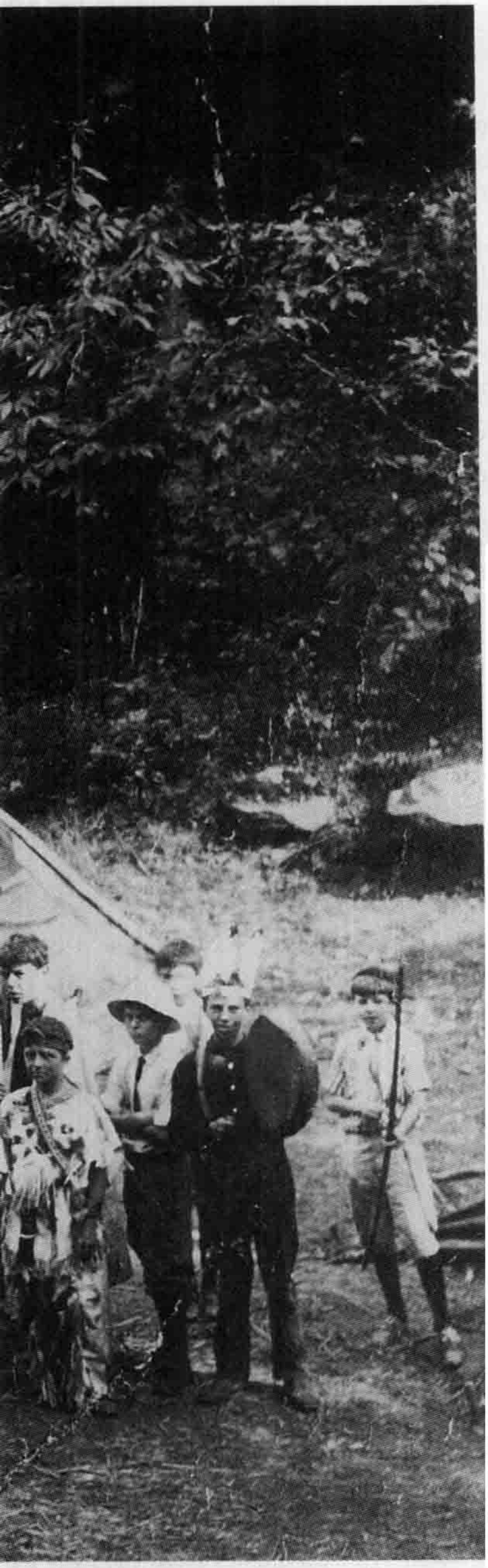
Playing Indian

Philip J. Deloria

Playing Indian

Philip J. Deloria



Published under the direction of the Department of History of
Yale University with assistance from the income of the
Frederick John Kingsbury Memorial Fund.

Set in Monotype Joanna type by Keystone Typesetting. Printed in the United States of America by BookCrafters, Inc., Chelsea, Michigan.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Deloria, Philip Joseph.
Playing Indian / Philip J. Deloria.
p. cm. — (Yale historical publications)
Originally presented as the author's thesis (Ph. D.)—Yale University, 1994).
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-300-07111-6 (cloth : alk. paper)
ISBN 0-300-08067-0 (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. Indians of North America—Public opinion. 2. Indians in popular culture—United States. 3. Indians of North America—Ethnic identity. 4. Indians of North America in literature. 5. Public opinion—United States. 6. United States—Civilization—Indian influences. I. Title. II. Series: Yale historical publications (Unnumbered)
E98.P99D45 1998
973'.0497—dc21 97-30936

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council on Library Resources.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Yale Historical Publications

For Peg

Playing Indian

Contents

Illustrations

Introduction

American Indians
and *American Identities*

Benjamin [Franklin] knew that the breaking of the old world was a long process. In the depths of his own under-consciousness he hated England, he hated Europe, he hated the whole corpus of the European being. He wanted to be American. But you can't change your nature and mode of consciousness like changing your shoes. It is a gradual shedding. Years must go by and centuries must elapse before you have finished. It is a long and half-secret process.

D. H. LAWRENCE,
Studies in Classic American Literature (1924)

In the fading evening light of December 16, 1773, Francis Rotch, the son of a Boston shipowner, trudged away from the home of provincial governor Thomas Hutchinson, his petition having been denied. Rotch's ship, the *Dartmouth*, had been anchored in Boston harbor for almost three weeks, the object of a struggle between Hutchinson, who insisted that its cargo—East India Company tea—be landed, and the Sons of Liberty, who refused to allow dockworkers

to unload the tea, which had come packaged with an unpalatable import tax. Customs rules prevented the *Dartmouth* from leaving the harbor, and the governor had ordered the Royal Navy to fire on any vessels attempting to do so. Even if the ship had escaped Boston unscathed and returned to London, Rotch and the other owners would have borne the ruinous costs of two profitless voyages. And so, on the nineteenth day of the twenty-day customs period, a crowd of Bostonians gathered at Old South Church to discuss the dilemma yet again and to send Rotch to make one final petition. The next morning, customs authorities would be legally empowered to seize the *Dartmouth*'s cargo.

Hutchinson, we know, refused to make any concessions, and when Rotch relayed the news, the crowd inaugurated the night of purposeful craziness Americans have come to call the Boston Tea Party. A chorus of Indian war whoops sounded outside the hall, and a party of what looked like Indian men sprinted down the street to the wharves. Boarding the *Dartmouth* and two other tea ships, the *Eleanor* and the *Beaver*, the Indians "overpowered" the sympathetic guards and dumped tea into Boston harbor for the next three hours. No one tried to stop the tea party, least of all the crowd of spectators gathered on the well-lit wharf. When they had finished, the raiders cleaned up the ships, apologized to the guards for a broken lock, and went home to wash off their war paint. The tea party had been street theater and civil disobedience of the most organized kind. In full costume, the actors had waited patiently in the wings for Francis Rotch to deliver his lines. And the appointed guardians of social order at the harbor had willingly turned a blind eye and deaf ear in order to facilitate the citizens' effort to resolve an apparently unresolvable standoff.[1]

It has never failed to make a compelling story, retold by everyone from grade-schoolers to politicians. The tale has dramatic appeal of its own, but it also offers a defining story of something larger—American character. In the national iconography, the Tea Party is a catalytic moment, the first drumbeat in the long cadence of rebellion through which Americans redefined themselves as something other than British colonists.[2] For the next two hundred years, white Americans molded similar narratives of national identity around the rejection of an older European consciousness and an almost mystical imperative to become new. Although other Americans would appropriate and alter those stories, they often chose to leave the basic narratives in place. And so, in the "long and half-secret" struggle to define and claim American identity, the Boston Tea Party became thoroughly entrenched as a key origin story, one that resonates for a diverse range of people. And yet, one has to wonder. Why, of all the possible

stories of rebellion and re-creation, has the notion of disguised Indians dumping tea in Boston harbor had such a powerful hold on Americans' imaginations?

One hundred and fifty years, a continent, and a nationality removed, the British writer D. H. Lawrence occupied himself with similar questions. In his most significant work of literary criticism, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, Lawrence focused on the issue of American identity, suggesting that American consciousness was essentially "unfinished" and incomplete. An unparalleled national identity crisis swirled around two related dilemmas: First, Americans had an awkward tendency to define themselves by what they were not. They had failed to produce a positive identity that stood on its own. Americans were, as he put it, "not so much bound to any haven ahead, as rushing from all havens astern."[3] Second, Americans (and he did not hesitate to generalize) had been continually haunted by the fatal dilemma of "wanting to have their cake and eat it too," of wanting to savor both civilized order and savage freedom at the same time.[4]

Offering readings of classic nineteenth-century authors, Lawrence revealed a string of contradictions at the heart of familiar American self-images. James Fenimore Cooper, he claimed, was continually trying to work out the tension between a society that promoted democratic equality and the undeniable fact that some people are born more able than others. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* illustrated the indecisive battle between the equilibratory urges of instinctual "blood consciousness" and self-aware "mind consciousness," the latter defining the former as sin yet never being able to eradicate it and, indeed, often finding its animal wildness desirable. A range of American writers—Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, Henry David Thoreau, Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, and others—had, even as they explored American contradiction, found themselves captured and humbled by its incessant ambiguities.

Throughout the essays, Lawrence frequently turned to "the Indian," intuitively locating native people at the very heart of American ambivalence. Whereas Euro-Americans had imprisoned themselves in the logical mind and the social order, Indians represented instinct and freedom. They spoke for the "spirit of the continent." Whites desperately desired that spirit, yet they invariably failed to become aboriginal and thus "finished." Savage Indians served Americans as oppositional figures against whom one might imagine a civilized national Self. Coded as freedom, however, wild Indianness proved equally attractive, setting up a "have-the-cake-and-eat-it-too" dialectic of simultaneous desire and repulsion.[5]

Introduction

Lawrence's intuitive insight was hardly exclusive. Most of the writers he dissected in *Studies* had sensed the ambiguous but important place of Indians in the national psyches they sought to bring to life. Self-exiled to New Mexico, Lawrence himself would be quite literally surrounded by a circle of modernist writers, poets, and painters exploring the same theme.[6] "There has been all the time, in the white American soul, a dual feeling about the Indian," Lawrence claimed, unable, finally, to say much beyond the obvious. "The desire to extirpate [him]. And the contradictory desire to glorify him."[7]

This is, of course, the familiar contradiction we have come to label noble savagery, a term that both juxtaposes and conflates an urge to idealize and desire Indians and a need to despise and dispossess them. A flexible ideology, noble savagery has a long history, one going back to Michel de Montaigne, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and other Enlightenment philosophers. If one emphasizes the noble aspect, as Rousseau did, pure and natural Indians serve to critique Western society. Putting more weight on savagery justifies (and perhaps requires) a campaign to eliminate barbarism. Two interlocked traditions: one of self-criticism, the other of conquest. They balance perfectly, forming one of the foundations underpinning the equally intertwined history of European colonialism and the European Enlightenment.[8]

Yet Lawrence, with his reckless prose and layering of unresolvable dualisms, seems (like his literary subjects) to be struggling to articulate something more. Indians, it is clear, are not simply useful symbols of the love-hate ambivalence of civilization and savagery. Rather, the contradictions embedded in noble savagery have themselves been the precondition for the formation of American identities. To understand the various ways Americans have contested and constructed national identities, we must constantly return to the original mysteries of Indianness.

Lawrence linked American incompleteness to an aboriginal "spirit of place" with which Americans had failed to come to terms. "No place," Lawrence observed, "exerts its full influence upon a newcomer until the old inhabitant is dead or absorbed."[9] Lawrence argued that in order to meet "the demon of the continent" head on and thus finalize the "unexpressed spirit of America," white Americans needed either to destroy Indians or to assimilate them into a white American world. These have, in fact, been two familiar options in the history of Indian-American relations, both aimed at making Indians vanish from the landscape. But loosing this unexpressed "spirit" required a difficult, collective, and absolute decision: extermination or inclusion. It is a decision that the American

polity has been unable to make or, on the few occasions when either policy has been relatively clear, to implement.

The indeterminacy of American identities stems, in part, from the nation's inability to deal with Indian people. Americans wanted to feel a natural affinity with the continent, and it was Indians who could teach them such aboriginal closeness. Yet, in order to control the landscape they had to destroy the original inhabitants. Lawrence saw the problem demonstrated most clearly in the writings of Crèvecoeur: "[Crèvecoeur] wanted his ideal state. At the same time, he wanted to know the other state, the dark, savage mind. He wanted both. Can't be done Hector. The one is the death of the other!"[10] The nineteenth-century quest for a self-identifying national literature that Lawrence took as his subject continually replicated Crèvecoeur's dilemma, speaking the simultaneous languages of cultural fusion and of violent appropriation. Likewise, American social and political policy toward Indians has been a two-hundred-year back-and-forth between assimilation and destruction.

Recent scholarship has pointed to similar cultural ambiguities arising from equally conflicted racial imaginings and relations with African Americans. Blackness, in a range of cultural guises, has been an essential precondition for American whiteness, and it has taken material shape in literature, minstrel shows, class and gender relations, political struggles, and spatial geographies.[11] This book will suggest that the figure of "the Indian" holds an equally critical position in American culture. Race has, of course, been a characteristic American obsession—and the racial imagination has been at work on many different groups of people, Indians included. But Americans—particularly white Americans—have been similarly fixated on defining themselves as a nation. As we shall see, those national definitions have engaged racialized and gendered Indians in curious and contradictory ways. At the Boston Tea Party and elsewhere, Indianness provided impetus and precondition for the creative assembling of an ultimately unassemblable American identity. From the colonial period to the present, the Indian has skulked in and out of the most important stories various Americans have told about themselves.

"The waves that wrought a country's wreck," observed Oliver Wendell Holmes in 1874,

> have rolled o'er Whig and Tory;
> The Mohawks on the Dartmouth's deck
> Shall live in song and story.[12]

In this and a thousand other songs and stories one can find Lawrence's half-secret, half-articulated Indianness, continually lurking behind various efforts at American self-imagination.

It is with this insight, however, that we part company with D. H. Lawrence, for, as suggestively quirky as it is, *Studies in Classic American Literature* deals almost exclusively in the world of texts and images. More interesting are the faux Mohawks slinking home down Boston alleyways on a chill December night. Their feathers, blankets, headdresses, and war paint point to the fact that images of Indianness have often been translated into material forms. Mohawk disguises allowed Bostonians not only to articulate ideologically useful Indian identities but also to perform and experience them. If Indianness is a key theme in this book, so too is the notion of disguise.

The Mohawk Indian disguise adopted by Tea Party participants has usually been explained as either an attempt to maintain secrecy and anonymity or as an effort—almost laughably transparent—to cast blame on a third party.[13] Neither explanation will suffice. As an attempt to deflect blame, dressing like an Indian had, at best, a limited rhetorical use. Few took the mammoth leap of imagination necessary to believe that a band of Mohawk raiders had traveled hundreds of miles through now-foreign territory solely to deprive Boston of its tea. The claim of anonymity is equally dubious. Although some participants donned feathers, for most a smear of soot and a blanket proved an easier choice. Others eschewed disguise altogether, making no effort to hide their identities. Having a recent history of political riot, Boston knew its popular street-gang leaders, and guessing the identities of many of even the disguised offenders was not an impossible task for informed observers. It was not the disguises that kept the participants' identities secret but the support of Boston residents and the social sanctions imposed by the enforcer wing of the Sons of Liberty.[14]

Even so, the participants took pains to offer up Indian identities, grunting and speaking stage Indian words that had to be "translated" into English.[15] If they did not care much about actual disguise, they cared immensely about the *idea* of disguise and its powerful imputation of Indian identity. Dressing as an Indian allowed these pretend Mohawks to translate texts, images, and ideologies into physical reality. In doing so, they lived out the cultural ideas that surrounded Noble Savagery as concrete gestures that possessed physical and emotional meaning.[16]

Costume and disguise—especially when associated with holidays, rituals, or

the concealing dark—can have extraordinary transformative qualities. Almost everyone has experienced the sense of personal liberation that attends the wearing of disguise, be it Halloween masks, cross-gender clothing, or garments signifying a racial, ethnic, or class category different from one's own. Disguise readily calls the notion of fixed identity into question. At the same time, however, wearing a mask also makes one self-conscious of a *real* "me" underneath. This simultaneous experience is both precarious and creative, and it can play a critical role in the way people construct new identities. As they first imagined and then performed Indianness together on the docks of Boston, the Tea Party Indians gave material form to identities that were witnessed and made real. The performance of Indian Americanness afforded a powerful foundation for subsequent pursuits of national identity.[17]

Although these performances have changed over time, the practice of playing Indian has clustered around two paradigmatic moments—the Revolution, which rested on the creation of a national identity, and modernity, which has used Indian play to encounter the authentic amidst the anxiety of urban industrial and postindustrial life. In the beginning, British colonists who contemplated revolution dressed as Indians and threw tea in Boston Harbor. When they consolidated power and established the government of the early republic, former revolutionaries displayed their ideological proclivities in Indian clothing. In the antebellum United States, would-be national poets donned Indian garb and read their lyrics to each other around midnight backwoods campfires.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the thoroughly modern children of angst-ridden upper- and middle-class parents wore feathers and slept in tipis and wigwams at camps with multisyllabic Indian names. Their equally nervous post–World War II descendants made Indian dress and powwow-going into a hobby, with formal newsletters and regular monthly meetings. Over the past thirty years, the counterculture, the New Age, the men's movement, and a host of other Indian performance options have given meaning to Americans lost in a (post)modern freefall. In each of these historical moments, Americans have returned to the Indian, reinterpreting the intuitive dilemmas surrounding Indianness to meet the circumstances of their times.

Playing Indian is a persistent tradition in American culture, stretching from the very instant of the national big bang into an ever-expanding present and future. It is, however, a tradition with limitations. Not surprisingly, these cling tightly to the contours of power. The creation of what Carroll Smith-Rosenberg has called a "national subjectivity" has, from the constitutional convention