BERKHOFER, ROBERT F. THE WHITE MAN'S INDIAN: IMAGES OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN FROM COLUMBUS TO THE PRESENT

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Persisting Fundamental Images and Themes

The centuries-long confusion and melding of what seem to us fundamentally different, even incorrect, ways of understanding human societies account for several persistent practices found throughout the history of White interpretation of Native Americans as Indians: (1) generalizing from one tribe's society and culture to all Indians, (2) conceiving of Indians in terms of their deficiencies according to White ideals rather than in terms of their own various
cultures, and (3) using moral evaluation as description of Indians.  

Not only does the general term Indian continue from Columbus to the present day, but so does the tendency to speak of one tribe as exemplary of all Indians and conversely to comprehend a specific tribe according to the characteristics ascribed to all Indians. That almost no account in the sixteenth century portrays systematically or completely the customs and beliefs of any one tribe probably results from the newness of the encounter and the feeling that all Indians possessed the same basic qualities. Although eyewitness accounts and discourses by those who had lived among Native Americans in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries often describe in detail the lives of a specific tribe or tribes, they also in the end generalize from this knowledge to all Indians. The famous reporters on Native American cultures in the colonial period of the United States, for example, invariably treated their tribe(s) as similar enough to all other Indians in customs and beliefs to serve as illustrations of that race in thought and deed. Even in the century that saw the rise of professional anthropology, most social scientists as well as their White countrymen continued to speak and write as if a specific tribe and all Indians were interchangeable for the purposes of description and understanding of fundamental cultural dynamics and social organization.  

Today, most Whites who use the word Indian have little idea of specific tribal peoples or individual Native Americans to render their usage much more than an abstraction, if not a stereotype. Even White writers on the history of White images of the Indian tend to treat all Native American cultures as a single Indian one for the purposes of analyzing the validity of White stereotypes.  

Another persistent theme in White imagery is the tendency to describe Indian life in terms of its lack of White ways rather than being described positively from within the framework of the specific culture under consideration. Therefore, tribal Americans were usually described not as they were in their own eyes but from the viewpoint of outsiders, who often failed to understand their ideas or customs. Images of the Indian, accordingly, were (and are) usually what he was not or had not in White terms, rather than in terms of individual tribal cultures and social systems as modern anthropologists aim to do. This negative prototype of the deficient Indian began with Columbus but continues into the present as any history of the White education of Native Americans reveals. To this day such education is still too often treated as philanthropy to the "culturally deprived" Indian.

Description by deficiency all too readily led to characterization by evaluation, and so most of the White studies of Indian culture(s) were (and are) also examinations of Indian moral character. Later White understanding of the Indian, like that of earlier explorers and settlers, expressed moral judgments upon lifestyles as well as presented their description, or mixed ideology with ethnography, to use modern terms. Ethnographic description according to modern standards could not truly be separated from ideology and moral judgment until both cultural pluralism and moral relativism were accepted as ideals. Not until well into the twentieth century did such acceptance become general among intellectuals, and even then only a few Whites truly practiced the two ideals in their outlook on Native Americans. Thus eyewitness description prior to this century and so much still in our time combines moral evaluation with ethnographic detail, and moral judgments all too frequently passed for science in the past according to present-day understanding. If ideology was fused with ethnography in firsthand sources, then those images held by Whites who never had experience with Native Americans were usually little more than stereotype and moral judgment.

Whether describing physical appearance or character, manners or morality, economy or dress, housing or sexual habits, government or religion, Whites overwhelmingly measured the Indian as a general category against those beliefs, values, or institutions they most cherished in themselves at the time. For this reason, many commentators on the history of White Indian imagery see Europeans and Americans as using counterimages of themselves to describe Indians and the counterimages of Indians to describe themselves. Such a negative reference group could be used to define White identity or to prove White superiority over the worst fears of their own depravity. If the Puritans, for example, could project their own sins upon people they called savages, then the extermination of the Indian became a cleansing of those sins from their own midst as well as the destruction of a feared enemy.

Since White views of Indians are inextricably bound up with the evaluation of their own society and culture, then ambivalence of Europeans and Americans over the worth of their own customs and civilization would show up in their appraisal of Indian life. Even with the image of the Indian as a reverse or negative model of White life, two different conclusions about the quality of Indian existence can be drawn. That Indians lacked certain or all aspects of White civilization could be viewed as bad or good depending upon the observer's feel-
ings about his own society and the use to which he wanted to put the image. In line with this possibility, commentators upon the history of White imagery of the Indian have found two fundamental but contradictory conceptions of Indian culture.

In general and at the risk of oversimplifying some four centuries of imagery, the good Indian appears friendly, courteous, and hospitable to the initial invaders of his lands and to all Whites so long as the latter honored the obligations presumed to be mutually entered into with the tribe. Along with handsomeness of physique and physiognomy went great stamina and endurance. Modest in attitude if not always in dress, the noble Indian exhibited great calm and dignity in bearing, conversation, and even under torture. Brave in combat, he was tender in love for family and children. Pride in himself and independence of other persons combined with a plain existence and wholesome enjoyment of nature's gifts. According to this version, the Indian, in short, lived a life of liberty, simplicity, and innocence.

On the other side, a list of almost contradictory traits emerged of the bad Indian in White eyes. Nakedness and lechery, passion and vanity led to lives of polygamy and sexual promiscuity among themselves and constant warfare and treacherous revenge against their enemies. When habits and customs were not brutal they appeared loathsome to Whites. Cannibalism and human sacrifice were the worst sins, but cruelty to captives and incessant warfare ranked not far behind in the estimation of Whites. Filthy surroundings, inadequate cooking, and certain items of diet repulsive to White taste tended to confirm a low opinion of Indian life. Indolence rather than industry, improvidence in the face of scarcity, thriftlessness and treachery added to the list of traits on this side. Concluding the bad version of the Indian were the power of superstition represented by the "conjurers" and "medicine men," the hard slavery of women and the meanness of men, and even cunning or defeat in the face of White advances and weaponry. Thus this list substituted license for liberty, a harsh lot for simplicity, and dissimulation and deceit for innocence.

Along with the persistence of the dual image of good and bad but general deficiency overall went a curious timelessness in defining the Indian proper. In spite of centuries of contact and the changed conditions of Native American lives, Whites picture the "real" Indian as the one before contact or during the early period of that contact. That Whites of earlier centuries should see the Indian as without history makes sense given their lack of knowledge about the past of Native American peoples and the shortness of their encounters. That later Whites should harbor the same assumption seems surprising given the discoveries of archaeology and the changed condition of the tribes as the result of White contact and policy. Yet most Whites still conceive of the "real" Indian as the aborigine he once was, or as they imagine he once was, rather than as he is now. White Europeans and Americans expect even at present to see an Indian out of the forest or a Wild West show rather than on farm or in city, and far too many anthropologists still present this image by describing aboriginal cultures in what they call the "ethnographic present," or as if tribes lived today as they once did. Present-day historians of the United States, likewise, omit the Indian entirely after the colonial period or the last battles on the Plains for the same reason. If Whites do not conceive of themselves still living as Anglo-Saxons, Gauls, or Teutons, then why should they expect Indians to be unchanged from aboriginal times, Native Americans ask of their White peers?

If Whites of the early period of contact invented the Indian as a conception and provided it a fundamental meaning through imagery, why did later generations perpetuate that conception and imagery without basic alteration although Native Americans changed? The answer to this question must be sought partially in the very contrast presupposed between Red and White society that gave rise to the idea of the Indian in the first place. Since Whites primarily understood the Indian as an antithesis to themselves, then civilization and Indianness as they defined them would forever be opposites. Only civilization had history and dynamics in this view, so therefore Indianness must be conceived of as historical and static. If the Indian changed through the adoption of civilization as defined by Whites, then he was no longer truly Indian according to the image, because the Indian was judged by what Whites were not. Change toward what Whites were made him into factum less Indian.

The history of White-Indian contact increasingly proved to Whites, particularly in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, that civilization and Indianness were inherently incompatible and verified the initial conception that gave rise to the imagery. Death through disease and warfare decimated the aboriginal population in the face of White advance and gave rise by the time of the American Revolution to the idea of the vanishing race. If Whites regarded the Indian as a threat to life and morals when alive, they regarded him with nostalgia upon his demise—or when that threat was safely past. Indians who remained alive and who resisted adoption of civilized...
tion appeared to accept White vices instead of virtues and so became those imperfect creatures, the degraded or reservation Indian. If there is a third major White image of the Indian, then this degraded, often drunken, Indian constitutes the essence of that understanding. Living neither as an assimilated White nor an Indian of the classic image, and therefore neither noble nor wildly savage but always scorned, the degraded Indian exhibited the vices of both societies in the opinion of White observers. Degenerate and poverty-stricken, these unfortunate were presumed to be outcasts from their own race, who exhibited the worse qualities of Indian character with none of its redeeming features. Since White commentators praised when they did not scorn this degenerate Indian, the image carried the same unfavorable evaluation overall as the bad or ignoble Indian.

Complete assimilation would have meant the total disappearance of Indianess. If one adds to these images the conceptions of progress and evolution, then one arrives at the fundamental premises behind much of White understanding of the Indian from about the middle of the eighteenth century to very recent times. Under these conceptions civilization was destined to triumph over savagery, and so the Indian was to disappear either through death or through assimilation into the larger, more progressive White society. For White Americans during this long period of time, the only good Indian was indeed a dead Indian—whether through warfare or through assimilation. Nineteenth-century frontiersmen acted upon this premise; missionaries and philanthropists tried to cope with the fact. In the twentieth century anthropologists rushed to salvage ethnography from the last living members left over from the ethnographic present, and historians treated Indians as “dead” after early contact with Whites. In these ways modern Native Americans and their contemporary lifestyles have largely disappeared from the White imagination—unless modern Indian activism reverses this historic trend for longer than the recurring but transitory White enthusiasm for things Indian.

That the White image of the Indian is doubly timeless in its assumption of the atemporality of Indian life and its enduring judgment of deficiency does not mean that the imagery as a whole does not have its own history. The problem is how to show both the continuity and the changes in the imagery. Ideally such a history would embody both (1) what changed, what persisted, and why, and (2) what images were held by whom, when, where, and why. On the whole, scholars of the topic attempt only one or the other of these approaches and adopt quite different strategies in doing so. One