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Representing Native Peoples: Native Narratives of Indigenous History and Culture

Nicolas G. Rosenthal and Liza Black

The Smithsonian Institute's National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), located on the National Mall in Washington, DC, opened a major exhibit in early 2018 that will run through 2022, titled, simply, *Americans*. Ambitious in scope, it addresses how depictions of American Indians have been pervasive in United States society and culture from the colonial period to the present, but almost always on terms defined by non-Indians. The exhibit begins with a central gallery that features Native American imagery appropriated for, among other things, government seals, fruit labels, children's toys, motorcycles, and military weapons, and then moves to a series of side galleries that specifically connect events in US history to American Indians as symbols. The story of Pocahontas, for instance, is a prime example of how historical episodes involving Native Americans have been interpreted for a national narrative. While the much-recounted story of Pocahontas saving Captain John Smith from execution is almost certainly false, it invokes the popular idea that the Native peoples of North America recognized American exceptionalism and gladly yielded their land and resources to the new nation. The exhibit goes on to demonstrate how the Pocahontas myth has persisted in American culture in spaces that range from the Disney Princesses franchise to the United States Capitol building. For curators Paul Chaat Smith and Cécile R. Ganteaume, the Pocahontas story and dozens of others represent one of the central tensions in American life: "Many Americans have no

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interaction with American Indians,” Smith argues, “yet they do know these images and symbols really well and have emotional connections with them.”¹

Scholars in Native American studies have long found these appropriations and misrepresentations of American Indian people, history, and culture to be fertile ground for analysis and critique. In one seminal work, *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (1978), Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr. examined non-Indian ideas about and images of Native peoples over time, stressing how they continue to shape understandings of the past, especially those that proclaim the superiority of European Americans and United States “civilization.” Moreover, Berkhofer argues, the country’s images of American Indians provide insight into American society and culture, but tell us little about actual Native peoples.² A similar premise has animated dozens of subsequent works. Philip J. Deloria’s *Playing Indian* (1998), for instance, focused on how Americans have sought to embody American Indians as a way of establishing national identities, from the British colonists “disguised” as Indians during the Boston Tea Party, to New Age appropriations of vaguely Native American dress, music, and ceremonies in the 1980s.³ Like Berkhofer’s *The White Man's Indian*, *Playing Indian* proved hugely influential for scholarship probing the connections between ideas about Native people and American culture and society; indeed, this combined work, developed over the past four decades, provides the intellectual foundation for the NMAI *Americans* exhibit.⁴

The exhibition’s omissions may be explained by a lack of scholarship in other areas. *Playing Indian* identified, albeit briefly, some Native Americans who engaged the country’s obsession with American Indians. For example, reformers such as Charles Eastman (Dakota) and Arthur C. Parker (Seneca) saw in these popular ideas the possibility for an intercultural meeting ground that could be used to negotiate with American society and to create new meanings from the intersection of American Indians and American identity in order to serve Native peoples’ social and political agendas. Deloria’s *Indians in Unexpected Places* (2004) expanded on this analysis, by powerfully addressing the tension between popular culture’s expectations of Native peoples and the realities of their lived experiences. *Indians in Unexpected Places*’ essays on film, sports, technology, and other topics reveal that American Indian participation in the trends of modern life has been regular, dynamic, and meaningful, yet significantly shaped by Native encounters with non-Indian expectations.⁵

This book, too, has had a major impact on the field of Native American studies, particularly as a starting point for those who examine Native peoples’ lives in modern American culture and society. Many such works take issues of self-representation seriously: investigating how Native peoples have sought to represent themselves and develop new narratives of Indigenous history and culture while negotiating the presumptions of settler-colonial society. This literature remains relatively small, however, especially when compared to the large amount of scholarly work on non-Indian representations.⁶ Perhaps it is to be expected, then, that there are few signs of actual Native peoples and their experiences in the NMAI’s *Americans* exhibit.

Thus, this exhibit illustrates not only how far studies focusing on American Indian representation have come, but also where they can still go, particularly when we

move Native people to the center of the story. We suggest that lingering over the part of the exhibition's main gallery dedicated to film and television depictions of American Indians will best illustrate this point. Certainly, there has been no greater force in spreading derogatory images of Native peoples than Hollywood—"It turns out that virtually every long-running sitcom on TV has an Indian episode," notes co-curator Smith, who adds, "There's a 'Brady Bunch' episode"⁷—yet unfortunately, the exhibit mirrors past scholarship in neglecting to recognize that American Indian actors often played these roles for important reasons. The episode titled "The Brady Braves" (1971), the plot of which revolved around the youngest Brady children befriending an American Indian boy during a family visit to the Grand Canyon, did resort to displaying and reifying American Indian stereotypes, but it also provided opportunities for the Native people who performed on the show.

An account of the experiences of one of the "Brady Braves" cast members, twenty-one-year-old Dennis Tafoya, illuminates how such alternative meanings are at work in American Indian performance. Following his family's move in the 1950s from Santa Clara Pueblo, Tafoya grew up in Los Angeles, the largest and most diverse urban American Indian community in the country. Dennis's father, Joseph Whitecloud Tafoya, Jr., worked in the aerospace industry, allowing the family to purchase a home and live a comfortable middle-class life in Hermosa Beach on the Los Angeles coast. The family supplemented their income by performing regularly as singers and dancers, a tradition of performing for non-Indians that went back to Dennis Tafoya's grandfather, who spent summers with several other Santa Clara families dancing for tourists at Manitou Springs, Colorado. During the 1950s and 1960s, Tafoya remembered his family "danced for Boy Scouts, Cub Scouts, Indian Guides, birthday parties, Bozo the Clown on TV. We were in parades, Miss Universe Parade, Rose Parade, always doing something."⁸

Tafoya specified that this type of performance for a popular audience was different from what the family did when they returned to Santa Clara, or went to intertribal powwows throughout Indian country, but it was still important, although in a different way: "My brothers, my sister, my dad, we did it all. Hoop dance, spirit shield dance, in fact a lot of the dances . . . were basically renditions of dances our family did, what we did before. . . . [But] it's a little different than powwow dancing, it's putting on a demonstration of a particular dance that has a meaning, then you share what that meaning is with the people who watch it. There's a different chant, song, different expression. Some of them are Plains dances, some are Pueblo dances. Some are dances taken from different tribes." Tafoya also stressed that Indian dancing led to his family "having opportunities to travel internationally," noting, "We traveled to Europe, to Spain, Sweden . . . a year in Japan, touring. My other brother was in Australia, my other brothers were in New Zealand, Indonesia, just sharing our American Indian dancing and songs . . . I went to Europe in '68."

With special fondness, Tafoya recalled how dancing became an entry point into the entertainment industry, including his television appearance on *The Brady Bunch*:

My parents were in Japan, they toured with Casey Tibbs, who was an all-around rodeo champion. . . . He took a rodeo, American Indian, cowboy kind of

extravaganza over to Japan. We did a lot of work with Monty Montana, Jr., who also has the rights to Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, Congress of Rough Riders. We did a lot of work with him, a lot of TV things, a lot of entertainment in that regard. . . . I don't know if you've ever watched *The Brady Bunch*, or the one show where the Brady Bunch goes to the Grand Canyon? Well, keep your eyes open. At the end of the program, [Mohawk actor] Jay Silverheels, who was Tonto [on the "Lone Ranger" television series], he plays the role of the chief. At the end of the program, we're all there dancing, and you'll see some Indian dancers dancing. Well that's us, [my family and] my good friends that were Cheyenne and Otoe, some Pawnees, Omaha.⁹

Clearly, the significance of American Indian performance for Dennis Tafoya, his family, and other Native people suggests the need for more complex analyses that go beyond a primary focus on the problems of cultural appropriation by non-Indians to include Native people's negotiations with those images and ideas, or studies that shift the scholarly focus to Native peoples and how they have negotiated, challenged, reinforced, shifted, overturned, and engaged in myriad other ways the representations of American Indians in US culture and society.

Studies like these are the basis for this special issue of the *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, *Representing Native Peoples: Native Narratives of Indigenous History and Culture*: simply put, the essays collected in this volume speak to the many ways that Native people have represented themselves, in several different periods and contexts as well as through various media. Dedicating a special issue to such a broad yet understudied topic allows for a wide range of approaches encompassing anthropology, art history, cartography, film studies, history, and literature. The contributing authors are rooted in their specific disciplines, but often embrace interdisciplinary methods and approaches. In this way, this special issue mirrors Native American studies as a whole, which while sitting in a space that is both interdisciplinary and marginalized, attempts to master and respond to many disciplines as it calls for the validation and attention it deserves.

The first essays in *Representing Native Peoples* set the tone, first discombobulating and then reorienting any readers perhaps overly conditioned by the norms of American culture. Annita Lucchesi's "Indians Don't Make Maps: Indigenous Cartographic Traditions and Innovations" refutes the claim in the essay's title by demonstrating a long history of Indigenous cartographers around the world who not only engaged ideas of space, nation, territory, and relationships to the land, but often countered colonial occupation and epistemologies. Working through three analytical categories—the ancestral, anticolonial, and decolonial—Lucchesi concludes that both studying and carrying on the practice of Indigenous cartography have tremendous potential for documenting Native histories and cultures, increasing tribal sovereignty, and mobilizing across communities for restorative justice. In rooting its claims in widespread common misconceptions about Indigenous peoples, then disproving them with compelling, overlooked evidence of Native agency and creative response, "Indians Don't Make Maps" establishes an analytical thread for the reader that is picked up by the

following essay, “The ‘Idiot Sticks’: Kwakwaka’wakw Carving and Cultural Resistance in Commercial Art Production on the Northwest Coast.”

Jack Davy calls for a reexamination of so-called “idiot sticks,” miniature totem poles, and other items Native Northwest coast artists carved in the early twentieth century for a commercial market. Although scholars, curators, and collectors often derided these carved miniatures as “tourist art,” Davy argues that the carvings were in fact a pragmatic response to Canada’s ban on First Nations cultural practices, which included not only carving, but other forms of art production. Far from being cheap tourist knockoffs, Davy sees “idiot sticks” as a means for Native artists to carry on cultural traditions and earn their living in the face of oppressive conditions. Moreover, Davy finds subversive and satirical texts embedded in these objects, suggesting that Native artists—knowing that the “idiots” in their interactions were truly the consumers, or even government officials who considered participation in the market economy a straight path toward assimilation—probably had few qualms about using the slang term “idiot sticks.” Davy shows us that, ironically, scholarly concern that these “inauthentic” representations are too much influenced by non-Indians has prevented these works from being embraced as revealing the complex ways that Indigenous peoples worked to maintain cultural autonomy.

Similar efforts by Native people, in the face of seemingly overwhelming odds, run through the next set of essays as well, which center on interventions into popular representations of American Indian history and culture during the first half of the twentieth century. Guest editor Nicolas G. Rosenthal’s “Painting Native America in Public: American Indian Artists during the New Deal” examines the lives of American Indian painters who undertook federal government commissions in the 1930s and 1940s. During a time when their perspectives on Native American history and culture were sorely lacking, these artists planned and painted murals in post offices, libraries, municipal buildings, and other public spaces throughout the country, enabling them to develop their skills, make a living as artists, and significantly influence Native representations. While they were limited by dominant expectations for American Indian art and the paternalism of officials and administrators, Rosenthal shows us that the benefits of these New Deal commissions and their efforts to paint Native America, on their own terms, laid a foundation for Native artists to build a place for American Indian art in the contemporary art world, one characterized by considerably more cultural and artistic autonomy. Indeed, the vibrant landscape of contemporary American Indian art today owes a substantial debt to the struggles of this generation. The work of Native American artists in the early twentieth century was paralleled in many ways by their contemporaries who sought to influence US culture and society through live performance. In “The West of the Indian . . . and white, of jazz and airplanes’: Urban Indians, Native Networks, and the Creation of Modern Regional Identity in the American Southwest,” Cathleen D. Cahill focuses on five Native American opera singers who, as the American Southwest was framing narratives of itself for purposes of tourism and regional development, saw opportunities in the entertainment industry’s need for living Native peoples to add authenticity and draw audiences to performances of regional plays and opera. Traveling along a circuit of emerging urban

centers, Native performers appeared in pageants and other live events meant to craft romantic and ultimately celebratory stories of the region's move from primitive past to modern present, but in ways that (literally) lent a Native voice to these projects. Native opera singers and other performers also became prominent figures and built on their stardom to help organize urban intertribal communities and advocate for broader issues impacting Native peoples, including control of their representations.

These struggles also occurred in the medium perhaps most responsible for the development and perpetuation of non-Indian representations of Native peoples, Hollywood films. Andrew H. Fisher's "Tinseltown Tyee: Nipo Strongheart and the Making of *Braveheart*" joins a growing body of scholarship that addresses the lives of Native American actors. Specifically addressing the 1925 Cecil B. DeMille film *Braveheart*, in which Strongheart's work as technical adviser influenced key parts of the narrative—including an ending that makes the case for honoring treaty-guaranteed fishing rights—Fisher argues that Nipo Strongheart (Yakama) was seeking to disrupt dominant discourses and negotiate the terms of Native peoples' representations on film. Believing, like other performers in this period, that combining education and entertainment could lead to reform, Strongheart saw his impact on popular representation as a key form of advocacy for Native peoples as he was working to build his career and reputation as an authority.

Jacob Floyd's article on Native actors works through the layers that often obstruct our view of such advocacy efforts. "Negotiating Publicity and Persona: The Work of Native Actors in Studio Hollywood" argues that a careful examination and interpretation of studio-produced publicity materials illustrates how Native actors created and perpetuated offscreen personas that could impact onscreen representations and reception with audiences. Pressbooks from the 1930s and 1940s offered particular spaces where Native actors could represent themselves and then craft public appearances to elaborate on those identities. In these ways, the actors who were named at birth Issac Johnny John (Seneca) and Daniel Simmons (Yakama) became the full-time stage personas Chief John Big and Chief Yowlachie, respectively, public personalities that allowed them to counter the negative stereotypes sometimes perpetuated by the very roles they were hired to play. The performers studied by Cahill, Fisher, and Floyd all understood that, during a time when most vehicles for representing Native peoples were determined by non-Indians, such identities were important cultural capital that facilitated a conversation with the culture at large.

Subsequent generations expanded the possibilities for shaping their representations through American culture and society. The oft-cited 1961 independent film *The Exiles* was remarkable not only in that the nonprofessional Native actors played themselves, created their own dialogue, and developed the storyline, but because the film validates those representations by framing itself as documentary and ethnography. In "*The Exiles*: Native Survivance and Urban Space in Downtown Los Angeles," guest editor Liza Black argues for understanding *The Exiles* fundamentally as a barely filtered portrait of American Indian life in Los Angeles. Ironically, in using the film for their own purposes, film and urban studies scholars have perpetuated the idea of Native people in the city as anomaly. Black's analysis, particularly through a focus on

Yvonne Williams (Apache), the primary Native woman in the film, finds that this is a historically specific portrait of Native American survivance through urban experience that was controlled by Native people more than any other filmic representation up to that point; thus, *The Exiles* managed to shatter the expectations of both audience and filmmaker.

Mary Stoecklin's "Native Narratives, Mystery Writing, and the Osage Oil Murders: Looking at *Mean Spirit* and *The Osage Rose*" examines Native American literature from the last few decades from authors who have embraced the detective genre and applied it to historical events in Indian country. Stoecklin contends that Native American authors Linda Hogan (Chickasaw) and Tom Holm (Cherokee/Muscogee Creek) have provided Indigenous representations of history and culture while advancing arguments on issues such as tribal sovereignty and land claims. Framing the Osage oil murders in 1920s Oklahoma as mystery stories, both Hogan and Holm drew in a broad audience but then disrupted its expectations by featuring Native victims, centering the story on Native detectives as heroes, and resolving the narrative through the enactment of justice derived from Native cosmologies. It has been common in the detective genre to use Native characters as exotic tokens who serve to legitimize the non-Indian protagonist, but the central figures in *Mean Spirit* and *The Osage Rose* take the readers through historical events from a Native perspective, thereby illustrating Native resilience in the face of settler colonialism.

Clearly, increasing control over the means of representation has created new opportunities for Native peoples to present their own narratives of Indigenous history and culture. Elizabeth Rule illustrates this vividly with the volume's final essay, "The Chickasaw Press: A Source of Power and Pride." Since its establishment by the Chickasaw Nation in 2006, the Chickasaw Press has sought to develop and distribute scholarship from a Chickasaw perspective. By discussing the development of the Chickasaw Press and its focus on publishing tribal-specific histories, cultural preservation efforts, and contributions to community programs, Rule argues that these efforts function as an act of tribal sovereignty. Going forward, Rule shows us that the type of "intellectual sovereignty" realized by the Chickasaw Nation through tribal publishing has tremendous potential for enacting decolonization through self-representation. The need for more of these and other tribally controlled representations remains as non-Native narratives continue to shape popular understandings of the past in ways that justify their actions and obscure the debates around current policies.

For hundreds of years, in dozens of different forums and multiple contexts, Native peoples have been striving to represent themselves by presenting their own narratives of Indigenous history and culture. Even at the NMAI's *Americans* exhibit there is a tantalizing indication of these efforts. Deep within the gallery dedicated to the Indian Removal Act, a display notes that Cherokee and Choctaw poets, scholars, and performers first popularized the well-known phrase the "Trail of Tears" in the early twentieth century, which helped to establish Indian Removal as a major event in standard narratives of American history as well as in popular culture.¹⁰ All of the essays in this volume depart from similar points to show how Native peoples have struggled to control their representations, often against significant odds, but always in ways

that make a difference for themselves and future generations. We hope, of course, to inform and inspire more work along these lines. Doing so would make it possible to fill a major exhibition space like NMAI's with a second installment of an *Americans* series—one that focuses on Native representations of Indigenous history and culture.

NOTES

1. Carolina A. Miranda, "It's Not Just Chief Wahoo. Why American Indian Images Became Potent, Cartoonish Advertising Symbols," *Los Angeles Times*, January 29, 2018. The discussion of the exhibition in this article is based both on Miranda's review and the primary author's July, 2018 viewing. Also see the exhibit's companion publication by Cécile Ganteaume, *Officially Indian: Symbols that Define the United States* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 2017). For additional perspectives on NMAI, see *The National Museum of the American Indian: Critical Conversations*, ed. Amy Lonetree and Amanda J. Cobb (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008).

2. Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1978).

3. Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

4. The vast literature on appropriation of American Indian culture includes *The Pretend Indians: Images of Native Americans in the Movies*, ed. Gretchen M. Bataille and Charles L. P. Silet (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1980); *Dressing in Feathers: The Construction of the Indian in American Popular Culture*, ed. S. Elizabeth Bird (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996); Devon A. Mihesuah, *American Indians: Stereotypes and Realities* (Atlanta, GA: Clarity Press, Inc., 1996); *Hollywood's Indian: The Portrayal of the Native American in Film*, ed. Peter C. Rollins and John E. O' Connor (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998); Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians: Native Americans and Film* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999); Shari M. Huhndorf, *Going Native: Indians in the American Cultural Imagination* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); Angela Aleiss, *Making the White Man's Indian: Native Americans and Hollywood Movies* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005); Erika Marie Bsumek, *Indian-Made: Navajo Culture in the Marketplace, 1868–1940* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008); Paul Chaat Smith, *Everything You Know about Indians Is Wrong* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Pauline Turner Strong, *American Indians and the American Imaginary: Cultural Representation across the Centuries* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2013); Liza Black, *Movie Indians: Native Americans in Film, 1941–1960* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, forthcoming).

5. Philip J. Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2004).

6. Examples which both precede and follow *Indians in Unexpected Places* include L. G. Moses, *Wild West Shows and the Images of American Indians, 1883–1933* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996); Paige Raibmon, "Theatres of Contact: the Kwakwaka'wakw Meet Colonialism in British Columbia and at the Chicago World's Fair," *Canadian Historical Review* 81, no. 2 (2000), 157–90, <https://doi.org/10.3138/CHR.81.2.157>; Beverly Singer, *Wiping the War Paint Off the Lens: Native American Film and Video* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); Michelle Wick Patterson, "Real' Indian Songs: The Society of American Indians and the Use of Native American Culture as a Means of Reform," *American Indian Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (2002), 44–66, <https://doi.org/10.1353/aiq.2003.0011>; Larry Nesper, "Simulating Culture: Being Indian for Tourists in Lac du Flambeau's Wa-Swa-Gon Indian Bowl," *Ethnohistory* 50, no. 3 (2003), 447–72, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00141801-50-3-447>; Clyde Ellis, "Five Dollars a Week to Be 'Regular Indians': Shows, Exhibitions, and the Economics of Indian Dancing, 1880–1930," in *Native Pathways: Economic Development and American Indian Culture*, ed. Brian Hosmer and Colleen O'Neil (Boulder: University

Press of Colorado, 2004), 181–206; Nicolas G. Rosenthal, “Representing Indians: Native American Actors on Hollywood’s Frontier,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (2005), 329–52, <https://doi.org/10.2307/25443194>; Michelle H. Raheja, *Reservation Reelism: Redfacing, Visual Sovereignty, and Representations of Native Americans in Film* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010); Joanna Hearne, *Smoke Signals: Native Cinema Rising* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012); Adria L. Imada, *Aloha America: Hula Circuits through the U.S. Empire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012); and David Davis, *Waterman: The Life and Times of Duke Kahanamoku* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015).

7. Quoted in Miranda, “It’s Not Just Chief Wahoo.”

8. The source of subsequent information is a May 6, 2004, interview with Dennis Tafoya by Nicolas G. Rosenthal, in Los Angeles, CA; a recording and transcript of this interview is on file with the coauthor.

9. Ibid.

10. This discussion is based on the primary author’s viewing of the exhibit in July, 2018.

