

# Reclaiming Representations & Interrupting the Cycle of Bias Against Native Americans

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*Abstract: The most widely accessible ideas and representations of Native Americans are largely negative, antiquated, and limiting. In this essay, we examine how the prevalence of such representations and a comparative lack of positive contemporary representations foster a cycle of bias that perpetuates disparities among Native Americans and other populations. By focusing on three institutions— the legal system, the media, and education— we illustrate how the same process that creates disparate outcomes can be leveraged to promote positive contemporary ideas and representations of Native Americans, thereby creating more equitable outcomes. We also highlight the actions some contemporary Native Americans have taken to reclaim their Native American identity and create accurate ideas and representations of who Native Americans are and what they can become. These actions provide a blueprint for leveraging cultural change to interrupt the cycle of bias and to reduce the disparities Native Americans face in society.*

What white people see when they look at you is not visible. What they do see when they do look at you is what they have invested you with. . . . To survive this, you have to really dig down into yourself and recreate yourself, really, according to no image which yet exists in America. You have to impose who you are, and force the world to deal with you, not with its idea of you.

— James Baldwin  
*The Last Interview and Other Conversations*<sup>1</sup>

When you think about the most accessible repre-



shape everyday *interactions* among people, institutions, and cultural products. Finally, ideas, institutions, and interactions all shape the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of *individuals*. When individual behavior aligns with cultural influences, it reinforces the culture cycle; when behavior does not align, it pushes back in subtle and not-so-subtle ways against the dominant cultural ideas and reconstitutes the culture cycle.

While conversations about disparities focus on how individuals' characteristics—such as race, gender, or social class—relate to outcomes, the culture cycle framework highlights the importance of considering the role of the entire cultural system in perpetuating and alleviating disparate outcomes for Native Americans. In the next three sections, we highlight the mutual constitution of cultural ideas, institutions, interactions, and individuals by focusing on the legal system, the media, and education. These institutions reflect and foster a core set of negative and limited ideas about Native people that can lead influential individuals—for example, politicians, judges, lawyers, and educators—to lower expectations and ultimately bring about the exact same disparate outcomes society has come to expect of this group. Finally, we discuss the steps Native American individuals and communities have taken to create more accurate and positive cultural ideas of their groups, and how these actions reverberate throughout the culture cycle to promote more equitable outcomes, both today and in the future.

**I**n historic and contemporary legal policy and practice, Native Americans have been represented as “uncivilized,” incapable of behaving according to mainstream American norms.<sup>7</sup> For example, until the 1975 Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act was passed, federal policies treated Native Americans as “wards of the government” and prevented Na-

tive American communities from making their own decisions about health care, education, and governance. Similarly, federal laws have restricted tribes' control over policing Native American communities; and federal agencies, such as the Bureau of Indian Affairs, have failed to provide adequate funding to keep Native communities safe.<sup>8</sup> On one hand, restricting tribal control over law enforcement reifies the notion

Construing Native people through a negative and limiting lens— as unable to gov-

*Eason, Brady  
& Fryberg*

state governments had jurisdiction over cases involving non-Native men assaulting Native women on reservations. Despite this jurisdiction, law enforcement agencies and prosecutors failed to investigate or litigate many cases involving non-Native individuals, leaving perpetrators free to reoffend and victims without justice.<sup>22</sup> While rates of reporting and litigating against sexual assault perpetrators are low regardless of victim demographics, people of color, and Native American women in particular, face additional barriers rooted in racial bias.<sup>23</sup> Like many people of color, Native women are perceived as less worthy of protection than White women:<sup>24</sup> as recently as 1968, a federal appellate court upheld a statute that reduced sentencing for rape cases involving Native American women.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, prosecutors often take Native women's sexual assault claims less seriously, assum-di0.52 o0.036 (upheld)0.6 (a)0.7ms.161 (iga)1 (te0.88

casation that Native Americans are represented in mainstream media, they often appear in stereotypical roles (such as the casino Indian, "Indian Princess," or drunken Indian) or in secondary roles lacking character development.<sup>33</sup> Individuals responsible for creating new media representations, such as casting agents or directors, often reify the invisibility of contemporary Native peoples by passing over Native actors for roles that are "unrealistic" based on stereotypes about Native Americans (for example, by not casting Native people as doctors or lawyers).<sup>34</sup> While there is great variability in how Native Americans look, speak, and act, Natives who do not fit a narrow, prototypical image of a Native American are often excluded from roles intended for Natives.<sup>35</sup> The lack of positive and accurate contemporary representations denies Native Americans' continued existence and literally and figuratively writes them out of contemporary life.

Widely available media representations of Native Americans carry significant consequences, as they undermine Native Americans' psychological well-being and hopes for future success. For example, Stephanie Fryberg and colleagues demonstrated through multiple studies that negative stereotypes of Native Americans and sports mascots such as the Cleveland Indians' Chief Wahoo depressed Native Americans' self-esteem, decreased perceptions of their Native community's worth, and made them less likely to envision successful futures (such as earning good grades, finding a job, or completing a degree).<sup>36</sup> Such representations set in motion a self-fulfilling prophecy that renders Native American accomplishments invisible, hindering Native people from imagining and pursuing their own successful futures.<sup>37</sup> While harmful for Native Americans, these biased representations have a positive impact on White individuals, which may exacerbate intergroup tensions and disparate outcomes. After exposure to widely

available representations of Native people, European American participants reported boosts in self-esteem and greater feelings of connection to their racial group. Both the negative effects of Native Americans and the positive effects for Whites at the expense of Native Americans suggest that it is critical to promote positive, contemporary representations of Native Americans that accurately reflect who Native people are and what they are capable of achieving. Breaking the cycle of discrimination and disparities in resources and achievement requires taking control of how Native people are portrayed both to the outside world and within Native communities themselves.

Although non-Native individuals created many of the prevalent representations of Native Americans, Native people are working to recreate representations that accurately reflect contemporary Native Americans. For example, in 2012, Matika Wilbur, a Swinomish and Tulalip photographer, launched Project 562, which aims to photograph members of all 562 federally recognized tribes. To date, Wilbur has photographed members of four hundred tribes. Wilbur's photos depict Native people of all ages in both urban and rural settings, wearing contemporary Western and tribally appropriate tradlly r-mpol3etlb W<sub>i</sub>W<sub>-</sub> €X 0 @ "xRai<sup>3/2</sup>

defined representations offer accurate, nuanced understandings of Native Americans that have always existed but have been obscured by biased portrayals created by non-Natives. As accurate images of Native Americans take hold, they have the power to challenge harmful stereotypes and ideas about Native Americans and illustrate what is possible for them, breaking the cycle of bias and disparate outcomes.

For a final example of how negative cultural ideas and representations of Native Americans perpetuate a cycle of bias and disparities, we turn to the education system. In the United States, education is often viewed as the key to upward social mobility and “a better life.” Yet, just as in the legal system and the media, biased ideas about and representations of Native Americans limit Native students’ opportunities and outcomes. For centuries, Native Americans have been portrayed as intellectually inferior and Native ways of knowing have been viewed as incorrect and incompatible with mainstream U.S. education. Federal boarding schools, in which Native children were forcibly enrolled throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, aimed to eliminate Native cultures and languages and acculturate Native children into White society. Although this explicitly assimilationist agenda has faded, many of its ideas prevail within the education system today. Research reveals, for example, that Native students are often perceived to struggle or to be “problem” students.<sup>40</sup> School curricula also fail to incorporate— and sometimes actively exclude— Native Americans’ cultural history and practices from the learning environment, as these histories and practices are deemed irrelevant to the goals of mainstream education.<sup>41</sup>

Negative and limiting ideas and representations influence interactions between educators and Native students and contribute to Natives’ disparate outcomes. For ex-

ample, compared with White students with equivalent test scores and grades, teachers are less likely to recommend Native students for advanced coursework.<sup>42</sup> Native students are also suspended at more than twice the rate of White students.<sup>43</sup> These inaccurate and biased understandings of what is possible for Native students systematically deprive them of the ability to engage with and succeed within a system intended to foster opportunities for upward mobility.

Changing the way Native students are understood and treated within educational institutions can break the cycle of bias and alleviate educational disparities. For example, Stephanie Fryberg, Rebecca Covarrubias, and Jacob Burack describe an intervention in a predominantly Native American school that resulted in an 18 percent increase in the number of Native students who met state performance standards.<sup>44</sup> Teachers were taught about Native cultural ways of being, and school g (i)0.5 (ti)Odeline

The culture cycle framework demonstrates the power of cultural ideas and representations in shaping Native Americans' experiences. Prevailing harmful and limiting ideas and representations of Native Americans fuel a cycle of bias and reinforce disparate outcomes for Native people. These ideas and representations shape the policies and practices of consequential social institutions, promote low expectations for Native people that influence their interactions with non-Natives, and limit what both Native and non-Native individuals believe is possible for Native Americans. In addition to the prevalence of harmful and antiquated ideas and representations about their group, Native Americans *also* contend with the systematic exclusion of positive, contemporary ideas and representations. Consequently, Native Americans are effectively written out of contemporary existence, which creates barriers to their well-being and success. Hence, the modern form of bias against Native Americans includes not only negative ideas and representations, but also the omission of positive, multidimensional ideas and representations of their group.<sup>46</sup>

Breaking this cycle requires challenging derogatory ideas and representations and





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