

THANK YOU, ADAM SANDLER & CO.,
FOR GIVING US A NATIVE AMERICAN ROSA PARKS MOMENT!

Celebrity actor/producer Adam Sandler stepped into controversy in May, 2015, when he and his producing partners embraced dehumanizing depictions of American Indians in their upcoming feature film "The Ridiculous Six." The script includes names for female indigenous characters like "Beaver's Breath," "No Bra," and "Sits-On-Face." When made aware that their project perpetuated humiliating Native Americans, Sandler and his partners disregarded several American Indian actors' concerns. Instead, Sandler's producers issued the performers a thinly veiled career killing ultimatum, "If you guys are so sensitive, you should leave." Several of the actors did, indeed, walk off the set.¹

This type of political/social power keeps Native Americans in the margins of our society. The real problem is the tidal wave of irrational and self-righteous opposition to indigenous inclusion that relies on blatant racism and infantilizing ideas of cultural preservation. American Indian identity no longer belongs to indigenous people but, instead, is now controlled by non-Native forces. Calling out cultural practices aimed at ridiculing Native Americans often places "whistleblowers" like these brave actors in organizational crosshairs. Dispossessed and powerless individuals are blamed and bullied into silence with routine corporate threats like being slapped with a label such as "difficult to work with." This, then, is followed by polite unspoken ex-communication. Widespread professional practices like these turn indigenous people into artifacts, commodities, and trademarks while they simultaneously disavow the damage done to American Indian self-worth, community worth, and hopes for the future.

Xenophobia is the key to this problem; not the lack of talent nor the amount of effort exerted by Native Americans to educate themselves in these production practices. Performance scholar Birgit Däwes notes, "commodified representations of the 'authentically lost' in American memory [and] self-assertive simulations of colonial power aim less at the preservation of the signified than at the reproductions and successful marketing of the signifiers."² Adam Sandler & Co. rely on the legacy of dominant colonial power, now held in corporate form by Hollywood film studios, in order to preserve and reproduce their degrading ideas of pan-Indian existence - a singular imagining of American Indians that erases them from contemporary consideration, inclusion, and participation.

Psychologist Dr. Stephanie Fryberg notes, "... [these representations] have negative consequences because, in the contexts in which they appear, there are relatively few alternate

¹ Schilling, Vincent. "Native Actors Walk off Set of Adam Sandler Movie After Insults to Women, Elders." *Indian Country Today Media Network.com*. Indian Country Today Media Network, LLC, 23 Apr. 2015. Web. <http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2015/04/23/native-actors-walk-set-adam-sandler-movie-after-insults-women-elders-160110>

² Däwes, Birgit. *Native North American Theater in a Global Age: Sites of Identity Construction and Transdifference*. Heidelberg: Winter, 2007. 352.

characterizations of American Indians.”³ Natives are creating counter narratives in theater, film, television, visual and performance art, and libraries full of literary contributions. But, in terms of cultural capital, social impact, financial investment, and organizational support, these efforts pale in comparison to the negative consequences created by singular non-Native works like Broadway’s *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson* (2010), UC Berkeley’s *Ishi: The Last of the Yahi* (2012), and Walt Disney Studio’s *The Lone Ranger* (2013) - the latter featuring the stereotypical character “Tonto” played by celebrity actor Johnny Depp after he was “adopted” by Comanche tribal elder LaDonna Harris.⁴

Conversely, Native American scholar Philip Deloria states, “... [there are] stories suggesting that things have not always been the way they have seemed. Indeed, these histories have been named anomalies and buried, in part, precisely because they have failed to accord with familiar and powerful expectations.”⁵ Native American artists and media producers are not creating essentialist “truths” intended to correct harmful stereotypes. Instead, they strive to improve the ways that we consider American Indian existence by showing the complexity of our cultures. We need to support these artists and their projects better, projects that disrupt the common practice of lumping American Indians into a monolithic typecast.

Largely overlooked in the media firestorm is the plight of Allison Young, a Navajo filmmaker educated at Dartmouth who also walked off the Sandler set.⁶ America touts college degrees as opening up doors of opportunities and possibilities. Yes, it is a romantic and noble idea but few people would imagine the reverse actually happening. For Allison and countless other ethnic minorities, graduating with a degree in film/media production (one of our country’s most lucrative professional fields) isn’t supposed to then require submitting to ridicule and psychological abuse even if it has been legitimized by generations of institutionalized racism. Investing years of time, effort, and dedication into a professional media career should not, and does not, also require having to face hateful castigation. However, Allison’s experience exemplifies a type of initiation that ethnic minorities are expected to submit to or face the risk of sabotaging their professional aspirations and wasting their educations. Condescending *Assistant-to-the-Assistant-Director/Producer-or-Something* “Yes-Men” routinely populate Hollywood sets. Apache consultant Bruce Klinekole explained to *Indian Country Today* that on Sandler’s set these “Yes-Men’s” job was to prevent concerned Native Americans from accessing the film’s

³ Fryberg, Stephanie A., Hazel Rose Markus, Daphna Oyserman, and Joseph M. Stone. "Of Warrior Chiefs and Indian Princesses: The Psychological Consequences of American Indian Mascots." *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 30.3 (2008): 216.

⁴ CBS/Associated Press. "Johnny Depp Made Honorary Member of Comanche Tribe." *AP Online*. CBS News, 22 May 2012. Web. www.highbeam.com/doc/1A1-529f843376d64fe7be20e9acc3003add.html?refid=easy_hf

⁵ Deloria, Philip Joseph. *Indians in Unexpected Places*. Lawrence, Kan.: University of Kansas, 2004. 231.

⁶ Schilling

decision makers. That is, American Indians were systematically cordoned off from inclusion and participation.

To be absolutely clear, the proliferation of destructive Native American stereotypes is not a Native American problem. It is a problem created by non-Native desires to reject the humanity of our nation's indigenous people. Highly trained indigenous artists, educated at the world's leading institutions, possess the talent and work ethic to correct this national embarrassment and, contrary to the many overused criticisms, we are willing to mock and satirize ourselves. Our creative work embraces humor as an important strategy when demonstrating just how Native America is not a singular entity, how we are more than stereotypes to be exploited for non-Native profit. Yes, despite their patronizing dodges, we know projects like Sandler's are not really "honoring gestures" coming from institutional powers-that-be because they truly "love [us] guys." And, no, we are not so "sensitive" as to overlook passive-aggressive threats of expulsion by filmmakers who lack any degree of cultural tolerance and understanding.

Native Americans were targeted for genocide and cultural eradication, isolated by geographical and ideological boundaries constructed specifically to make Euro-Americans feel superior to "The New World's" indigenous peoples. I'm not trying to re-litigate these traumatic histories nor chronicle the rise of harmful Native American stereotypes that dominate our pop-culture imaginings. These are self-evident phenomena. But just imagine this: Civil Rights legend Rosa Parks steps onto the famous bus where she will conduct her world-changing act of civil disobedience. Just as she's about to sit, a fellow Black rider tells her, "Don't be so sensitive, Rosa. You're going to ruin it for us all. We get to ride the bus, don't we? Isn't that enough? God, there's no pleasing you!" Then a chorus of White folks joins in, "Don't you Black people have bigger concerns to worry about? Just look at your communities - poverty, substance abuse, unemployment, poor health - aren't there more important things for you to spend your energy on than a bus seat!?" Driven by a throng of Black and non-Black vocal opposition that dismisses her concerns as frivolous, Rosa Parks picks up her things and walks off that bus never having drawn a line nor made a stand.

Thank God Rosa Parks didn't walk off that bus. Thank God she had the courage to recognize the importance of her act. And thank you, Adam Sandler & Co., for giving us this Native American Rosa Parks moment. More importantly, thank you Allison Young, Bruce Klinekole, David Hill, Loren Anthony, and all the others who had the courage to draw a line and walk off that feature film set. I hope we honor your leadership with our future actions and decisions.

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