



"ALL THE REAL INDIANS DIED OFF"

When they got off the boat they didn't recognize us. They said "who are you?" and we said "we're the people, the human beings." "Oh, Indians," [they said], because they didn't recognize what it meant to be a human being . . . but the predatory mentality shows up and starts calling us Indians and committing genocide against us as the vehicle of erasing the memory of being a human being.

—John Trudell, in *Reel Injuns*

When the first Europeans came to the shores of what is now the United States—what many descendants of the original inhabitants know as Turtle Island—they encountered enigmatic people who challenged everything the newcomers believed about themselves and the world. The Indigenous people looked different from them and spoke different languages, and their customs were mysterious and frightening. They inhabited a landscape that was entirely foreign and "wild." Perhaps most disturbing, they were not Christians. But they had one thing the immigrants wanted: land and the life it could give them. In the subsequent five centuries since those early encounters, gaining access to that land has been the central factor that has shaped the relationships between Indigenous peoples and immigrant. Those relationships have never ceased to be vexed and conflict-ridden. They have been and continue to be characterized by seemingly endless ignorance, arrogance, and misunderstanding.

Where do the myths about Native people come from? What are the motives behind them and what purpose do they serve?

To answer these questions we need to look at the ways experts in the social sciences talk about history, the nature of the society we live in, and how modern countries are formed. There is not unanimous agreement on everything, but there are certain generalities that can reasonably be claimed. For instance, some social scientists talk about the "master narratives" of a country that describe things like its national character and history. The narratives have many purposes, one of them being to construct a sense of national—or, more to the point, state—identity.¹ In countries like the United States, where citizens otherwise have very little in common with each other besides a shared language or a history of immigration, the narratives reinforce a contrived sense of unity. They reflect what acclaimed international relations scholar Benedict Anderson famously called an "imagined community."²

From where do the master narratives come? They are woven into the fabric of society from the start in its founding documents (like the Declaration of Independence or the US Constitution), and then gain hold through the printed word, through the mass media, through the education system. They are amplified during times of national crisis and manifested through patriotic public displays during national holidays and through the singing of national anthems at sporting events and other public gatherings. As Anderson suggested, the effervescence generated in these public spaces is itself the outward expression of this imagined unity.

A country's master narratives are not necessarily based in fact or truth. They are sometimes deliberately fictitious or contradictory of documented history. One of their purposes is to provide rationalization or justification for injustices committed against others in the name of democracy and liberty. In this way many master narratives are more like state mythologies, designed to undergird the patriotism and emotional commitment

necessary in a loyal citizenry. All of the myths about American Indians emerge out of larger narratives that construct the United States as a place of exceptional righteousness, democracy, and divine guidance (manifest destiny), or what has been called "American exceptionalism." The myths tell more about the non-Native mind than they tell about Native peoples. They are clues that point to the motivations, aspirations, and ambivalence about US history and the collective identity of its citizens. We'll explore this more throughout this book.

No myth about Native people is as pervasive, pernicious, or self-serving as the myth of the vanishing Native, also known as "the vanishing Indian" or "the vanishing race." The myth, which had been building for centuries, reached an extreme at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, a time when the Indian wars of resistance had come to a conclusion, punctuated by the massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890. In 1900 the US census counted approximately a quarter of a million Indians, a small fraction of the Indigenous population in 1492 (even based on a modest population estimate of ten million), and census figures such as this have been used to "prove" the vanishing Indian myth. It's true enough that the Native population had diminished dramatically throughout the centuries due to slavery, disease, war, and Christianization, which often took away people's names, languages, and even their clothing and hair. But the larger point to understand about the self-serving function of the myth is how it was used to advance dubious—even nefarious—political agendas aimed at the continual seizure of Indian lands and resources. It was used by both the "friends" and foes of Indians to justify policies of forced assimilation, which would mean the final solution to the "Indian problem," the ultimate disappearance of Indians to facilitate the transfer of Indian treaty lands into settler ownership.

One reason the myth of the vanishing Native has been so pervasive is that it has been woven into history books by predominantly non-Native historians and researchers who have wittingly or unwittingly served political agendas. But there has been a marked shift in the way history is being told, thanks to the increasing scholarship of Native peoples and their allies who in the past forty to fifty years have been reframing conventional historical narratives. This reframing is often referred to generally as postcolonial theory (or postcolonial studies), and it views history from a larger perspective that, among other things, recognizes the role of imperial and state power—and its abuse—in the shaping of the modern world. It sees history in terms of post-Columbus European and US expansionism and the effects it had (and continues to have) on Indigenous people. It also encompasses Native perspectives by incorporating the growing academic field of Native American and international Indigenous studies. This recent scholarship, sometimes derisively called “revisionist history,” has rendered incomplete (if not obsolete) much of the earlier scholarship.

Within postcolonial studies is a theoretical framework known as “settler colonialism.” Viewing history through a lens of settler colonialism entails making distinctions between the ways colonization played out in different places, and it does this in two fundamental ways. First, when European empires (predominantly the English, Spanish, Dutch, Portuguese, and French) spread into Africa and Asia, they did so primarily to exploit natural resources such as gold, silver, other minerals, and timber.³ They established colonies as bases from which to run their business enterprises and sometimes, especially in the cases of the Spanish and the French, married into Indigenous cultures to secure better access to those resources. For the most part, however, they didn’t send large populations from the metropolises (countries or empires of origin)

into the colonies to live. Thus, in the African and Asian colonial contexts, the Indigenous peoples remained the majority populations, even though they had become dominated through military power and religious conversion. This is why the decolonization movements in those continents during the mid-twentieth century were able to reestablish Indigenous control (however problematically in, for example, Africa) and expel the foreign powers. But in the Americas, and in a few other places, like Australia and New Zealand, the colonial powers engaged in wholesale population transfer, sending massive numbers of settlers to occupy the lands (resulting in new countries after successful rebellions separated colony from the empire). And they kept coming. As these settlers came to outnumber the Indigenous populations, it became impossible for the Indigenous people to expel the invaders.

The theory of settler colonialism has gained wide acceptance among Indigenous scholars in the United States and other settler states over the last decade. It postulates, as the Australian scholar Patrick Wolfe has written, that the singular goal of the settler state relative to Indigenous peoples is the elimination of the Native in order to gain access to land.⁴ The elimination of the Native can take place in a multitude of ways, including full-scale genocidal war, but it is usually more insidious than that. Not so much an overtly historical event, it becomes woven into the structure of settler society through practices that chip away at the very concept of "Native." Examples of these practices include officially encouraged intermarriage, privatization of Indigenous lands, forced assimilation via social systems like boarding schools and other educational institutions and public schools in general, citizenship bestowal, child abduction and adoption, and religious conversion, to name just a few.⁵

The myth of the vanishing Native can be traced precisely to the impulse of the state to eliminate the Native. It can be thought

of as the central organizing myth from which most other popular myths about Native people arise. As the predominant myth, it is informed by the past and reaches into the present and future to continue challenging ideas about who American Indians are on a cultural level, which has ramifications at the legal level in determination of who is an Indian and who is not. It is a fully exclusionary project that limits "Native" as a category of racial and political identity. This is why deconstructing myths about American Indians is so important. At their core, the debates about Indianness are debates about authenticity. Authenticity is predicated upon specific dynamics that define "real" Indians. These are "commonsense" understandings that are built into society's dominant narratives, where certain assumptions are held to be unquestionably true. For example, real Indians are expected to look a certain way based on an appropriate minimum "blood quantum." Or real Indians live on reservations, not in cities, *and* they embody the requisite appropriate blood quantum. These examples imply an impossible ideal about Indians as frozen in an unchanging past, where they are unable to be both modern and Indian.

Today's Native studies scholarship tackles these deeply embedded stereotypes. In one study, Jeani O'Brien sought to understand how Indians were written out of New England history between 1820 and 1880, despite the fact that they continued to live in the region. Based on reading hundreds of local histories, she discovered a pattern in which Indians were not recognized as Indians (in part to justify the seizure of their lands) due to their intermarriage with non-Natives or because they lived as modern non-Native people did. O'Brien writes,

This penchant for Indian purity as authenticity also found essential expression in the idea of the ancient: non-Indians refused to regard culture change as normative for Indian

peoples. Thus, while Indians adapted to the changes wrought by colonialism by selectively embracing new ways and ideas, such transformations stretched beyond the imaginations of New Englanders: Indians could only be ancients, and refusal to behave as such rendered Indians inauthentic in their minds.⁶

O'Brien's work—as that of numerous other scholars—is to challenge the myths that equate blood purity and cultural stasis with Native authenticity. The myth of the vanishing Indian is entirely untrue, if for no other reason than because there are currently 567 federally recognized Native nations in the United States today and because, according to the 2010 US census, 5.2 million people identified as Native American or Alaska Native, either alone or in combination with other races. About 2.9 million people identified as Native American or Alaska Native alone. But because the vanishing Indian myth is today more concerned with the authenticity of those who claim to be Indians, a nuanced argument is required, one that we will return to repeatedly. What this book is ultimately about is how society's hidden assumptions have led to the myths that persist, with mostly harmful consequences to Native people.