
Dustin Tahmahkera. *Tribal Television: Viewing Native People in Sitcoms*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014. 244 pp.

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In *Tribal Television: Viewing Native People in Sitcoms*, Dustin Tahmahkera introduces the key concepts of “decolonized viewing” and “sitcom sovereignty,” which he then uses to analyze televisual representations of Indigenous peoples over the past seventy years. He draws upon theoretical approaches based in Indigenous studies, cultural studies, and television studies, bringing the three fields into conversation in order to offer a complex reading of both the “recognizably Indian” and the “recognizably Native” through “an Indigenous-centered lens” (15, 24, xv). Tahmahkera grounds his arguments in an ongoing discussion that includes the voices of respected Indigenous authors, scholars, and community leaders—including, for instance, commentary by Sherman Alexie, Oren Lyons, and Joy Harjo. Relying on these sources to demonstrate both the positive and negative influences of television in general and sitcoms in particular, Tahmahkera contends that Native peoples can not only “critique popular culture’s contributions to colonialism,” but, ultimately, that they can replace colonizing representations with “recognizably Native comedy” that “liberates by uncovering and analyzing the recognizably Indian” (13, 29).

Throughout the text, Tahmahkera traces the slow process by which televisual representations of the Indian, beginning with the Indian Head test pattern of the 1930s, have given way to the “recognizably Native” in contemporary broadcast and digital comedy. Deftly weaving together an analysis of American Indian policy since the mid-twentieth century, a discussion of the sitcom and its generic tropes, and a history of the complicated narrative of creation and production that takes place off-screen, *Tribal Television* makes a compelling argument about the ways that sitcoms reflect popular attitudes toward Indigenous peoples and, more importantly, about the ways that Native peoples take control of those narratives.

Early in the text, Tahmahkera explains that, “[w]hereas the recognizably Indian has largely marginalized, disavowed, and displaced the Native, the recognizably Native has labored to critically resist and creatively circumvent the Indian” (24). By drawing a distinction between the “recognizably Indian” and the “recognizably Native,” he creates a framework for acknowledging the distinction between stereotypical representations—often created by non-Native writers and producers—and Native people’s portrayals of themselves. Although *Tribal Television* situates the Indian and the Native at opposite ends of a spectrum, each chapter acknowledges the complexities and irregularities that accompany individual representations. Moreover, although the text moves chronologically, it does not simply assume that the oldest representations are the most offensive or, by the same logic, that more recent texts are necessarily more likely to be recognizably Native. For instance, Tahmahkera makes a point of discussing an unusual moment on the 1963 *The Beverly Hillbillies* episode called “Jed Cuts the Family Tree,” in which “Jed questions Pearl’s unchecked social hierarchy and implied white privilege”

(23). Similarly, a brief analysis of episodes of *Family Guy*, *The Simpsons*, and *South Park* illustrates that the recognizably Indian is alive and well in the twenty-first century.

The nuanced critiques that arise out of this critical framework are one of the text's great strengths. It would be easy enough to distinguish between "good" and "bad" representations of Native people: on one side of the line would be episodes of *I Love Lucy* and *The Flintstones* that feature characters trying to defend themselves against "savages," and on the other would be *Mixed Blessings*, the Aboriginal People's Television Network (APTN) sitcom featuring Indigenous producers, writers, and actors. But such a book might easily become both self-righteous and self-congratulatory without offering a substantial contribution to the discussion. Instead, Tahmahkera tackles murkier—and more interesting—questions of identity and representation. Even when discussing sitcoms that seem as though they could be easily divided into the binary categories of "Indian" or "Native," *Tribal Television* avoids demonizing or idealizing particular shows by situating them within a larger cultural and political landscape. Rather than simply condemning a particularly condescending and historically inaccurate episode of *The Brady Bunch*, for instance, Tahmahkera draws parallels between Mike Brady's problematic paternalism and the contemporary political rhetoric of Presidents Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, who espoused self-determination without following through in their policies. At the other end of the spectrum, *Mixed Blessings* is similarly situated within the narrative of both APTN's development as a network and head writer Drew Hayden Taylor's career as a Native humorist.

The convoluted and overlapping relationship between the Indian and the Native is most clearly illustrated in Chapter Three, "The Neo-Indian in *King of the Hill*." Here, Tahmahkera explores the on- and off-screen development of the character John Redcorn, a complicated process that has included not only the writers and producers of *King of the Hill* but also the increasing influence of Jonathan Joss, the White Mountain Apache actor who voices Redcorn. In early episodes, Redcorn clearly filled the role of the recognizably Indian: he appeared only occasionally and was identified as a New Age healer who shared sacred ceremonies with non-Native characters. As Joss urged writers to give Redcorn a bigger role within the "settler-dominated universe of *King of the Hill* . . . dueling processes of submission and resistance play[ed] out and overlap[ped] each other" (107). Ultimately, Tahmahkera situates Redcorn in an ambiguous space between the recognizably Indian and the recognizably Native. In exploring such nuances, *Tribal Television* illustrates the complexity of representation in popular culture; the finished product is an amalgam of information from many sources, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, sometimes accurate and tribally specific, and sometimes ill-informed and problematic.

Despite the success—or lack thereof—of any individual representation, Tahmahkera argues that decolonized viewing must also involve "recognizing Native Peoples as long time producers, receivers, and traders . . . of a multitude of pop cultural practices and texts spanning generations" (13). The range of examples included in *Tribal Television*, which range from non-Native actor Max Gail's efforts to include Native storylines on *Barney Miller* to Charlie Hill's rewriting of a Thanksgiving episode of *Roseanne*,

reinforce the text's depiction of "a televisual tribalogy that includes the Indigenous and their relations with the nonIndigenous" (25). Within this framework, Tahmahkera's lengthy analysis of John Redcorn's origins on *King of the Hill* contribute to a depiction of pop culture that blurs the lines between representations of the Indian and the Native in order to remind us that Native peoples are not simply victims of Hollywood but also active participants who retain agency—albeit rarely as equal partners—and have a voice in negotiating the "televisions," in Tahmahkera's terms, that ultimately appear on our screens.

Emphasizing the importance of Native voices not only in the creation of sitcoms but also within the text itself, *Tribal Television* draws on the work of contemporary scholars in Native Studies, such as Jodi Byrd and LeAnne Howe, to establish major theoretical concepts. In one of the most productive examples of this approach, Tahmahkera turns to Gerald Vizenor's definition of a simulation as "the absence of a tribal real," a concept that he applies to sitcom storylines that feature "guest-starring older male Indians [who] appear briefly and attempt to assert their agency before conveniently dying and leaving a temporary impact on settler characters" (19). Such characters may attempt to stand in for the authentically "Native," but, finally, they fail to demonstrate that they are "grounded in their contemporary familial and tribal ways of expressing indigeneity" (24).

Thanks to Tahmahkera's insightful analysis and cross-disciplinary approach to the topic, *Tribal Television* will appeal to audiences in both Native studies and critical media studies. Students of either field will appreciate the text's solid theoretical foundations, but it is also possible to follow Tahmahkera's argument with fairly little preparation in either area. Similarly, readers need not come to the text with an intimate knowledge of the sitcom in popular culture. Although audiences are likely to be familiar with at least some of the texts that are analyzed here, the easy balance of exposition and analysis welcomes readers of various backgrounds, including students working in multiple disciplines. Although much of the text consists of a critique of popular culture, *Tribal Television* never falls into the dangerous trap of shaming its audience. Tahmahkera makes it clear from the very beginning that he identifies, with Sherman Alexie, as a "sit-com kid" who has been deeply influenced by the material that he analyzes (xii). Perhaps because television is a collaborative medium, he never ends up shaking his finger at a particular actor, writer, or audience. Although the text certainly makes no excuses for the recognizably Indian, it remains focused instead on ways that the recognizably Native, from sitcoms like *Mixed Blessings* to digital media like the short videos produced by the 1491s, can respond to and replace such harmful representations. Ultimately, *Tribal Television* combines an emphasis on decolonized viewing and sitcom sovereignty with Tahmahkera's respect for and academically rigorous critique of his material in order to engage readers in a serious discussion of the sitcom.

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