet music, and in theatrical performances. The cigar store Indian presents as one of the main stereotypes of Native men—the stoic noble savage who simultaneously guards the store entrance but also complies with white rules of “no dogs or Indians allowed.” Similarly, the Indian “princess” is used to convey natural, wholesome virginity and freshness to products such as Land O’Lakes butter or Sue Bee Honey. The oppositional squaw/drudge is the “anti-Pocahontas”:

Where the princess was beautiful, the squaw was ugly, even deformed. Where the princess was virtuous, the squaw was debased, immoral, a sexual convenience. Where the princess was proud, the squaw lived a squalid life of servile toil, mistreated by her men—and openly available to non-Native men.

(Francis 1995: 121–2)

These portrayals were widely distributed with the introduction and popularity of cinema. In 1890, at the same time as motion pictures were invented, the U.S. 7th Calvary, led by General George Armstrong Custer, killed hundreds of American Indian men, women, and children at Wounded Knee on the Pine Ridge Reservation in North Dakota. This genocide secured the place of Indians in the white European imagination as mythological, subsumed, tragic, and metaphorical in a romanticized view of the past. From 1883 until around 1913, Wild West Shows such as Buffalo Bill Cody’s toured the nation with demonstrations by “wild” Indians, some of whom were survivors of the horrors of the expansionist genocide. Many of the extras were paid in tobacco and alcohol. The important leading roles were not played by Indians, but rather by whites in “redface.” These onscreen betrayals continued throughout the twentieth century.

At the same time, however, Indian actors, directors, and producers started making their own movies, telling their own stories. James Youngdeer (of the Nanticoke tribe) was the first American Indian director/producer/actor/writer. He and Lillian St. Cyr (Winnebago) produced single-reel Westerns during the silent film era that positively portrayed Indians. The Silent Enemy (i.e., starvation) was a 1930 independent film that intentionally steered away from the war-whooping stereotypical depictions. The attempt was a more naturalistic, historically accurate documentary-style film shot in Northern Ontario. While the goal was to capture a “vanishing” way of life, the motivations were truer than in studio productions.

The population of Native Americans was at an all-time low (estimates of fewer than 250,000 individuals) and the idea of the vanishing Indian quite real. Several photographers
Native Americans

(John Throssel, Crow) and filmmakers made their own media and told different stories than their white counterparts. This auteurship continued through the 1930s.

Films of the 1930s–60s were created mostly through a non-Indian lens. They included I(indian)s, but the only successful productions were those that reified the formulaic savage image, nowhere more evident than in the genre of Westerns. Cowboy and I(indian) movies such as *Stagecoach*, by director John Ford, typified the static story structure: innocent white people besieged by indians (who stand in the way of progress and are brutal, ruthless, and a threat to white women). “Tonto-speak” (broken English) was employed as a narrative device that contributed to the stereotype of Indians as unassailable, ignorant, naïve, and childlike. The typical film had a white hero encounter wild, untamable “savages.” White men in “redface” also played indian roles. Charlton Heston, Victor Mature, Chuck Connors, Burt Reynolds, and others donned heavy make-up, wrapped a headband around their foreheads (Indians don’t wear headbands), and pretended to be indians (redface). This is no less problematic than white actors in black or yellowface. The monolithic Plains Indian of Hollywood and advertising is often some combination of randomly assigned “indian” dress, i.e., beads, feathers, and headdresses regardless of gender, with little to no regard for the tribe to which the person might belong. Screen legend John Wayne stood in for the mythological loner hero who was tough, fearless, and above all else, justified in fulfilling Manifest Destiny no matter the price.

White women often played Native women as well. Except for the princess and a few abused older Indian women, Native American women have been largely invisible in films. The mythic princess image is particularly powerful as it often forms the basis for non-Indian children’s image of Indian women. Thus, the desire Disney’s highly historically inaccurate *Pocahontas* portrays is one of impossible-to-achieve female beauty wrapped up in buckskin and self-sacrificing for the white hero’s life and liberty.

There is less research on news representations of Native Americans. News, “which purports to deal in fact, not fiction, which seeks to inform as well as entertain, plays by a different set of rules from popular culture or literature or advertising” (Weston 1996: 2). Whereas readers and viewers know that films, advertisements, and other popular representations might be fantasy based, there is an expectation that news represents an accurate view of the world. While today newspapers stories about Indians are mostly limited to powwows and casinos, the frontier press emphasized three major stereotypes we still see today: Noble Savage, Bad Indian, and Degraded Drunken Indian (Berkhofer 1979). The Noble Savage was “the good Indian [who] appears friendly, courteous, and hospitable to the invaders of his land” (28). The Bad Indian is the dark, sexually promiscuous, thieving, naked savage. Representations of Native Americans as savages, in whatever form, reduce an entire people to the status of object, and “within the traditional Western conceptualization of the world mere natural objects have no moral standing” (Green 1993: 323). Finally, the Degraded Drunken Indian is inassimilable, scorned, and pathetic. In his study of press coverage of eight “watershed events in Native American history from 1862–1891,” Reilly (2010) concludes that the frontier press, which was closer to the conflicts, actually did a better job and had more accurate, less stereotypical coverage than did national newspapers.

What was different about Western United States frontier press coverage compared with that in the East was the “tyranny of distance” (Blainey 1968/2001) and that reporters couldn’t interview “the other side,” i.e., the Indians. For many readers, the encounters were not only geographically far away, but also emotionally and psychologically. The mythological narratives of frontier battles were influenced by legend: “To the open spaces of the West . . . journalism has added its own mystique” (Reilly
In a study of mainstream twentieth-century newspaper and magazine coverage of Native Americans, Weston (1996) wrote not about Indians but rather about the coverage of them and the role coverage might have had in shaping views of Native peoples and influencing public policy.

News coverage is situated in historical moments and yet the “official view of how Native Americans should be treated shifted from forced assimilation to cultural pluralism to termination to limited self-determination” (4). As such, representations in the press remained relatively static.

The very conventions and practice of journalism have worked to reinforce that popular and often inaccurate imagery—[stories of conflict, the unusual, the bizarre]. Stereotyping does not depend only on the use of crude language or factual inaccuracies. It also comes from the choice of stories to report, the way the stories are organized and written, the phrases used in the headlines.

News media coverage of the occupation of Alcatraz Island by the American Indian Movement (AIM) (1969–71) put Indians in front of non-Indians, but the representation showed activism as violence. In 1973, another standoff with authorities took place in the community of Wounded Knee, South Dakota when U.S. federal officials seized land occupied for 71 days by 200 Oglala Lakota and AIM members on the Pine Ridge Reservation. The previous summer, members gathered to discuss the many (371) broken treaties, the high unemployment rate, poverty, and police brutality. On February 27, heavily armed federal troops surrounded the poorly supplied, cold, and hungry protestors who sought retribution for past and present dishonors and demanded an investigation into corruption in the Federal Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), misuse of tribal funds, strip mining of the land, and restoration of promises such as honoring the 1868 treaty that said the Black Hills of South Dakota belonged to the Sioux people.

Oddly, an inaccurate and somewhat absurd movie (Billy Jack) along with an act of civil disobedience at that year’s Academy Awards helped restore hope and renew faith among the tribe. At the Academy Awards, when Marlon Brando was announced as the winner of the Best Actor award for The Godfather, Shasheen Littlefeather (Apache, Yaqui, Pueblo), dressed in full tribal regalia, spoke in his place, saying Brando declined the award, “because of the treatment of American Indians today by the film industry . . . . And also with recent happenings at Wounded Knee.” The audience response was both cheers and boos. Littlefeather apologized for interrupting the evening, and then followed with it being her hope that “in the future . . . our hearts and our understandings will meet with love and generosity.” According to the documentary Reel Injuns (Diamond 2009), the Sioux at Wounded Knee who saw this surprising act of resistance felt supported and heard.

Despite mediated moments of visibility, fictionalized and stereotypical notions of Indian people persist in films, advertising, and popular culture. Appropriation continued of so-called Indian ways at summer camp reenactments, in Halloween costumes, Thanksgiving pageants, mock tribal naming and sweat lodge practices, ecstatic dancing, tribal games, and overall imitating Indian people as children of nature, and is still found today. Little in popular discourse serves to contradict these one-dimensional, inaccurate narratives. Imitating magical Indians is something non-Indians often do. The 1990s saw a revitalization of the nostalgia trope, “the reenacting and re-ritualizing . . . the imperialist, colonizing journey as narrative fantasy of power and desire, of seduction by the
The 1990s looked to be an era of setting the record right: Ted Turner’s mini-series *500 Nations* and films such as *Dances with Wolves* (1990) and *Last of the Mohicans* (1992) seemed like a step in that direction. However, these expressions solidified the Indian as living only in the past. Native American director Chris Ayre’s *Smoke Signals* (1998, based on the Sherman Alexie short story) was the first all-Indian starring, directed, produced, and written feature film in nearly 70 years. That same year two other Native-directed films also premiered at the Sundance Film Festival: *Tushka* (Ian Skorodin, Chocataw) and *Naturally Native* (Valerie Red-Horse, Cherokee/Sioux).

In the 2000s, the blockbuster success of the *Twilight* franchise has overshadowed new representations of Native masculinity and perpetuated young Native men as animalistic and highly sexual.

Only the television series *Northern Exposure* (1990–5) offered a more realistic narrative about being Indian. The outsider perspective was still in place, by telling the story of a white doctor who is sent to a tiny Alaskan community. But the program sympathetically presented Indians as complex, everyday people, not a mass of undifferentiated types. Unfortunately it was and is the only television representation like this.

Since the early twentieth century, American Indian images, music, and names have also been incorporated into many American advertising campaigns, marketing efforts, and commercial labeling. These continue to demarcate and consume the Indian as the exotic Other in the popular imagination (Ganje 2011; Merskin 2001, 2011a, 2011b, 2014). Today, products on grocery and department store shelves still bear faces and names that are entirely fanciful, constructed by outsiders, or that rightly belong to American Indian individuals and tribes. The savage stereotype as mascot for the Florida State Seminoles football team or the University of Illinois Fighting Illini, for example, draws on portrayals of an evil, angry, generic Indian pulled from literary and photographic sources of earlier times. The savage-as-signifier of death, vengeance, evil, and rage, when placed on a t-shirt, transfers meaning to the otherwise ambiguous product. Three primary representations of Native people, all derivations of the savage stereotype, persist today in brands, logos, and names: (1) Noble Savage—includes the image of a teary-eyed Native American chief who watches as the land is polluted and naming vehicles a (Jeep) Cherokee, Dakota, or Winnebago to associate it with qualities such as adaptability, ruggedness, and sense of adventure; (2) Enlightened Savage—the child-of-nature/first environmentalist stereotype; and (3) Bloodthirsty Savage—used as sports team mascots such as the Atlanta Braves, Washington Redskins, Cleveland Indians, and Kansas City Chiefs (all of whom are still with us). These monikers are also applied to American military equipment such as Tomahawk Missiles and Black Hawk helicopters. As a result, the “savage” is thought of as an outsider, “merely an animal in human form” (Green 1993: 327); from which the Other developed in three representational directions that still apply today. The problem is that these representations are not contradicted by other information, or alternative views in mainstream media. Thus, the stereotypes persist, full of hegemonic potential. There is a consumer blind spot when it comes to these brand images and names because they are so long-standing and familiar. The red and white packaging of Big Chief Sugar, for example, alludes to red skin, as well as the company’s Americana schema. Crazy Horse Malt Liquor, no longer available due to successful lawsuits by its descendants, combined the Noble Savage stereotype with a “proud, but ultimately defeated, Indian chief” (Merskin 2001: 168). While many of these products originated in what we might think of as less-enlightened times, the defense of a team name like Redskins remains. Furthermore, new products have been introduced...
that bear names, images, or associations: for example, the 1982 introduction of American Spirit cigarettes, owned by R. J. Reynolds. American Spirit visually, typographically, and symbolically brands itself by using the silhouette of a chief in full-feathered headdress, smoking a peace pipe (Merskin 2014).

**Critical Perspectives and Debates**

Much of what is written, historically at least, about Native Americans is by non-Natives. Whether anthropological or historical, this literature has largely come from a non-Indian perspective. In a review of the book *The Invented Indian*, Vine DeLoria Jr. writes, “There never has been an objective point of view regarding Indians and there never will be. For most of the five centuries, whites have had unrestricted power to describe Indians in any way they chose,” thereby creating “comfortable fictions” that veil the truth about what happened (1992: 397–98). Thus, “Indians were simply not connected to the organs of propaganda so that they could respond to the manner in which whites described them” (398). This includes a good deal of academic scholarship.

DeLoria further argues for reflexivity and that those writing in this area of scholarship with a social justice component should not pretend to be objective, but rather be open about their politics: “[A] political agenda is permissible—but just say so. Don’t cloak the collection in a mist of piety, which purports to restore balance and objectivity to the modern scene” (398).

“Whites telling . . . other whites something about Indians” as if they know “the truth” is also problematic. Just as politics should be laid bare in reflexive writing, so should be one’s genetics and lived experience (or lack thereof). This conflict speaks to an invented Indian who is sometimes one’s media-constructed self-image of Indian, and for others a sense of failed authenticity because the generated stereotype is so pervasive. For non-Indian others it is training that firmly implants stereotypes. Whoever speaks should speak from their heart—and do so reflexively. This perspective relates well to an ethics of representation that includes reflection upon who says what about whom and with what authority, not only in media representations but also scholarship. To declare some representations “bad,” others good, chastise Native peoples for not stepping up and representing themselves the way the author thinks they should, or deciding that one knows the “right” representation is, in the end, not terribly productive. It might be more useful to think about what skills all researchers have, from insider knowledge to expertise on representation, social justice, semiotics, law, policy, and health. Participatory action research that draws on liberation psychology offers another useful path toward new knowledge.

What is at stake here not only concerns communication practices but also individual well-being. Children, Native American included, are perhaps the most important recipients of this information. If during the transition to adolescence, Native children internalize these stereotypical representations that suggest Indians are lazy, obligated to willingly provide their native/natural bounty to whites, alcoholic by nature, and violent, this misinformation can have a lifelong impact on perceptions of self and others.

To ignore history and continue presenting Native peoples in this limited way is a moral decision on the part of communications experts and corporations, “for, denying humanity to Native Americans, they thereby deny to them the possibility of receiving the moral standing and treatment that is due to them as human beings” (Green 1993: 329). Stereotyping communicates inaccurate beliefs about Natives not only to whites but also to Indians.
Notes

1 The terms Indian, Native American, Indigenous North American, First Nations, American Indian, and Native are used interchangeably throughout this chapter in honor of individual preferences and histories.

2 Drawing on Klopotek, I use the uncapitalized term “indian” “which connotes the symbolic character of the white imagination, akin to a troll or an elf,” and the upper-case term “Indian,” to denote the people descended from the original human inhabitants of the Americas: “The purpose of making the distinction between indians and Native Americans in writing is to emphasize the extent to which the indian is truly a construction of the white imagination, having little resemblance to Native Americans. Of course the concept of any universal term or category for all the indigenous nations of the Americas is itself deeply rooted in colonialism, but such terms—for better or worse—have become more meaningful at the beginning of the 21st century” (Klopotek 2001: 20).


4 Ironically, Turner owns the Atlanta Braves whose tomahawk-chopping fans celebrate the team with this racist gesture.

References

Further Reading

Bird, S. E. (1999) “Gendered Construction of the American Indian in Popular Media,” *Journal of Communication* 49(3): 61–83. (This is a historical study of how representations of Native Americans have become sexualized in relation to the white gaze, particularly the stud and the princess stereotypes.)

Carstarphen, M. G. and Sanchez, J. (eds.) (2012) *American Indians and the Mass Media*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press. (This edited collection contains chapters that examine mainstream media representations and how they have impacted Native communities, cultures, histories, and imaginations. Topics include early newspapers, *Life* magazine, the movie *Smoke Signals*, the squaw stereotype, and in particular, tribal voices are heard throughout, especially in entries on new media.)


Strickland, R. (1997) *Tonto’s Revenge: Reflections on American Indian Culture and Policy*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press. (Legal scholar Rennard Strickland’s essays on law, literature, history, film, art, and culture reveals patterns of oppression and domination through representation as well as opportunities for self-redefinition.)

Yellowbird, M. (2004) “Cowboys and Indians: Toys of Genocide, Icons of American Colonialism,” *Wicazo Sa Review* 19(2): 33–48. (This first-person essay describes the experience of a Native American academic who discovers cowboy and Indian figures at a convenience store and observes his nephews playing with them. Critical observations on the construction of Otherness are amplified as well as how these toys serve as symbols of genocide and colonialism.)