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Source: *American Anthropologist*, New Series, Vol. 98, No. 4 (Dec., 1996), pp. 743-749

Published by: Blackwell Publishing on behalf of the American Anthropological Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/681882>

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The Commodification of Indian Identity

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PRE-CABOTIAN (1497), NATIVE NORTH American peoples, like all peoples, had a myriad of ways of defining their group's membership.¹ Like most human societies, they generally relied on kinship criteria—consanguinity and affinity—of many varied types. Like most others, they also had systems of naturalization that could confer group membership on non-kin. The Navajo, for example, took in large numbers of foreigners, creating Jemez, Zia, and Mexican clans in the process (Aberle 1961).

These systems of self-definition were group specific, and there is little evidence of any shared label of common identity that was pan-Indian, one including all of the hundreds of separate linguistic and cultural entities of North America (Cornell 1988:106). Large territorial states, however, had emerged, and some were generating more complex heterogeneous "citizenship" notions. I once wrote a text and, looking for some alternate to the absurd label *Indios*, borrowed the Nahuatl *Chichimeca*, by which the Aztec state referred to the peoples to the north (Castile 1979).

Making a Market

With the arrival of the Europeans and their subordination and expropriation of the Native peoples, things changed in these systems of identity. Immanuel Wallerstein observed that "the historical development of capitalism has involved the commodification of everything" (1983:16). The colonialists made a "market" for ethnic identities, in which they have been traded as a commodity ever since. Over time the price of these commodities has fluctuated, and steps have been taken by the federal government to regulate the purity of the product—to guarantee the customer is getting "the real McCoy," officially sorting out the genuine from the spurious (Sapir 1924).

One sort of commodification took the form of complete expropriation of Indian imagery for symbolic and hegemonic purposes (Castile 1992). Just as land was taken over and put to European uses, without reference to the former owners, so too with Indian identity. Indian images were useful in the process of the self-invention of a new "American" national identity (Anderson 1983; Friedman 1992). The "New Americans" defined themselves in part in terms of the "Old Americans"—the Native peoples.

John Locke is an early example of such expropriation. When he declared in his *Second Treatise of Government* that "in the beginning all the world was America," he was marketing an image of Native America without government, in useful contrast to the European state of advancement (Locke 1960:48). Not true, but once you "own" these images the reality of the former possessor is irrelevant. You can even freely recycle them, using them to make both ends of the same point. Locke gave Native Americans no government at all, while others have endowed them with not just a government but the very model of the U.S. government, created by the followers of Locke and Montesquieu in America (Grinde and Johansen 1991; Tooker 1990).

There are many other examples of these often bizarre political uses of the Indian image in the process of American cultural self-invention as, for example, the creation of the heroine Sacajawea by the Western woman's suffrage movement (Landsman 1992:271). In all these instances, Indian image and identity have simply been extracted from Indian reality as a "raw material," to be smelted and forged into new shapes. The processing is managed by wholly owned subsidiaries of the dominant society, entirely free of Indian influence or control. The power of the market to transform its raw material is evident in the repackaging of AIM activist Russell Means as first the faithful Chingachgook and then the fatherly Powhatan—what next, Natty Bumppo? (Batille and Silet 1980).

My most recent encounter with this ongoing image expropriation occurred at the wedding of one of my anthropological colleagues. In deference to his profession, the minister announced he would include part of the "Apache Wedding Ceremony" in the doings. He then movingly intoned, "Now for you there is no more loneliness." The Apache in question, I realized, were those led by Chief Jeff Chandler in the 1950 movie *Broken Arrow*. Although such foolishness can be amusing, it has not been without its impact on Native Americans themselves. In most of American history, barring the occasional "noble savage," these reprocessed "images" were almost entirely negative (Berkhoffer 1979; Stedman 1982). To define Indians as cruel, ignorant savages without civilization served a practical purpose for the larger society. Cotton Mather was able to observe, of the destruction of the Pequots, that "these barbarians were dismissed from a world that was burdened with them" (quoted in Hauptman 1995:9). Raw conquest of these people, with subsequent expulsion from their lands, might otherwise

seem unjustified; it eases the collective conscience if they had it coming (Dippie 1982; Drinnon 1980).

Brummagem Wares

Some forms of Indian identity were not simply expropriated but were left in the hands of Indians themselves, "reserved" to them as were some of their lands. Like the lands, the systems of identity were not self-governing but were subject to greater or lesser degrees of external administration. They were also, like the land, by definition brummagem wares; otherwise they would not be left behind. In the ruling ideology of the colonialists, though their imagery could be useful, to actually *be* an Indian was to be a member of an inferior "race," lacking "competence," unworthy to control resources or vote (Bieder 1986; Biolsi 1995a:35). In this sort of ethnic marketplace, there was created a strong incentive to convert this low-quality identity into something more finished, to upgrade savagery to civilization (Pearce 1988).

Such upgrades were possible since the general policy of the new American government in regulating its ethnic market was "progressive," based on Lockean Enlightenment notions of the perfectibility of even lowly forms of man. Toward all ethnic minorities (except blacks), the promise was one of eventual equality through assimilation. It is not surprising that in such a market many made the trade, and by the 1920s, when the value of Indian identity was at an all-time low, there were few claiming to be Indians—only 250,000 counted by the government. Since the 1960s, the Indian stock is up in the ethnic market and the population has grown far faster than is biologically possible, by "recruitment" (Passel and Berman 1986).

Identifying Land

In the treaty era of land confiscation, the federal government first took an active interest in defining real versus ersatz Indians. It became important to confirm "chiefs" who could legitimize the transfer of lands by treaty. It was under such circumstances that the federal government began to regulate the free market of ethnicity and to retain for itself the right to determine who is the real McCoy in the various Indian trade "intercourse" acts (Prucha 1962). Indian identity in general was regarded as destined to vanish shortly after the settlement of the land transfer, and there was little point in keeping track of ordinary tribal members.

A more enduring system of federal certification of authentic individual Indians thus did not become formalized until the reservation era in the late 1800s. With

most "vacant" lands taken, new schemes were devised to break up the reserved remainder. The Dawes, or Allotment, Act made it important to sort out accurately who was and who was not an Indian, at least temporarily (Beaulieu 1984). Land needed to be allotted, but only to the small number of "real" Indians, not to potentially numberless frauds, so that a proper amount of surplus would be left over (Unrau 1989).

It was under these circumstance that most Native groups were forced into bookkeeping by "blood" and into "standard" kinship reckoning—no matriarchies need apply. One-quarter blood was and remains the most common minimum for genuine Indians, but federal laws vary depending on the issue at stake (Pevar 1992:12; Wilson 1992). By the 1930s, when John Collier headed the Bureau of Indian Affairs, land redistribution was no longer the primary federal aim (Kelly 1983). Newly concerned with the corporate survival of the tribes, enrollment in a "recognized tribe under Federal jurisdiction" rather than simply "How much blood you got?" was stressed in the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act (Feraca 1990:3; Hagan 1985:317). "Reorganization" added complexities to the rules of blood and shifted more responsibility for sorting them out to the tribes themselves, as it did in other areas of newly gained self-governance.

There was a brief resurgence of the resource redistribution focus in federal regulation of identity in the late 1940s. Cash settlement of outstanding Indian land-loss claims began, and these were often accompanied by per capita distribution of funds to those who were officially members of the claiming tribe, creating an obvious new motivation to assert identity on the part of many. Similarly, in the 1950s termination era, a great many long-lost tribal members came out of the ethnic closet to vote for liquidation of the assets of "their" tribe and its redistribution to the "members" (Clifton 1977).

The Big Bull Market

All of this primarily land-based focus was effectively over by the 1960s, and so presumably the value of Indian identity and the importance of keeping federal track of it went into a decline. But just the opposite was the case; into the 1960s and 1970s, the concern for defining Indianness became greater, not lesser. The new demand activity started in the "other" market for Indian imagery, the "Big Board" of the general society, where Indians had now shifted from savagery to various forms of nobility. This movement had absolutely nothing to do with Native American realities or even with a concern for their well-being. Only

their image was at issue. But it came to have an impact on their status.

Historically, this is the result of a combination of the counterculture movement and the Civil Rights movement, raising the value of all things ethnic in the symbolic market (Brand 1988). Cultural diversity is newly celebrated under such labels as “multiculturalism.” Oddly, anthropologists have been left out of this new trading boom despite having been nearly the sole source in the “primitives” market previously. We have finally shared something of the Native Americans’ experience through participation, not observation. One anthropologist asking “Why Do Multiculturalists Ignore Anthropologists?” answered himself: “One explanation for our exclusion might be the reluctance to acknowledge previous inhabitants when people claim new territory” (Perry 1992).

This new level of positive valuation of things Indian is not focused on Indians per se. The environmentalist movement has generated a great deal of interest in alternative ways of approaching man’s relation with nature, including the Native American way. The result is not investment on the reservations to alleviate the actual environmental problems present there—economic, educational, and health problems. Instead, it creates a market for Indian teachers. Those hungry for insights into the environmental way of the Indian people will pay good money to those who will teach them, but of course only to “real” Indians who offer the “real” goods on my Mother the Earth (Kehoe 1990).

There are a great many such teachers. Jamake Highwater and Lynn Andrews are two who come readily to mind (Andrews 1981; Highwater 1981). Unfortunately I suspect we often have here what Gerald Vizenor has called “simulations of tribal identities in the literature of dominance” (1994:59). The audience of these teachers is not the Indian communities they claim to represent but the book-, lecture-, and even ordeal-buying public—the litterateurs of dominance. The struggle for control of this authentic insight market has generated a considerable internal dispute among the simulators, with real Indians actively engaged in exposing the falsity of the unreal, what Wendy Rose has called the “Great Pretenders.”²

One result of all this disputation is that Indians have become the only card-carrying ethnic group in America and now must be able to produce their papers on demand. There was, for example, a dispute in *Wicazo Sa Review* over who is an Indian for purposes of inclusion in collections of Native American Studies (*Wicazo Sa Review* 1993). The editors cite anthologist Elizabeth Cook-Lynn as insisting that “tribal enrollment (i.e., citizenship) be a qualification for inclusion in our volume” (*Wicazo Sa Review* 1993:115). Similarly, the Institute of American Indian Arts, organ-

izing an exhibit of Native American photography, said, “Eligibility is limited to American Indians who must provide a letter of enrollment or card from a federally-recognized tribe or a Certificate of Indian Blood (CIB). Birth certificates are not adequate.” Papers, please.

Certifying the authentic is complicated by the problem of genuine but “generic Indians,” to borrow William Hagan’s term, or “supratribal consciousness,” to use Stephen Cornell’s (Cornell 1988:107; Hagan 1985:320). The Indian Arts and Crafts Board has existed since 1937 to “certify” genuine Indian art, but in 1990 the Indian Arts and Crafts Act criminalized misrepresentation and limited Indianness to members of federally recognized tribes (Barsh 1994:61). I have on my desk a Kachina doll, a Mudhead, reasonably authentic in detail, made by certifiable Indians, Navajos, but the Navajo have no such art in their own traditions. I may therefore have a “hot” Kachina. In the Seattle area, there is an Indian dance troupe led by Don Smith, who calls himself Lelooska and tells Northwestern tribal stories. Lelooska is no sort of Northwest Indian, though, but an Oklahoma Cherokee (Pyle 1995:127). Such an Indian has the necessary national identity card, but does that then entitle him to authentically publish Northwest rather than Cherokee traditions?

A Seat on the Commodity Exchange

Since the 1960s and the turn toward self-determination and increased federal tolerance of Native Americans’ governmental sovereignty, the value of being a corporate tribe has increased greatly—if for no other reason than to control who will be on the rolls of a federally recognized tribe and thus a card-carrying Indian. A 1978 court case—*Santa Clara Pueblo v. Martinez*—made clear that such tribes alone have the right to determine their membership rules, but also made clear that simple membership in a tribe does not in fact guarantee recognition of the individual’s Indian status by the government for all purposes (Pevar 1992:245).

Important new resources have, since the 1960s, become available to groups who can claim tribal status and may at last allow them to finally solve pervasive problems of real poverty in Indian country. What has turned out to be a resource more valuable than land is the special federal-Indian relationship itself. The utility of the new resource has nothing to do with the size of a reservation or even the size of its labor force. In this new postindustrial economy, the Navajo and the Mashantucket Pequot are in possession of exactly the same resource—sovereignty.

To be sovereign is to be unregulated and unrestricted by laws you have not made yourself, though the limits of that sovereignty are constantly contested (Biolsi 1995b). Indian country can potentially become an onshore version of existing offshore free-economic zones, providing services that the surrounding governments may not choose to offer. Most promising is gambling. From the first bingo parlor established by the Seminole in 1979 to the huge success of the Mashantucket Pequot Foxwood Casino, there has been a veritable South Seas Bubble of speculation and development based around gambling—with good and obvious reason, since the Indian casinos collectively took home something like \$1.5 billion (Kanamine 1994).

There are increasing image problems as a good deal of this new enterprise is essentially “sinful”—tax-free cigarettes, booze, fireworks, and so forth. Note William Safire, on “the Pequots, whose chiefs are turning aboriginal Americans into a nation of croupiers” (1995). Or observe the peculiar fear of a new colonialism in a Portland, Oregon, newspaper editorial urging the federal government “not to allow Indians to establish off reservation colonial enclaves that undermine the laws of state and local governments and the investments of non-Indians who rely on these laws” (*Oregonian* 1995). Colonizing the colonizers?

There are other, largely noneconomic, corporate benefits to official tribal status that are probably more valuable in the long run to the tribal peoples, if not to the outside world. Self-government, in the sense of running one’s own affairs, is the most obvious and most fundamental. Since the 1975 Indian Self-Determination Act, there has been a general move toward self-administration through contracting, supported by federal funding (PL 93-638; see Prucha 1990:274–276). Indian groups have also acquired a great deal more legal say-so (because the feds say so) in their relations with their local neighbors and in the regulation of land, graves, holy places, and the like (McGuire 1992). All “goods” to the good.

These new resources have touched off a new phase of federal sorting-out of eligibility (Weatherhead 1980). Gambling, already much hedged about by the provisions of the 1988 Indian Gaming Regulatory Act (PL 100-497; see Prucha 1990:316–317), is now in some turmoil since part of that act has been struck down by the Supreme Court (*Oregonian* 1996). It was already in the process of active reconsideration in the Senate (S. B. 487) and threatened with taxation by Washington State’s own Indian fighter, Slade Gorton (Wines 1995).

The most acrimonious of sortings-out is FAP, the Federal Acknowledgement Process, mandated by Congress in 1978. If an Indian is anyone a tribe itself recognizes—by whatever rules it has set—then who recog-

nizes the recognizer? The federal government has created this ethnic FDA to certify the purity of tribes themselves. Posing a conundrum for those who would argue against this federal role, in favor of leaving it to the Indians, is the fact that it is often the already recognized tribes who have fought longest and hardest against recognition of the newcomers. The longest running resistance is to the reality of the Lumbee (Hagan 1985:322; Sider 1993).

Recognition has created a seemingly endless sequence of congressional hearings, court cases, and petitions to FAP. At the Mashpee Wampanoag trial in quest of recognition, Vine Deloria Jr. testified reasonably enough as to what a tribe is: “As I use it and understand other people using it, it means a group of people living pretty much in the same place who know who their relatives are” (Clifford 1988:323). Deloria’s view, like many put forward by Indian people, depends on the criterion of self-awareness. The judge did not agree and the Mashpee failed to gain recognition, despite the testimony of a great many experts that they were indeed a tribe (Campisi 1991).

The Code of Federal Regulations (1992) now spells out in detail what it is you need to do to achieve official tribal recognition. The procedures are many, complex, and difficult to satisfy, as witness the slow pace of successful petitions (Greenbaum 1985; Roesel 1989). As the Mashpee case demonstrated, “knowing who you are”—perfectly satisfactory within any human group—doesn’t cut any external legal ice. The required criteria in the FAP process boil down to “we see you.” Proof of a historical continuity is insisted on, not the groups’ own unbroken sense of peoplehood, but the extent to which they have consistently made it visible to the others. They must be “seen” in the records of government, common report, churches—somebody other than themselves must vouch for them and not lose sight of them.

Invented Indians?

Are the Mashpee and the Lumbee perhaps charlatans of some sort? Are they what Stephen Feraca has called “paper tribes” (1990:225)? Are these new tribes just invented for market purposes, now that the market is bullish? I have a few cautious thoughts, cautious because I would like to avoid the fate of James Clifton, who has recently been heavily criticized for suggesting the term “invented Indian” (1990). Vine Deloria Jr., for example, has reviewed the work by that title in a manner best described as spluttering (Deloria 1992). Deloria has also recently dismissed virtually all of anthropology, along with the more general “myth of scientific fact” (1995).

Who is to say who is real and who invented, since after all, every people “plays” with its history in an ongoing process of self-invention (Dietler 1994; Lofgren 1995). Clearly, Deloria feels it is not up to Clifton or other scalawag anthropologists, or to the federal government. Like many, he seems to believe we should give it back to the Indians, let them say who is who. My gut reaction is to agree. I even agree with scholars like Annette Jaimes that if Indians can do so, “they will be able to move onward into a true process of decolonization and reestablishment of themselves as national entities” (Jaimes 1992:132).

Alas, as I have been arguing in this essay, the game has been otherwise rigged since colonial times, and such complete freedom of choice is simply not on the menu, nor is it likely to be. While Native Americans may today have greater self-determination than ever before, they are still inextricably linked to the ebb and flow of the dominant society and its markets and are subject to the rules of its regulators. The federal government and the ticket-buying public are simply not going to buy “we know who we are, trust us.” Do I think this is a good thing? Do I think that the federal government is judging infallibly who is the “real McCoy” and who is not? Of course not. But, however reluctantly, we must deal with what Chief Justice John Marshall called the “actual state of things” (Getches et al. 1993:330). The key problem is the “special relationship” of Native Americans to the federal government, which is for better or worse unlike that of any other ethnic group. What makes it special and valuable is what also makes it subject to the arbitrary decisions of the outsiders. If the federal government is going to provide trust services and funds and act as an intermediary with the states on behalf of those defined as tribes—and no others—it is inevitably going to demand a voice in saying who qualifies.

I am not arguing that peoplehood itself has anything whatever to do with federal recognition or its formal criteria. Historically many Native peoples became geographically dispersed like other diaspora peoples. They have no visible physical communities because they have been unable to retain a land base. Many live entirely inside urban non-Indian communities, without clearly demarcated ethnic neighborhoods (Weibel-Orlando 1991). They may no longer speak a distinctive language or wear distinct costume; they may, as Donald Trump commented, not even “look like Indians” after generations of intermarriage. But none of this need mean that a people no longer exists.

Stephen Fugita and David O’Brien demonstrate, in the case of Japanese Americans, a persistent ethnic group that maintains a degree of structure and cohesion with none of the factors mentioned above and with little external recognition (1991). Edward H.

Spicer has shown how the Sonora Yaqui have persisted over centuries in diaspora, continually changing location and redefining *kotumbre*, yet enduring as a people (1980). But what happens when we turn back to who is an official Indian rather than a people? The Yaqui, once a group of Mexican migrants, in 1978 gained federal recognition as Indians, though far more native Natives have not (Willard 1994). Indeed, one of the Arizona Yaquis, Eddie Brown, even became assistant secretary for Indian affairs under President Bush. Go figure.

The situation is very much an ongoing argument. As I write, Congress debates modifications to the Indian Child Welfare Act that would restrict the definition of an Indian child to one who maintains “significant social, cultural or political affiliation with the tribe” (Schmitt 1996). Indian identity has become unavoidably commodified, bound up in the politics, as well as the economics, of political economy. I do not doubt for a moment that there are hundreds of perfectly “real” Indian groups unrecognized—but in the end it becomes a matter of convincing the market and its federal regulators that you and your people are genuine—“Thereal McCoy.”³

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Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 94th Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Washington, DC, November.
2. Rose 1992. See also Hagan 1985:318 and Vizenor 1994:61.
3. The name of a character in Philip Roth’s novel *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969).

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