

Alan Trachtenberg. *Shades of Hiawatha: Staging Indians, Making Americans, 1880-1930*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2004. 400 pp. Paper, \$17.00.

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Alan Trachtenberg's work *Shades of Hiawatha: Staging Indians, Making Americans, 1880-1930* examines a pivotal question: What is an American? That question has implications for other immigrant groups mired in the twenty-first century's public policy discussion. Trachtenberg focuses on the dominant culture's construction of what it meant to be American at the turn of the twentieth century with the arrival of twenty-three million immigrants between 1890 and 1920 and how Indian peoples were forced to fit those constructions in a way different from immigrants and African Americans.

The constructed image of an American was partly forged by the changing image of the Indian from a savage to be annihilated, to a benevolent savage to be corralled on a reservation, to a noble representation of the triumph of individualism. Never mind that Indian culture valued the communal over the individual. This image was disseminated widely, and consistently, during this period by mass media in poetry, plays, movies, novels, paintings, and photographs.

The author sees a linkage between heavy immigration and the country's need to define an American cultural nationality. On the one hand, Indians, the first inhabitants of America, could be a symbol of America to immigrants in a way that African Americans could not. The head of an African American would not be chosen to appear on the nickel, although the head of an Indian would be. The aborted plan to erect on Staten Island a welcoming statue, even bigger than the Statue of Liberty, of an Indian warrior would never have been considered for African Americans. At the same time, Native Americans were forced to relinquish their lands through legislation such as the Dawes Act in 1887. The government took 90 million of the 138 million acres of Indian land. Indian boarding schools forced Indians to abandon their culture and way of life.

The main recurring theme throughout the text is Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's fictionalized Hiawatha as representing the white ideal of an Indian, one who is nonthreatening and exudes "sentimental heroism" (26). The Song of Hiawatha was published in 1855 and sold fifty thousand copies in six months. Longfellow's Hiawatha, Trachtenberg points out, is a composite based more on a mythical figure, Ojibway, and less on the founder of the Iroquois. Longfellow's Hiawatha poses no threat to whites; he sprung from Longfellow's imagination as the "generic white man's Indian" (84). The poem was transformed into a play that was reenacted thousands of times in pageants performed over decades across the country; it was even translated into Yiddish and performed by immigrants. Trachtenberg expertly and thoroughly analyzes the literary elements and construct of the poem. Other theoretical perspectives include works by John Dewey and Henry James. He agrees with Dewey's concept put forth in 1917 that America had difficulty identifying a cultural nationality.

The turn of the twentieth century was a period of change as the country moved from agrarian to urban and from family business to industrialization, with large-scale immigration thrown into the mix. Immigrants searched for new identities while Indians were forced to give up theirs. This time period also is significant in the development of mass media, and Trachtenberg's work contributes to this scholarship. For much of the time period under Trachtenberg's scrutiny, before scholarly research in the discipline began, mass media were thought to have powerful, uniform, and immediate impact on readers and viewers. Heroes began to be taken from popular culture rather than real life. Not until after the 1930s and 1940s did researchers looking at mass communication conclude that it was more difficult than previously thought for the media to influence individual beliefs and societal beliefs. However, Melvin DeFleur and Everette Dennis postulate that when the mass media present consistent images that reinforce a particular point of point over a long period of time, the effect can be cumulative and have a powerful societal impact.¹ This construct of the Americanized Indian would seem to fit that case.

Trachtenberg is professor emeritus of American studies, the Neil Gray Jr. Professor Emeritus of English, and a senior research scholar in English at Yale University. He earned his doctorate in American studies from the University of Minnesota. He has written many other texts about this time period in American history. He points out in the acknowledgments that some chapters have been published previously as journal articles. The text won the forty-eighth annual Francis Parkman Prize for historical nonfiction from the Society of American Historians. Ironically, in his discussion of the books of Lewis Henry Morgan, Trachtenberg mentions Morgan's friend, Francis Parkman, and refers to him parenthetically as "no particular friend of the Indian" (20).

Trachtenberg's presentation of the influence of Morgan's books could have included reference to recent scholarship on the oral traditions of Indian culture. He quotes Morgan's view of the Indian as having "no desire to perpetuate himself in the remembrance of distant generations" (17). Similarly, he cites the Indian princess Pocahontas in several instances as becoming a symbol for America (23). While his greater point remains the construct of Indian in the white imagination, incorporation of recent scholarship assessing the story of Pocahontas could have added to his thesis.

The book makes compelling points in comparing how the dominant culture viewed and treated the immigrants and the Indians during this time period. The comparison with the African American experience, while alluded to in the preface, does not receive the same degree of focus and could be further elaborated in future work.

The construct of the vanishing Indian was just that — a construct. The shade of Hiawatha still casts its shadow. The Indian has not vanished but continues into this century, still a part of the public policy debate that continues to try to define what is an American.

NOTE

1. Melvin L. DeFleur and Everette F. Dennis, "Understanding Mass Communication," 4th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991), 560.