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Reshaping the Narrative: How Media Misrepresentations Frame Indigenous Issues

Despite what history books and Old Western films like to tell us, the struggle for Native self-determination has involved much more than 18th century scuffles over land and treaties. Anglo-European colonization and displacement has had broad and lasting effects on Native identities and agency, impacting everything from their socioeconomic sovereignty, their relationship with the environment, their health and wellbeing, and their interaction with the media. Although all of these aspects of Indigenous life have complex intersections, the emergence of “content frames” has upheld one-dimensional representations of Native identity in the media, simplifying and exacerbating a painful history. Through the investigation of CNN clips regarding Native American issues between 2016 and 2020, I will question how the portrayal of Indigenous issues in news media has characterized Native peoples and affected their modes of activism. Through discourse analysis, I argue that the current framing of Native people in the media is a repackaging of blatant stereotypes as objective reporting, which has perpetuated historic implicit biases towards Indigenous groups; further, I argue that Native misrepresentation has driven Indigenous activists to expand into different forms of media in order to reclaim and reframe their identities as a form of self-determination.

To identify how biases towards Natives have been spread in the media, one must have an understanding of some of the different stereotypes historically held towards Indigenous people. Many scholars in Indigenous and communication studies have provided their own classifications

of the various Native stereotypes present in popular media; based on this conversation, the Native stereotypes found in my investigation are the Vanishing or Mystical Native, the Great Man, the Generic Native, and the Greedy Native. The Vanishing or Mystical Native stereotype isolates Native people as beings of a different time or of different powers, considering them to be “destined for oblivion” and therefore outside of social consideration (Lang 88). The Great Man stereotype is often used to represent Native leaders who support Anglo-European standards such as assimilation, as they reflect “what society values” and affirm such standards in spite and because of their Native identities (Greene-Blye 41). The Generic Native is a blended caricature of what a Native person looks like, as “stereotypical artifacts, actions, or characterizations of Indians” are pieced together to create a recognizable, palatable Native character (Baylor 244). Finally, the Greedy Native stereotype presents Indigenous people as exploitative, conniving businesspeople, often linked to Native casino interests (Lang 92). All of these representations have served to outcast Indigenous people, grouping them together as a foil to Anglo-European superiors. The historic appearance of these stereotypes has involved everything from textbooks to sports mascots to Disney movies, yet today, their reappearance seems limited. Why?

Studies of Native representations in news media have revealed that Indigenous stereotypes have taken new, more subtle forms. As defined by communications scholars, “content frames” are semantic strategies that simplify and address issues “in ways that extend and reinforce views of the dominant culture” (Miller 246). Unfortunately, this simplification of issues and reinforcement of societal views is what has allowed Native stereotypes to be repackaged and disseminated in the media without sparking controversy. The Indigenous content frames that appear in my investigation are Stereotype, Rights, Reaction, Concern, and Otherness. The Stereotype frame hones in on generic perceptions of Native people, centering coverage on

Native environmentalism, mysticism, iconography, and practices that are typically irrelevant to the story at hand (Miller 249). The Rights frame, which considers Native appeals to treaty and civil rights, is not commonly found in general news coverage and is instead more prominent when discussing the circumstances of Native protests (Baylor 245). The Reaction frame is the acknowledgment of a Native phenomenon, such as the Quileute Nation's association with the *Twilight* saga, following a boom in publicity (Moore 244). The Concern frame contextualizes Native issues in non-Native spaces, as it involves the public's desire to restore cultural or environmental balance to a Native community or preserve public safety in light of Native crises (Moore 237). Finally, the Otherness frame emphasizes how Indigenous people are an outgroup in society, often manifesting in complete dehumanization or use as "counterpoints" to highlight Anglo-European goodness (Miller 249). These frames heavily generalize Native identities and perspectives, reinforcing an insufficient understanding of Indigenous ideas and issues, and confirming many of the implicit biases that originate with stereotypes.

The perpetuation of biases towards Natives then reveals a deeper systemic issue, as journalistic practices that further misrepresent Indigenous people have come into use in the media. Communications scholar Martin J. Lang outlines the impact of "institutionalized news practices"--objectivity standards, selective sourcing, and profit seeking--that have historically limited the agency and representation of Native groups (Lang 85). The objectivity norm, in theory, is a reasonable practice within journalism that would ensure neutral and representative coverage; in practice, however, this standard fails to address the inherent subjectivity of reporting and the power of news to define viewers' perceptions of identity (Miller 245). Reinforcing the idea that news coverage is innately neutral dismisses the acknowledgment of personal biases and understanding, both for journalists and viewers. Attempts to adhere to "objectivity" can lead to

omissions of Native sources because of their perceived bias in comparison to “neutral” government officials, for example; audiences’ assumptions of publications’ objectivity then confirms those kinds of decisions (Lang 91). As a result, standards of objectivity limit the contribution of diverse perspectives and continue the subtle spread of biases in the media. Selective sourcing further undermines Native representations in news, as Indigenous groups and individuals rarely get the chance to be omitted from coverage in the first place. When covering Native issues, white government officials, experts, and even lobbyists are referred to over Native representatives to a significant degree, revealing journalists’ dependence on familiar, non-Native sources (Lang 92). Besides direct Native references, Indigenous statistics and data have also been selectively sourced, with issues such as Native alcoholism being discussed “without citing either statistics or sources” (Miller 253). This selectivity works to silence Indigenous voices by oversaturating the conversation with non-Native views, featuring perspectives that invalidate Natives, and not giving Native people the opportunity to denounce or disprove such perspectives. The final practice of profit seeking has grown with the news industry’s role as a “profit-driven enterprise motivated by the demands of the majority of consumers” (Butler 16). Audience attraction and the revenue that comes along with it has been increasingly prioritized within journalism, and it often leads to the omission of stories that are irrelevant to the majority of viewers; as this “majority” can also be interpreted as white Americans, this silencing and exclusion of Natives in the media can be connected to its colonial roots (Lang 95). As Natives make up a small percentage of the U.S. population and therefore a small percentage of news profits, their perspectives are written off, subjecting them to misrepresentations and denials of self-determination that they are not given an opportunity to fight against. These news practices

have been integrated into viewers' perceptions of media they consume, ensuring that the subtle biases held towards Natives can be repeatedly reinforced.

The appearance of these media perceptions can be traced back to the era of Indian Removal in the 1800s, where news coverage of Natives was blatantly misrepresentative and goal-driven. Scholar Melissa Greene Blye's "Great Men, Savages, and the End of the Indian Problem" investigates coverage of the Miami Nation of Indiana at a time of increasing white settlement and calls for the tribe's displacement. Miami sovereignty was disregarded by the American government and settlers, and the Native people were instead seen as "obstacles to economic growth and national expansion" (Greene-Blye 42). Native sovereignty, more generally referred to as self-determination today, was at complete odds with U.S. power at that time and was consequently depicted as a controversial concept in the media. By distinguishing the Miami as threats to success and progress, the news media demonized Native people, further enforcing their marginalization and elimination. This assigned otherness and dehumanization is one of many instances of the Vanishing stereotype, with the Miami's portrayal in the news also being centered around an Otherness frame. In stark contrast, wealthy or assimilationist Miami people were uplifted in the news as examples of virtuous people representative of American values in usages of the Great Man stereotype (Greene-Blye 41). In aligning themselves with agreeable Native people, non-Native assimilationists were able to use Indigenous identity to further their own interests of settlement, elimination, and expansion and deny Native sovereignty in the name of Manifest Destiny. These characterizations display how Native people have historically been made relevant depending on their degree of closeness to those with influence, diluting Native agency and rewarding adherence to Anglo-European values.

Other examples of historic Native misrepresentations can be found in case studies performed on the Lower Elwha Klallam and Quileute tribes of Washington state. Authors Ellen E. Moore and Kylie R. Lanthorn compiled news coverage of both tribes' environmental justice cases between the early 1900s and early 2000s in their article "Framing Disaster," finding that public interests motivated the tribes' coverage, if their situations were covered at all. In the case of the Lower Elwha Klallam, the duality of a "'feel good' success story" that served the tribe's overarching lifestyle concerns and the public's desire to restore "environmental balance" improved the tribe's coverage and reception (Moore 243). The Concern frame was a prominent identification in many of the stories investigated by Moore and Lanthorn, indicating the preference for non-Native goals over Native ones in coverage. For the Quileute, who were involuntarily associated with Stephanie Meyer's popular *Twilight* franchise, the publicity they received from their representations in the movies was strategically redirected towards their public safety interests (Moore 244). Again, public buzz motivated news coverage, and the Reaction frame dominated much of the Quileute's coverage following the release of the first *Twilight* movie in 2008. In both of these cases, the tribes were primarily left unrepresented, as it was concluded that the tribes had to fight "for decades to be recognized as worthy" of mainstream news coverage (Moore 237). When the Lower Elwha Klallam and Quileute finally gained attention, coverage was centered around popular public interests and not for their efforts in preventing environmental disaster in their communities; this again emphasizes how Native stories and people have historically been deemed relevant by those with influence, which has continued to detract from Native self-determination. Further, these two case studies give insight into how Native biases have persisted over centuries.

This persistence can then be seen in CNN's 2016 feature about the Standing Rock Sioux entitled "Victory for Native Americans in Dakota Access Pipeline," which covered the tribe's celebration for halting construction through their lands. Instances of the Mystical, Generic, and Greedy Native stereotypes come up in the segment, with Native spirituality, tribal celebration, and monetary gain being at the forefront of the piece. The spiritual leader of the camp, Lee Plentywolf, is quoted to describe the importance of spirituality within the protest's values but is accented with mystical, sci-fi wording to describe the prophecies in which "his people foretold of a dangerous force that would lead to ruin." A familiar sight in most Native news coverage, "drum beats, cheers, and tears" are featured at the start of the piece, and are then followed by the description of the camp as a "mass of humanity living off the grid" suggestive of a primitive Native caricature. The discussion of the offering of "five million dollars and some land" to the Sioux is meant to emphasize how meaningful it was that such material value was turned down, drawing on the Greedy Native stereotype. Next, the Stereotype and Rights frames are most prominent in the segment, highlighting how stereotypes can allow for further implications about Native identities. The Stereotype frame concerns the characterizations previously mentioned, with an increased emphasis on environmentalism; the depiction of the camp's celebration of the pipeline's prevention is minimized to "drum beats, cheers, and tears" because of the protection of their water without elaborating on the broader significance of the Sioux's goals to protect their sacred sites, maintain the quality of the drinking water for multiple communities, and promote the health of the planet. In this, the frame limits Native activism to celebration rituals and spiritual relationships with the environment, detracting from the wider importance and severity of the Standing Rock situation. The Rights frame, similarly to most Native coverage, is briefly used to address the significance of tribal lands and waters within treaties, and is overshadowed

by references to government officials' and the construction company's legal perspectives; further, the tribes' rights are undercut by language that asserts Native invalidity, such as the assertion that the halt occurred solely as a "political move by the Obama administration". This frame is minimally used, yet it allows for the invalidation of the camp's efforts, as well as Native self-determination as a whole. Finally, selective sourcing is used in the segment, permitting such overshadowing to occur in the first place. Although the segment primarily refers to Native individuals, the discussion of treaty rights and Native entitlements is dominated by the non-Native voices of government and financial stakeholders. Even when Chase Iron Eyes, a Sioux tribesman and major figure in the protest, was quoted regarding legal proceedings, he was prompted by a question regarding then-President-elect Trump's power to reverse the Sioux's victory. In all, this portrayal of Natives and Standing Rock through stereotypes, content frames, and journalistic practices has withheld the depth of Native issues and struggles from the public, minimizing Indigenous identities and efforts to maintain self-determination.

Another recent example of Native media perceptions comes in a 2019 CNN segment entitled "Lawmakers look to tackle invisible crisis," which discusses the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirits (MMIWG2S). The Vanishing and Generic Native stereotypes are used to depict Native women and their families in this segment, emphasizing Native people as Others. Host Jake Tapper opens the story with a shocked tone, questioning "why and how thousands of Native women have been mysteriously killed or have vanished"; Tapper's emphasis on mystery and women seemingly disappearing into thin air evokes an image of Native people as mystical. The Generic stereotype serves as the primary depiction of Natives in this clip, as those featured on screen are primarily playing drums, holding posters, chanting, and praying silently. Consequently, the Reaction and Otherness frames are

prominent in the segment. Following Tapper's introduction, reporter Scott McLean and Alaskan Senator Lisa Murkowski repeatedly remark on non-Native disbelief regarding MMIWG2S without fully engaging with the complexity and systemic grounding of the issue: McLean minimizes the governmental limitation of tribal powers as a "confusing web of jurisdictional conflicts," while Murkowski's proposal to improve Native data collection is praised without discussing its terms. The Otherness frame adds onto these minimizations of the crisis by primarily using stereotypical images and videos without dialogue to portray the Native people featured, which dehumanizes their testimonies. Finally, selective sourcing and the objectivity norm, which further reinforce the trends of Native reduction, can be seen in the piece. The two Native women featured in the clip, Roxanne White and Tina Russell, are repeatedly cut off as they speak, whereas Senator Murkowski and other officials are quoted without being interrupted; further, many more Native people in the segment are visually shown giving their testimonies, but the audio is removed and left unaddressed. In efforts to maintain "objectivity," police are quoted multiple times to deny accusations of blame or discrimination towards Native people, and these references distract from the story at hand because of their lack of engagement with the issue. These media perceptions misrepresent the MMIWG2S crisis by depicting Native victims and families as a stereotypical outgroup, limiting their testimonies, and prioritizing non-Native commentary on the situation. In both the previous segment and this one, these analyses show that historic biases are still very relevant in today's news media despite their more subtle and varied appearances.

In its shift away from non-Native perspectives on Native crises, the 2020 CNN segment "After dozens of Native women disappear, families seek action" gives much-needed insight into Native responses to community issues and resulting media representations, again with a focus on

MMIWG2S. Naturally, a major response to Native issues like having a missing or murdered mother, sister, or daughter is grief; the trauma faced by Native families and friends in the wake of the MMIWG2S crisis is evident in the emotional testimonies of Paula Castro Stops and Yolanda Fraser, relatives of murdered Native women Henny Scott and Kaysera Stops Pretty Places. As a result, these tragedies have driven Native communities to collectivize and demand justice for their loved ones, with Native activism becoming more widespread. Activists like researcher Annita Lucchesi have worked to amass proper data and histories regarding missing and murdered Natives, as “the government doesn’t even have a proper count of all of their cases.” As shown in the segment, activist efforts have ranged from hosting public vigils, protesting, organizing policy and media campaigns, and more. Native people have also worked to challenge the biases of media representations, with this segment serving as an improvement in representations relative to previous clips. Stops, Fraser, and Lucchesi were given ample opportunity to speak, which allowed them to represent their perspectives in their own terms without interruption or minimization through frames or other practices. Lucchesi herself directly denounces the Mystical or Vanishing Native stereotype, remarking that the depiction of Native women as “rabbits in a magic act [that] mysteriously disappear” is both unrealistic and disingenuous. With these insights into MMIWG2S alone, it can be seen that Native efforts to reclaim Indigenous agency are gaining traction.

On a wider scale, Native grief and activism have led Indigenous people to become more involved in media and policy, and these involvements have become modes of asserting self-determination. Trauma expression via social media has allowed for therapeutic Native communication and productive nation-building, as shown in Sarah Parsloe and Rashaunna Campbell’s “Folks Don’t Understand What It’s Like to Be a Native Woman.” Parsloe and

Campbell found that Native social media users have framed their trauma in unique, personal ways, which has promoted critical and emotional discourse between Native people; these reframings have also redefined how Native people can be represented in media (Parsloe 1). As seen in platforms like Twitter, TikTok, and Youtube, Native people have begun to express their trauma in a wide variety of ways--comedy, art, education, etc.--and involved themselves in the broader community of Indigenous creators and activists. These forms of more personal media involvement complement the larger movements and organizations that dominate Native activism, such as the National Congress of American Indians. Many of these groups emphasize the intersections of Native identity, media, and policy, promoting the control of Indigenous images as well as the “indigenizing” of the media (Lang 97). These values of reclaiming Native agency within media have led to the proliferation of Indigenous-run media sources, such as the website *Native News Now* or the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe newspaper *DeBahJiMon*, that document issues important to Native people from a Native perspective. All of these responses to misrepresentation and trauma within the media illustrate the resilience and versatility of Native communities as they’ve continued to assert their self-determination.

At the close of my investigation of Native misrepresentations in the news, it is safe to say that media biases have had lasting effects on Indigenous people and their experiences. The complex histories and lives of Natives have been entangled with the media, as centuries-old biases continue to pervade stories of Indigenous rights, culture, and activism through stereotypes, content frames, and journalistic practices. The outlined progression of CNN’s coverage of Native issues illustrates only one case of poor journalistic habits, and although it serves as an example of relatively positive progress, much more work must be done in the news media industry. Even though today’s media landscape more intentionally aims for inclusivity, misrepresentative

perceptions of Native people will remain prevalent if left unchecked; as consumers of media, it is our responsibility to continually hold ourselves and content creators accountable for the implicit biases we all hold and perpetuate. Adopting an “indigenist” lens can allow us to more effectively consume and engage with Native perspectives and media that actively combat the harmful media perceptions that we have all learned to accept. Moreover, this engagement can help Indigenous people to reclaim their sovereignty and reshape the limiting narratives that they have been confined to.

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