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.

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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[1]

When you think about the most accessible representations of Native Americans in the United States, what comes to mind? You might conjure historical representations of buckskin-wearing, teepee-dwelling people with feathers, or contemporary images of impoverished, drug-abusing, uneducated people.[2] Such negative, limiting, and inaccurate representations are widely accessible in the United States. Now, take a moment to think about what it means to be suc-

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cessful. You might think of someone who is highly educated, with a lucrative career in law, entertainment, education, or some other field. Do the aforementioned representations of Native Americans align with this image of success? How do you think these representations affect the way Native Americans are viewed and treated in consequential domains such as the legal system, the media, and education?

Social scientists largely agree that being human is a social project; people are shaped by the individuals around them and the cultural context in which they live.[3] The dominant culture provides ideas, beliefs, and assumptions about what it means to be a person or a member of a group and, as such, offers a schema for understanding both oneself and others.[4] For Native Americans, the most widely accessible ideas about their group, as well as the representations that stem from them, are not harmless misunderstandings or overgeneralizations. As Baldwin's quote highlights, White American institutions and individuals have overwhelmingly created and defined prevalent representations of racial minority groups, including Native peoples.[5] The resulting representations reflect negative, inaccurate ideas about Native Americans while ignoring positive, accurate ideas. Consequently, biased understandings of how contemporary Native Americans look, sound, and behave permeate U.S. society. We contend that biased ideas and representations of Native Americans – particularly the scarcity of positive, accurate, and contemporary ideas and representations – constitute the modern form of bias against Native Americans and perpetuate a recursive cycle of low expectations, prejudice, and discrimination that reinforces disparities in domains from public health to education.

Breaking this cycle, as Baldwin contends, requires that new ideas and representations defined by Native American people accurately reflect who and what Native people are, not who others imagine them to be. We draw upon the culture cycle framework to describe how ideas and representations of Native Americans become embedded in the social fabric (that is, within institutions, interactions, and individuals) and provide a roadmap for change. First, we highlight how widely accessible ideas and representations about Native Americans fuel a cycle of bias and create disparate outcomes, specifically in the legal system, the media, and education. Second, we call attention to actions of Native American tribes and individuals that have reshaped U.S. culture and promoted more equitable outcomes for contemporary and future Native people. We end with a discussion of how both Native and non-Native people can leverage cultural change to break the cycle of bias against Native peoples.

The *culture cycle* describes the relation between the surrounding cultural context and individuals' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Four levels of culture – *ideas*, *institutions*, *interactions*, and *individuals* – work together in a mutually constitutive manner to shape and reinforce social and cultural outcomes.[6] The highest level of the culture cycle includes *ideas*, such as social, political, and economic histories, assumptions, and norms. These ideas include understandings of how to be a "good" or "moral" individual, stereotypes that shape expectations of group members, and the value placed on different ways of knowing or engaging with the world. *Institutions* include the legal system, the media, and the education system. The practices, policies, structures, and products of institutions reflect prevalent cultural ideas. For example, the legal system sanctions individuals who violate ideas about "good" and "moral" behavior, and the media produces movies, books, and news reports that reflect and reify cultural ideas. Institutional practices and policies in turn provide scripts and norms that

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.

In historic and contemporary legal policy and practice, Native Americans have been represented as "uncivilized," incapable of behaving according to mainstream American norms.[7] 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 Native 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.[8] On one hand, restricting tribal control over law enforcement reifies the notion that Native Americans are incapable of policing their own communities.[9] On the other hand, federal and state governments' failure to provide sufficient resources to Native communities causes the negative outcomes expected to arise from Native Americans' supposed inability to police themselves, thus reinforcing harmful stereotypes.

Biased institutional understandings of Native people also impact law enforcement officers' interactions with Native people and, ultimately, Native peoples' outcomes within the legal system. For example, interactions with law enforcement are more likely to end in the use of deadly force for Native Americans than for any other racial group relative to population size.[10] A study of Native American individuals from seven states and eight tribal nations revealed that even when interactions with police do not lead to violence, police often use racial slurs or derogatory language.[11] Courtroom interactions are similarly biased; for example, Native youth are 30 percent more likely than White youth to be referred to juvenile court rather than having their charges dropped.[12] Given these outcomes, Native Americans report being reluctant to turn to the legal system when they need help because they believe that law enforcement will not take their complaints seriously or intervene when they are in danger.[13] Interactions between Native Americans and the legal system not only perpetuate distrust, but also promote racial disparities that undermine Native peoples' well-being and livelihood.[14]

Construing Native people through a negative and limiting lens – as unable to govern themselves or as "uncivilized" – further justifies the perpetuation of disparate outcomes for Native Americans interacting with the legal system. The underlying assumption of these negative and limiting ideas is that anything non-Native legal institutions do on behalf of Native Americans is better than what Native people could have done on their own. According to this logic, in spite of Native Americans' disparate outcomes in the legal system relative to other groups, changes do not need to occur because Native people are still better off than they would be if they were governing themselves. Yet such a biased and inaccurate view of Native people in the legal system obscures the fact that Native people have long governed themselves and worked to alleviate the disparate outcomes they face in the American legal system. According to the National American Indian Court Judge Association, 93 percent of federally and state-recognized tribes have their own tribal justice systems.[15] Furthermore, Native American individuals and communities have long utilized Indian law to advocate for their well-being and to challenge federal and state laws. Two such examples include the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) and the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA).

ICWA, which passed in 1978, gives Native American tribes jurisdiction over child welfare cases involving Native children. From 1969 – 1974, the U.S. government separated 25 – 35 percent of all Native children from their families and placed them in foster homes, adoptive homes, or institutions. A majority (85 percent) of these children were placed in non-Native homes even when Native homes were available, reflecting the bias that Native Americans are incapable of raising their own children.[16] The Association on American Indian Affairs conducted surveys in states with large Native American populations to understand why so many Native children were removed. These surveys revealed that many children were removed not because of abuse or neglect, but because their families practiced communal childrearing. Communal childrearing is normative in Native American communities, but it conflicts with the nuclear family model of childrearing that prevails in White, middle-class contexts.[17] Thus, the research affirmed that the removal of Native children was fueled by cultural bias against Native ways of being.

By giving tribes control over child welfare cases, ICWA directly challenged negative beliefs about Natives' ability to care for their own children and changed how the U.S. government intervened in these cases. Following ICWA, the number of Native children placed in foster care or adoption between 1978 and 1986 decreased significantly.[18] ICWA's passage set the stage for Native tribes nationwide to build child welfare agencies that keep Native families and communities together.[19] By challenging biased understandings of Native families and ways of being, ICWA and the Native individuals, organizations, and communities that were essential to its passing improved both disparate child welfare outcomes and relationships among tribal governments, Native parents, Native children, and federal and state governments.

Just as ICWA was a direct response to the disproportionate removal of Native American children from their families, the 2013 reauthorization of VAWA came as a direct response to the disproportionate rates of violence experienced by Native women at the hands of non-Native men. Approximately 56 percent of Native American women report experiencing sexual violence in their lifetime, and 96 percent of these women report sexual assault by a non-Native man.[20] Native women are the only ethnic group more likely to be assaulted by a male of a different ethnicity than by a male of the same ethnicity.[21] Prior to VAWA, federal and/or

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.[22] 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.[23] Like many people of color, Native women are perceived as less worthy of protection than White women:[24] as recently as 1968, a federal appellate court upheld a statute that reduced sentencing for rape cases involving Native American women.[25] Furthermore, prosecutors often take Native women's sexual assault claims less seriously, assuming that Native victims were under the influence (in accordance with the stereotype of Native Americans as drunks), making it less likely that litigation will proceed.[26] In 2015, after a decade of Native American grassroots efforts and advocacy, Congress added a provision to VAWA granting tribes jurisdiction over cases of intimate partner violence involving non-Native individuals on reservations. Once VAWA passed, a pilot project gave three tribes early jurisdiction. In the span of seventeen months, these tribes charged a total of twenty-six offenders.[27] While advocates are seeking to expand VAWA protections to other types of violence, this legislation stands as an example of Native communities working to address the needs of their people and improving their outcomes by assuming control over their own legal processes.

ICWA and VAWA demonstrate how Native tribes have pushed back against biased legal policies and practices to better protect and serve their communities, thereby improving their lives in contemporary society. In particular, there is a direct relationship between the number of self-determining actions a tribal community takes and the community's mental health. Specifically, First Nations bands (the Native people of Canada) who enacted more self-determining practices that reflected their cultural histories and values, such as making claims to traditional lands or taking community control over education and health services, had lower suicide rates than bands who enacted fewer self-determining practices.[28] The legal system's biased understanding and paternalistic treatment of Native Americans undermines equitable outcomes for Native American individuals and communities. Importantly, these outcomes are not predetermined or rooted in Native Americans' "inadequacies"; when Natives challenge biased legislation and self-govern, Native communities flourish.

The institution most responsible for creating and transmitting biased representations is the media. Psychologist Peter Leavitt and colleagues, for example, examined the content that emerged from search engine queries for the terms "Native American" or "American Indian."[29] Ninety-five percent of Google results and 99 percent of Bing results included antiquated portraits of Native American people in traditional clothing and feathers; contemporary images of Native Americans were scant. Although inaccurate, these antiquated images remain prevalent because people continue to consume them, so search engine algorithms continue to present them as valid representations of Native Americans.[30]

Biased and inaccurate representations of Native Americans also persist in television, film, and advertising. While contemporary members of other racial groups are by and large represented, Native Americans are largely omitted.[31] From 1987–2008, only three Native American characters were featured on primetime television (out of 2,336 characters).[32] On the rare oc-

casion 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.[33] 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).[34] 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.[35] 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).[36] 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.[37] 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 traditional clothing. Unlike twentieth-century photographer Edward Curtis, who is responsible for many of the antiquated images of Native Americans that prevail today, Wilbur collaborates with her Native American subjects. She presents contemporary Native Americans in positive, contemporary ways that counter the systemic exclusion that characterizes the modern form of bias against Native people.[38]

Similar video campaigns (including Buzzfeed's "I'm Native, but I'm Not . . . " and Arizona State University's "Native 101") and websites (WeRNative.org) showcase Native Americans resisting negative cultural ideas and offering more positive contemporary representations of Native people.[39] Native-

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.[40] 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.[41]

Negative and limiting ideas and representations influence interactions between educators and Native students and contribute to Natives' disparate outcomes. For example, compared with White students with equivalent test scores and grades, teachers are less likely to recommend Native students for advanced coursework.[42] Native students are also suspended at more than twice the rate of White students.[43] 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.[44] Teachers were taught about Native cultural ways of being, and school guidelines and routines were created to validate Native American cultures. Each school day began with a welcome assembly that included a tribal song and dance and a culturally relevant welcome message. When the intervention began, the school ranked in the bottom 5 percent of schools in the state, and much like the state and national pattern for the past forty years, there were no notable positive changes among Native students.[45] However, during the intervention, Native students improved immensely, showing growth on the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) test at a rate of 1 to 1.5 years' advancement in half a school year. This intervention revealed that school culture was the problem, not Native students: Native students thrive when their ways of knowing and being are validated in educational contexts and when they are seen as having potential. Creating more accurate representations – and thus understandings – of Native students paved the way for their success.

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.[46]

Breaking this cycle requires challenging derogatory ideas and representations and also, as James Baldwin suggests, infusing the broader cultural context with more accurate contemporary representations defined by Native people themselves. The culture cycle framework can be leveraged to reclaim what it means to be Native American and promote equity. Indeed, Native people and communities have already begun harnessing this power for change. As we have shown, their actions in key institutions have brought light to positive, nuanced understandings of Native Americans as they live today and have challenged antiquated, biased representations. As Native Americans and their allies continue fighting systemic exclusion and bias, we must ensure that targeted action is implemented at each level of the culture cycle. The ideas and representations put forth must reflect Native Americans' knowledge of who they are and what they are capable of achieving.

While it is essential for Native individuals and communities to have a voice in creating accurate representations of Native Americans, the onus for changing the culture cycle does not rest solely on Native Americans. Non-Native individuals and institutions must also actively foster cultural change. For White individuals specifically, this responsibility necessitates acknowledging the legacy of building and benefiting from a cultural system that has intentionally misunderstood and devalued Native people and ways of life and attempted to thwart Natives' well-being and, in many respects, their very existence. As such, the dominant institutions must ensure that their practices, policies, and products set the stage for positive and equitable interactions with Native American individuals and communities. More generally, this responsibility hinges on a commitment to building a more equitable system that uplifts people from all backgrounds and allows all people to understand and recognize the needs, voices, and contributions of communities of color.

As the opening quote suggests, Native Americans are living within a cultural system that was constructed neither for nor by them. By understanding cultural influences on institutions and individuals, and by taking strategic, targeted action to change biased cultural ideas and representations, we can reconstitute the culture cycle to reflect accurate understandings of who Native people are and what they can become. Ultimately, these actions will produce more equitable outcomes for Native peoples both in the present and in the future.

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