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‘The best remedy ever offered to the public’¹: Representation and Resistance in the American Medicine Show

Like modern commercial television, 19th-century medicine showmen provided rural American audiences with ‘free’ professional entertainment in order to sell special remedies and medical treatments. With fierce competition in the medicine show business during this period, proprietors were frequently on the lookout for ways to draw in an audience and to substantiate their medicinal claims. One solution was to develop complex narratives around their goods, which were authenticated by adopting particular identities, like Indians, Quakers or Oriental Fakirs. Quite often these identities were constructed according to binary views, and drew on recognised stereotypes of these Others held by the public. In this article, I’m undertaking an analysis of John Healy and Charles Bigelow’s application of Native American images for their Kickapoo Indian medicine, which toured the US between 1881 and 1912. In this article I argue that in applying binary representations simultaneously, the Kickapoo medicine shows may not have simply validated widespread narrow perceptions of Native American cultures, but may have instead created a space where new knowledge about them could be articulated. Drawing on theories of representation and culture, the article shows that radical potential may have existed in these apparently oppressive performances, which may have offered some level of agency and political autonomy to those being represented. Jason Price is a Lecturer in Drama & Performance Studies in the School of English at the University of Sussex.

In popular entertainment, transmutability of character is more of a handicap than a virtue; audiences want an always-recognizable commodity, know what they’re going to see before they purchase a ticket.²

The medicine show was a travelling entertainment form that used speciality acts organised in a variety format around a sales pitch or lecture as a means of drawing in audiences to sell goods, primarily herbal

remedies, medical treatments, and cheap cure-alls. Whilst mountebanks and quack doctors were prevalent in the United States from the 18th century, the medicine show's heyday is generally acknowledged to be between 1870 and 1930.³ Although travelling companies performed in most American states, the favoured territories were the Midwest and South.⁴ Believing that audiences in these areas were more gullible, and therefore more inclined to buy their goods, touring patterns and circuits were organised according to seasonal harvests.⁵ Shows were often performed on vacant lots in towns and cities in temporary structures like 'airdromes' (a tent-like structure without a roof), tents, on the back of horse-drawn carriages, and later out of motorised vehicles.⁶ The shows performed during this period varied in size from a single pitchman to elaborate productions featuring over a hundred performers.⁷

Troupes in the late 19th century tended to adopt one of three primary identities for their shows: Indian, Quaker, or Oriental.⁸ As these groups were perceived by many to have healing insights, such identities were often used to help authenticate the pitchmen's medicinal claims. Like much of popular entertainment, the application of Other identities often catered to narrow perceptions of particular social groups, exploiting American society's scepticism towards non-white and foreign individuals.⁹ In the case of the Indian medicine shows, troupes sought not only to capitalise on their reputation as healers but, as Brooks McNamara argued, on "[...] the excitement of ritualized cowboys and Indians conflict [...]". Consequently, "they catered to the popular taste for romantic and sensational visions of the 'Indian troubles' that were making constant headlines during the [eighteen] eighties and nineties".¹⁰

Thus, the exploitation of stereotypes of Others was a staple of the medicine show during this period. Collectively, the applications of multiple identities, often in the same show, form a complex web of representations that served to appeal to audiences in order to sell goods. These representations, like the medicines and other goods sold, were commodified, mass-produced and widespread. Further, the travelling medicine show, its performative elements and goods, were licensed by local and state governments.¹¹ Hence, the stereotypes that medicine shows exploited, and the oppressions that they ambiguously validated for commercial gain, were also state-sanctioned.

Like many popular entertainment forms from this period, the content of the medicine show is often subjected to criticism for its representations of Others. This criticism is, of course, warranted: many variety performances were exclusively designed to ridicule for comic effect, certainly offensive to those being represented. Yet, some scholars have endeavoured to determine what other effects the material might have generated. Paul Distler, for instance, observed that the performance of Other social groups, whilst undoubtedly designed to ridicule, may have also helped the Other assimilate into American society. Because the representation serves as recognition of the Other, over time audiences came to accept that those being represented were present and unavoidable; audiences therefore became familiar with the Others and learned to accept them as part of their culture.¹² Writer and theatre practitioner Ann Anderson has argued in reference to minstrel performance, that it served as a

“safety valve for class tensions,” which allowed the “disenfranchised to challenge the social order in a sanctioned way.”¹³ Baz Kershaw has also addressed the possibilities of minstrelsy in his *The Radical in Performance*, where he argues that such performances were capable of generating ambiguity and uncertainty for audiences because of the way in which they were performed, e.g. through exaggerated physicality and voice, and comic effects like the black mask on a white face. Thus, the popular performance can “contribute to the creation of resistant autonomous subjects, especially through an engagement with systems of formalised power in an effort to open up a space for radical freedom”.¹⁴ If we look beyond the surface, therefore, we may find that some of the material in minstrel and medicine shows may have helped reshape attitudes about oppressed cultures.

This article seeks to contribute to this conversation by analysing the application of Native American images in John Healy and Charles Bigelow’s Kickapoo Indian medicine shows, which operated in the United States between 1881 and 1914.¹⁵ My analysis will consider the ways in which images of ‘real’ Native American bodies were juxtaposed in performance to sell Sagwa, a cure-all elixir which the purveyors claimed had been developed by the Kickapoo Indian tribe, and how these images were advanced, and in some ways contradicted by their publicity materials, which often featured the company’s unofficial mascot, a fictional Kickapoo Indian princess known as Little Bright Eye. Drawing on the work of Bhabha and Foucault, my analysis will consider what meanings these images were capable of generating, and to ask whether the conflation of the images generated any radical opportunities for those represented. In this context, radical refers to the potential of material (images or text) to serve as a counter-hegemonic tool which may facilitate certain freedoms, whether abstract or actual, for oppressed individuals. I argue that whilst many performances from this period were designed to ridicule others, and thus may be offensive to many, it also made audiences confront the stereotypes that they held and thus presented an opportunity to explore perceived differences in public openly. The objective here is not to determine the efficacy of the methods employed by troupes – as their ‘methods’ were unquestionably designed for the purpose of making money – but to theorise the location of radical spaces within their otherwise hegemonic and reductive approaches. In other words, I aim to show how radical freedoms might have emerged from apparently oppressive performances.

Ambivalence and National Identity

In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Michel Foucault uses the plague, and particularly the image of the leper, to explain how modern disciplinary systems were developed. The leper, observed as one who is contaminated, and thus abnormal, proved harmful to the system of power as a whole, and was consequently isolated from those who were identified as being healthy, or ‘normal’. Foucault explains:

The constant division between the normal and the abnormal, to which every individual is subjected, brings us back to our own time, by applying the binary branding and exile of the leper to quite different objects; the existence of a whole set of techniques and institutions for measuring, supervising and correcting the abnormal brings into play the disciplinary mechanisms to which the plague gave rise.¹⁶

Foucault then links the system of identification of the normal/abnormal and surveillance that arose out of the plague to Jeremy Bentham's model prison, the Panopticon.¹⁷ The panoptic system, which broadly includes any disciplinary institution – such as federal, state and local governments, churches, hospitals, prisons, and schools, and the microdisciplinary systems which ensure that these systems function effectively and according to the law – constantly surveys its users for system-harming behaviour, isolating those whose behaviour is deemed abnormal and providing them with 'corrective' training.¹⁸

The treatment of Native Americans by the US government is well documented, but due to its complexity difficult to contextualise briefly. Conflicts between Americans and Native Americans began almost as soon as the first European settlers arrived in North America in the 16th century. Until the American Revolution, wars, relocations, genocide, and enslavement were common, but it would not be until George Washington became president that a formal Indian policy was enacted.¹⁹ According to Michael Green and Theda Perdue, "[...] Washington's Indian policy committed the United States to acquire Indian-owned land and resources and to eradicate Indian cultures." They explain that this was achieved, "[u]sing federal officers and Christian mission organisations," whose task it was, "to educate Native people into becoming culturally Anglo-American".²⁰ In Foucault's terms, we might view the federal officers and Christian missions as aspects of the panoptic system designed to provide corrective training to the Native Americans.

By the 1820s, it became clear that stricter measures would be necessary to facilitate westward expansion, and in 1830 President Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act, which permitted the US government to negotiate treaties with Indian nations in exchange for land.²¹ The Indian Removal Act was responsible for the forced emigration of tens of thousands of Native peoples. One of the more well-known treaties which resulted from the Removal Act was the Treaty of New Echota, which saw the forced relocation of the Cherokee nation. Better known as the Trail of Tears, the process of emigration resulted in an estimated 4,600 Cherokee deaths.²²

Throughout the 19th century, conflicts between settlers, the US military and the Native Americans intensified, largely as a consequence of the removal programmes. Legislation passed throughout the century further established the Natives as Other. The Indian Appropriations Act of 1851, for instance, provided federal funding for dedicated reservations, which were necessary to house those that had been forced to emigrate. Later, the Appropriations Act of 1871 specified that the United States would no longer recognise Native nations as autonomous

political bodies. For over fifty years after the Appropriations Act of 1871, up to one third of all Native people officially had no nationality, and it would not be until President Calvin Coolidge signed the Indian Citizenship Act in 1924 that Native Americans were granted American citizenship.²³

Whilst not as aggressive as US governmental policy perhaps, the arts' role in furthering the *Otherness* of Native Americans should not be underestimated. The representations that appeared in medicine shows and other popular forms in the latter part of the 19th century were initially introduced and nurtured through literature. In her book *The Insistence of the Indian*, scholar Susan Scheckel explains that two literary approaches to the Native American had emerged in the early-19th century and were fortified throughout the rest of the century. The first approach was romantic, depicting the natives as noble, exotic, primitive peoples. The other was more sensational, depicting the Natives as savages an approach which deliberately played upon the fears that some Americans held of them.²⁴ In the former category we might include works such as Washington Irving's *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* (1819-20) and James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking* series (1823-27); in the latter, Francis Parkman's *The Conspiracy of Pontiac* (1851) and Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876). Each of these texts presents contradictory images of Native American cultures: as noble naturalists or as bloodthirsty savages. It perhaps goes without saying that these images were manufactured and nurtured according to wider public perceptions. They were, in other words, *ideal* images, in that they represented what was perceived as an ideal by their creators, largely white men. There is little middle ground to be found in the literary or performance histories of this period.

But it is the space that opens up between these images that may harbour the most radical potential. For instance, in applying Turner's concept of liminal/liminoid space,²⁵ Anne Norton has argued that the middle ground found between these polar images serves as critical space which facilitates a process of contemplation about real or perceived differences. Specifically, Norton explains in her *Reflections on Political Identity* (1988) that liminals, and the contemplation they provoke, may help foster a national identity. She explains that

Liminals serve as mirrors for nations. At once other and like, they provide the occasion for the nation to constitute itself through reflection upon its identity. Their likeness permits contemplation and recognition, their difference the abstraction of those ideal traits that will henceforth define the nation.²⁶

In other words, identifying in an image one's personal viewpoint is edifying and reassuring. Contrasting this with an opposing image, however, forces the viewer/reader to contemplate the difference between them. Not only might such negotiations contribute to a firmer understanding of difference, and potentially re-shape one's own viewpoint, but the recognition of difference contributes to the way nations come to collectively view themselves. Hence, in recognising our own view in relation to those of others', we may locate common ground amongst

the similarities and differences; on this common ground a collective identity can begin to develop.

Bhabha's concept of hybridity might also usefully be applied here.²⁷ Hybridity is 'an in-between space' that combines two or more cultures. The hybrid does not represent the development of a third, unique culture borne out of the merging of particular traits from the two primary cultures, but instead represents "[...] a process that creates new forms of knowledge about the relations between the combined cultures".²⁸ This hybrid space generates what Bhabha refers to as 'ambivalence', which is a consequence of friction caused by the alignment of binary opposites.²⁹

If we apply Turner and Bhabha's theories together, the idealised images serve as liminal points. The idealised images represent not just a means by which Americans could symbolically control Native American Indians, but reflect how they perceived aspects of their cultures. There are, however, sharp contrasts between the two images. The romantic appears to promote greater tolerance of the Native Americans, whilst the sensational very clearly supports the state's more aggressive tactics to eradicate Native cultures. When conflated, the images are unable to promote the view that they were designed to represent; instead, audiences are required to contemplate the validity of each. The space, then, between these two images might be viewed as an ambivalent space which may have encouraged audiences to contemplate the difference between the two images. "If Indians provided a crucial site of reflection on national identity," Sheckel observes, "they also represent that which had to be denied for a coherent image of the nation to be recognized."³⁰

As a licensed form of entertainment, the medicine show commodified and exploited the idealised images to audiences, providing them, superficially, with affirmation that their state's treatment, and the views they held of these people, were justified. And yet if we look at some of the techniques and approaches taken by medicine show companies during the late 19th century, it becomes clear that their application of images was not so straightforward. In the case of the Kickapoo Indian Medicine shows, for instance, real Native Americans were employed to enact scenes and perform behaviours according to the idealised images. But as the company hired real Native American performers, audiences would not only have had to confront the ideal images, but the reality of the Native American problem represented by the real bodies. Thus, three representations may have appeared simultaneously within a single performance. When conflated, the images do not simply reinforce one particular view, but create, if we return to Bhabha, an ambivalent space that may have encouraged audiences to think more critically about the views they held. As liminals, the real and idealised images may have created a space where not only a national identity could have been fostered, but where new knowledge about oppressed Others might have been forged. A closer examination of the practice of the Kickapoo Indian Medicine Company may shed further light on this issue.

The Kickapoo Indian Medicine Company

The Kickapoo Indian Medicine Company, founded by John Healy and Charles Bigelow in 1881, was one of the most successful medicine show companies of the late-19th century.³¹ It was also one that directly capitalised on the dual image of the Native American that persisted during this period. The company specialised in the selling of the cure-all elixir Sagwa, which they claimed was an ancient remedy that had been created and passed down for generations by the Kickapoo Indians.³² To substantiate these claims, every Kickapoo Indian Medicine Show would call upon its so-called Kickapoo Indian tribe, which consisted of Native American performers who were paid to take part in the performances. Of the eight hundred Indians Healy and Bigelow claimed to have employed for over one hundred Kickapoo-themed shows, none was actually Kickapoo; instead, they were made up of performers taken from many tribes, including New York Iroquois, Pawnees, Crees, Sioux, Blackfeet and Cherokees.³³ The real Kickapoo were sworn enemies of American settlers and, according to McNamara, “sulked on the barren Deep Fork Reservation in Indian Territory, which Healy and Bigelow’s advertising described as a veritable Garden of Eden inhabited by a race of benevolent primitive physicians”.³⁴

Like Buffalo Bill’s *Wild West* spectacles, actual Native Americans were incorporated into performance here in order to give credibility to the shows. In their study of Bill’s work, Scott Magelssen and Heidi Nees (2011) have argued that the use of ‘real’ Native American bodies in performance was an authenticating mechanism deployed to make the Wild West experience seem more ‘real’. They write that:

In such an environment where “actual” artifacts and bodies from “real-life” events could be seen in a performance space and “representational” artifacts and bodies from “performative” events could be seen in a real-life space, it is not surprising that audiences’ perceptions of authenticity could be shaped and manipulated [...] the blurred lines between “actual” and “performative,” serve to highlight how such ideas were used to attract and keep audiences’ attention.³⁵

Similarly, the Indians hired by the Kickapoo Indian Medicine Company could seemingly authenticate the show’s aesthetic and the fictional narrative that had been developed for its principal product, Sagwa. Healy and Bigelow claimed that Sagwa was “the Purest, Safest, and the Most Effectual Cathartic Medicine known to the public” and could ‘cure’ just about everything from constipation to a ‘deranged liver’.³⁶ As Sagwa was rumoured to consist of stale beer and aloes, such authenticating efforts were probably necessary.³⁷

In one afternoon an audience at a Kickapoo Indian Medicine show would see Native American performers perform a number of acts. According to Nevada Ned Oliver, a banjo player and ‘Indian agent’ for the company,³⁸ a typical Kickapoo show began on a bare stage framed by an oil-painted backdrop depicting a prairie scene. Braves from the fictional Kickapoo tribe entered and sat in a semi-circle on stage. One would stand and address the audience in

'Kickapoo', which was then translated by Oliver. Oliver would then make a speech about the merits of Sagwa, after which the tribe would beat their tribal drums. The audience were then called upon to purchase the elixir.³⁹ According to advertisements for the company, following the sale, audiences were treated to the following kinds of scenes:

Representing all Points of Interest in the Indian Country including Gold diggers crossing the Plains, Indians attacking the Train. Massacre of the Emigrants. Savage orgies over the scalps of their victims. Surprise and attack on the Indian Camps by General Custer. Home of the Kickapoo Tribe on the Washta [sic] River. Indian Squaws gathering Herbs to make Medicine.⁴⁰

Authentication, then, was performed for an audience in several ways. The audience would see Native American bodies and hear them speak Kickapoo (or something similar); they might observe a passive scene of a hyper-real Kickapoo habitat, where the performers gathered ingredients to make Sagwa; they would then see the Kickapoo massacring pioneers. Just as literature and news media had applied the Native American image in romantic and sensational ways, so did Healy and Bigelow. As many Americans would not have had first-hand experience of Native Americans, then why would they question the authenticity of a Kickapoo Indian medicine show?

Despite the authenticating function the Native American performers may have served, they created a unique problem exclusive to the Kickapoo shows. A typical medicine show would have consisted of variety acts made up of primarily white performers adopting stereotypical characteristics of other Others, such as black peoples, Jewish peoples, or women.⁴¹ Here, however, audiences were confronted with the real and manufactured images together. While the behaviours of the performing Native Americans imitated those of the stereotypes, their real bodies remained present. Unlike other performances where audiences could laugh or respond to the image of the Other knowing they were absent, the Kickapoo were there, or bodies that may have been easily mistaken for them were, and thus responses were likely contained. Whereas other performances presented an opportunity to laugh at the Other without their actual presence, thus serving as a kind of "safety valve for class tensions",⁴² the audience here could not 'enjoy' experiencing their idealised images without potentially causing offence to the real bodies performing for them. This suggests that audiences were confronted with the challenge of determining which image presented was the more accurate.

Not content, however, with the inclusion of actual Native Americans in their performances, Healy and Bigelow developed books and periodicals to promote their shows and substantiate their content. *The Indian Illustrated Magazine*, *Life and Scenes Among the Kickapoo Indians*, and *The Kickapoo Indian Dreambook*, among others, contained illustrated scenes of the Kickapoo Indians in their 'natural' habitat. These publications often depicted Little Bright Eye, a fictional

Kickapoo Indian Princess, introducing readers to domestic Kickapoo life, their culture and healing practices.⁴³ Little Bright Eye served as an 'in-between' figure for her audiences, who were most likely to be white men and their families. Unlike the braves used in the shows, Little Bright Eye was depicted as graceful, friendly and helpful. The following description of Little Bright Eye stems from one of Healy and Bigelow's publications:

Prairie flower of grace and splendour,
Little Bright Eye trips along!
Oh! Her glance so soft and tender,
Thrills us as the birdie's song!
O'er the wild and bounding prairie,
Speeding like a young gazelle,
Sunny hearted as a fairy,
Beams the maiden loved so well.⁴⁴

Little Bright Eye is thus not presented as a dangerous savage, or as a passive promoter of Sagwa, but is drawn according to the romantic image of the Native American. This harmless, romantic figure was more appropriate for the Victorian household than the sensationalised 'savages' depicted in their stage shows. In making their mascot female, Bigelow and Healy also aligned her with the image of the domestic female that persisted throughout most of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.⁴⁵

Using a female mascot, however, was not new, and Healy and Bigelow would have been aware of the successful medicine manufacturer Lydia Pinkham, a New England housewife who became famous for her Vegetable Compound, a remedy that claimed to treat "female complaints and weaknesses." Her image, which appeared on bottles of Vegetable Compound and in newspapers across the country, became an icon of "motherly Victorian countenance."⁴⁶ At the time of her death in 1883, two years after Healy and Bigelow started the Kickapoo Indian Medicine Company, Pinkham is said to have been the most famous woman in America.⁴⁷

Drawing on the more compassionate, civilised image of the Victorian woman that Pinkham had used, Little Bright Eye could possess those characteristics as well as be an exotic Other. Like Pinkham, Bright Eye could direct readers to the healing powers of Sagwa and other Kickapoo products that might keep the household healthy. Also like Pinkham, Little Bright Eye encouraged readers to write to her for medical advice. Female readers could, for example, write in and receive a special book, authored supposedly by little Bright Eye herself, about their special 'lady problems'.⁴⁸

When considered together, there is an obvious contradiction in Healy and Bigelow's application of Native American images. Within the same show Native Americans were seen massacring pioneers, losing mock battles, and calmly validating an orator's tale about 'their' special remedy. Little Bright Eye, on the other hand, was a fictional Kickapoo authority, a princess and a compassionate

medical advisor. Outside the performance space Little Bright Eye functioned to help audiences establish trust for the Kickapoo tribe by deconstructing readers' preconceptions about Indian savagery, to authenticate the company's 'remedies', and to generate interest in the Kickapoo more generally. The puzzling conflation of images appears to suggest that the Kickapoo wanted the white man either healthy or dead.

But opacity, in this instance, was probably necessary. In isolation neither image would have satisfied the views held by audiences at this time. Because it was important that an authentic aesthetic be generated, both had to be applied simultaneously in order to satisfy those views. If one could not see the Indians acting as they were 'supposed' to, how could one believe that their remedies were authentic? Savagery was inappropriate for the household, and thus Little Bright Eye proved a useful figure to appeal to domestic sensibilities. It was important that audiences could believe that the Native Americans were both dangerous and harmless; murderers as well as healers. Such dichotomies were necessary to validate the company's fictional narrative.

Thus, Healy and Bigelow's practice did not validate the sensational or romantic image of the Native American, but in a sense presented a case for the validity of both. In the absence of an authoritative image, audiences were encouraged to think through the differences between the polar images; that is, their ideal image, which represented their view of Native Americans, and those that were less ideal. If we return to Bhabha's concept of hybridity, we could view this process of negotiation as one facilitated by the friction stirred by the aligned images, where the space between them was filled with ambivalence rather than certainty. In the ambivalent space audiences were encouraged to negotiate between the accuracy of each image, with "their difference the abstraction of those ideal traits"⁴⁹ that each image contained in isolation. As Kershaw has noted, this blurring "[...] destabilises the modernist binaries that upon which racist oppression depends"⁵⁰ and thus it may hold the potential for some form of radical freedom.

Further negotiations would have been facilitated by the presence of Native American bodies. Unlike other performances, wherein a performer adopts behaviours of particular Others, in the Kickapoo shows those being represented were representing themselves. In the presence of reality, the responses typical of variety performance, such as laughter, amusement, or awe, may have been muted. Rather, the presence of real bodies may have resulted in the audience being more critical of the issues posed by the images than was typical of popular performances. Their presence, moreover, made the denial of the issues that Native Americans posed in reality extremely difficult, and facilitated a process whereby audiences had to negotiate the tensions of their manufactured images in front of actual Native Americans. It was in this space – the ambivalent and uncertain space which the conflated images generated – that perceptions were unable to be completely affirmed or denied, and thus a certain level of freedom for the Native American from the narrow perceptions held of them may have been found.

In the case examined here, radical freedom may have emerged from two primary locations. The first, as Kershaw observes, concerned destabilising the binary images of the Native American. Rather than lending weight to one particular view/image, the performance and promotional materials apparently gave equal weight to several. Thus, not only did audiences have to negotiate between the validity of the dual representations, but had to do so before performers that could, at any moment, prove that the view they held was right or wrong. Secondly, the images failed to validate the American government's handling of Native American cultures during this period. Had the Kickapoo shows only depicted violent scenes, they would have helped promote the state's actions. However, in electing to brand and promote a product with Native American images and narrative, the company could not afford to give weight to one particular view. Consequently, Healy and Bigelow's practice may have harboured radical potential by destabilising polar images/views of the Native American. Through this process, new knowledge about one's views on the issue could be formed, and questions about the state's treatment of Native American cultures raised. So it appears that within the framework of an apparently oppressive practice, an opportunity for audiences to evaluate the issues that Native Americans presented more critically could be found.

Conclusions

The medicine show, like many popular entertainments during the 19th century, capitalised on images of Others in order to satisfy audience perceptions and to help sell goods. As licensed entertainment, the medicine show became a vehicle of the state to reinforce legislative oppression and thus stabilise its power. Had the performances been constructed in accordance with particular social stereotypes, and simply reinforced them, then such shows may have been successfully able to do this. However, the representations offered either to authenticate its goods and/or serve as entertainment, did more than this. In some cases, bombarding audiences with multiple representations of a particular social group, like the Native Americans in Healy and Bigelow's shows, made it difficult for a cohesive, definitive view of the subject to emerge. Rather, the images destabilised each other and the views they represented. The fissure thus created by the conflation of images had tremendous possibility. As an ambivalent and liminal space, it encouraged reflection upon the merits of one's own view as opposed to the others presented, which might have generated new knowledge about, in this case, a political issue or social group. As a consequence of this critical process, questions may have developed about the state's oppressive policies and thus its objective to stabilise its power through a licensed arts practice was not entirely met.

The medicine show was at its most popular at the turn of the 20th century and gradually lost favour after that. Ironically, part of its demise was as a consequence of legislation. In 1906 President Theodore Roosevelt signed into law the Pure Food and Drug Act which began to monitor the contents of

medicines more closely. Further legislation would come, and by 1936 thirty-nine states had passed laws regulating drugs.⁵¹ Faced with fines for falsely advertising their goods and serious competition from radio and other media, the medicine show slowly went out of business. One could still see a performance, however, as late as the 1960s, when the last of the big shows closed in 1964.⁵² The official end of the Kickapoo Indian Medicine Company, however, came in 1912 when Bigelow moved to England, where he began selling similar products under the name Kimco (an acronym of the Kickapoo Indian Medicine Company).⁵³ Healy had left the company more than ten years before, selling his share to Bigelow and immigrating to Australia.⁵⁴ Sagwa, however, continued to sell in drug stores well into the 1920s.⁵⁵

Whether or not the Kickapoo Indian Medicine Show or any of its imitators helped change perceptions about Native Americans through their performance is debatable. My suggestion here is that it may have been a possibility. This article hopefully facilitates a dialogue about the possibilities of 19th-century American popular entertainment that looks beyond how obviously offensive it was when examined in a contemporary context. Rather, I hope it encourages others to look beyond the surface and consider what else the literature and performance techniques from this period might reveal about systems of power, cultural perceptions, and oppression.

What we do know, however, is that the 20th century brought a period of relative peace for the Native Americans. The Indian Citizenship Act of 1924, discussed earlier, granted those who had not already become citizens the opportunity to do so, and along with citizenship came the right to vote and run for political office. But it would not be until the twenty-first century that the US would officially acknowledge its mistreatment of Native Americans. In December 2009, buried, perhaps ironically, in the defence budget for 2010, an official apology appeared:

the United States, acting through Congress...recognizes that there have been years of official depredations, ill-conceived policies, and the breaking of covenants by the Federal Government regarding Indian tribes.⁵⁶

The apology included a list of what the current US government believed were particularly ill-conceived policies, including the Removals Act of 1830. It then went on to clarify, however, that the government would not be willing to offer financial compensation for any wrongdoings, nor would it be willing to support lawsuits by those who believed they had been wronged by the government's policies.⁵⁷

¹ This line is taken from an advertisement for Hamlin's Wizard Oil, a product developed by John Hamlin's Wizard Oil Company that was founded in Chicago in the 1870s. Hamlin claimed his oil could 'cure' all kinds of aches and sprains and could safely be used on cattle. See Brooks McNamara, *Step Right Up* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1976), 70.

² Clifford Ashby and Suzanne De Pauw May, *Trouping Through Texas: Harley Sadler and His Tent Show*, (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green Popular Press, 1982), 2.

³ Although medicine shows continued to be performed until 1960, for example, Milton Bartok's Bardex show.

⁴ McNamara, *Step Right Up*, 48.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Brooks McNamara, "Popular Entertainment," in Vol. 2 of *The Cambridge History of American Theatre*, ed. Don B. Wilmet and Christopher Bigsby, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), 396.

⁷ Numerous examples of the kinds of shows and their size can be found in McNamara, *Step Right Up*, and in Ann Anderson, *Snake Oil, Hustlers and Hambones: The American Medicine Show* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, Inc, 2004).

⁸ Violet McNeil, *Four White Horses and a Brass Band* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1947), 53.

⁹ Brooks McNamara, "The Indian Medicine Show," in *Educational Theatre Journal*, 23:4 (Dec., 1971): 431-445.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ See McNamara *Step Right Up*, 23 and McNeil *Four White Horses*, 43. McNeil's account is particularly interesting. Throughout her memoirs, she often describes the process of obtaining licences, also known as 'readers'. Frequently these were obtained through some form of deception.

¹² Paul Distler, "Racial Comedy in Vaudeville and Burlesque" in *American Popular Entertainment: Papers and Proceedings of the Conference on the History of American Popular Entertainment*, (London: Greenwood Press, 1977), 38.

¹³ Anderson, *Snake Oil*, 76.

¹⁴ Baz Kershaw, "Chapter 4: The Shadow of Oppression: Performance, the panopticon and ethics," in *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard* (London: Routledge, 1999), 154.

¹⁵ McNamara, *Step Right Up*, 79, 130.

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin Books, 1977), 198.

¹⁷ Ibid., 200.

¹⁸ Ibid., 211, 223.

¹⁹ Michael D. Green and Theda Perdue, "Native American History" in *A Companion to 19th-Century America*, ed. William L. Barney, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 210.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ "Indian Removal Act" in *The Library of Congress Web Guides*, Accessed 14 August 2011, <http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/ourdocs/Indian.html>.

²² Logan, Charles Russell (1997). *The Promised Land: The Cherokees, Arkansas, and Removal, 1794-1839*, (Little Rock, AK: Arkansas Historic Preservation Program), 51.

²³ For a very detailed overview of the treaties generated by the US government in response to Native Americans, please see Elmer F. Bennett, *Federal Indian Law*, (Clark, NJ: The Law Book Exchange, 2008), 164-212. Information about the treaties discussed in this paragraph has been taken from this chapter.

²⁴ Susan Scheckel, *The Insistence of the Indian: Race and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century American Culture*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP), 8.

²⁵ See Victor Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage," in *The Forest of Symbols* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967).

²⁶ Anne Norton, *Reflections on Political Identity* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 54.

²⁷ See Homi K. Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990) and *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

²⁸ Kershaw, "The Shadow of Oppression," 146.

²⁹ Bhabha, *Nation and Narration*, 112.

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- ³⁰ Scheckel, *Insistence*, 12.
- ³¹ McNamara, *Step Right Up*, 84.
- ³² McNamara, "The Indian Medicine Show," 431.
- ³³ McNamara, *Step Right Up*, 92, 94.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 94.
- ³⁵ Scott Magelssen and Heidi Nees, "'Real Live' Indian": Sitting Bull's Performance of Self in Buffalo Bill's Wild West" in *Popular Entertainment Studies*, 2:1 (2011), 29-30, accessed May 23, 2011, <https://nova.ojs.newcastle.edu.au/ojs/index.php/pes/article/viewFile/34/26>.
- ³⁶ Kickapoo advertisement in McNamara, *Step Right Up*, 82.
- ³⁷ McNeil, *Four White Horses*, 53.
- ³⁸ McNamara *Step Right Up*, 81.
- ³⁹ N.T. Oliver (as told to Wesley Scout), "Med Show," in *Saturday Evening Post*, 14 Sept. 1929, 169.
- ⁴⁰ Kickapoo in McNamara, *Step Right Up*, 98.
- ⁴¹ McNamara has identified some of the more popular stereotypes featuring in variety acts in this period include: Irish as 'drunks'; blacks as 'thieves'; Jews as 'greedy and devious'; and women as "blatant sex objects, physical grotesques, shrewish wives, termagant mothers-in-law, and sinister gold diggers". See McNamara "Popular Entertainment", 152-4.
- ⁴² Anderson, *Snake Oil*, 76.
- ⁴³ McNamara, *Step Right Up*, 88.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 87.
- ⁴⁵ There has been much written about the roles of women during the 19th century. A good overview of scholarship in this area can be found in Laura Edwards "Gender and the Changing Roles of Women," in *The Companion to 19th Century America*, ed. William L. Barney (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 223-237.
- ⁴⁶ Anderson, *Snake Oil*, 36.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 36-38.
- ⁴⁸ McNamara *Step Right Up*, 88.
- ⁴⁹ Norton, *Reflections*, 54.
- ⁵⁰ Kershaw, "The Shadow of Oppression," 143.
- ⁵¹ Anderson, *Snake Oil*, 157-8.
- ⁵² McNamara, *Step Right Up*, 157.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, 128-9
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 129.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 130.
- ⁵⁶ John D. McKinnon, "U.S. Offers An Official Apology to Native Americans," *The Wall Street Journal*, Accessed: 15 August 2011, <http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2009/12/22/us-offers-an-official-apology-to-native-americans/>
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*