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**AMERICAN  
INDIANS**

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**Stereotypes  
& Realities**

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**Devon A. Mihesuah**

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**CLARITY** 1996

*Regina Sk*

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 Reprinted 1997  
 Reprinted 1998  
 Reprinted 1999  
 Reprinted 2001  
 ISBN: 0-932863-22-1

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**In-house Editor: Diana G. Collier**

**Cataloguing in Publication Data:**

**Main entry under title:**

Mihesuah, Devon A. (Devon Abbott), 1957-  
 American Indians : stereotypes & realities

Includes bibliographical references.  
 ISBN 0-932863-22-1

1. Indians of North America - Popular opinions.
2. Stereotype (Psychology) - United States. 3. Public opinion - United States. I. Title.

E77.M543 1996 973'0497 C96-9200382

A co-publication of:

**Clarity Press, Inc.**  
 Ste. 469, 3277 Roswell Rd. N.E.  
 Atlanta, GA. 30305

and

**Clarity International**  
 Ste. 253, 919C Albert St.  
 Regina, SK. S4R 2P6  
 Canada

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am sincerely grateful for the advice and suggestions from Curtis Hinsley, Professor of History at Northern Arizona University (N.A.U.), Flagstaff, Arizona; Shirley Powell, Professor of Anthropology and Archaeology Lab Director at N.A.U.; James Riding In, Assistant Professor of Justice Studies at Arizona State University in Tempe, Arizona; Donald Worcester, Professor Emeritus of History at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, Texas; Dan Boone, photographer at the Bilby Research Center, N.A.U., and as always, my husband, Joshua.

# INTRODUCTION

No other ethnic group in the United States has endured greater and more varied distortions of its cultural identity than American Indians. Distorted images of Indian culture are found in every possible medium — from scholarly publications and textbooks, movies, TV shows, literature, cartoons, commercials, comic books, and fanciful paintings, to the gamut of commercial logos, insignia and imagery that pervade tourist locales throughout the Southwest and elsewhere. Nor are the stereotypes consistent: they vary over time, and range from the extremely pejorative to the artificially idealistic, from historic depictions of Indians as uncivilized primal men and winsome women belonging to a savage culture, to present-day Indians as mystical environmentalists, or uneducated, alcoholic bingo-players confined to reservations. It is little wonder, then, that we have misinformed teachers in our schools, who pass along their misconceptions to their students.

Not only Euro-Americans, but also Europeans, Africans, and Asians appear to have definite expectations of what Indians should look like. Indian men are to be tall and copper-colored, with braided hair, clothed in buckskin and moccasins, and adorned with headaddresses, beadwork and/or turquoise. Women are expected to look like models for the "Leanin' Tree" greeting cards. These mental images are so pervasive that in the Southwest border town where I live, it is not uncommon for tourists to survey the downtown streets and ask where all the "real Indians" are, while short-haired Navajos dressed in jeans and cowboy boots stand right next to them.

Obviously, these images are not created from contact with real Indians. Most non-Indians still learn about Indians from movies. This influential medium often denigrates some Indians while elevating others to larger-than-life dimensions. Whether due to ignorance, lack of access to Indian advisers, or to the tendency to stereotype everything typical of American filmmakers whose primary interest is in making money, American films largely focus on those images that the public recognizes. Recent movies attempt to portray Indians more realistically than

the blatantly racist movies of the past decades such as *The Searchers* (1956), *The Unforgiven* (1960), and *White Manache* (1968) but Hollywood still has a long way to go. In the movie *Dances With Wolves* (1990), for example, the Lakotas, a tribe popular among hobbyists and New Ager, are positively portrayed as people with human emotions, values, and spirituality, whereas Pawnees, whose culture is no less humane than that of the Lakotas, were insultingly characterized as barbaric. As so few movies portray Indians in their current circumstances, a movie so widely popular as this one tends to perpetuate the image of Indians as living in the world of the past, and however inadvertently, reinforces the belief that all Indians were just like the Lakotas of the northern plains. And of course, as is typical of earlier Hollywood productions concerning Indians, or indeed any non-European people, we still find that the lead female is Euro-American, and she falls in love with a Euro-American hero. Apparently the Euro-American public cannot watch a movie about Indians unless it is really about Euro-Americans. The hero and heroine ride off together at the end, leaving the Lakotas to their unpleasant fate. If the audience had been provided with a more fully historical rendering, including the fact that the Lakotas and other plains tribes were subdued and confined to reservations by the 1880s, it seems likely that the movie would not have been as successful.

Another controversial movie, *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992), not only focuses on the Euro-American stars (at the expense of the most interesting character, Magua), but gives the impression that the Mohicans (Mohegans) have disappeared. That is probably surprising news to the Mohegans, who still live in Connecticut. The Walt Disney production of *Pocahontas* (1995) epitomizes Hollywood's commercialized approach. The heroine absurdly sings with forest animals, is clothed provocatively (contrary to the modest dress typical of women of her tribe) and in true Disney fashion, is blessed with a Barbie doll figure. Disney has made an exorbitant amount of money from this happy image, yet that is all it is—an image. The movie ignores the reality that Pocahontas was only 12 at most when she met John Smith. She did not love him, she did not marry him, and she died at the age of 22 in England. Within twenty years after the period depicted in the movie, the Powhatan confederacy was practically

exterminated at the hands of colonists and disease. It will take years of cinema to mitigate the influence of the stereotypes that Hollywood has created for profit.

Many accurate books about Indians have been written, yet misinformation abounds and inundates our children at an early age. Racist television cartoons, which were drawn in the 1940s and portrayed Indians as befeathered savages, are shown today as entertainment. As a result, children still play "cowboys and Indians." Were their games to reflect historical reality, they should be playing "United States army and Indians" since Indians and cowboys rarely fought each other. (Besides, the first cowboys were Mexican Indians.) Children pretending to be Indians grunt "ugh," which has grown into a nonsensical, verbal symbol of the quintessence of Indianness. Children tell each other not to be "Indian givers." This phrase implies that Indians took back what they gave. Many Indians suggest that this might more properly be changed to "U.S. government givers."

Textbooks have been and continue to be inadequate, even today, when one might have thought that certain historical realities had achieved common parlance. For example, students still learn in first grade that in 1492 Columbus "discovered" America, a land sparsely populated by heathens who had nothing to contribute to the world except corn, and that for 500 years after this encounter, all peoples of the Western Hemisphere have been content, despite the fact that this cultural encounter resulted in the most devastating holocaust the world has ever known. "Feel good" history appears to constitute the norm in our country's curriculum at all educational levels.

There are other ways teachers impart information about Indians to their pupils. Strongly influenced by the writings of prominent historians of yesteryear such as Frederick Jackson Turner, who saw Indians merely as obstacles to overcome in the spread of civilization and Christianity across the continent, they teach the "unrolling carpet theory," i.e. that it was inevitable that the tide of democracy, Christianity, and European superiority would unroll like a great carpet from east to west over a small, uncivilized population of inferior peoples. Professors who teach this version of history evaluate Indians by non-Indian standards. They still frequently refer to Indians as "savages," "heathens," and "red men," and never give the Indians' side of

the story. Many historians who study tribal histories and cultures never bother to consult with Indian informants in an attempt to formulate complete histories. Indeed, among scholars who write about Indians, the question of whether Indians can accurately recount their past is a major point of contention. Another approach followed by instructors who believe Indian culture to be unimportant is simply to ignore Indians. They teach their version of American history, sociology, art, law, literature, music, religion, political science, and education without referring to Indians at all.

There are, however, some teachers who, no less stereotypically, discuss Indians in a tone reserved for sinless martyrs. According to many Indian sympathizers, Indians were and are generous, nature-loving, noble savages, pure in heart and passive victims of the European onslaught, with no abilities to defend or think for themselves.

Thousands of Europeans belonging to over 100 "Indian enthusiast" groups are so captivated with the long-since-passed lifestyles of the Plains tribes that they gather together in camps to obsessively imitate the lifestyles of their idealized heroes. These European hobbyists or "Indians" (Germans mainly) are disappointed to discover that Plains tribes do not live their lives as portrayed by the 19th century German pulp novelist, Karl May, as are German students who enroll in my classes in a steady stream. One summer I visited the Wupatki National Monument outside of Flagstaff and was amused to read the number of German names on the park's register that wrote in the space for comments, "Where are all the Indians?!" "I expected to see Indians." Wupatki has been deserted for almost 800 years.

Given this legacy of misinformation, it should not come as a surprise that our grade-school teachers cannot properly educate young people about the non-European segments of our society. Lacking a sound educational background in Indian history and culture, teachers often revert back to what they learned in elementary school. They have their students dress as Pilgrims and Indians for Thanksgiving, but fail to mention Indians again until they discuss the western pioneers who settled the country despite attacks from bloodthirsty savages. They also teach that Columbus was a hero without examining his treatment of the New World's indigenous peoples.

While some scholars contend that many of the more negative stereotypes have given way to more positive ones, it has been my experience that both positive and negative ideas are still held by men and women of all classes, races, and cultures. It appears that many non-Indians are still confused about Indians; they see them as simultaneously "noble" and "ignoble," just as the early European settlers did. Puritans in Massachusetts, for example, referred to Indians as the "Devil's disciples" to justify killing scores of Indians and taking their lands, yet many Puritans admired the tribes' cultures and preferred to live with Indians than within the oppressive Puritan society. Spanish conquistadors and colonists who lusted for the Indians' gold but wanted someone to mine it for them resolved both inconveniences that stood in their way by proclaiming Indians as subhuman and destined by God to be their slaves. At the same time, Spanish missionaries attempted to convert Indians to Christianity. Even humanitarians subscribed to the oxymoronic notion of the "Noble Savage," which asserted the intellectual ascendancy of European civilization even as it appeared to invest Indians with a higher moral or spiritual stature.

Today, while university students understand and are saddened by the atrocities committed against Indians in our nation's past, they are still convinced that Indians enjoy benefits not available to others: they believe Indian students attend school *sans* tuition, regularly drink to excess, and receive free trucks from car dealerships. Many Americans believe Indians are lazy and on welfare, yet Euro-American collectors spend thousands of dollars to expand their collections of Indian art, rugs, and jewelry, clear evidences of Indians' artistry and industry.

Despite negative ideas about Indians, their images are used for profit. Indeed, the traditional dress, hairstyles, religious ceremonies, and fighting methods of tribes ignite the imagination, yet accurate details of tribes' cultural aspects become distorted in the hands of those attempting to imitate them for profit or amusement.

Non-Indian historians make lucrative careers out of writing about Indians, yet most are loath to actually talk to Indians about their versions of the past because many writers believe oral history is not an effective way to transmit knowledge. Euro-Americans and African-Americans who desire to be Indians

proclaim that they are "part Indian" without assuming any of the real social, economic, and political struggles that real Indians endure on a daily basis. Citizens of towns that derive considerable income from tourists attracted by their Indian population express their displeasure that Indians receive government funds while refusing to acknowledge the millions of dollars Indians spend in non-reservation grocery stores, shopping malls, restaurants, movies and car dealerships. New Agers obsessed with Indian religions rely on the ramblings of non-Indian, self-proclaimed "religious leaders" for advice while ignoring the complaints of real Indians that what they, the New Agers, are doing is intrusive and often sacrilegious.

Today in Santa Fe, one can attend a spa where an option is to exercise in an "aerobic kiva" or to perform pool aerobics to the sound of a "real chanting medicine man." Sweat lodge parties abound in the backyards of affluent denizens in this part of the state, and one of the activities in the men's movement is to chant and beat a drum. Many Americans want "something Indian" to display in their homes, while others hope to adopt Indian children. The Neiman Marcus Christmas catalog offers a "traditional Sioux teepee" for \$2,200, while Spiegel's sells an "Indian and Daniel Boone Play Set." Indian art is popular, and is a lucrative business for many non-Indians (and a very few fortunate Indians). Americans often claim to have an Indian grandmother, and Indian scholars are continually asked to speak at library, church, and ladies' book club meetings about "anything to do with Indians." Since the late 1960s, hundreds of books of uneven quality have been published that focus on almost every aspect of Indian society. Indian Studies departments have been formed in many universities where the majority of enrollees are non-Indians. Sports teams fans of the Cleveland Indians and the Washington Redskins insult Indians with their drunkenness, dyed turkey feathers and sloppy face paint, screeching war hoops and spasmodic dance steps that belong to no tribe.

\*

I am a member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, born and raised in Texas and Oklahoma, and am employed as Associate Professor of American Indian History at Northern

Arizona University in Flagstaff. I do not claim expertise on Indian cultures and histories, but am sensitive to myths about Indians. I have found it easy to continually update my slide show on stereotypes of Indians; opportunities abound for photographs of mannequins dressed as Navajos in front of jewelry stores, fake tipis that advertise Indian novelties in roadside tourist shops, "Return of the Native" clothes that adorn models in fashion magazines, and tacky sports team mascots, to name a few.

As an educator and researcher, I favor an interdisciplinary approach to studying and teaching the truth about Indians—one that encompasses data from history (including oral histories), religion, anthropology, political science, statistics, economics, as well as including psychological and spiritual elements. Teaching also should encompass issues of race, class, and gender. But despite these good intentions, my attempts to dispel false images of Indians among students invariably meets with resistance. Each semester, a few students who do not want to hear about the atrocities committed against Indians in this country accuse me and other minority professors of being too "politically correct." Of course, these are the same pupils who become indignant when told that two of the four men on Mount Rushmore owned slaves, and that all four referred to non-Europeans as inferior to Europeans. I often wonder why these people cannot understand that if most classes don't mention Indians at all, a few courses focusing on Indians are vital in order to complete a full picture of United States history. This country's educational system needs to put more emphasis on under-represented ethnic groups, not less.

I began this book one evening after my husband and I discussed Indians with some tourists from England. My husband was wearing a tee shirt emblazoned with the Seal of the Comanche Nation, and one lady inquired where he obtained it. After replying that he bought it at the Comanche tribal complex in Lawton, Oklahoma, the woman was thoroughly bamboozled. If she could get a Navajo tee shirt here in Arizona, why could she not get a Comanche shirt at the same place? As do many non-Indians, she believed all Indians live on one big reservation together. I then decided to try to refute some of the most common myths about Indian peoples in book form that could be used by educators and by the public at large.

Indians are indeed multi-faceted peoples. Each tribe or nation has a complex past and present, and it is a mistake to generalize Indians, just as it is incorrect to generalize Europeans, Africans, Hispanics, or Asians. Because of the differences between tribes and diversity of the individual tribal members, discussing Indians is not easy. Indians as well as their cultures and traditions change over time, in response to the conditions around them. They are not static. New ideas meld with old ones. Indians are individuals and within each tribe are people who might be labeled traditional, progressive, mixed-blood, or fullblood. Members of the same tribe do not have the same adherence to traditional culture. Some Indians speak their tribal language and practice their religious ceremonies. Some know little about their culture because of disinterest or because they have not been raised in their tribal environment. In some cases, Indians are just like non-Indians in both appearance and in cultural adherence.

Terms also can be troublesome. The term "traditional," also. An Indian who still speaks his or her language and practices tribal religious ceremonies is often considered "traditional," but only traditional for this decade because chances are that he or she wears jeans, drives a car, and watches TV — very "untraditional" Indian things to do. Plains Indians who rode horses in the 1860s are considered traditional today, but were not the same as their traditional ancestors of the early 1500s who had never seen a horse.

There is debate over what to call the indigenous peoples of the United States of America. The terms "American Indians," "Native Americans," or "First Nations" are incorrect because these are European terms. It is preferable to refer to each tribe by its name, and certainly tribal members refer to themselves by their tribal names. For example, Navajos call themselves Dinee, the Chippewas — Anishinabeg, the Choctaws — Chatas, the Creeks — Muscogees, and so forth. However, as it's not feasible to list all 500 or so tribes every time I refer to the indigenous peoples of this country, American Indians will have to suffice as a way of referring to tribes or groups of Indian people.

This book is arranged by topic with a few suggested readings at the end of each section. There are hundreds of scholarly works that focus on particular tribes, individuals, time periods, and on every possible cultural aspect of Indian peoples, and more are

published every year. I have listed some of the most notable. One way to acquire lists of available books besides the local library is to write to university presses requesting their seasonal catalogs. Unfortunately, it is mostly non-Indian scholars, many of whom do not supplement their research by consulting with tribal people who know more about the topics than they do, who have written (and reviewed) most of these books. As a result, many works offer only the victors' side of the story, and are further cluttered with inaccuracies, embellishments, and racism — both subtle and blatant. Many of these books tell more about the persons writing them than they do about Indians. Unless readers are educated about the basic nuances of the tribe or topic of interest, they will not recognize misinformation when they encounter it.

This book is not intended to chronicle the history of any tribe or to analyze its culture, nor to detail intricacies of American Indian tribal politics, law, or economics. It is not intended to glorify Indians nor to criticize those people who believe the myths. Its purpose is to stimulate dialogue and to correct some of the most prevalent misconceptions about Indians. There are more, no doubt. But it is my hope that this book will spur teachers to fight for better textbooks — books that include a complete history of this country — and to push for multicultural curriculums. It is important for all of us to recognize and to combat stereotypes. All peoples deserve to have their histories and cultures properly placed in the scheme of things. Anything less does us all a disservice.

#### Recommended Readings:

- Bataille, Gretchen, and Charles P. Silet. *The Pretend Indians: Images of Native Americans in the Movies*. (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1980).
- Idem*. *Images of Indians on Film: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Garland, 1987).
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## American Indians: Stereotypes & Realities

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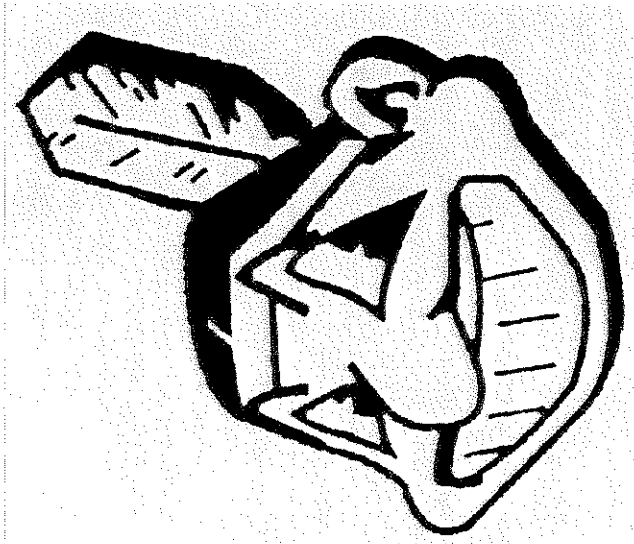
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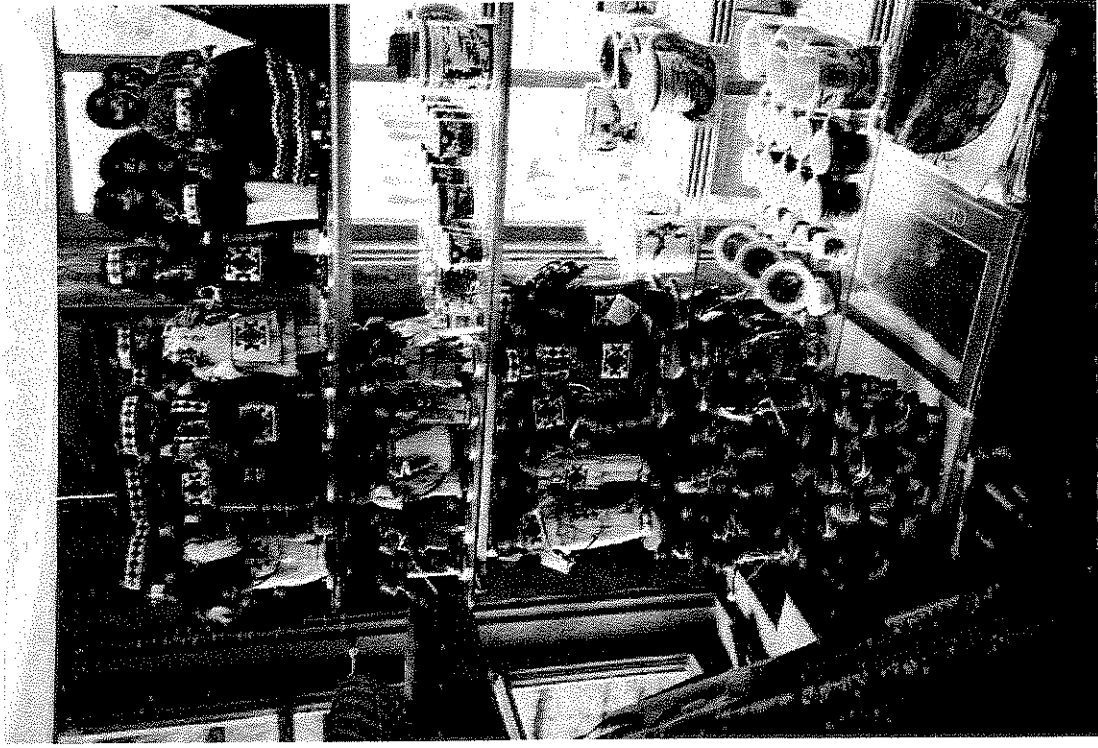
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"Chief Wahoo," the Cleveland Indians' logo. Despite Indians' protests against using their images as sport mascots, dozens of teams continue to use unflattering, stereotypical symbols.



Indian dolls are for sale almost everywhere. Usually, they are incorrectly dressed and possess Caucasian features that are dyed brown (Photo by Dezon Millesini)