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Global Transmission and Local Consumption: Navajo Resistance to Mainstream American Television

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Abstract

A common assumption maintains that the global outreach of mass media inevitably leads to deleterious consequences for native communities. Indeed, different scholars have argued that awareness of the outside world from television results in the homogenization of local cultures. However, images viewed through the electronic peephole radically transform not only an understanding of the outside world, but the way indigenes define themselves and their relationship to each other. By presenting subaltern audiences with an idealized other, television compels the emergence of an objectified self. “Who are ‘we’?” would not have been asked—or asked in the same way—were it not for the “Who are ‘they’?” necessitated by the introduction of television. In this article, I examine a particular group of subaltern viewers who reassign the roles of “self” and “other” in order to preserve, defend, and construct their own selfhood. Because they look and act differently from those in the mediated mainstream, Navajo television viewers create oppositional identities by understanding themselves first in relation to and then against standardized models. Resisting mainstream American television is a way of articulating experiences of powerlessness in a white-dominated society as well as a means of communicating a discourse of resistance to the dominant ideology.

Keywords: Globalism; localism; television; identity; subaltern; Navajo.

Native responses to the Impact of Television: Navajo Resistance to Mainstream American Television

Marshall McLuhan prophesied the worldwide coalescence of human awareness into a single community that he would call the “global village.” According to McLuhan, the developed world would experience a transformative convergence of computing and communications technology, the impact of which would rival that of the replacement of muscle power by machines (Wright 1990:84). During the intervening years since McLuhan made his now famous proclamation, mass media have certainly become global in nature. Satellite transmissions across continents and oceans are now routine such that major sporting events such as the Super Bowl or the Olympic Games are seen by hundreds of millions of viewers worldwide (Croteau and Hoynes 2003:337). The Internet connects users from around the world by enabling instant communication with the click of a mouse. Indeed, technology has reduced the significance or even erased the notion of physical distance.

At the same time, however, the makings of a global village have not yet come to fruition. McLuhan’s vision suggested an even playing field occupied by equally influential actors with equal access. Instead, the globalization of mass media has been neither democratic nor egalitarian, as centralized conglomerates of unprecedented size and influence have dictated mass media ownership and control (Croteau and Hoynes 2003: 343). Media ownership has become increasingly concentrated so that, today, only six multinational conglomerates dominate the mass media industry (Bagdikian 2000).

In terms of content, foreign imports continue to dominate local programming. Last but certainly not least, media are not equally accessible around the globe because of widening economic inequalities.

The fear is that the globalization of media will result in the homogenization of local cultures. There is already a common perception that American products dominate the world’s markets. Coke and Pepsi battle for supremacy across every continent. It seems as if there is no place left on earth where one cannot purchase a Big Mac. Indeed, the threat of globalization is often perceived as a force that will erode or, worse, dissolve cultural differences and variety. Benjamin R. Barber, author of *Jihad vs. McWorld*, predicts that the former will be defeated by the latter because of the long-term capacity of global information and global culture to overpower parochialism and to integrate or obliterate partial identities (1995:82).

Localism

The presence and pervasiveness of American-made goods does not necessarily signal the death of local, regional, or national identities because the act of cultural transfer is never met with total acceptance. Ideas and values originating in the media undergo a process of diffusion, which is neither automatic nor indiscriminate (Banerjee 2002:521). The sheer presence of Western cultural goods does not necessarily entail profound cultural transformations or impact.

In his book, *Cultural Imperialism*, John Tomlinson challenges the notion of a neat correlation between the economic and the cultural: “No one really disputes the dominant presence of Western multi-national, and particularly American, media in the world; what is doubted is the cultural implications of this presence” (1991:57). Tomlinson dismisses the assumption held by many observers that what occurs is simply an imposition of wants, tastes,

and desires upon the brainwashed global consumer. Such a conclusion disregards what the individual or group might bring to the act of consumption.

In particular, the dual flows of objects and images via commodity consumption and mass media do not institute a global monoculture. Theodore Levitt argues that consumption habits promoted by the globalization of media produce “heteroconsumers”: “People who’ve become increasingly alike and indistinct from one another, and yet have simultaneously varied and multiple preferences” (1988:8). Likewise, the power of the media is not something that is simply imposed on unwitting audiences. Media messages require construction and are subject to revision. Audiences resist the imposition of preferred meanings by actively reinterpreting media messages in contrary and even subversive ways. While the products of American media may be washing up in every hamlet, village, and nomad’s tent in the world, the way people choose to understand the images produced through American media varies from place to place (Scott 2000:11).

Ironically, globalization appears to engender a form of localism. Increasing global integration does not simply result in the elimination of cultural diversity but rather provides the context for the production of new cultural forms that are marked by local specificity (Ang 1996:155). The “local” is usually considered to be an authentic source of cultural identity as long as it remains unsullied by contact with the “global.” Instead of being conceived as two distinct and opposing realities, the global and the local are mutually reinforcing. Often, the “local” itself is produced by means of the “indigenization” of global resources and inputs (Morley 1991:15).

Contrary to proponents of Coca-Colonization and McDonaldization, globalization does not lead to homogenization. While there certainly is no debating the global outreach of Western-made products, their introductions are subject to local appropriation and domestication that is channeled in some directions and not others. To be sure, the world’s consumers have taken advantage of their newfound economic and political freedom to pick and choose the products that *they* find most appealing (Foster 2002:151).

Agency Revisited

There is a danger, however, in taking the agency argument too far. All of this talk about empowerment and freedom of choice has become increasingly appealing and trendy whenever discussions in academic circles turn to native peoples and their continuing survival. In our politically correct climate, it is not only popular but prerequisite to acknowledge the decisive voice and deed of “the native” as a conciliatory gesture to atone for the sins of our forefathers. Indeed, to refute the dogma of indigenes as agents of their own destiny in part or degree is essentially to reject the natives themselves and risk being branded with a scarlet “C” for “colonizer.”

Of course, it is comforting to believe that, despite centuries of forced assimilation, natives have still been able to pick and choose what they want to incorporate into their cultures and reject everything else while maintaining their essentialness along the way. There is something deeply satisfying in the notion that the tools of colonialism may be grasped by their supposed victims and turned on their creators (Wilk 2002:176). The colonized native is similar in this way to one of those inflatable punching bag dolls: no matter how many times or how hard you hit it, the doll bounces rights back up—all the while with that goofy grin planted on its face.

In more recent years, a powerful backlash has been brewing against this tendency to celebrate the ability of subaltern audiences to produce divergent or resistant readings of mass media texts (Gibson 2000:253). As David Morley writes, “Much recent media work is marred by a facile insistence on the polysemy of media products and by an undocumented presumption that forms of interpretive resistance are more widespread than subordination” (1993:14). A number of scholars have pointed out quite simply that active viewing is, by itself, not political resistance (Gibson 2000:256). In the end, the social and historical conditions within which audiences generate such meanings, not to mention the actual political import of such televisual resistance, become obscured in favor of an optimistic celebration of audience autonomy (Gibson 2000:256).

In his study of urban and rural television audiences in Brazil, Conrad Kottak found that television impact should be interpreted as a phenomenon that occurs in distinct stages (1990). The first stage is characterized by strangeness and novelty as new viewers are usually transfixed by the mysterious box. During Stage I, the medium rather than the message is the mesmerizer (1990:139). Once viewers become more accustomed to and comfortable with television, they enter Stage II. Here, according to Kottak, they begin a process of selective acceptance and rejection, interpretation, and reworking of TV messages (1990:139). In the next stage, as community saturation and length of exposure increases, statistical measures of its impact become less obvious and accurate because television’s presence differentiates less and less among residents (1990:143). Stage IV encompasses the cumulative effect of viewing television on adults who have spent their entire lives in a society pervaded by TV and the mass phenomenon it spawns (1990:143).

The complex ways in which international audiences have adapted foreign images to fit their own cultural views are well demonstrated by Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz’s often cited study of the television program *Dallas*. To summarize, the researchers compared the “decodings” of four different ethnic groups in Israel: Arabs, Moroccan Jews, recent Russian immigrants, and kibbutz members (1990). An additional comparison was made with second-generation Americans living in suburban Los Angeles. Liebes and Katz found that each cultural group negotiated with the program uniquely and was characterized by different types of readings, different levels of involvement, and different mechanisms of self-defense (1990:12).

The researchers reported substantial differences among the ethnic communities—both in how they watched the program and how they interpreted it—and maintained that reception patterns clearly correlated with ethnic distinctions. Both the Arabs and Moroccan Jews, who were the most culturally distant from *Dallas*, interpreted the program referentially by relating the story to real life. The Russians, on the other hand, demonstrated an awareness of the program as being separate from reality and questioned the accuracy of the representation. The Americans and the kibbutz groups also employed a more analytic framework, as their retellings of the episodes utilized an existing knowledge of characters to speculate on future complications.

Beyond the general conclusion that reception is an active and selective process, the data suggest specifically how various sociocultural groups make their own sense out of television programs like *Dallas*. Liebes and Katz attributed the lesser involvement in the thematic content by the “Western” audience members to their higher level of familiarity with the society portrayed in the program. In essence, the American, Russian, and kibbutz groups relied on different interpretive strategies for analyzing the program than their Arab and Moroccan counterparts because of their greater socialization in the genres of television.

Thus, the transition from global *versus* local to global *and* local is contingent upon having enough time to absorb and acclimate to outside forces. In fact, Jayasinhji Jhala contends that an authentic indigenous aesthetic may be located not at the point of first contact but after native groups have already domesticated and internalized new technologies and made them their own (1998, p. 384). To a large and unexpected extent, localism challenges the imperative of globalization by compensating for the standardization and perceived loss of identity that is said to accompany it.

The world-wide dissemination of U.S. produced material—together with the ideological values these are often said to carry—are seen by many to crowd out locally produced content and, in the process, to threaten the autonomy of local, regional, and national cultures. Not only does the spread of American media all over the world not result in the homogenization of local cultures, such a process will eventually lead to an increased awareness of how indigenous peoples define themselves and their relationships with each other.

A Case Study

What is needed is an approach to audience research that pays simultaneous attention to both (1) the ability of audiences to generate creative and divergent meanings and (2) the wider national and global determinants that constrain and limit some meanings while enabling and encouraging others (Gibson 2000:258). To accomplish this dialectical feat, we clearly need a way to conceptualize how the wider structures of economic, political, and cultural power are configured and organized as well as an understanding of how this totality is reproduced within, and perhaps even transformed by, the practices of everyday life.

Elsewhere, I have posited an alternative approach to television reception among subaltern audiences (Pack 2001). Television reception is neither homogenizing, as cultural imperialism theorists assert nor simply a terrain for active interpretation, as proponents of cultural studies argue; rather, it revolves around the negotiation for identity rooted in a negotiation of power relations. I argued that television culture is a symbolic space wherein subaltern people negotiate their senses of identity and learn about power in contemporary culture while situated in multiple sociocultural contexts.

I had the opportunity to field test this theory during four years of ethnographic fieldwork on the Navajo reservation, investigating the crucial role television plays in the formation and contestation of social and cultural identities. In this capacity, I conducted an ethnography of television viewing among members of the Benally family, a network of clan-related kin whom I had known and intermittently lived among for more than a decade prior to the research. However, it is important to point out that I do not purport that the members of this particular extended family constitute a representative sample of all "natives" or even all Navajos. Rather, this case study approach is in line with a critique of the tendency to generalize that has historically plagued anthropology's depiction of the "other." Pronouncements of homogeneity purport the singular ("the native") as being representative of the whole. Generalization, the characteristic mode of operation and style of writing of the social sciences, can no longer be regarded as a neutral description. When the anthropologist generalizes from experiences with a number of specific people in a given community, he or she tends to flatten out differences among them. The appearance of an absence of internal differentiation makes it easier to conceive of a group of people as a generic entity who do this or that and believe such-and-such.

A healthy distrust of representing peoples as coherent entities has emerged in recent years, and ethnographies written from feminist standpoints and other critical positions now commonly argue that essentialized representations obscure members' diverse experiences (Frank 1995:145). Feminist anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod, for example, has advocated what she calls "ethnographies of the particular" by focusing closely on particular individuals and their changing relationships (1991:149). This methodological turn to the individual in anthropological studies corresponds to postmodernism and the much-ballyhooed "crisis of representation." As a result, through the 1980s and 1990s, the lived experiences of individuals have seized the academic spotlight. In a culture that is becoming increasingly heterogeneous, it is important to understand how individuals construct their own sense of self and world given their particular, dynamic, and complex lives. If we want to know the unique experience and perspective of an individual, there is no better way to understand this than in the person's own voice.

Images viewed through the electronic peephole radically transform not only an understanding of the world outside the reservation but also the way indigenes such as my informants define themselves and their relationships to each other. By presenting subaltern audiences with an idealized "other," television compels the emergence of an objectified "self." Because they look and act differently from those in the mediated mainstream, Navajo television viewers create oppositional identities by understanding themselves first in relation to and then against standardized models.

Vis-à-vis Effect

Since their inception, every form of mass media has become an easy and convenient target at which to direct blame for society's ills. Mainstream television, in particular, has been a favorite scapegoat for everything from teen drinking to obesity to the destruction of indigenous cultures. As is always the case, cultural change results from numerous factors instead of a single one. Rather than causing the breakdown of native traditions, I found that television provides an expanded frame of reference by introducing Navajos to peoples, places, and things they would likely never otherwise see or know. Indeed, mass media presents viewers with the imaginative resources to envision virtually infinite possible lives, a phenomenon I call the "vis-à-vis effect."

Besides acquainting Navajos with a variety of strangers, the electronic box also functions as a window into an unimaginable world of gadgets and trinkets. On television, everybody looks beautiful and happy, and everything appears shiny and new. By comparison, every person on the reservation seems to struggle with one problem after another, and everywhere one looks is plain desert littered with dilapidated housing and trash—or, as one of my informants eloquently stated, "It's all just brown." Measured according to TV's yardstick, Navajos naturally feel like they are getting stuck with the short end.

Most members of the Benally family have limited first-hand knowledge about life outside the reservation. Television serves as their primary, if not only, means of learning about the outside world. More than just the entertainment value, viewers are drawn to the screen because it presents them with a rare opportunity to compare their own lives with the televised images of foreigners. Analyzing the differences gives them new perspectives not only about other cultures but, more importantly, about their own way of life. The vis-à-vis effect revolves most prominently around people and possessions.

Nicknames

The degree to which mass media personalities have influenced Native Americans is most obviously manifested in mundane aspects of daily life, such as the popularity of nicknames. Among close friends and family, very few Indians are referred to by their given names. Often, the preferred moniker is taken from a television or film character or else a famous musician or athlete.

Tim Giago, an Oglala Lakota journalist who writes a weekly column for the *Lakota Journal*, reminisces how the Hollywood movies shown every Sunday at his BIA boarding school propagated a variety of colorful nicknames for his classmates:

Martin White got his nickname “Capone” from a movie, and of course his brother Dennis then became “Dillinger.” Western movies seemed to have been the source of several nicknames. A movie cowboy named Buck Jones gave his name to one of the boys. “Dopey Lone Dog” was named after the Seven Dwarfs came out. Aloysius Red Elk was tagged as “Rochester” which eventually became plain “Roch” after a Jack Benny movie introduced his sidekick to us. Another Western movie was the source of Bill Irving’s name. He became “Curly Bill.” Duane Garnette had several nicknames. He was, all at one time, Frosty, Peter Rabbit and Snowshoe. His brother James was “Heavy.” Leo Wounded Foot was “Tiny Tim.” Two Trimble brothers became “Snazzy” and “Fatty,” but I’m not sure they were named for movie characters or movie slang. (2002:9)

Giago concludes his trip down memory lane by withholding speculation about the nicknames that contemporary movies have spawned for Indian boys and girls. So I will pick up where he left off.

Five decades later, media inspired monikers are alive and well on the reservation. Among the Benally clan, for example, numerous family members have been bequeathed nicknames by friends or relatives based on mainstream media personalities. Lola has recently been tagged as “J-Lo” after Jennifer Lopez, the multi-talented celebrity, for “hopping from man to man.” Friends and family members call Chucky “Ace” after the character Jim Carrey made famous in *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* (1997) since both share similar goofy mannerisms. Chucky’s younger brother, Holden, is known as “Usher” because his singing voice and appearance resemble the R & B singer. Everybody, including his own parents, calls Tyrone “Chubs” after Chubby Checker, the famous musician from the 1950s, for obvious reasons.

Since many of the Benallys have watched the same films multiple times, they have subconsciously incorporated various aspects of these into their daily lives. I have observed frequent instances in which somebody will spontaneously recite dialogue or re-enact a scene from a favorite movie. While swimming at the public pool in Gallup, for example, Chucky thought it was the appropriate time to showcase his impression of Kate Winslett’s character in *Titanic* (1997) after the ship sank and she emotionally bids goodbye to her lover who has frozen to death. Although this heartrending scene brought worldwide audiences to tears, Chucky’s re-enactment drew howls of laughter from everyone within earshot.

I-Want-Itis

The inevitable result of the intimate connection between television and consumerism is that more and more people believe that the good life can be had from material goods. Increasing numbers of consumer-citizens worldwide have bought into the idea that it is possible to buy happiness. Advertisements perpetuate the “missing piece syndrome” by constantly assuring viewers and readers that a certain product is just the thing to make them feel better about themselves. Consumers are lulled into buying the promise rather than the product.

As a result of television, information about products—such as their existence, appearance, function, availability, and current price—directly and regularly reaches people in small communities and remote areas (Kottak 1990:161). Every day, television exposes millions of non-Western people to the Western consumer lifestyle, offering a heavily skewed model of success. There is a reason why people in other countries think all Americans live in mansions with swimming pools, tennis courts, and maids and drive luxury automobiles when their private jet is not readily available. Due to the new comparison processes enabled by television, nearly everyone has begun observing and aspiring to the standards set by the wealthy.

I have witnessed countless occasions on which members of the Benally family have expressed a longing for items advertised either directly or indirectly. “Oooh, I want that!” is a proclamation frequently exclaimed during commercials and infomercials promoting products such as automobiles, consumer electronics, and exercise equipment, to name only a few. But the fact of the matter remains that statements of yearning are just that: yearning. There is little to no possibility that they will ever have the financial resources to acquire most of the products they see advertised. They are fully aware that media messages set unattainable consumer aspirations.

Can't-Have-Itis

For most Navajos, including my informants, the lifestyles advertised on TV are simply unrealistic. They know that no matter how much they strive to acquire the material possessions or become like the rich, beautiful people who flaunt them, these items will always remain out of reach. As the desire for consumer goods has grown, the awareness of their own poverty has sharpened. The lack of jobs and the concomitant paucity of money on the reservation leave Navajos in the awkward position of having little to earn yet everything imaginable to buy.

Subaltern audiences live on the periphery of the social mainstream with all its promises of belonging and rewards. TV teases Navajos with so many advertised items that they desire, but the vast majority cannot afford to buy them. Sherman Alexie describes this merciless teasing in *Reservation Blues*, his novel about contemporary Indian life:

He turned on his little TV to watch white people live. White people owned everything: food, houses, clothes, children. *TV constantly reminded Thomas of all he never owned.* (1995:70; emphasis mine)

The frustration of wanting without the ability of acquiring creates a perpetual state of unfulfilled longing. In a world of aspiring imaginations, fantasies of wealth and power easily fuel a sense of being left behind and out of the way (Knauft 2002:132).

Today, “traditional” is sometimes used as a euphemism for “poor.” Given the option, most “traditional” Navajos would prefer a more “modern” lifestyle in terms of living in a nice

home equipped with up-to-date amenities and driving a new vehicle. There is a reason why Grandma Elsie and Delbert, the two most traditional members of the Benally family, love to watch game shows: to imagine that they, too, could win all that money and fantasize about all the things that they would buy. Realizing that this is not possible, they find solace in being more “authentically” Navajo. In this way, traditionalism serves merely as a consolation prize.

Television has become the main cultural reference point that Navajos use to compare and contrast their own status. This development has inspired viewers to dream of a better future, while at the same time they have become frustrated and angered by the barriers that stand in the way. New desires thrive precisely *because* there is little likelihood that they can be satisfied. However, constantly not having eventually manifests in a backlash against those who have.

“I Hate White People!”

For Native Americans, a history of colonization has ingrained racial hierarchies into their collective identity. Generations of government support have created a mentality whereby whites are viewed as the rich giver while Indians are the poor receiver. As a result, Indians have inculcated paradoxical attitudes towards whites. On the one hand, they envy white peoples’ superior wealth, intelligence, appearance, and overall status as kings of the ethnic mountain. On the other hand, the shame associated with this inferiority complex also leads to a bitter resentment directed towards whites precisely because of their perceived superiority.

Every Indian I have ever known has claimed an aversion for Anglos. “I hate white people!” is a common catchphrase Navajos mutter in response to everything from feeling like they are being stared at in restaurants to being short-changed by traders or pawnshop owners. But this refrain is said most frequently after witnessing some ostentatious display of wealth, beauty, or happiness—and especially a combination of all three.

I remember watching an episode of MTV’s *Cribs*, a show that invites viewers into the luxurious homes of celebrities, with a group of half a dozen male members of the Benally family. This particular episode featured Tommy Lee, the former drummer for the heavy metal band Motley Crue but perhaps better known as the former husband of Pamela Anderson, who proudly played the role of tour guide for “Tommyland,” as he calls his four-acre Malibu mansion. As he paraded through his estate and highlighted certain areas such as the disco in the basement and the tropical-themed swimming pool or bragged about unique features like his own professionally installed Starbucks cappuccino machine and the Chinese Basket, a kind of acrobatics-required “sex swing,” in his bedroom, my living room guests “oohed” and “aahed” with every grandiose display. At the conclusion of the virtual tour, Elton shook his head and spoke those four familiar words. These young Indian men hated Lee for having everything they can only dream about but know they will never experience. As was the case for the character in *Reservation Blues*, TV constantly reminds them of all the things that they themselves will never own.

“Beavis and Butthead” Complex

In his study of television, Fiske asserts that the act of interpretive resistance itself produces pleasure (1987). Resistance is fun, he maintains, because it empowers those who do not wield power in their daily lives. Beavis and Butthead know all about the pleasure of resistance. These two animated losers are incredibly idiotic and unattractive pubescent morons who, despite incessantly talking about “chicks,” could not get a date with a member of the

opposite sex to save their pathetic lives. When not committing acts of cruelty to animals or setting stuff on fire, Beavis and Butthead irreverently mock conservative excesses through their frequent attacks on oppressive authority figures (Young 1993:46).

During the five years their show aired on MTV, these cartoon friends introduced the world to their particular brand of adolescent male humor by making fart noises with their armpits and regularly discussing the state of their genitals. The typical misadventures of Beavis and Butthead included random destructiveness, defiance of authority, and failed attempts to score with the ladies. Critics have accused the duo of representing and encouraging everything that is wrong with the youth of today: violence, lack of motivation, disrespect for authority, and unadulterated stupidity (Morrow 1999). Alternatively, fans of the show know it to be a brilliant satire of exactly the same things.

At least half of every half-hour program consisted of the duo sitting on their couch and commenting on music videos. Beavis and Butthead follow a very simple system of aesthetic evaluation: the video either “sucks” or it is “cool.” These judgments are not random, though the criteria are highly idiosyncratic. What is “cool” consists of fiery explosions, fast cars, heavy metal, and, most of all, hot babes. What “sucks” is basically everything else. And they are more than happy to say so. Beavis notices that when artsy folk singer Edie Brickell bent over and strained at her deadly serious lyrics, she looked like she’s “pinching a loaf” (Young 1993:43).

Viewers understand Beavis and Butthead’s video criticism in diverse ways. Published responses range from those who take the show literally to those that emphasize the complexity of a show on MTV that implicitly criticizes the content of MTV (Morrow 1999). While the show has attracted more than its fair share of detractors, those who criticize the content of the episodes do not seem to realize that the audience is not asked to agree with or accept Beavis and Butthead’s actions or words. The story line of every episode makes it clear that the cartoon tandem is illiterate, amoral, and antisocial. As Ginia Bellafonte explained in an article for *Time*: it is “a show set in a vast nowhere starring two cretins who do nothing, absorb nothing, and stand for even less” (1997:72). Indeed, savvy audience members watch and enjoy the program through the filter of irony.

The Talking Couch

Beavis and Butthead certainly have not cornered the market on making derisive remarks about media personalities. Indians have been doing it for years. In fact, this was the rationale behind a performance called “The Talking Couch,” where Native American comedian Drew Lacapa and filmmaker Chris Eyre provided humorous commentary about a series of film clips typical of how Hollywood has stereotyped Indians as either faithful sidekick to the white man, wild savage threatening the white man, or noble savage inspiring the white man (Ingles 2002:1).

A full capacity crowd filled a Santa Fe theater to hear and watch two prominent Indians give their opinions about the popular representations of Native Americans. Partially obscuring the screen were the silhouettes of two figures sitting on a couch, munching snacks, and cracking jokes as they watched the action. When the masked Lone Ranger and his faithful sidekick Tonto galloped across the screen, one of the figures quipped, “I wonder if he ever fell off, trying to act all bad...Whoa!” while the other followed with “C’mon, Tonto, we’ll stay at that KOA we love so much,” causing the packed house to roar with laughter (Ingles 2002:1).

From Buster Keaton and “Three Stooges” comedies to John Wayne westerns to Disney’s *Peter Pan* and *Pocahontas*, the parade of images that shaped mainstream America’s

understanding of its native population flashed on the screen while Lacapa and Eyre supplied running commentary (Ingles 2002:12). Some of the duo's comments, while bringing laughs, were more serious. When the animated John Smith reaches his hand toward Pocahontas in the Disney clip, for example, Eyre says, "Take my hand. I want to give you syphilis" (Ingles 2002:12). In another example of how Indians use humor as a weapon, the joking that Eyre and Lacapa brought to the event was meant to take the power away from those who have historically defined them. Just as whites have historically reduced Indians into a dichotomy of the "noble savage" or the "ignoble savage," Indians have similarly idealized and then disparaged whites.

Subject-Object Inversion

In *Language and Art in the Navajo Universe*, Gary Witherspoon articulates the "subject-object inversion" in Navajo speech: "The rule appears to cause the object of the sentence to become the subject and the subject of the sentence to become the object" (1977:63). So, for example, while the sentence "The man kicked the horse" is acceptable, the sentence "The horse was kicked by the man" is grammatically regular but culturally unacceptable because it violates the Navajo hierarchy of social beings (Witherspoon 1977:64-65).

According to Mary Helen Creamer, Navajo nouns are ranked according to inherent qualities and characteristics that Navajos infer from experience in terms of "who can be expected to be able to act upon whom" (1974:30 cited in Witherspoon 1977:71). The eight ranked groups she delineates are as follows:

- | | |
|----------|--|
| Group 1: | Nouns denoting persons |
| Group 2: | Nouns denoting the larger animals and medium-sized animals of special intelligence. |
| Group 3: | Nouns denoting medium sized animals |
| Group 4: | Nouns denoting small sized animals |
| Group 5: | Nouns denoting insects |
| Group 6: | Nouns denoting natural forces |
| Group 7: | Nouns denoting plants and inanimate objects |
| Group 8: | Nouns denoting abstractions such as old age, hunger, disease, etc.(1974:33-37 cited in Witherspoon 1977:71). |

Nouns may freely act upon other nouns of equal or lower status but not on nouns of higher status, as the above example with the man and the horse indicated. To prevent nouns of lower status from being the subject of a sentence, the subject-object inversion takes into effect. In other words, the inversion rule becomes obligatory when a lower status being acts upon a higher status being, assuring that the higher status noun precedes the lower status noun in the syntax of the sentence (Witherspoon 1977:72).

In the event that it was the horse that kicked the man, Navajos would never state, "The horse kicked the man." This sentence is rejected by Navajo speakers because in their conception of the world, human beings are more intelligent than horses so horses cannot will and carry out actions against human beings without the action being caused by the conscious will of the human or else his careless behavior (Witherspoon 1977:72-73). Thus, the more suitable alternative

would be “The man was kicked by the horse” or, better, “The man inadvertently had himself kicked by means of the horse.”

Witherspoon discovered that features of Navajo and western European languages themselves inform human action in fundamentally different ways. Western European languages, he shows, emphasize *nominal* categories. Such languages are representational in nature, and to speakers of these languages, reality is encapsulated by nouns, terms that represent an objective reality that is out there and independent of human action (Morrison 1992:202). Navajo language, to the contrary, highlights *verbal* categories and focuses on relational processes, a trait that is common to all languages of exclusively oral peoples (Morrison 1992:202). In other words, Navajos do not understand words as standing for something objectively constituted. Rather, language engenders reality and brings substance into being.

In the Navajo hierarchy of nouns, the highest-ranking group includes those involving persons. Since their first contact with European Americans, this group has been further subdivided into two main categories: Navajos and Anglos. The history of colonization that has characterized the relationship between the two groups ever since has created a paternalistic mentality whereby Navajos view whites as those holding the upper hand in terms of power and privilege. Tired of being on the outside looking in, Navajos paradoxically—and simultaneously—feel an attraction to and repulsion from European American culture. In fact, Navajos disparage whites *because* they envy them. Subverting the gaze is their way of imposing an inter-cultural subject-object inversion.

Talking Back

On numerous occasions, I have witnessed members of the Benally family (as well as other Indians) repeatedly ridicule characters on television programs or movies in the style of the MTV duo of Beavis and Butthead. But this type of joking only occurs among themselves or around people they know well, which holds true for their unique brand of humor in general. In the company of strangers, they will typically hide behind a stoic demeanor that serves as a protective cocoon to avoid interaction.

Alan Blum has shown that lower-class blacks commonly engage in hostile joking relationships with white television performers even though they, too, are less likely to act that way in the actual presence of whites. Sometimes this role playing is overt, as when “the spectator would chide the performer, cajole him, answer his questions directly, warn him of impending dangers, and so on” (Blum 1964:432). Anyone who has watched a film in a theatre with predominantly African American moviegoers can attest to these types of vocal and spirited reactions throughout. Blum attributes this hostility to class and race divisions—or what I would consider unequal power relations.

“Talking back” also seems to be an integral component of the viewing experience for Navajos, albeit on a smaller scale. This type of behavior is most evident when they are “channel surfing” while watching television alone or with a few of their peers. I have noticed that the remote control confers an almost almighty power upon its holder. With the power to change channels at whim, he is the master of his own mediated universe. Indeed, the encounter is similar in many ways to a king being entertained by various court jesters all competing for his favor: he will laugh and applaud if he approves, or he will promptly dismiss the performer if he is not entertained.

The more acculturated members of the Benally family have very short attention spans and will consequently change channels at a dizzying rate. What is most interesting is the totally different persona the individual assumes while flipping through the channels in search of entertainment. For instance, Elroy is usually very aloof in public but transforms into an indigenous Howard Stern with the remote control in his hands:

Commercial: “Make a fortune selling real estate!”	<i>Shut up, dude.</i>	[click]
Commercial: “Girls Gone Wild” video	<i>Damn, I need some of that...</i>	
[click]		
ESPN’s Sportscenter: NBA highlights	<i>I could do that, no problem.</i>	[click]
Who Wants to be a Millionaire?: Game show	<i>The answer’s “C,” stupid!</i>	
[click]		
Scream 2: Horror movie	<i>Don’t go in there, bilagaana lady!</i>	[click]

While other scholars have argued that mass media transports viewers to a “different world,” I contend that this passage is accompanied by a different persona as well.

Under usual circumstances, most Navajos would never dream of talking to Anglos in such a disrespectful manner. The people on the screen hold positions of power and authority by constituting the proverbial “them” in opposition to “us.” However, shielded behind the veil of anonymity enabled by the one-way communication of the television viewing context, these typically reserved individuals feel safe enough to react the way they *wish* they could in everyday life. In this carnivalesque atmosphere, Delbert feels free to declare, “Come over here, baby, I’ll show you how we do it Indian style” to a bikini-clad model on the TV screen even though he would not dare utter such words to an attractive white woman he just saw on the street. Watching television in this way provides Navajos with a means of articulating their experience of powerlessness in a white-dominated society as well as a means of articulating a discourse of resistance to the dominant ideology. “Talking back,” then, serves as a necessary outlet for Navajo viewers to freely express their true feelings towards mainstream society via the “id” components of their personality.

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