How many more Indians? An argument for a representational ethics of Native Americans

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What is This?
How Many More Indians? An Argument for a Representational Ethics of Native Americans

Debra Merskin

Abstract
This article explores the persistence of stereotypical representations of Native Americans as brand images and situates a call for change within an ethics of representation. American Spirit Cigarettes are used as an illustrative case study to demonstrate that these representations cannot be relegated to less enlightened times, rather endure because naturalization is part of commodified racism. The present essay argues for engagement in representational ethics on the part of communicators to interrupt the contribution of stereotypes to the maintenance of colonial ideologies.

Keywords
native American, stereotype, marketing, ethics

Images on packages, in advertisements, on television, in films, and as sports mascots are sometimes the only indians seen by non-Native Americans. Stereotypical representations of Natives deny their humanity and present them as existing only in the past as single, monolithic indians (Ganje, 2011; Merskin, 1998, 2001). American Indians are certainly not the only racial or ethnic group to be discriminated against, overtly or covertly, in commercial and
entertainment media. The dehumanizing, one-dimensional images of Aunt Jemima and Rastus also originated in a tragic past but, like Betty Crocker, these trade characters have been updated. Aunt Jemima lost weight, and the bandana and the Frito Bandito disappeared (Burnham, 1992). Nevertheless, the Indian image persists in corporate marketing and product labeling. For example, a recent Absolut Vodka ad shows an Eskimo pulling a sled of the beverage, and a Grey Owl Wild Rice package features an Indian with braids, wearing a single feather, surrounded by a circle that represents (according to Grey Owl’s distribution manager) the “oneness of nature” (Burnham, 1992, p. E1). Numerous brands of tobacco are sold using Indian allusions and names (American Spirit, Geronimo, Red Man tobacco and snuff, Big Indian, Omaha, Sky Dancer, Smokin’ Joes). Santa Fe Tobacco, manufacturer of American Spirit and other brands of cigarettes, which is discussed later, states the products use Indians and Indian names that “were created in our belief in the traditional Native American usage of tobacco...our brand name was chosen as a symbol of respect for tradition” (Akst, 2000, n.p.). In August 2008, the National Hockey League voted number one the Chicago Blackhawks’ logo, created in 1926, according to a team press release because it represents everything this competition is about. It is instantly recognizable, has universal appeal, and has inspired countless imitations. The logo itself has an unwavering sense of pride and duty to it and looks great on a jersey or a hat. It is truly one of the classics in all of sport. (“Blackhawk’s Logo Voted,” 2008)

Using images of Native Americans and words from indigenous languages in brands and product names is a moral issue. Consistently appearing as one of three “savages” (Noble, Civilizable, and Bloodthirsty) in American commercial culture, “the concept of Native Americans as savages undercuts the very condition for the possibility of moral respect” (Green, 1993, p. 323). In fact, almost 20 years ago, the American Indian Mental Health Association of Minnesota (1992) made the same argument: “We are in agreement that using images of American Indians as mascots, symbols, caricatures, and namesakes for non-Indian sports teams, businesses, and other organizations is damaging to the self-identity, self-concept, and self-esteem of our people.”

Both the American Psychological Association (APA) and the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights have issued similar resolutions recommending “the Immediate Retirement of American Indian Mascots, by Schools, Colleges, Universities, Athletic Teams, and Organizations” because the portrayals are “insensitive,” “disrespectful,” and “offensive” (“U.S. Commission on Civil Rights,” 2001; “APA Calls for Immediate Retirement,” 2011). The APA states that “the continued use of American Indian mascots, symbols, images, and personalities” is racist and damaging to Indian and non-Indians (“Summary of the APA,” 2014). In addition, an interdisciplinary body of
academic research has argued the same thing whether the representations are found as team mascots (Black, 2002; King, 2001, 2004; Staurowsky, 2007; Tovares, 2002; Wallace, 2011), in films (Edgerton, 1994; Merskin, 1998; Mihelich, 2001; Strickland, 1997), in news (Freng, 2007; Miller & Ross, 2004; Sanchez, 2003), or as brand images (Green, 1993; Merskin, 2001; Sanchez, 2012). Yet the stereotypes persist and are perpetuated by the introduction of new products such as Native Spirit cigarettes and racist discourse in the case of the 2011 hunt for Osama bin Laden when the U.S. government gave the mission the operation code name “Geronimo” (Westcott, 2011). This identity theft is common in American culture, particularly in the naming of products and the creating of brands, logos, and advertising. 3

What is at stake here not only concerns communication practices but also individual well-being. For example, American Indian women have lower social and economic status than White women with lower earnings (58 cents on every dollar White men make), less education, more poverty (25% live in poverty), and more than a third (38%) of families headed by a Native woman are in worse health and receive poorer health care than do women of other racial groups (Caiazza, Shaw, & Werschkul, 2004). Homicide is among the top 10 reasons for Native women’s deaths (Guedel, 2009). Indians are subjects of higher rates of violence and higher incarceration rates than the general population (Freng, 2007). The suicide rate among American Indian/Alaska Natives is more than double that of other groups, particularly during adolescence and young adulthood (Frieden, 2011). There is more binge drinking, higher alcohol and tobacco use, and the highest poverty rates of any group. Typically, because of small sample sizes, statistics about this group result in their being made invisible by assignment to the “other” category of research findings (Frieden, 2011). A Warm Springs tribal member points out, “If your people have been the victims of genocide, it’s real hard to listen to anyone on the other side saying anything about respecting you” (as quoted in Williams, 2010, p. A1).

The impetus behind this essay is to remind academics and communication practitioners that continued use of one-dimensional, limiting stereotypes is an ethical issue. “Experiences of suffering that can be attributed to ‘real’ people need to inform our concrete ethical responses rather than empty abstractions” (Burns, 2008, p. 318). In the sections that follow, problematic representations are identified that have not changed despite a body of research that has voiced disquietude about marketing’s visual representations of Native Americans (Cortese, 1999/2008; Ganje, 2011; Merskin, 1998, 2001, 2010; O’Barr, 1994; Schwarz, 2013; Sigelman, 1998). This concern is then situated within Schroeder and Borgerson’s (2005) “representational ethics,” which explores the ethics of using images or words to stand in for qualities of being and asks “who has the right to represent others and under what circumstances?” (Johnston, 2000, p. 73). This is followed by a discussion of advertising and branding and how stereotypes in and on consumer goods operate as a lens.
through which we can observe how race is commodified and how colonial discourse is reified. American Spirit cigarettes function as a case study demonstrating the continued contemporary use of racist discourse.

**Representational Politics**

If you are among the 99% non-Indian population and the only source of information you have about Americans Indians comes from product packages, advertising, and mass media portrayals, what would you conclude about the physical, emotional, and intellectual characteristics of indigenous North Americans? Bloodthirsty savages? Children of nature? Indian princesses? Defilers of White virgins? These are a few of the persistent stereotypes that appear in the mass media, particularly in advertising and as brands that features images and attributes of Native Americans. Stereotypes, defined as “overgeneralized, reductionist beliefs, [that] are collections of traits or characteristics that present members of a group as being all the same” (Merskin, 2004, p. 160) are signifying mental practices. They provide convenient shorthand for the identification of a particular group. Thus, “in the absence of an opportunity for self-definition, words, regardless of their ancestry, are assigned as names for peaks, mountains, roads, creeks, … buttes,” as well as products, brands, and mascots (Merskin, 2010, p. 350). The Washington Redskins team, the Jeep Cherokee vehicle, and Land O’Lakes butter are a few enduring contemporary examples of how racist representations are commodified. As Coombes (1998) points out:

> From Red Man® chewing tobacco, Indian Spirit® air freshener, Indian-style™ popcorn, teams of Braves®, Red Indian® jeans, Warrior boxes, and Indian heads on everything from baking soda tins and neon beer signs to children’s campgrounds, the corporeality of the “Indian” continues to mark the privileges of the incorporated in commerce. (p. 186)

In the absence of personal interaction with an indigenous person, non-Indian perceptions of indians likely come from sources other than personal experience such as textbooks, parents, teachers, movies, television programs, cartoons, songs, commercials, art, product logos, and the media. American Indian images, music, and names have, since the beginning of the 20th century, been incorporated into many American advertising campaigns, marketing efforts, and commercial labeling, demarcating and consuming the Indian as an exotic “Other” in the popular imagination (Ganje, 2011; Merskin, 2001; Sanchez, 2012). Whereas a century ago sheet music covers and patent medicine bottles featured “coppery, feather-topped visage of the Indian” (Larson, 1937, p. 338), today’s Land O’Lakes packages display a doe-eyed, buckskin-clad Indian “princess.” The fact that there never were Indian princesses (a European concept), and most Indians do not have the kind of European features
and social availability that trade characters do, goes largely unquestioned. These stereotypes are pervasive but not necessarily consistent, varying over time and place from the “artificially idealistic” (Noble Savage) to images of “mystical environmentalists or uneducated, alcoholic bingo-players confined to reservations” (Mihe suah, 1996, p. 9). A trip down the grocery store aisle today reveals ice cream bars, beef jerky, corn meal, baking powder, malt liquor, butter, honey, sugar, sour cream, chewing tobacco packages, and a plethora of other products emblazoned with images and names of Indians. Table 1 lists a few of the many products and services that continue to be advertised and marketed using stereotypes of Native people. In the next section, I describe how product labels and brand names reinforce long-held stereotypical beliefs.

**Commodity Racism**

As sources of learning, the mass media in general, and advertising in particular, are powerful sites of cultural (re)production where dominant (White, patriarchal) beliefs about race, ethnicity, sex, and gender (among other isms) are reinforced and recirculated. Stereotypes, as hegemonic tools, reduce individuals to a single, monolithic, one-dimensional type that appears, and is presented as, natural and normal as they fit into ideological patterns of representations that serve, among other functions, to establish “in-group categorizations of out-groups” (Ramírez Berg, 1990, p. 294). Hegemonic beliefs and values are articulated through the construction, maintenance, and perpetuation of stereotypes that “get hold of the few simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped, and widely recognized characteristics about a person, reduce everything about the person to those traits, exaggerate and simplify them, and fix them without change or development to eternity” (Hall, 1997, p. 258).

Stereotyping “puts people in boxes and creates images that result in false presumptions accepted as inconvertible truths” (Oboler, 1998, p. 27). This “articulation” is concretized by the lack of contradictory images in media representations (Hall, 1997). The stories the media tell are based on deeply entrenched cultural beliefs and values that cultivate and build support for a system of symbolic representation that benefits the financial, cultural, economic, and social interests of the ruling elite through the reinforcement of racialized heteronormative beliefs and values. These racialized tropes remain largely unchallenged, so that carefully cultivated cultural constructions of race, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender become normalized as a “regime of truth” in the American popular imagination (Coombes, 1998, p. 190). This colonial narrative thereby “fixes otherness in an ideological discourse” by requiring “that which is already known” to be continuously presented, represented, and repeated” (Coombes, 1998, p. 191).

Stereotypes perform at least two functions. First, through the use of specific signs and symbols, articulated in particular words and images, racial/ethnic and
Table 1. Examples of Products and Services Using Native American Names and Images.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vehicles</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dodge Dakota</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jeep Cherokee</td>
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<tr>
<td>Toyota Tacoma</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ford Apache</td>
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<td>Pontiac</td>
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<td>Winnebago</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lakota</td>
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<tr>
<td>Indian motorcycles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tomahawk missile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Hawk helicopter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winnebago</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pontiac Aztek</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Products</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American Spirit cigarettes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apache:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helicopter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web server</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rib doormats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Hawk</td>
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<tr>
<td>Helicopter</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cigarettes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cherokee brand clothing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chinook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helicopter</td>
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<tr>
<td>RV</td>
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<tr>
<td>Comanche firearms</td>
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<td>Delaware</td>
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<td>Punch</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grape</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eskimo Pies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Indian motorcycle</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tomahawk mulcher</td>
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<td>Umpqua</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bank</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dairy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Indian Spirit® air freshener</td>
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<tr>
<td>Land O’Lakes products</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minnetonka moccasins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mohawk Carpet Mills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mohave clothing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mutual of Omaha</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
sexual stereotypes draw strength from a shared cultural reservoir of thought-to-be-truths about particular groups of people. Based on a history of cultural, social, and psychological infusion of one-dimensional and distorted presentations of qualities (or lack thereof), these “truths” serve the interests of those in power who aim to retain their status and resources (Coombes, 1998; King, 2001; Merskin, 2001, 2004; Said, 1978; Strickland, 1997).

Second, the maintenance of stereotypical beliefs also satisfies the human need for psychological equilibrium and order, finding support and reinforcement in ideology that distinguishes an Us from a symbolic Them. Defined as “typical properties of the ‘social mind’ of a group” (van Dijk, 1996, p. 56), ideologies provide a frame of reference for understanding the world. Racist ideology functions psychologically, socially, and politically to reproduce racism by legitimating social inequalities, thereby justifying racially or ethnically constructed differences. Racist ideology serves three primary purposes: (1) organizes specific social attitudes into an evaluative framework for perceiving otherness, (2) provides the basis for “coordinated action and solidarity among whites” (van Dijk, 1996, p. 9), and (3) defines racial and ethnic identity of the dominant group. These beliefs and practices are thereby articulated in the production and distribution of racist discourse, the result of which creates “distance between the ‘real’ Indian and a manufactured replica of an Indian stereotype” (Staurowsky, 1998, p. 304), that is, the artificial Indian who is the product of colonization.

Scientific and commodity racism are two “dialectally related forms of consciousness” (McLaughlin, 2000, p. 17) that are tied to the transference of oppressive energy. The first, scientific racism, is closely related both to Said’s (1978) concept of Orientalism and Foucault’s colonial “power-knowledge” paradigm wherein intellectual colonization is also a tool of oppression, one that presupposed the role of “fiduciary of all knowledge” (Doxater, 2004, p. 618). The second occurred “in the specific forms of advertising and photography,
the imperial Exhibitions, and the museum movement” (McClintock, 1995, p. 33). This form of racial narrative demonstrated the transition of “the narrative of imperial progress into mass-produced spectacle” because “advertising translated things into a fantasy visual display consisting of signs and symbols” (McClintock, 1995, p. 33). This process moved imperialist discourse from the arena of scientific publications and clubs to that of the commercial and domestic spheres. Just as pseudoscientific information provides support and rationale for male superiority, so too did photography. Advertising provided evidence of Native inferiority without the requirement of literacy.

Commodity racism “was not just reflective of how the larger society’s racism showed up in ads, but also deeply constitutive of the very ways in which Whites connected race, pleasure, and service” (McClintock, 1995, p. 220). A commodity occurs “on the threshold between culture and commerce, confusing the supposedly sacrosanct boundaries between aesthetics and economy, money, and art” (McClintock, 1995, p. 221). The resultant images and text draw upon the collective unconscious residing in a symbolic reservoir that revitalizes the latent racist point of view that exists just below the surface of conscious memory. At the same time, the advertising industry discovered that by manipulating “the semiotic space” around a commodity, it could simultaneously manipulate the “unconscious as a public space” (McClintock, 1995, p. 213).

Branding Meaning

To every advertisement they see or hear, people bring a shared set of beliefs that serve as frames of reference for understanding the world around them. Advertising and branding are mechanisms through which visual and verbal discourse is distributed. “All successful brands have an underlying cognitive value… A cluster of attributes and associations that consumers connect to the brand name” (Ellwood, 2002, p. 71). Beyond the obvious selling function, advertising images are about making meaning. Ads must “take into account not only the inherent qualities and attributes of the products they are trying to sell, but also the way in which they can make those properties mean something to us” (Williamson, 1978/2002, p. 12). Barthes (1972, p. 109) described these articulations as myth, as “a type of speech” or mode of signification conveyed by discourse consisting of many possible modes of representation, including, but not limited to, writing, photography, publicity, and advertising. Myth, articulated by the process of semiology, “postulates a relation between two terms, a signifier and a signified” (Barthes, 1972, p. 112). The correlation of the terms signifier, signified, and sign describes how associative meaning is made. What is experienced in seeing or reading an advertisement or product label are basic elements composed of linguistic signs (words) and iconic signs (visuals). Barthes uses a rose, for example, as a symbol of passion. Roses are not passion per se, but
rather the roses (signifier) plus the concept of passion (signified) result in roses (sign). He states, “the signifier is empty, the sign is full, it is a meaning” (Barthes, 1972, p. 113). Quite simply, a sign, whether “object, word, or picture” has a particular meaning to a person or group of people. The sign is formed at the intersection between the image, brand name, and meaning system articulated in a particular product. “It is neither the thing nor the meaning alone, but the two together” (Williamson, 1978/2002, p. 17).

A brand is a “bundle or container of meaning” that is presented in advertising that has a cultural relationship within society (McCracken, 1993, p. 125). A brand can have gendered meaning (maleness/femaleness), social standing (status), nationality (country meaning), and ethnicity/race (multicultural meaning). It can also stand for notions of tradition, trustworthiness, purity, family, and nature. The Marlboro man is an example of these components wherein a simple red and white box came to signify freedom, satisfaction, competence, maleness, and a quintessentially American, Western character. The product becomes part of the constellation of meanings that surround it and thereby soaks up meanings. When the rugged Marlboro man is situated on his horse, on the open plain, almost always alone, the meaning constellation becomes obvious: He is freedom, love of the outdoors, release from the confines of industrialized society, he is a real man, self-sufficient and individualistic. The meanings become part of a theme comprising prototypical content while simultaneously being “idealizations and not reality itself” (Schmitt & Simonson, 1997, p. 124). Tools of branding thereby draw upon and create a particular image in the mind of the consumer.

Advertisements further boost the commodity value of product names by connecting them to images that resonate with the social and cultural values of a particular society. These ads are loaded with established ideological assumptions that, when attached to a brand, create the commodity sign. Consistently, the American advertising industry has successfully employed racist “constructs and deploy[ed] racialized tropes and images in its efforts to sell a vision” (Leonard, 2005, p. 15). An example is Ivory Snow, which was advertised using stereotypical dark caricatures designed to demonstrate how effective the soap was in washing away “ignorance and war,” thereby fixing categories of difference between White and other cultures (Domash, 2004, p. 8). By fetishizing the product, in this case soap, the advertising promised “spiritual salvation and regeneration through commodity consumption” (Mansvelt, 2005, p. 211) and accomplished this by employing “racialized notions of empire” with images of removing, washing away darkness, blackness, and “color” (p. 39). The Pears soap campaign is (in)famous for images of little Black boys washing away their race/dirtiness by using the soap, “as if magically erasing the racial degeneration of blackness” (Darian-Smith, 2002, p. 186). One-dimensional racial and ethnic images of Native Americans are deeply entrenched in American popular culture and thought and have not disappeared.
Savages, Savages

Representations of Native Americans as savages, in whatever form, reduce an entire people to the status of object, and “within the traditional Western conceptualization of the world mere natural objects have no moral standing” (Green, 1993, p. 323). The savage stereotype as mascot for the Florida State Seminoles football team or the University of Illinois Fighting Illini, for example, draw on portrayals of an evil, angry generic indian drawn from literary and photographic sources of earlier times. Thus, the savage (signified) has an immediate, obvious connection to the product—football and sports (King, 1998, 2001). The savage-as-signifier of death, vengeance, evil, and rage, when placed on a t-shirt (sign), transfers meaning to the otherwise ambiguous product. Three primary representations of Native people, all derivations of the savage stereotype persist: (1) Noble Savage—includes the teary-eyed Native American chief who watches as the land is polluted, and the Jeep Cherokee, a vehicle with associated qualities such as adaptability, ruggedness, and sense of adventure, (2) Enlightened Savage—the child-of-nature/first environmentalist stereotype, and (3) Bloodthirsty Savage—used as sports team mascots in name and image, such as the Atlanta Braves, Washington Redskins, Cleveland Indians, and the Kansas City Chiefs (all of whom are still with us).4 These monikers are also applied to American military equipment such as Tomahawk Missiles and Black Hawk helicopters. As a result, the “savage” is thought of outsider, “merely an animal in human form” (Green, 1993, p. 327), from which the Other developed in three representational directions that still apply today.

To the primary target audience, the product and associated image make sense, based on a collective history of defining Indian people in a one-dimensional way. When these views are not contradicted by other information, or alternative views are not provided, the stereotypes persist, bearing full of hegemonic potential. There is a consumer blind spot when it comes to these brand images and names because they are so long-standing and familiar. The red and white packaging of Big Chief Sugar alludes to red skin, as well as the company’s Americana schema. Crazy Horse Malt Liquor, no longer available due to successful lawsuits by its descendents, combined the Noble Savage stereotype with a “proud, but ultimately defeated, Indian chief” (Merskin, 2001, p. 168). These stereotypes are not only male but also have female equivalents such as the generic Land O’Lakes “Indian maiden” and Sue Bee Honey logo that draw on the “child-of-nature imagery in an attempt to imbue qualities of purity into their products” (Merskin, 2001, p. 165). To ignore history and continue presenting Native peoples in this limited way is a moral decision on the part of communications experts and corporations “for, denying humanity to Native Americans, they thereby deny to them the possibility of receiving the moral
standing and treatment that is due to them as human beings” (Green, 1993, p. 329).

Representational Ethics

“Stereotyping is an ethical concern and raises the question ‘who has the right to represent others and under what circumstances?’ Norma Peone, Coeur d’Alene tribal council member” (as quoted in Johnston, 2000, p. 73).

Many ethics-based approaches to marketing are critiques of capitalism or of the contribution of marketing to hyper-consumerism. Borgerson and Schroeder (2008) advance the discussion of ethics by adding the concept of representational ethics to this pool, a view that draws on “existential-phenomenology, feminist ethics, and critical race” theory (p. 87). Representational ethics requires inquiry into and an understanding of “not only the implications or consequences of representational conventions—customary ways of depicting products, people, and identities . . . but also emphasizes the ethical context from which such representational conventions emerge” (Borgerson & Schroeder, 2008, p. 86). Rather than applying the typical critiques of a capitalist, consumerist society or morally evaluating representations of individuals or groups, an ethics of representation is done from an identity perspective. In other words, “represented identities profess to express something true or essential about those represented” (Borgerson & Schroeder, 2008, p. 93). This model involves not only attention to implications and consequences of “representational conventions—customary ways of depicting products, people and identities” but also “the ethical context from which such representational conventions emerge” (Borgerson & Schroeder, 2008, p. 580).

This is accomplished first by identifying “representational conventions,” which are “customary ways of depicting products, people, and identities” that are impacted by contextual information about them and revealed in their articulation as logos and brands (Borgerson & Schroeder, 2005, p. 256). Beyond images, words are also representational because, drawing on Voloshinov (1973), language is never neutral, and the selection of particular words and phrases articulates an individual’s and a society’s beliefs as a form of disclosure. Thus, language is ideological and dialogic—we speak out of bounded systems of constructed knowledge and every utterance is a “two-sided act” (Voloshinov, 1973, p. 86). However, the products discussed using Indian identity were and are constructed largely, if not entirely, by outsiders.

Over the past few years, a few racist sports mascots have been retired (such as the University of Illinois’ Chief Illiniwek), but many consumer goods bearing stereotypical images remain on the market. Tootsie Rolls, for example, still carry the image of the savage chief on their wrappers (Smith, 2000), and plastic
cowboy-and-Indian figures, “this nation’s most passionate, embedded form of hate talk,” are still available for children’s play (Yellow Bird, 2004, p. 42). Another example is the 2013 hard-line stance of the Washington Redskins football team’s owner Daniel Snyder to retain the racist name, the power of which is stated by Oneida Nation representative and CEO Ray Halbritter:

For many people, their most direct contact with the very idea of Native American culture is the Washington team’s name. On billboards, on T-shirts, on hats and on countless TV screens every week, millions of people are told that we are a mascot. (Halbritter, 2013)

It would be easy to dismiss many of these labels and logos as having been created in less enlightened times. Their continued presence, and the introduction of new products, is harder to understand.

Smoking Symbols

In 1982, Santa Fe, New Mexico-based product American Spirit Tobacco was introduced. The company, branded as American Spirit Cigarettes, is owned by R. J. Reynolds, who also owns Camel, Winston, Kool, Pall Mall, and other brands. Information about this 30-year-old company is available on their Web site, where the viewer is then greeted with “Welcome to the home of Natural American Spirit 100% additive-free natural tobacco, organic tobacco, as well as 100% U.S. grown tobacco.” American Spirit visually brands itself by using the silhouette of a chief in full-feathered headdress, smoking a peace pipe. The characteristics of naturalness and purity of the Nobel Savage are carried on the tobacco product. This is similar to uses of nativeness on packages such as Land O’Lakes, which suggest, through association, the product is purer or more natural by using this child-of-nature stereotype. Furthermore, the Native association supports the company’s claim that the tobacco is organic, that is, devoid of harmful chemicals found in other brands. The naturalness motif and the organic consideration could communicate that smoking this brand is safer than others, something greenwashing awareness activists have criticized (Koch, 2011, p. 3A). Furthermore, the company tries to gain legitimacy by tying the brand to traditional Native use of tobacco and with the intention of “hon[or] Native people” (Schwarz, 2013, p. 74). The stereotype is further naturalized in less than obvious ways through the typography used on the package. The font, Neuland, designed in 1923 by Rudolf Koch, has historic associations with stereotypes of the primitive or exotic (Cinamon, 2000; Giampietro, n.d.). This “stereotypography” functions through artificially created ideas of Native Americans and is expressed in choice of fonts (Horne, 1999, p. 72). These false correlations make connections between what is seen as “a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always ‘in place,’ already
known, and something that must be anxiously repeated” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 95). This constructed ambivalence creates an otherness that is simultaneously that of fantasy, difference, desire, and identity.

The association of tobacco (a symbol on its own of colonization), American Indians, and nature thus constructs a vision of “living in a state of innocence in Nature is an imaginative reconstruction of the colonizer in an Edenic existence” (Horne, 1999, p. 74). This colonial discourse in image and text normalizes and naturalizes difference and contributes to the commercial conversation that insists on placing Native Americans firmly and permanently in the past. As Bhabha (1994) noted, “the stereotype is at once a substitute and a shadow” (p. 117). The colonial stereotype’s currency “ensures its repeatability in changing historical and discursive conjectures; informs its strategies of individuation and marginalization, produces that effect of excess of what can be empirically proved or logically constructed” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 95).

Mainstream stereotypes such as those discussed not only reinforce dehumanizing and limiting views of the capabilities of American Indians but also result in “structural exclusions and cultural imagining [that] leave[s] minority members vulnerable to a system of violence,” symbolically and actually (Perry, 2002, p. 232). Thus, “the performative construction of reality rests heavily on discursive acts, i.e., on the power of naming and speech to define reality” (Nagel, 2000, p. 116). A deconstructive approach takes its examples from the past, recognizing that “savages” are still with us, as “an attempt not simply to reverse certain categories but to displace, dislocate, or to shift (if ever so slightly and slowly) a historical structure and the logical system that has served as a convenient excuse for it” (Vannoy Adams, 1985, p. 26). Messages conveyed through the authority of mass media (broadly defined to include print and broadcast journalism, advertising, and photojournalism), branding and labeling, and popular culture rigidify and perpetuate the stereotype in American imagination reifying the hierarchical position of dominant Euro-American culture by controlling access to resources and power.

Not only does stereotyping communicate inaccurate beliefs about Natives to Whites but also to Indians. Children, Native American included, are perhaps the most important recipients of this information. If, during the transition of adolescence, Native children internalize these representations that suggest Indians are lazy, obligated to willingly provide their native/natural bounty to Whites, are alcoholic by nature, and violent, this misinformation can have a lifelong impact on perceptions of self and others. By playing a game of substitution, by inserting other ethnic groups or races into the same advertisement, the problem is clear. Stereotypical images do not reside only in the past because the social control mechanisms that helped to create them remain with us today. Instead, they have gone mainstream, working smoothly through media and popular culture representations, relying on connotative understandings deeply rooted in the collective unconscious. Manring (1998), drawing on the remarks of Eldridge Cleaver,
refers to this iconic phenomenon as “the secret of Aunt Jemima’s bandana” (p. 181). Just as the bandana-clad mammy situated White male desires for the proper place of Blacks and White women, in the case of Native Americans, race and gender are similarly used tools through which advertisers reify stereotypical images of savages and princesses, and enshrine them safely in the past to fulfill their proper roles as historical relics. Adams (as cited in Yellow Bird, 2004) points out the consequences of this discourse:

The colonizer’s falsified stories have become universal truths to mainstream society, and have reduced Aboriginal culture to a caricature. This destroyed reality is one of the most powerful shackles subjugating Aboriginal people. It distorts all Indigenous experiences, past and present, and blocks the road to self-determination. (p. 1)

Discussion

In this essay, I draw attention to the process of stereotype construction of Native people and how these misrepresentations in advertising and branding work to maintain the values, ideals, and controls of mainstream society—all of which should be addressed by an ethics of representation. That products such as American Spirit cigarettes are introduced using the same images and associations seen in earlier times is troubling because the same sense of appropriateness that forced the retirement of stereotypical images of other groups has not been applied to these. I argue that to continue this way of representing Indians should be an ethical concern to educators, marketers, business, and the legal community.

Marketers have a responsibility to produce ethical messages. Business needs to acknowledge not only how media messages operate as conduits to consumers but also that marketing acts as a representational system that produces meaning outside the realm of the promoted product or service. As part of lived experience, marketing draws upon, reflects, and influences the ways consumers see the world and themselves in it. Not presented as a claim of consumer naïveté, the intensity and ubiquity of information in our current “image economy” make it difficult for consumers to sort out truth from representation (Borgerson & Schroeder, 2008, p. 87). Thus, the responsibility for ethical representations rests on the shoulders of those doing the presenting. Lacking clear sociological grounding as truth or falsity, images convey symbolic information that embodies shared cultural understandings. For example, the ubiquity of visually presented marketing information and consumer familiarity suggest consumer literacy, but that is not necessarily the case. Consumers do not necessarily know the origins of logos, labels, and images on products or what ideology informed the construction of specific imagery. Critical analyses of this form of communication can assist in this process of decoding representations of identities that “profess
to express something true or essential about those represented” (Borgerson & Schroeder, 2008, p. 88).

Representational shifts are difficult, as American Indians do not represent a significant target audience to advertisers, accounting for less than 1% of the U.S. population and are the most economically destitute of all minority groups (Cortese, 1999/2008). Without the population numbers or legal resources, it is nearly impossible for Native voices to be heard, unlike other groups who have made representational inroads. An ethics of representation is a useful lens through which to view representations of all kinds to ascertain appropriateness. Future research could use this approach to qualitatively analyze situations where members of represented groups differ in views on what is or is not honorable or questionable.

Media industries argue they are working toward increasing diversity in communication content and employment. If this is true, along with it goes the responsibility of knowing something about the people hired and represented in marketing efforts. While marketing and media presentations are not solely responsible for causing or maintaining prejudice and discrimination, they should be held accountable for those times when they participate and preserve it. Thus, with increased awareness of a people’s history, concern for thoughts and ideas as an ethics of care, scholars and practitioners can better work their way through the challenges of word and image choices when creating media and marketing content. What is or is not problematic should always be considered from the perspective of those represented.

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Notes

1. Lower case “i” is used, consistent with Klopotek (2001) to distinguish “between the term ‘indian’ (uncapitalized), which connotes the symbolic character of the white imagination . . . and the term ‘Native American,’ which connotes the people descended from the original human inhabitants of the Americas” (p.18).
2. Every individual has a preference about the term used to describe indigenous people. American Indian is commonly used, as is Native American, Native, and Indian. These words are used interchangeably throughout this manuscript in recognition of individual preferences without disregarding the weight each term carries.
3. Brands are defined as “a way to identify a product, organize a consumer’s experience with the product . . . and build a long term relationship between the product and the
consumer” (Franzen & Moriarty, 2008, p. 19), and logos as “identifying signals, which are usually trademarkable” (p. 18).

4. The fight song for the Washington team includes the words “braves” and “war path” (Wallace, 2011). The Cleveland team’s mascot Chief Wahoo has an “orange tinged face, a prominent nose, and huge teeth” (Guggenheim, 1998, p. 205).

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