

Cowboy, 'Indian', Rider: Deconstructing Dichotomous Stereotypes in *The Rider*

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Hollywood westerns are replete with stock characters and trade in common stereotypes. Indeed, there is perhaps no more familiar stereotype than the genre's binary pairing of cowboy and "Indian." While historical analysis shows that these character types are more likely to be reductive "caricatures" (Vestal 67) than accurate portrayals, these figures exert a powerful influence nonetheless. Indeed, both Stanley Vestal and John Price argue the Hollywood cowboy and the "celluloid Indian" (Vestal 63) have done more to shape viewers' perceptions of the American West than the region's actual history. This is true because more people have acquired their sense of cowboys and "Indians" through motion pictures than historical sources (Price 75). Unfortunately, because cinematic portrayals trade so heavily in stereotypes, the account they imbue in audiences is predominantly inaccurate. A recent film that subverts this pattern is Chloe Zhao's *The Rider* (2017).

Seeing is Believing

In order to understand the unique way in which *The Rider* subverts traditional stereotypes, particularly stereotypes of Native Americans, it is necessary to examine those stereotypes as well as the basis for their persistent dissemination and ongoing influence. As most would agree, the most influential aspect of cinematic portrayals is image. Movies are mimetic; they are *motion pictures*, pictures that re-present worlds to us, pictures that can both reflect and distort the individuals and settings they portray. As theorist Carol Duncan explains, images are not typically neutral. Instead, they are "engines of ideology" (172). Whether the pictures we encounter are static or in motion, "images wield great authority, structuring and reinforcing the psychic codes that determine and differentiate the real possibilities of men and women" (178).

Though Duncan is more concerned with the effect of gender stereotypes than ethnic stereotypes, her insights regarding image, particularly the influence of *stereotypical images*, can be extended to representation of Native Americans in media. As Portman and Herring note, with few exceptions, mainstream media "continue[s] to perpetuate stereotypes of Native Americans" (Portman and Herring 190). These stereotypical representations are problematic because they adversely affect the way Native Americans are understood by others, and also how Native peoples understand themselves. Indeed, Leavitt et al assert "Mass media plays a substantial role in the way social groups understand

themselves...Native Americans are rarely portrayed in mass media and, in the rare cases they appear, are...depicted in stereotypical, ...narrow, and limiting identity prototypes." We cannot dismiss the use of stereotypes as merely an aesthetic issue because "millions of people the world over have acquired their beliefs about North American Indians through motion pictures"(Price 75) and millions will continue to acquire erroneous beliefs so long as movies employ reductive stereotypes, portraits that perpetuate unconscious bias due to their inaccuracy, and which undermine social justice because of their imprecision.

The reductive portraits of Native Americans that prevail in motion pictures are rooted in earlier media sources. Movies themselves reproduce a familiar pattern of portrayal. Ranging from early works in American literature, to influential works of philosophy, to contemporary cinematic and television portrayals, reductive tropes have consistently been used to depict Native peoples.¹ The most common trope observed is the binary portrayal of Native Americans anachronistically as either vicious or noble savages. As Belton states in *American Cinema American Culture*, movies have tended to represent Native Americans as "violent savages"(255) and in "even in the [more recent] films that are most sympathetic to them, Indians are not represented as Indians, but as romantic, Rousseau-esque [figures]"(255). While simple logic should be sufficient to dispel the assumption that 1.) a society could exist where all members are savage, or 2.) that every member of such a society could be classified as either violent or noble, it isn't. These tropes, and the unconscious (and erroneous) patterns of perception they enable, persist.

Seeing Red: The Interests Behind [Mis]representation

As Duncan's comments regarding the relation between image and ideology suggest, there are various reasons why reductive depictions of Native Americans occurred and persist. First, there are historical reasons for the misrepresentation of Native Americans. Clearly, the early characterization of Native Americans as violent savages provided precisely the ideological justification needed to support colonial enterprises. It legitimized the forceful subjugation of Native Americans as well as their removal from, and the subsequent appropriation of, tribal lands. Indeed, for some, it justified the extermination of Native peoples. Contemporary misrepresentations of Native Americans (including the continued and consistent underrepresentation of Native Americans in media) serves the interests of parties who seek to minimize the perception of Native individuals and communities and the legitimate claim Native peoples have to resources and services.

There are also psychological reasons for the reductive portrayal of Native Americans, as Renato Rosaldo explains in "Imperialist Nostalgia." These include the ongoing tendency to portray Native Americans anachronistically, as primitive yet noble savages. This stereotypical portrayal allows non-Natives in mainstream culture to keep alive a satisfying image of the Native American that colonization largely destroyed, thereby assuaging their collective guilt over that destruction. The reductive portrayal of Native Americans persists not merely as a function of habit, but also because it serves ideological

¹ See works such as "A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson" (1682), Locke's "Second Treatise on Government" (1689), and modern films such as *The Searchers* (1956), all of which employ the savage stereotype to varying degree.

interests such as those mentioned. This mode of portrayal is not ancient history. It is alive and well. There has been “little progress” (Vestal 63) toward more accurate portrayals, especially in Hollywood, where reductive “caricatures” (V. Deloria 67) and underrepresentation of Native Americans still predominates, expressive, to be sure, of persistent racial bias not just in Hollywood, but the nation writ large.

The [Still] Invisible “Indian”

A recent 2019 report on the representation of minorities in media by Darnell Hunt, Ana Christina Ramon, and Michael Tran, the authors confirm that Native Americans continue to be misrepresented and that the distortion occurs in various ways. First, it occurs as a result of underrepresentation. Underrepresentation literally reduces audience’s ability to “see” Native peoples and to thereby apprehend and empathize with their concerns. Out of sight is indeed out of mind. While the 2010 census establishes that 1.3% of the US population identifies as Native American (US Census Bureau), only .4% of character roles in film are Native American. This means that roughly three times as many Native Americans exist as are depicted in media. In digital series, the situation is worse. Only .2% of character roles are depicted as Native Americans, making the true population six times that which is depicted. While other communities of color are also underrepresented, the report by Hunt et al indicates that these groups (e.g., Latino, African-American) have notable gains in the volume of representation in film and television whereas Native Americans have not seen the same degree of increase. Native Americans do not have proportionate representation, and as such are virtually invisible as a minority.

Moreover, as Hunt et al note, even when Native American characters are present, Native American actors are still not always cast in those roles. Moreover, in the small number of contemporary major market films and television serials where Native Americans are represented, the manner of representation is typically inaccurate. Longstanding patterns of reductive representation continue and misrepresentation prevails. For instance, portrayals still tend toward anachronistic portraits that invoke familiar stock character types (e.g., chief, medicine man). And Native American characters are rarely in lead roles. Rather, as the long-standing pattern of portrayal dictates, they are typically relegated to secondary and subordinate roles relative to white characters. Lastly, if characters are in fact rendered in a more modern manner, popular racial/racist stereotypes are often invoked (e.g., drunk “Indian,” casino worker).

Seeing Double: Cowboy + Indian = Rider

Perhaps more than anything else, the modern [mis]perception of Native Americans has been framed by the western genre and its familiar binary of the cowboy and “Indian.” These binary figures framed the modern perception of Native Americans for millions of viewers and continue to do so today. However, as Michael Moses states in “Savage Nations: Native Americans and the Western,” “Native Americans have been ill served by the...western...a genre in which they have been misrepresented and demeaned” (261). In order to counter the pervasive influence of stereotypes and the reduced and largely erroneous perception of Native peoples that they encourage, we need to see more Native Americans in front of and behind the camera, and we need to see them in roles that capture

the “richness and diversity of Native American communities” (Rajeha 222) not merely as they existed in the past, but as they exist today.

But how does one unseat such a pernicious stereotype and make way for more diverse manner of representation? In *The Rider* (2017), it is achieved through synthesis. It deconstructs the binary through collapse. It subverts the traditional pattern of representation through the conjunction of contrary visual tropes. Specifically, it focuses audience attention on its main yet unlikely character, Brady Blackburn, an “Indian” cowboy.

The Rider recounts Brady’s story. A young saddle-bronc rider, Brady is forced to determine a new trajectory for his life after a catastrophic rodeo accident. With his doctors telling him he should no longer rodeo or ride, Brady is left to consider the limited number of opportunities left to him on the Pine Ridge Reservation now that he can no longer be a cowboy. Based on the story of a real life cowboy and Lower Brule Sioux, Brady Jandreau, the main characters are all played by the real life individuals those characters represent. In addition to its unique conjunction of cowboy and “Indian,” this continuity of narrative and character helps *The Rider* operate as a film that is illustrative of Philip Deloria’s notion of an “unexpected”(11) text, one that reveals genuine aspects of Native American identity and culture rather than reinforces erroneous stereotypes. Instead of reproducing the familiar reductive binary, *The Rider* poignantly communicates the ways in which Brady’s identity has been shaped by the traditional ideals of cowboy culture at the same time as it critiques that framework. By dispensing with the tired binary trope of cowboy versus “Indian,” it offers a far more compelling and complex narrative, one that encourages audiences to see past reductive stereotypes to an individual story of resilience and hope.

The Code of the West[ern]

The Rider unseats the traditional reductive stereotype of Native Americans by turning it on itself. In doing so, it succeeds in providing a more realistic view of the life of one contemporary Native American person. In an ingenious maneuver, the film deconstructs the traditional stereotype by conjoining the exclusive figures of the cowboy and “Indian.” Whereas traditional portrayals unconsciously condone the notion that an individual must *either* be cowboy *or* “Indian,” *The Rider* instead presents audiences with a character who is *both* cowboy *and* “Indian.” Interestingly, the intriguing effect of this conjunction on viewers “trained” to see Native Americans through mainstream film is that Brady is not initially recognizable as an “Indian.” Instead, he is visually coded: cowboy.

The visual coding used in Brady’s character conforms to well-recognized visual code of the western. We may not think we know this code, but most Americans do. Film upon film has indoctrinated us to possess certain visual expectations relative to characters in the western genre. Cowboys are expected to appear one way, “Indians” another. Cowboys have a predictable physical appearance as do their Native counterparts; there are conventions for dress, and there are associated object markers. As the term suggests, *cowboys* are male; they tend to be white, have short hair, and they are recognized easily by their cowboy hat, boots, and chaps. They are associated with object markers such as rifles, pistols, and saddlebags. By contrast, film reinforces a different phenotype when it comes to Native Americans. Native peoples are depicted with a darker complexion and typically

are shown with long hair (in some presumably indigenous style).² Headdresses and deerskin attire replace the hat and chaps of the Hollywood cowboy. Similarly, bow and arrow replace the cowboy's sidearm and western saddle. What is especially interesting about *The Rider* is what while viewers are given subtle clues that Brady is Native American, from the opening scene of the film he is coded as cowboy. For instance, while we *once* see Brady receiving medical care at what *careful inspection* reveals to be an Indian Health Services clinic, throughout the *whole* of the film he plays the role of the cowboy and has all the physiological and object markers associated with the role. To any viewer indoctrinated to the code of portrayal association with the "Hollywood Indian" (Vestal 63), Brady does not look native. This may seem troubling at first, just another example of "whitestream" (Grande 4) culture trumping indigenous culture. And maybe it is at one level. However, in another way, the synthesis is ingenious. Precisely because viewers do not initially see Brady as a Native American they actually can "see" him as such. Rather than have their perception of his character is immediately determined (reduced and falsified) by the unconscious influence of the longstanding "Indian" stereotype, they are precluded from applying that label. Instead, they are lead to watch him, and come to understand him as he moves through this unexpected story of a cowboy who cannot ride.

In his work, *Indians in Unexpected Places*, Philip Deloria discusses the damaging impact of stereotypical portrayals of Native Americans and talks about the cognitive benefit of unexpected stories. He distinguishes between "anomalous" (11) portrayals of Native Americans and "unexpected" (11) portrayals. While anomalous works diverge from the Native American as savage stereotype, he argues that they do not tend to subvert other tropes, including the noble savage trope and the corresponding tendency to portray Native Americans predominantly as spirit guides and primitive healers. In fact, because of their continued use of common stereotypes, Deloria argues that anomalous works usually "reinforc[e]" (Deloria 11) cultural misunderstanding. However, as Deloria notes, "when non-Natives see Indians in unexpected places...their unconscious prejudices are confounded and the possibility for 'stereo-type busting'" (Deloria 3) occurs. The portrayal Zhao offers in *The Rider* offers is decidedly unexpected, so unexpected, in fact, that many viewers might not initially realize that Brady is Native American. In this way, *The Rider* carries viewers to place where they have the potential to develop a more objective appreciation of a contemporary Native American person and the community in which he lives. For those whose acquaintance with Native Americans and Native American culture is limited to the reductive tropes that pervade mainstream media, this portrayal confounds

² Studies note that despite some important movement toward increased realism of representation, most portrayals of Native Americans are not typically true to their subject. For instance, rather than assure verisimilitude in the rendering of a particular tribe by hiring tribal historians as consultants and faithfully reproducing highly specific patterns of appearance and dress, the phenotype evident in many cinematic representations still derives predominantly from Plains tribes and is such an amalgam of styles from those different tribes that, while readily recognizable, is reducible to none. See John Ewers, "The Static Images" where he states, "Indian stereotypes are not figments of the white man's imagination. All could be found among some Indians in some areas...but they appear in combination only in works of fiction" (16). Moreover, as Michelle Rajeha states in *Reservation Reelism*, the array of phenotypes evident in Native American communities "do not match the Hollywood one" (110).

expectation. The film's conjunction of tropes that viewers were indoctrinated to regard as mutually exclusive precludes them from invoking old (and erroneous) assumptions.

And what does this unexpected conjunction help viewers see? We see a tragic yet inspiring story of Brady's resilience and courage in the face of adversity. We see that the encounter with death encouraged Brady to live better, and that, in the end, his traumatic experience expanded his sense of opportunity more than it limited it.³ More broadly, we see the impact of generational poverty, and how the lack of economic and educational opportunities as well as poor health care have impacted Brady, and other members of the Native American community, both on the Pine Ridge Reservation and in the surrounding region. Unlike traditional westerns that romanticize the cowboy figure, we see a film that takes a critical look at the influence of cowboy/rodeo culture, its effect on contemporary Native Americans in South Dakota, and also its broader cultural impact. Rather than continue to celebrate the American cowboy, *The Rider* sheds light on the potentially adverse impact of cowboy/rodeo culture due to its glamorization of high-risk activities, and the way it may exert a coercive appeal on individuals who lack alternative means of social recognition and income (Salzman). In the end, *The Rider* succeeds in employing two of the oldest stereotypes in the western genre in a manner that "bust[s]" (Deloria 3) both. Though it is a story about a cowboy and an "Indian," it is no stock replaying of the traditional cowboy and "Indian" story. Rather, it is a narrative that, through its conjunction of contraries and attentive portrayal of its protagonist, Brady, helps audiences of this unexpected western see at least one Native American person in a clearer light.

³ For further discussion of the way in which *The Rider* comments not only on the role of death in life, but also on the way in which individuals in marginalized communities may be uniquely subject to existential pressures, see "Death, *The Rider*, and a Pale Horse" at <http://ernestbecker.org/features/death-denial-at-the-movies/mcmahon/>.

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