

**Silenced Voices: How Indigenous Culture is Represented to Children and the Impact of
Misrepresentation on Indigenous Communities**

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Abstract

This research paper will examine how Native Americans have been represented in different forms to children and the impact that this has on society as a whole. These negative representations have shaped the perception children have of Indigenous communities in the United States. There will be a specific focus on textbooks, cartoons, mascots, and children's toys. These are types of representation that children are traditionally exposed to at an early age, and these perceptions often influence their worldview. The project is interdisciplinary, as it is centered on history, politics, psychology, and rhetoric. History is used to examine how representation has changed over time, politics is used to understand why biased media representation prevails despite criticism, psychology is used to understand the mental impact misrepresentation can have, and finally, rhetoric is examined to show how verbiage is connected to biases and misconceptions. Therefore, it shall be argued that the misrepresentation of Native Americans to children is a prevalent issue in society and is actively harming Indigenous communities. One way to rectify this problem is to center Indigenous voices in history and combat stereotypes through more progressive representation in children's classrooms. The following analysis centers on what the current scope of representation is, the harm it creates, and possible solutions.

Keywords: Representation, Native American, children, stereotypes

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Imagine for the first time in history, a little girl turns on the TV and sees a cartoon character who looks like her. She has become accustomed to cartoons that feature blonde hair and blue eyes, but one day that changes. The girl on the TV has a braid, darker skin, and reminds the young child watching of herself. Although it may seem like a small moment in her life, in actuality, it may impact her self-perception and vision for her future. Moments like these are significant and reveal how impactful representation in the media can be. Traditionally, Indigenous communities have been portrayed as either warriors or savages, if they are even portrayed at all. Not only this, but when discussed in textbooks and educational settings, Native Americans are talked about as if they are extinct or a people of the past; this could not be further from the truth.

Indigenous communities are resilient, and the way they are represented should reflect that. Unfortunately, childhood representations of Indigenous people are full of stereotypes and biases, leading children and adults alike to have a false conception of what it means to be a Native American. This analysis will examine how Native Americans have been portrayed in textbooks, movies, cartoons, toys, and mascots. Although the misrepresentation of Indigenous peoples has been studied, this essay will fill the gap in the research by looking at the impact this has on Native Americans and general society as a whole. Words are powerful and have been used as tools of oppression, and to understand the impact this has, a thorough analysis will be conducted.

For example, in a novel by a Spokane Native named Sherman Joseph Alexie Jr., he describes the impact that bias and misrepresentation had on his life. Alexie discussed how even

doing something as simple as grabbing a soda was related to the way people would stereotype Indigenous communities. He writes about how the 7-11 clerk was staring at him for too long, and that “he knew this dark skin and long, black hair of mine was dangerous. I had potential” (Alexie, 1993, 1). Unfortunately, Alexie’s experience is a common one that many Indigenous people in the United States experience. Experiences like this make a researcher question why Indigenous people are stereotyped as dangerous, and when this stereotyping started.

Along with this, one of the key principles guiding this study is that proper representation can increase understanding of Indigenous cultures, but misrepresentation has the opposite effect. The crux of this study is to go beyond tolerance and move towards acceptance. Acceptance involves asking for Indigenous input on representation for children, and making sure it is known that they are welcome and accepted. Therefore, the lack of representation, and improper representation, of Indigenous communities contributes to a culture of erasure, marginalization, and a skewed understanding of Native American communities. This misrepresentation by the United States educational system is actively harming Indigenous populations and will continue to do so unless there is both a curriculum and cultural shift.

Historiography

Since their first encounter with the Indigenous peoples of North America, colonizers have used verbiage to degrade and mistakenly categorize Native Americans as ‘less than,’ ‘savage,’ or ‘other.’ The way scholars have documented Native American representation over time reveals how hierarchy and placement in society played a major role when it came to writing about Indigenous peoples. They were placed at the bottom of a hierarchy, and were always written about in relation to colonizers, but never as their own set of people. Although this narrative has

become more progressive over time, there is still an issue with the biases against Indigenous Americans, and this can be revealed through historiography.

According to Dr. Giulia Iannuzzi, a speaker on the history of publishing, 18th-century travel literature from Englishmen would include lists of Indigenous languages that were identified as “savage vocabularies” (Iannuzzi, 2021, p. 357). These lists of words, or vocabularies, would only include basic words related to the physical world, but would leave out more abstract concepts. The purpose of these lists was to falsely suggest that Native Americans were “incapable of abstract thought” and that their languages were not advanced enough to define or understand abstract concepts (Iannuzzi, 2021, p. 361). In fact, all through the 18th century and 19th century as well, the language Native Americans spoke was written about in travel journals and letters as being “primitive” (Iannuzzi, 2021, p. 364). This was a method used to falsely establish that they were at the bottom of the hierarchy.

Through the 18th and 19th centuries, Native Americans continued to be written about and intentionally viewed in derogatory and hierarchical terms. Wild West shows, popular in the 19th and early 20th century, would portray Native Americans attacking stagecoaches and as violent people (Hirschfelder & Molin, 2018). This perception continued up until the Civil Rights Movement, when the National Indian Youth Council addressed in speeches the way Indigenous people have been treated, represented, and viewed over the years as unacceptable (Tanner, 2025, p. 2). According to Dr. Valenzuela, a Professor of Educational Policy at the University of Texas at Austin, protests and objections to textbooks primarily came from Indigenous communities, and these concerns were often overlooked by institutions (Valenzuela, 2019, p. 199). However, the 1960s-1980s were still a period of progress as harmful textbooks were removed from schools and advocacy efforts increased across the country.

Today, in the 21st century, there is still a constant battle for appropriate Indigenous representation. It has been a struggle to shift the narrative that Indigenous people are not savages, but they are a group of resilient individuals who have important stories to share. Indigenous scholars are rejecting these negative stereotypes and instead are bolstering “a historical paradigm constructed from Indigenous knowledge by Indigenous thinkers” (Miller, 2009, p. 26). Notably, this shift is being advocated primarily by Native people, showing that progress still needs to be made in the realm of hierarchy and representation. Altogether, the historiography reveals that Indigenous people have been viewed as less than throughout history, and although progress has been made, there is still a substantial amount that needs to be done.

American Textbook Representation

When analyzing past historical traumas, it can be easy to view tragic events as things that occurred, from which we learned, and then we moved on. However, in reality, the past influences present-day biases and representation. Indian Boarding Schools may have been closed for over 50 years now, but the impact these schools have had on present-day decisions is catastrophic. When analyzing textbooks, mascots, television programs, and toys that include Indigenous characters, it must be asked: What kind of representation is this? What impact does this representation have on society?

To demonstrate the content that students are consuming surrounding Indigenous representation, it is necessary to start with textbooks. Textbooks are presented as factual and not something that students are meant to question. Therefore, the negative portrayal of Indigenous Americans as factual only reinforces bias. Textbooks surrounding American history teach students not only what happened when the country was “founded,” but these textbooks also convey a particular viewpoint surrounding Native Americans. Traditionally, this viewpoint has

been negative and biased towards Indigenous Tribes. Textbooks should be viewed as powerful forces that impact the viewpoint children develop about groups of people, themselves, and cultural identity. Notably, textbooks inappropriately representing Indigenous people have always faced criticism, but the primary movement to remove these textbooks from schools occurred during the Civil Rights Movement. This context helps an individual understand why textbooks have changed over time, and why a shift occurred in the 1960s and 1970s around what verbiage was used in textbooks about Indigenous people.

The negative viewpoint surrounding Native Americans in textbooks is ingrained in the educational system and, therefore, has been problematic to change. Depree M. Shadowwalker, a previous Doctor of Philosophy candidate at the University of Arizona, says the reason for this is that textbook culture is dominated by states like Texas, which have powerful financial backing from publishers (Shadowwalker, 2012, p. 12). Since textbooks have become focused on monetary value, profit becomes more important than updated information. It is expensive to reevaluate curriculum and approve new textbooks that offer more inclusive language, so what occurs instead is the reuse of problematic but profitable textbooks.

There is quantitative evidence to support the idea that American history textbooks are still using inaccurate depictions of Indigenous culture. According to a study by Tony Sanchez conducted on the representation of American Indians in textbooks, 5 out of the 15 books he surveyed from 1998 to 2003 received the lowest score possible on a scale that was meant to represent distortion (Sanchez, 2007, p. 316; Shadowwalker, 2012, p. 17). This means that approximately 33.3% of the textbooks surveyed either completely misrepresented Native American history or omitted it altogether (Sanchez, 2007, p. 314; Shadowwalker, 2012, p. 17).

The implications of misrepresentation and omission will be examined later in this research, but it should be noted now that these acts of misrepresentation limit what Native children see as possible for themselves and their futures (Fryberg & Eason, 2024, p. 1909). It is not merely that stories are being excluded from a textbook, but that these stories shape the way children view themselves, each other, and their possible futures. It can be more difficult for a child to imagine themselves as a leader when no one with their identity is represented as a leader in their educational material. One way to approach this hindrance in the United States educational system would be to create more inclusive textbooks, but this is unfortunately difficult to achieve based on current procedures in the textbook industry.

With this, textbook approval varies by state, but in states like Texas, the Texas State School Board (SBOE) must approve the use of textbooks in the K-12 classroom. This leads to equity issues for a multitude of minority groups. Since minority groups have historically been left out of history, their stories are not included or are misrepresented in educational material. Dr. Valenzuela from the University of Texas, Austin mentions how “several Pre-K Committee members advocated for the incorporation of other Indigenous groups...but that the SBOE placed limits on what could get included” (Valenzuela, 2019, p. 199). This example shows how there is a power hierarchy when it comes to whose story gets to be told in a textbook. Consequently, the stories that are left out tend to be the stories with Indigenous origins.

Comparing textbooks over time helps to reveal how Indigenous representation has changed, and how it is still substantially lacking. First, the textbook *The Growth Of The American Republic Volume One* by Samuel Eliot Morison was published in 1962 and was meant to cover history from the founding of the United States up until the Civil War. Morison was an American Historian who had his Ph.D from Harvard University, and was known for writing

textbooks on American history. His textbook was meant to serve as the standard for history textbooks in the classrooms, but it only mentions Native Americans once and then abruptly moves on. This occurs in many classrooms and leaves children with the impression that Native Americans are a people of the “past,” and that they did not play a major role in the founding of this country. Additionally, this perspective makes it seem like Native Americans either gave up the land peacefully, signed treaties, or that the people just naturally went extinct over a period of time. This is not the truth, but history textbooks have pushed this narrative, leading to generations of students who do not know the true story behind the founding of the United States.

The exclusion of Indigenous stories in textbooks is evident, but equally problematic is the misrepresentation of the community as a whole. *The Westward Movement: A Short History* by Kent Ladd Steckmesser was published in 1969 and uses biases to characterize Native Americans. This textbook will be utilized as an independent example, but similar themes appear across history textbooks that attempt to describe American history. The author of the textbook was a history professor at California State University, and would assign the textbook as required reading to his students (Wassaja, 1973, p. 14). The textbook was likely also utilized in some high school classrooms in California.

Steckmesser’s 400-page textbook has an abundance of examples that use derogatory terms in regards to Native Americans, but we will only focus on a few of these illustrations in this paper. In a section of his textbook, Steckmesser titles the section “The Indian Menace,” and then proceeds to describe Native Americans as “tawny serpents of the forest, those scalp-hunting tribesmen who paced the frontier line like zoo animals before feeding time” (Steckmesser, 1969, p. 70). This characterization performs a couple of different functions. One, it signals to the reader that they should believe Native Americans and zoo animals are equivalent to one another.

Second, it makes the reader believe that Indigenous people were the enemy, and that they were pacing the “frontier line” as if they were waiting for a chance to battle. Clearly, these assumptions are grossly erroneous, but someone without proper education and understanding of history may not think so.

This is not the only example in *The Western Movement: A Short History of* misrepresentation. Later in the textbook, in a section entitled “The Indian Threat,” Native Americans are described as “the greatest menace on the northwestern frontier” (Steckmesser, 1969, p. 93). This section is full of verbiage that describes Indigenous tribes as uncivilized people who needed outside help. Additionally, the author says that “the Indians’ survival depended upon their learning of the white man’s ways” (Steckmesser, 1969, p. 93). Interestingly enough, the author is unable to describe what ways the white man benefited the Indigenous people of the land, and what “valuable” information the white man possessed that was necessary for the Native Americans of the region. This way of thinking is eerily similar to Richard Henry Pratt’s doctrine of “Kill the Indian, Save the Man,” which was utilized to justify boarding schools and cultural erasure. It is concerning the amount of resemblance a textbook from 1969 has to boarding school doctrine that attempted, but failed, to erase Indigenous culture, history, and people.

Not only does this text use derogatory terms to describe Native Americans, but the author also makes jokes about the genocide that Indigenous people endured. For example, a tribe called the Salish was called “Flat-heads.” Steckmesser then proceeds to describe how “the fact that their heads were as round as anyone else’s caused tourists endless disappointment” (Steckmesser, 1969, p. 161). This sarcasm is oddly placed in a textbook about bloodshed and war in the founding of the United States. This comment is also placed in a section about how the land was

stolen from Indigenous people by violent measures. Therefore, the sarcasm is not only insensitive, but it also signifies to the reader that the struggle Indigenous people went through was humorous, or that jokes can be made surrounding the topic. In reality, nothing was amusing about the killing of thousands of innocent men, women, and children.

Steckmesser's textbook has been used to show that there are textbooks used in classrooms that actively misrepresent Indigenous populations. Although this one specific textbook does not represent the entirety of how Native American history is taught in the classroom, it does provide a concrete example of the outdated language that is still used surrounding the native people of the United States. Misrepresentation in textbooks is especially concerning because reading that a certain group of people is always classified as 'menaces' may lead an individual to believe this is the objective truth. This belief system can then lead to bias and the continuation of the settler colonialism perspective in the education system.

The next textbook, *What Joy Awaits You* by Open Court Publishing Co., was published later than other textbooks in 1977, but it still included offensive themes. It was meant to serve as a textbook for elementary students, but used language that described Native Americans as "bloodthirsty savages" (The Indian Trader, 1988, p. 22). This textbook was approved in at least ten other states, including densely populated ones like California. Even after this specific book was criticized for its offensive language, the Utah State Textbook Commission still refused to remove the book from the list of approved curriculum. They stated that supplemental material could be provided alongside the book, but that they would not be removing traditional literature. Their justification was that they could use the book to show how "perspectives of Native Americans have changed" (The Indian Trader, 1988, p. 22). However, this would require every

elementary school teacher to understand and be willing to teach the history of Native American genocide in the United States, which seems unlikely to occur.

21st Century Native American Representation in Textbooks and Solutions

Thus far, the textbooks discussed have been from the late 20th century and exemplify Native American representation at the time. To understand the progression of this topic and where we are today, it is necessary to investigate 21st-century examples of Native American representation in textbooks. The following provides examples of proper representation in textbooks, but also recognizes that there is progress to be made. *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz and *Reclaiming Diné History: The Legacies of Navajo Chief Manuelito and Juanita* by Jennifer Nez Denetdale are just two examples of books that tell the history of America through a more progressive perspective. Although issues are identified in *The American People: Creating a Nation and a Society*, this textbook is still a reflection of change over time in the discussion of Indigenous representation in schools. Analyzing these textbooks leads to a more nuanced understanding of the way Indigenous people are represented, and how these changes may impact students.

Next, Jennifer Nez Denetdale is a professor of American Studies in New Mexico, and she was the first Navajo to receive a Ph.D. in history. In her 2007 textbook, she writes about the process of signing treaties and how “this trauma has been passed down from generation to generation and is still present within the community” (Denetdale, 2007). This is a new perspective from older textbooks because it acknowledges the trauma Native Americans went through, and does not view them as a people of the past. Instead of comparing Native Americans to zoo animals like Steckmesser did in his textbook, Dr. Denetdale describes Native Americans as people who are worthy of respect and recognition. She also talks about the present-day Navajo

community, which signals to the reader that Native Americans are not extinct, but they are still creating culture and protesting continued colonization.

Moving into 2009, professors from seven different universities across the United States wrote a history textbook that was meant to encompass the entire history of the United States. The textbook, *The American People: Creating a Nation and a Society* by Gary B. Nash and Julie Roy Jeffrey, does not use slurs or derogatory verbiage to describe Native Americans. However, the textbook still has some of the exact same issues that those from the 20th century had. The title itself, specifically the verbiage that says ‘creating a nation,’ implies that the United States was formed out of nothing. The word ‘creating’ is often used to say that something completely new has been brought into existence, but this is problematic because the Americas were not a ‘new’ place; they were just new to colonizers. Verbiage like ‘creating’ continues to perpetuate the stereotype that colonizers formed the United States from nothing.

In addition, the authors still use more aggressive and war-oriented verbiage to describe Native Americans. In chapter 3 of the textbook, the authors describe the Susquehannock tribe as “thirsting for revenge” (Nash et al., 2009, p. 57). This is an interesting description because when Englishmen are described in the book as aggressive, the phrases often used were simple, like “he attacked” and “[they] were ready to challenge” (Nash et al., 2009, pp. 57, 68). This contrast suggests that Native Americans are naturally more aggressive and have an inclination for war.

Although not as vulgar as describing Native Americans as zoo animals, the word ‘thirsting’ still prescribes animal-like characteristics to Indigenous people. ‘Thirsting’ is often used when the behavior is irresistible, so using that in this context implies that Native Americans could not resist violence. This would not be worthy of notice in Dr. Nash’s textbook if both Native Americans and Englishmen were described with warlike verbiage. Yet, it is noticeable

because there is an imbalance in descriptions that, although possibly unintentional, puts colonizers in a more positive position.

When looking at the connotation of words and the impact they have on individuals, it is beneficial to examine why word choice is powerful. In his 2017 research article, a Professor of English named V. Chandra Sekhar Rao argues that the connotation of words is important, and can lead to a person forming opinions on a specific topic or group of people. He argues that “most of the words do not simply express a thought, but also express feelings beyond the word’s literal meaning” (Rao, 2017, p. 1).

Even though Dr. Nash and Dr. Jeffrey’s 2009 textbook may have been considered progressive at the time, examining how language influences feelings is important. If a child reads about Native Americans as a population of people “thirsting for revenge” or as one that is “nearly extinct,” this can lead them to have feelings associated with the words used (Nash et al., 2009, pp. 57, 69). As English Professor Rao describes, using negative words can lead to negative feelings about the subject (Rao, 2017, p. 2). In the case of Indigenous representation, if children are constantly exposed to negative terms used in textbooks when Native Americans are described, an association can form between the negative context of the words and the negative context of people. This may lead to the formation of stereotypes, biases, and continued misrepresentation (Aguilar, 2021, p. 6).

Moving into 2023, Dunbar-Ortiz's textbook reveals how the verbiage used in textbooks has improved over time and has begun to recognize the injustice done to Native people. Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz is an American historian and professor who grew up in Oklahoma. In her 2023 textbook on Indigenous history, she states that “America is ancient, not a 'new world’” (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2023, p. 15). This recognition differs drastically from the previous textbook

examples because it suggests that America was not discovered, but that Indigenous people lived here, and they had a claim to the land. She argues that colonization did not create a new world but destroyed an ancient one. Additionally, the author looks at how colonization impacted Native Americans and how they were the first people of the land. Recognizing that Indigenous people had an original claim to the land that they did not willingly give up is a step in the right direction toward the proper representation of Indigenous history.

However, these textbooks are not consistently utilized in classrooms and are often not labeled as ‘textbooks.’ Indigenous people should be invited to participate in the creation of K-12 history textbooks, not forced to write their own because their story is never included. Additionally, even positive examples of textbooks that do include an Indigenous perspective struggle to be included in the curriculum due to the banning of critical race theory in the classroom (Medrano, 2023). This point will be further explored when discussing the cultural impact of representation, but it should be noted that this framework being banned may have detrimental effects on students (Medrano, 2023).

Next, in an article written by philosopher Dr. Gary Padgett, he focuses on how the verbiage surrounding Native Americans in textbooks has improved, but there is still a substantial amount of work to be done. He analyzed five modern textbooks and found that they are not as explicit in their racism and calling Native Americans ‘menaces,’ but Padgett argues that the assimilation techniques and viewing Indigenous people as people of the past are still prevalent in modern textbooks (Padgett, 2015, p. 165).

One of the prominent reasons this bias still exists is that textbook bias research has only been around for eighty years (Padgett, 2015, p. 155). Based on the previous analysis of textbooks, this makes sense. If educational materials are not continuously reevaluated for

relevance and accuracy, then biased textbooks may prevail. Although textbooks from the 1960s and 1970s might not still be in prominent circulation, the concepts from them may be recycled and used in modern textbooks. Along with this, the way textbooks have been written has not changed substantially when it comes to including the Indigenous perspective. Dr. Gary Padgett notes that Indigenous historians are still not being included in the writing of textbooks, which leads to a misunderstanding of their culture and traditions. It is difficult to understand Native American history when Native Americans' inputs are not considered.

Based on this perspective, this research argues for an Indigenous perspective to be added when analyzing textbooks. To fully grasp the importance of this, Dr. Padgett discusses how Tribal Critical Race Theory can be used to help in the “decolonization of United States history textbooks” (Padgett, 2015, p. 156). There are nine main components of Tribal Critical Race Theory, but the two pillars are particularly relevant to the examination of textbooks. The fifth pillar discusses how Native American culture takes on a new meaning when it is written and examined by Indigenous people, and the eighth pillar argues that stories are intertwined with theory (Padgett, 2015, p. 161).

If these two pillars were applied to textbooks, there would be Indigenous history written by Indigenous authors and stories of resilience and survival. There would be stories of bloodshed and pain, but also stories of tribal sovereignty and perpetual strength. Additionally, textbooks would provide information on tribal governments, and there would be a focus on how these governments still exist today. Instead, schools are left with a distorted history of colonization and “objective” accounts of how the United States was formed. By critiquing textbooks through a Tribal Critical Race Theory, it is revealed how much progress still needs to be made when

educating the next generation on United States history, especially when it comes to the inclusion of Native American governments.

Philosopher Dr. Padgett identifies that ignoring these modern Indigenous governments by not putting them in textbooks sends a message to students that these governments no longer exist, because Indigenous people barely still exist (Padgett, 2015, p. 164). Additionally, it should be argued that not mentioning tribal governments is an intentional decision that contributes to the idea that Native Americans needed the white man to save them, and forming a national government was one way to do this.

We should pay close attention to the idea that textbooks make it seem like Indigenous people were unable to form their own government or survive on their own. This perspective made it easier for colonization to occur, and thus is continuously justified in textbooks from the founding of our nation to today. So, although textbooks past the year 2000 may have improved by using less offensive language to describe Indigenous people, they still perpetuate the idea that Native Americans are people of the past and needed the help of the white man.

Including the perspectives of Indigenous people, information about their governments, cultures, and historical perspectives would aid in a more equitable educational system. If the purpose of the United States educational system is to create informed citizens, then a reevaluation of how Native American history is portrayed in textbooks needs to occur. It is difficult to be an informed citizen when the perspective of a large portion of our nation is omitted from textbooks. Unfortunately, reworking textbooks will not solve the issue of Indigenous misrepresentation, because mascots also contribute to this conversation.

Native Mascot Representation

Sports teams across the United States utilize Native symbols as their mascots under the guise that this honors Indigenous culture. Some may argue that this is a positive expression and is drawing attention to Indigenous communities. Proponents of these mascot representations may also argue that mascots are symbols of strength, and so utilizing Native symbols is actually a compliment to the community. However, this could not be further from the truth. According to sociologist Davis-Delano, even Native mascots or symbols that are considered neutral have “negative psychological effects on Native students” (Davis-Delano et al., 2020, p. 618).

The issue of whether Native American mascots should be allowed is more than just a difference of opinion debate. The discussion goes much deeper than this. Native American mascots are, like textbooks, a way to subordinate and organize Indigenous peoples into a certain category. Native Americans already experience discrimination in K-12 education, and the mascots only add fuel to the fire (Davis-Delano et al., 2020, p. 614). Interestingly, the majority of mascots are connected to educational institutions, which sends a message. Educational institutions are meant to promote equality and understanding in our society. However, when these same institutions allow offensive mascots to be the faces of their schools, it forces an individual to question what is truly being valued: profit or accountability? When it comes to mascots and Indigenous representation, profit takes precedence.

In an Illinois school district, school officials debate whether the cost of changing their Native American mascot is a worthy or unnecessary expense. There was once a possibility that House Bill 1237 would pass, and all Illinois schools would be required to change mascots, logos, or names that included Native American imagery (McDaniel-Ogletree, 2025). Changing a mascot is no easy task. The school would be responsible for changing everything that the mascot was on, from t-shirts to school gyms. An argument against changing the mascot comes from

Representative C.D. Davidsmeyer. He claims that "You don't name a building after someone who has accomplished nothing. And you don't name a mascot after something you don't respect" (McDaniel-Ogletree, 2025). However, this calls into question the naming of all buildings and mascots.

If you don't name a building or a mascot something you do not respect, then we should look to other mascots to see if this statement is still true. Sports teams have green monsters, various animals, trees, and oranges as their mascots. It would be extreme to say that society respects these objects and compares them to Native Americans. Likewise, there are plenty of buildings named after individuals who it would be uncomfortable to say accomplished anything at all. Saunders Hall at the University of North Carolina (UNC) was named after a Ku Klux Klan member. Although the name has been changed in the last ten years, it would be inconceivable to say this was a building named after a man who accomplished something besides hate and racism (Taylor, 2021). Therefore, it is not true that buildings and mascots are always named after things we respect. In the case of Native American mascots, using them as a mascot is not a sign of respect; it is just another method of misrepresentation.

In addition, there is a claim that mascots are tied to community identity, and forcing the community to change is stripping them of who they are. According to a local reporter, Superintendent Thad Walker of Meredosia-Chambersburg schools said that 'the Indians' are the town's identity, and to lose that affects the entire town (McDaniel-Ogletree, 2025). See Appendix A, Figure A1 for mascot image. Conveniently, it is not Indigenous tribes that are claiming this is their identity, but people who are not Native American, stating that this is who they are. When examining the history of boarding schools and cultural erasure, it is clear that the United States government forcibly tried to strip Indigenous people of their identity; they failed. This is not the

same as non-Native people saying their identity is being taken away because of a mascot. To restore Indigenous identity and proper representation, the focus should come from Native support. In the debate around mascots and similar debates about representation, this is what is missing from the story. The conversations around mascots typically do not center on Indigenous voices, and this has adverse psychological effects on the community.

Psychological Impact of Native Mascot Representation

2025 has been a prominent year in passing legislation to remove Indigenous imagery from schools, but the emotional harm this has caused remains. In August of 2025, the Tulsa Public Schools Board of Education voted in favor of removing Native American mascots from two schools because of the advocacy from Indigenous alumni (Eagle & Berlin, 2025). Indian Education resource advisor Teresa “Erin” Parker talks about how she wants her 9-year-old son to grow up in a community that supports his cultural heritage and does not make fun of it. In order to achieve this, mascots that promote stereotypes and misrepresentations should be removed.

Indigenous Alumni of Tulsa Public Schools have also commented on the harm that has come from Native mascots and how the emotional impact of misrepresentation contributes to mental health issues. A man named Chase Parker attended Union High School, where their mascot was ‘the Redskins.’ See Appendix A, Figure A2 for mascot image. Parker explicitly states that “The mascot made me feel like I didn’t belong” and that he was more reserved at school because he did not feel like it was a safe place for him (Eagle & Berlin, 2025). The feeling of not belonging to Parker was one of his causes of depression, even though school board members told him that he should “feel honored” to be represented through the mascot (Eagle & Berlin, 2025). To be told to feel a specific way about one’s own culture is unsettling and a consistent issue that is seen in this debate about Indigenous mascot representation.

Along with personal stories and examples, research studies conducted by Davis-Delano, a sociology professor, show that mascots harm the mental health of Native American students. In a study conducted at an Arizona high school, 71 Native American students had their self-esteem examined based on representative images (Davis-Delano et al., 2020, p. 617). The first group of students was shown images of Native American mascots, the second group of students was shown romantic Native movies, the fourth group was shown negative outcome conditions, and the final group was the control group (Davis-Delano et al., 2020, p. 617). After being shown these images, students were then asked to take an assessment on their self-esteem. The first and second groups had lower self-esteem, but even more notably, the group that was shown the mascots had the worst self-esteem of all three groups. Now, imagine these students choose to attend a university that has a Native American mascot. The mascot is all over billboards, classroom chairs, and the basketball stadium; it is inescapable. Based on this research, the student would be more likely to have low self-esteem because of the presence of a Native mascot in every facet of their university life. This signals to the student that they do not belong.

Additionally, Native mascot representation contributes to implicit bias for non-Native individuals. Five prominent research studies discuss this perspective, and they all reveal the same results. At least for some non-Native persons, exposure to Native American mascots leads to increased stereotyping, prejudice, and “tendency to discriminate” against Native populations (Davis-Delano et al., 2020, p. 624). Specifically, after being exposed to images of Native American mascots, 81 white university participants at an unnamed school were asked to take an Implicit Association Test (IAT). The majority of liberal participants who took this test ascribed the word ‘warlike’ to images of Native people, but not to images of white people (Davis-Delano

et al., 2020, p. 619). However, when they were just exposed to the names of schools, there were no score increases on the IAT.

All in all, mascots lead to lower self-esteem for Indigenous students and increased implicit bias for white students. Mascots stereotype Indigenous people as warriors and as people from the past, which is what causes these negative psychological effects. In order to shift the narrative, Native people need to be centered in this conversation. To support this ideology, this section ends with a quote from an Indigenous man named David Hank Bible from Catoosa, Oklahoma. He says, “We’ve survived assimilation, relocation, and boarding schools. We’re still here. We’re proud of who we are. But we’re not mascots” (Eagle & Berlin, 2025).

Native American Representation in Cartoons, Plays, and Toys

Native American people have been falsely represented through mascots, but they have also been mischaracterized in childhood cartoons. For example, the 1953 version of the film, *Peter Pan*, was extremely popular in the media, but had a horrendous representation of Indigenous people. The film features a young girl who is supposed to represent Indigenous people, named Princess Tiger Lily, who dances specifically for Peter Pan. She gets close to him, touches her nose to his, and then makes him join the rest of the dancing. This depiction continues to romanticize the idea that Native American women are for the white man’s attention, a notion that is also showcased in *Pocahontas*.

Even the name, Princess Tiger Lily, is playing into stereotypes. The film depicts Native Americans as being unable to speak in full sentences and seemingly less intelligent than Wendy and Peter Pan. By naming a prominent character “Princess Tiger Lily,” the movie perpetuates the idea that Native Americans did not know other English names and just chose to name her based on things they had encountered in nature.

In addition to perpetuating stereotypes, the name itself is just inaccurate and would not have been used in reality. Using an inaccurate historical name reveals that the writers of *Peter Pan* did not do research on the Indigenous practice of naming individuals, because this is an important part of tribal culture. In an article from North Carolina Central University, Frank Exner (also known as Little Bear) writes about how significant the naming tradition is for Indigenous people, and how this history has often been discarded (Exner & Little Bear, 2007, p. 7). Indigenous names do things like “tell a person’s story” and “identify clan membership,” so they are extraordinarily important to individuals (Exner & Little Bear, 2007, p. 11). *Peter Pan* completely disregards this tradition and continues to put forward a false perception about Native American people, without asking Indigenous people for input.

Consequently, *Peter Pan* was also a play that used a string of derogatory and unrepresentative terms to describe Native Americans. In the play, Native Americans are referred to as the “piccaninny warriors” (Laskow, 2014). According to journalist Sarah Laskow, this is “a blanket stand-in for others” (Laskow, 2014). Eventually, this term became a slur used for black children, who were also “othered” and viewed as a subordinate group in society. Therefore, this continues to contribute to the narrative that Indigenous people are their own separate category and are consistently “othered” by false media perceptions. Lines in the play also include “Ugh, ugh, wah!” from Native Americans, while Peter and Wendy speak in full sentences.

Although one line like “Ugh, ugh, wah!” may seem insignificant at first glance, this contributes to a culture of marginalization and a skewed understanding of Native Americans. As Oklahoma defense attorneys Kim Chandler Johnson and John Terrence Eck highlight, depictions like this can “erode self-image among Indians, hamper their achievements, and trivialize sacred and religious customs” (Johnson et al., 1996, p. 72). When it comes to self-image, if this is the

first introduction you have of yourself in a school play and all the kids in the audience laugh, it could easily lead to a child being insecure about their cultural identity and not wanting to talk about it among friends.

In both the play and the movie, religious ceremonies that Native Americans perform are viewed as a joke, and both Wendy and Peter look uncomfortable during the ceremony. This can then lead to Native children feeling like they cannot talk about this part of themselves because it will make their white classmates feel uncomfortable. Unintentionally, this adds to the culture of misunderstanding because if children feel like they cannot talk about their religious ceremonies, and the only exposure white children have to these ceremonies is in movies like *Peter Pan*, then a skewed understanding of culture will persist. Since *Peter Pan* was such a popular film and play, these stereotypes become part of an entire generation's expectations of what Indigenous people are like, especially if this is the only exposure they have to Native American culture. Therefore, misrepresentation in the media can lead to a culture of marginalization for Native children.

In addition to cartoons, children also play with toys and may see them as a reflection of society. In 2004, an Indigenous professor wrote about toys and how they are not just things that children play with, but that they are symbolic of larger cultural themes (Bird, 2004, p. 43). Toys often introduce children to the world and how they view themselves and others that they interact with. A toy from the 1960s called "Hopping Nutty Mad Indian" depicts a stereotyped Native American man aggressively beating a drum. This plays into the stereotype that Indigenous people are warlike and enraged.

Additionally, the majority of Native American toys depicted them only dressed in traditional clothing, ignoring the large population of Indigenous people who do not wear this.

These toys signal to children that Native Americans do not need to be taken seriously because they are just things to play with. It also signals to children that there is only one type of Native American, which leaves out the history and culture of hundreds of Native tribes.

According to numerous writers from St. Xavier's College, toys are significant in the shaping of children's attitudes towards groups of people. As stated in the Department of Anthropology and Sociology EIDOS publication at St. Xavier's College, "children's perception of the world and their resultant relationship with its constituents can be accounted for through dolls" (Roychoudhury et al., 2021, p. 79). This means that when offensive dolls, like "Hopping Nutty Mad Indian," are advertised, it is pushing forward a negative stereotype and narrative on how children should engage with their Indigenous classmates. This misrepresentation in toys is not confined to the 1960s but is still a recurring issue in December 2025.

Although toys have evolved and are no longer as blatantly racist as "Hopping Nutty Mad Indian," there is still an issue with the representation of Native Americans through toys. A quick search of "native american and cowboy toy set" on Amazon reveals that toys characterizing Indigenous people as make-believe and things to play with are still prominent. One specific toy, entitled "Wild West Action Figure Set" by River Colony Trading on Amazon (2025), includes 108 pieces of cowboys and Native Americans in various fighting positions. See Appendix B, Figure B1 for toy image. Interestingly, the box includes instructions that encourage kids to engage with a "face-off" where it is Native Americans fighting the cowboys. This continues to perpetuate stereotypes, but it also makes children see cowboys and Native Americans as two groups of individuals that are inherently different and must fight with one another.

Not only does the toy include red plastic figures that are meant to represent Native Americans, but it also comes with teepee tents. However, most Indigenous people live in

standard homes, so providing tepees in the toy set is an offensive way to indicate to children that Native Americans do not own or live in brick homes. As a writer from St. Xavier College indicated, “toys act as agents of socialisation by, more often than not, representing the attitudes and beliefs of the dominant group” (Roychoudhury et al., 2021, p. 79). This means that the attitudes of white men are often embodied in toys, and that leads to children growing up assuming that is the correct or standard perspective.

Finally, the toy includes canoes and horses so that the cowboys and Native Americans can “ride into battle.” Again, this signals to youth that the way cowboys and Indigenous people interact with one another must be through battle. It should also be noted that the Native American figures are bulkier than the cowboy pieces, and they are all wearing a headdress. The issue here is not that there are no Native Americans with these features. The concern is that this is the only image children associate with Native Americans, and that will create a stereotypical view.

This specific toy has been sold over one hundred times in the span of a month, meaning it is influencing children all across the United States. This specific toy, and others like it, continue to show that “the prevailing beliefs of racism reflected through objects such as toys, ultimately contribute in reinforcing them for children, who are impressionable” (Roychoudhury et al., 2021, p. 81). Therefore, when children pick up a toy, they are doing more than just playing pretend. They are viewing the toy as a reflection of reality, and if biases are reflected in a toy, that becomes part of their perception of the world.

Not only do toys create a false perception for children who are not Indigenous, but they also impact how Native American children view themselves. Roychoudhury argues that “the under-representation of...Indigenous dolls can lead to the feeling of Otherness,” and this feeling

is further perpetuated when offensive toys continue to be utilized in 2025 (Roychoudhury et al., 2021, p. 81). This feeling of otherness often manifests itself in Indigenous children being embarrassed by their culture and not wanting to share it with their classmates. This then leads to their classmates not being educated on Native American culture, and the only representation they see ends up being false, biased, and offensive.

Conclusion

Indigenous representation has been consistently scrutinized, debated, and misrepresented. Analyzing misrepresentation as it connects to youth is particularly problematic because childhood is a formative time when individuals form opinions about self-identity and what their place in the world is. Looking at how Native Americans are characterized in textbooks, mascots, cartoons, plays, and toys reveals how far-reaching misrepresentation is in the United States. These forms of representation stereotype Indigenous people as warlike, violent, and less than others. Although the way Indigenous people have been portrayed has improved since the 1960s because of the Civil Rights Movement and Indigenous pushback, there is still a sizable amount of work to be done.

When children grow up in a society that misrepresents their culture, it can lead to significant mental health issues (Davis-Delano et al., 2020, p. 613). To combat this harm, two brief suggestions are offered from a professor of psychology, a Ph.D. candidate of psychology, and a research associate at the University of Washington. The third suggestion is offered by the author of this research. At the heart of each of these suggestions is the idea that Indigenous people deserve a platform to make their voices heard. The first concept introduced is to support media representation by and for Indigenous people, like Project 562. The aim of this project is to capture pictures of all 562 federally-recognized tribes in “positive, contemporary ways that

counter the systemic exclusion that characterizes the modern form” (Eason et al., 2018, p. 75).

This helps combat the idea perpetuated by textbooks that Native American people went extinct in the 18th century.

Second, teachers and professors alike should be educated on Indigenous history and include meaningful units about present-day Native American culture as well. An unnamed school with predominantly Native American students started to incorporate a “welcome assembly that included a tribal song and dance and a culturally relevant welcome message” (Eason et al., 2018, p. 76). After the welcome assembly was introduced and performed each day, test scores at the school drastically increased (Eason et al., 2018, p. 76). This goes to show that when Indigenous knowledge is incorporated in the curriculum, and students feel more welcomed, they perform better in the classroom.

Third, calling out misrepresentation and holding individuals accountable is necessary to improve Indigenous representation in the United States. Including Indigenous voices in schools and the media is an important step in the right direction, but it will not be fully successful unless people who intentionally misrepresent Indigenous culture are called out. This means not buying offensive toys on Amazon, getting rid of inaccurate textbooks, changing mascots, and not supporting cartoons or media programs that perpetuate the feeling of “otherness” for Indigenous people. This means calling out teachers and professors who do not include Indigenous readings in their curriculum, and it also means not supporting businesses or sports teams that profit off Indigenous culture without giving credit where credit is due.

All in all, representation matters. It is how children form opinions about themselves and others, and improper representation leads to a skewed understanding of Indigenous people. Misunderstanding will continue unless purposeful action is taken to combat stereotypes. It will

not be an easy battle to rectify the centuries of silencing of Native American voices, but it is a necessary step in making sure children know they belong and their culture is valued. No child's voice should be silenced, and no person's story should go unheard.

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Appendix A**Images Relevant to Analysis****Figure A1**

Pittsfield High School. (2025). *Mascot* [Image]. Pittsfield High School Home Page.

<https://www.phs.net/o/phs>

Figure A2

Butler, T. (2020). *Mascot* [Picture]. News Channel 8 Article.

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Appendix B

Image Relevant to Analysis

Figure B1



Amazon. (2025). *Wild West Action Figure Playset*. [Image]. River Colony Trading.

<https://a.co/d/45dDPY0>