

# Being Native American in a Stereotypical and Appropriated North America

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Stereotypes are a common facet of the human psyche. These are often gross overgeneralizations about places, things, or most commonly, people. A stereotype can latch itself onto any widely held belief or idea and blow it out of proportion, tainting the truth and smudging the facts. The issue of stereotyping lends itself often to matters of race. As "race" is a matter of compartmentalization, stereotypes flourish. These can be harmful, whether they are "good" or "bad," as they inevitably lump people into a category under an idea that often does not apply to all within the larger group. This can easily lead to a lack of individual identity as well as simple misconceptions. All races, especially minorities, are victims to stereotyping, and this includes Native Americans.

Being the indigenous peoples of America, the Native Americans have always been viewed as the "Other" since colonization by European peoples began. The clash of cultures and language barriers resulted in endless conflict in which the natives were often depicted in a negative context. The history of early American colonization is a dirty and bloody one which still leaves much to be explored. Misunderstandings and lack of a double-sided education about this tumultuous period has resulted in overgeneralizations, stereotypes, and the devaluing of the Native American peoples and their cultures. Lack of knowledge and respect leads to the formation of stereotypes-- aided in contemporary times by cultural appropriation-- which has been fed by incorrect and demeaning images and ideas of Native American life and culture as expressed in the media, particularly film.

The history of the Native American stereotype is a complicated one as there are many of them, and though some have changed over time due to contemporary lifestyles, they hold true to the same racist ideals of the past. The story of the Native American as it is known to the masses today took place on the frontier within the context of colonization pushing its way across America. The frontier is a land of opposites, which personifies the "otherness" of the native—wilderness versus civilization, savagery versus humanity, and individual versus community (Smith 130). Those who told the stories and therefore shaped the context of this history were the colonizers, who paid little mind to the natives as people, and that is where the clashing images of the natives truly began.

As the world modernized, the understanding of the native peoples of America did not seem to move forward. Some of the first widely distributed images of

Native Americans arose in dime novels in the 1860s, in which they were most commonly portrayed as bloodthirsty savages battling against the white protagonist (Hirschfelder and Motano 177). Soon after came the rise of the Wild West show in which real animals, natives, and "cowboys" would be used to act out stories of the frontier. As the frontier quickly closed, the nostalgia for it grew, and the Wild West shows reached soaring heights of popularity. The most popular of these was Buffalo Bill's Wild West show, which opened in 1883. Buffalo Bill was known for hiring "real Indians" to partake in his show, including Sitting Bull, Gall, Gabriel Dumont, and Black Elk (Smith 126).

It is unclear how the Native American actors felt about being a part of the shows, or why they participated. Some say that they needed the revenue or felt a need for mobility (Smith 126). Both of these reasons sound somewhat suggestive to ideas of what "whites" imagine natives value or lack, though one cannot be certain that these were not the reasons. Another suggestion is that they wanted to use the opportunity to communicate their own cultural identities (Smith 126). Though essentially playing cowboys and Indians for a crowd may not seem like the best route to cultural understanding and acceptance, Native Americans have continued to try to have their voices heard in any way that they can, which has unfortunately tended to be exploitive.

In 1894, Thomas Edison created the first moving pictures, an invention which immediately resulted in the penny arcade peep-show. One of the first of these was called the *Sioux Ghost Dance*, a series of images of Native Americans dancing, surely in the stereotypical garb and manner that America had already come to expect from the natives (Smith 125). As these moving pictures advanced into films, the nostalgia for the frontier did not weaken, but instead manifested itself into the Western genre of film, which was at its height from the 1920s into the 1950s. The staple of these films were the cowboys and Indians who fought upon the stage of the still-open frontier of the past (Smith 129). These films helped shape and engrain many of the stereotypes and images of Native Americans still held today.

Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the frontier closed and many Native Americans still living within their homes and cultures, assimilation of these peoples was made official federal policy by the United States government. The steady crushing of their cultures was enacted in several ways, perhaps the most famous and brutal of which were the boarding schools, in which native children were taken from their cultural homes and forced into embracing the white culture and language (Treuer). It was also during this time that the stereotype of the "doomed" native arose. Native culture and language was being eradicated and buried beneath that of the colonizers, resulting in a shallow form of pity for the slowly dying "race" ("Stereotypes").

The idea of the extinct Native American is a deep one, which was further engrained by western films.

Westerns, primarily the only genre to include Native American characters as integral to the plots, are set in the historical past. The genre runs off of the conflict between colonizers and Indians, an issue which is tied within the genre to a time and place—the open frontier (Mihelich 130). As far as popular media is concerned, the “Indians” did not survive the transition from the Wild West to modern society (“Common Portrayals of Aboriginal People”).

This concept has had some far reaching and startling results. Native Americans have become “obsolete” to some. There is a stigma that “real Indians” can only be those that modern culture recognizes from the past (“Common Portrayals of Aboriginal People”). The idea that they cannot wear skinny jeans, shop at GAP, or drink a caramel macchiato at Starbucks if they want to be “real” natives is absurd and also damaging to their identities. The concept of having to remain “other,” and further, the “other” that was designated for them by the white culture, undermines their sense of self and their place in American society.

America has distorted ideas of what Native Americans are, do, and believe, which have been enforced through the media. Film is the primary catalyst for these misconceptions because it has had the opportunity to spread misinformation for generations. As stated by Paul Chaat Smith in his essay “The Big Movie,” “If you live in North America, westerns are the Book of Genesis, the story of our lives” (Smith 125). This accurately portrays the persuasive power of the western genre over the Native American identity. Western films have focused on four primary Native American character archetypes; the beautiful maiden, the savage warrior, the wise medicine man, and the noble savage. These archetypes tie into misconceptions or downright historical and social smudging of the past relations between the natives and the colonizers, and continue to appear in the media today.

The archetype of the beautiful Indian maiden is perhaps one of the most directly harmful to Native American women, as it is a concept that still affects the way that they are viewed and treated today. In the media, the Indian maiden is beautiful, virginal, and “other,” though in this context her otherness is an attribute directly tied to her sexuality. She is to be conquered and assimilated through white patriarchal dominance. The common storyline associated with this archetype in film is her falling in love with a white man and assisting in his mission to “civilize” her people (“Common Portrayals of Aboriginal People”). This archetype is often added to with the concept of the “native princess.” As the native peoples did not have a system of inherited royalty, this was a concept personified onto the native peoples through the cultural perceptions of the European colonizers (Riverwind). The most common interpretations of this archetype can be seen in *Pocahontas* (1995) and Tiger Lily in the story of *Peter Pan*. This concept of a malleable, exotic, and conquerable woman has resulted

in the image of the “easy squaw,” a derogatory term for Native American women which implies their loose morals. This has led to the very serious and real problem of high rates of sexual assault among native women, most commonly perpetrated by non-native men (Nittle).

The savage warrior is another archetype which has been fed not just through the media but also through educational systems which often focus on the battles between colonizers and natives, a history which is almost inevitably painted in shades of the majority's cultural concepts and values. This has led to the image of the savage warrior, which takes on multiple levels depending on the context. Most often in western films, native warriors have been portrayed wielding tomahawks (although this was not a weapon used by every tribe across North America) thirsting for the blood of white men and the purity of white women (Nittle). These men are portrayed as a threat to civilized society. In other contexts, these warriors are depicted as strong, silent, brave, and over all, sexualized in their “otherness” (“Common Portrayals of Aboriginal People”). The primary issue with this archetype is that it portrays Native Americans as being occupied with savagery and warfare, when many tribes did not partake in much conflict, especially amongst themselves, and it obscures the importance of community and spirituality which were much more prevalent amongst native peoples (Nittle). Kocoum from *Pocahontas* (1995) is a modern interpretation of this archetype, as he is strong, silent, and willing to fight to the death for his people.

The wise man is one of the “positive” stereotypes of Native American culture which is based in European concepts. Some tribes did have medicine men who knew a good deal about herbs and cures. There were also healers who used prayers and ancient methods of healing. The term “shaman” is often used to describe these people. This is a term which does not exist in any of the Native American cultures, and has its origins in Europe (Riverwind). This archetype shares many qualities with that of the “magical negro.” In film, these characters often act only as a guide for white protagonists, making them beneficial characters (Nittle). An example of this character can be seen in the film *Little Big Man* (1970). This archetype has led to the grossly overblown belief that many Native Americans are exceedingly wise and spiritual, which may not have a heavy toll on their culture today, but still resonates as a proclaimed aspect of their culture via the white culture of America (Ridgway).

The oldest and deepest set of these archetypes is that of the noble savage. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, some native people were imbued with certain virtues that the colonizers deemed to be noble, including guilelessness, strength, and helpfulness to whites (“Stereotypes” National Endowment for the Humanities). Perhaps the best known example of this mentality arose in Benjamin Franklin's *Remarks Concerning the Savages of North America*, in which he paints them to be noble and well-living people. The sentimentalism of the noble

savage has carried into modern film, apparent in films such as *Little Big Man* (1970) and *Dances with Wolves* (1990).

This evolution has resulted in a counter-culture of westernized films which attempt to flip the expected narrative on its head by portraying the natives of America as the “good guys” and the colonizing whites as the “bad guys”. In the film *Little Big Man*, the main protagonist is a white male who is raised by a Native American tribe and spends his life between the two worlds—that of the native cultures and that of “civilization.” Through his character, the audience is made to feel the importance of native peoples and their cultures. There is a similar realization of the pitfalls of white civilization present in the film *Dances with Wolves*.

Many see this as a step forward for the representation of Native American culture, but this too has its pitfalls. As is the case with both of these films as well as many others that try to bring Native American life to the forefront in western settings, there is still the issue of what Paul Chaat Smith refers to as the “master narrative” in his piece “The Big Movie” (Smith 132). Even in these films with more “enlightened” views of native culture, the protagonists are still white. The natives themselves most often appear in supporting roles and therefore often lack character and personality. This essentially has the effect of putting them on a short little pedestal but leaving them without a voice (“Common Portrayals of Aboriginal People”). They play as pawns stoking a campfire or smoking a peace pipe in the narrative in which the white protagonist faces character defining life issues (Smith 130).

Film has been a sort of second frontier for the Native Americans, as they must fight every step of the way to retain their cultural identities and their voices as people of conquered nations. For some time—and even today, though it is admittedly more difficult to pull off since the invention of the color TV—Native Americans in films were most often portrayed by white people, usually Italians or Spaniards if possible due to their darker but still European complexions (“Common Portrayals of Aboriginal People”). In 1936, William Hazlette formed the Native American affiliation of the Screen Actor’s Association in an attempt to stop Native Americans from being misinterpreted on screen (Hirschfelder and Montano 182).

In 1960, Harry Preston Smith, most widely known for his role as Tonto on *The Lone Ranger* television series of the 1950s, spoke out against the way that natives were portrayed on TV, and even wrote protest letters to President Dwight Eisenhower (Hirschfelder and Montano 183). He also went on to create the Indian Actors’ Workshop in 1966, which widely promoted the use of natives in Indian roles and taught useful skills to Native American actors concerning show business, such as acting skills and even horse skills (Hirschfelder and Montano 183). Finally, in the 1990s, the American Indian Registry for the Performing Arts in Los Angeles began

publishing a directory of Native American performers (“Common Portrayals of Aboriginal People”).

The history of the Native American people in film is important because the perceptions created through this medium have formed the opinions of the nation perhaps more than for any other minority in America. Between the misconceptions enforced through film and history books, many Americans do not know much about the true Native American peoples and their cultures. The lack of clarification between truth and falsity has led to multiple layers of stereotypes surrounding the Native American people, some with more wide-reaching results than others.

One of the oldest and most narrow-minded stereotypes concerning Native Americans is the belief that the whole of North America consists of one culture. This is not much different than assuming that all of Europe or Africa consists of one set of beliefs, one language, and one way of life. When colonizers came to America with the intent to conquer it, the differentiation in cultures meant little for their overall cause. Certain images—the tomahawk, the peace pipe, the dreamcatcher, and the headdress for example—all became melded into one culture, implying one tribe, and one set of identical people.

In actuality, there are about 560 tribes recognized by the United States Bureau of Indian Affairs in North America today (Blais-Billie). Each of these tribes has its differences, which is a part of why many Native Americans have an issue with being considered a “race.” The overgeneralization of their similar continent of residence meaning that they are of the same “race” is more political than genetically accurate. This is equivalent to insisting that all the peoples of Europe are just “Caucasians,” which strips a person of an important part of their national identity (Blais-Billie).

Another stereotype that reaches back to the point of colonization is the belief that Native Americans have an endless love for animals, are essentially tree huggers, and practice sun-worship. Many tribes believe that all animals and plants have a spirit, but they do not worship them or idolize them in the way that many modern Americans assume. Most tribes—as has been the case for thousands of years in hunter/gatherer as well as other “primitive” societies—observed animals and used plants to exist in harmony with nature, as well with the necessity of understanding the land in order to survive (Riverwind). Native Americans for the most part believe in a Supreme Being—not unlike most Europeans—and do not worship the sun and other aspects of nature, but simply respect them (Ridgway).

There are many stereotypes concerning Native Americans that have come to define the modern Indian in American culture. These are mainly negative, enforcing the status of “minority.” As late as the 1950s, relocation programs were pushed towards Native Americans in an attempt to get them to move off their cultural lands with the promise to provide housing and job training (Treuer).

This has led to the idea that all Native Americans live on reservations. This is of course somewhat ironic, as in the western film genre all natives lived in tipis (Riverwind). Tipis were common housing for tribes of the Plains, but these were not the only houses natives had across the continent. Some in the east lived in wigwams, long wooden buildings, whereas some tribes of the west lived in houses made of adobe bricks (Riverwind).

As was the case during and before colonization, Native Americans do not all have the same living arrangements today. There are currently about 560 federally recognized reservations in North America, and as of 2010, only about 22% of Native Americans live on one (Ridgway). Around 60% of Native Americans actually live in cities, with New York, Los Angeles, and Phoenix boasting some of the highest Native American populations in North America (Nittle).

The concept of the reservation as home to Native Americans has led to other stereotypes in itself. The knowledge that many on the reservations receive some sort of government benefits has led to the idea that Native Americans are lazy and abuse the system. This idea is founded in ethnocentric definitions of "laziness", primarily the idea that they lack education, work ethic, and higher goals. These are values that modern American culture deems acceptable and important, therefore demeaning the Native American people or any minority that does not follow suit (Ridgway).

One of the most popular stereotypes believed about Native Americans is that they are all alcoholics. A study done by the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), suggests that white males are the demographic most likely to drink alcohol on a daily basis and drive under the influence. The idea of the drunken Indian is embedded in the history of the native peoples and the use of alcohol as a leverage tool by colonizers. In modern times, alcoholism is a trait associated with the economically disadvantaged and issues of racial discrimination (Ridgway).

On the other end of the misconception of the government money dependent Native American is the myth of the casino and the supposed massive hauls of money it makes to support reservations. In 1976, the United States Supreme Court gave certain reservations the rights to govern themselves, define their membership, manage their property, and handle their own tribal business and relations. Of the roughly 560 federally recognized reservations, only about 224 are involved in gaming. Casinos do provide funds for housing, health care, schools, and jobs. Despite this, unemployment on some reservations is reaching up to 75% and nearly 10% of Native American families are homeless (Lentsch).

There are also many other stereotypes that don't seem to have a secure source or deeper meaning than a misinterpretation of culture. These include natives lacking a sense of humor, having no money sense, putting little effort into becoming educated, being skilled at handicrafts, seeking handouts, lacking unity, and

ostracizing themselves rather than blending into society (Riverwind). Several of these are obviously baseless, and some are tied into the history of oppression and displacement that natives have suffered at the hands of the United States government.

In the modern age, television is not the only form of media. There are endless venues into which misinformation can be fed and spread at alarming rates. As is made pretty clear by the modern stereotypes of Native American life, stereotyping, racism, and ignorance has had to become more subversive, but did not go away. The primary regime of media in a capitalist system is entertainment and advertisement. Everyone wants to be entertained, and everyone wants and needs money to survive. Westerners sold the image of a savage Indian, and perpetuated untrue archetypes and stereotypes that have lasted until today. In contemporary life, commercials reign. These ads sell people everything—services, devices, entertainment, tools, food, etc.—and use popular images, ideas, and even colors to make their money.

Modern America tends to use its status as a "melting pot" to "borrow" ideas, images, and cultural icons from minority groups to feed the need for the changing atmosphere of high end white culture. This often leads to cultural appropriation, the use of a minority group's cultural elements in the dominant culture, thereby making it more "acceptable" in the context of the "superior" group. Native Americans have fallen victim to this time and again, and it has helped feed some of the stereotypes that people have concerning the native cultures of America.

The most common version of the removal of a cultural item, which is glorified by the dominant culture only after it is in "their" consumption, is that of the headdress. Fashion magazines and runways are full of Native American prints, jewelry, and imagery, but the headdress is perhaps the most popular due to its regal beauty. The meaning of the item is often discarded—as most culturally appropriated things are—and there lies the disrespect of the use of the item. In some Native American cultures, headdresses are restricted items, holding very important values for the wearer, not unlike military medals or a bachelor's degree. The ownership of a headdress is an honor which must be earned. They represent achievements accomplished by the wearer, and it is offensive to many native peoples to see them used as a fashion statement ("An Open Letter to Non-Natives in Headdresses").

This issue is taken to an extreme in the matter of mascots. Indians or Red Skins are popular sports mascots in high schools across the nation, and the Washington Red Skins are a major football team. This imagery is demeaning to the Native American culture because it perpetuates a ridiculous and outdated stereotype of what an "Indian" is. A "race" of people should not be summed up into an image that is used to represent a sports team or a school event. This shows a clear lack of

understanding of Native Americans as a modern living culture. This might be equivalent to having the "Yellow Skins" mascot with slanted eyes and large front teeth. It is the image that the dominant culture wishes to portray, a defeated people of the past who can now be summed up into a costume for people of the majority to wear and use at their disposal (Ridgway).

Though stereotypes are still a part of the modern Native American representation, things are slowly changing. The Native American voice is being heard more than ever before. Sherman Alexie, a popular Native American writer, has been writing about the Native American experience in modern America for years. One of his books, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* contained a short story that inspired his screenplay for *Smoke Signals*. This film was the first full-length feature film made completely by Native Americans, opening the arena of film even wider for others who want their stories told (Alcalay).

Of course, there will always be steps taken backwards by some. Recently, several Native American actors and a cultural adviser walked off the set of Adam Sandler's film *The Ridiculous Six* (2015) due to the use of disrespectful imagery and interpretations of the Apache culture. Some of the native female characters were given names such as "Beaver Breath" and "No Bra." Another native actress was instructed to squat and urinate while smoking a peace pipe. These sorts of ideas are clearly insulting and unnecessary (Garcia).

Native American culture through the lens of natives is also being expanded into the realm of fashion and journalism. Kelly Holmes started the first Native American fashion magazine in 2012 called *Native Max*. Fashion is an area of heavy cultural appropriation of the native cultures, and hopefully more native peoples will strive to have their voices heard through their passions (Duggan). Native voices will do the most to enact change and the eradication of stereotypes from popular culture. When these voices are heard, read, or seen through the passions of native peoples' talents and work, there will be no excuses left to those who perpetuate these damaging stereotypes.

The most useful tool that the unaware and those of the dominant culture can use to aid in this reclaiming of identity is education and respect. Assumptions lead to stereotypes which rob people of their sense of individuality, a value modern culture holds above almost all else. Unfortunately, this can be difficult when the education system teaches the same lies and misconceptions as Hollywood (Mihelich). Those who wish to be educated and culturally aware must walk a fine line, and need to reach deeper than popular culture and outdated history books for their answers.

The government system is also starting to take a closer look at the needs of Native Americans. On July 9, 2015 the White House is going to host the first ever White House Tribal Youth Gathering. This opportunity

will provide American Indian and Alaska Native youth from across the country the chance to interact directly with senior Administration officials and the White House Council on Native American Affairs. This will hopefully be an exciting and fruitful meeting of minds which will result in the native voices being heard and appreciated ("White House To Host First Ever White House Tribal Youth Gathering").

The Native American identity has been subversively oppressed by the colonizing culture since the days of the frontier. After the fighting, there arose the invention of film, another battle ground on which the natives had to fight for their identities and often lost ground. Stereotypes were engrained into the popular culture of America, and eventually their cultures became little more than symbols or ideas that were taken out of their cultural contexts and used as props for the dominant culture of America, leaving the Native Americans with even less of their identities than before. Though Native Americans have been long silenced, their voices are rising through film, literature, and other modes of communication and media. They are slowly taking back their cultural icons, their histories, and their personal identities. They no longer must reside as the "other," after all, this is America, and they are its native peoples.

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