

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

When History Is Myth: Genocide and the Transmogrification of American Indians

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2wj6q05d>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 29(2)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Colwell-Chanthaphonh, Chip

Publication Date

2005-03-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

COMMENTARY

When History Is Myth: Genocide and the Transmogrification of American Indians

CHIP COLWELL-CHANTHAPHONH

One afternoon, in August of 1881, the Sixth Cavalry of the US Army was nervously setting up camp along Cibecue Creek after arresting Nockaydelklinne, a medicine man accused of stirring unrest among Apaches newly settled on small reservations in Central Arizona.¹ Ordered to “capture or kill” Nockaydelklinne, the soldiers had boldly entered Nockaydelklinne’s quarters and told the old man that he would come with them. Nockaydelklinne acquiesced—but soon hundreds of Apache warriors surrounded the cavalry, incensed that he was seized without cause. Shots were fired, and men fell on both sides; a soldier shot Nockaydelklinne point blank. Later, seeing the medicine man still miraculously alive, a soldier decapitated him. The Eastern press reported that Indians massacred 117 men.² The final count was six. For months afterward, Apaches broke from the reservations, reoccupying their traditional lands. They were incessantly hunted by the army—killed or forced to return. The citizens of Arizona were outraged that these Indians dared to exceed the boundaries of the land assigned to them. A century later, scores of texts chronicling the battle of Cibecue have been published. Yet nearly every article and book simply recounts the story from the standpoint of the Euro-American participants.³ The voice of the Apache victims, their experiences and perspectives, has been utterly and almost completely silenced.

* * *

Chip Colwell-Chanthaphonh is an anthropologist at the Center for Desert Archaeology, a private nonprofit organization in Tucson, Arizona.

The colonial occupation of North America is one of the greatest known land thefts in human history. In 1491, Native peoples in the area that now comprises the United States controlled more than 3,500,000 square miles; by 1981, they controlled less than 79,000 square miles.⁴ The acts of removal and assimilation entailed in this dramatic shift include a range of stratagems, from the overt methods of warfare and slavery to the veiled practices of boarding schools and religious missions.⁵ Among the first to define genocide, Raphaël Lemkin conceived of such undertakings as the coordinated annihilation of a group of people through “a composite of different acts of persecution or destruction.”⁶ These attacks, from Lemkin’s view, involve deadly means as well as nonlethal violence that threaten social and political institutions to subvert the security, autonomy, and dignity of a people.⁷ Certainly, the vast story of North America’s colonial past is made up of a multiplicity of stories—a complex tale of local adaptation, triumphant and failed alliances, idiosyncratic personalities, greed and hunger, and everything else human.⁸ But the ultimate result was a staggering loss of land and the collapse of a way of life formed over the millennia.⁹ Thus genocide in North America became the means to achieve dispossession—the implicit and explicit aims of territorial appropriation. Murder, however, is rarely accomplished with a clean conscience.

Those who perpetrate genocide need an explanation for their actions, a system of justification to provoke the social machinery of brutality and ameliorate the collective guilt that follows.¹⁰ While murder, the deliberate execution of another, entails annihilation, killing can serve as a peculiar form of purification if the victim is not blameless. A vast gulf stands between the untimely death of a saint and a tyrant. The devices of genocide therefore transform innocent victims into culpable predators—the oppressed are made the oppressors. When this transformation occurs, victims become the source of violence while simultaneously providing a solution to rage. That is, through their death, victims of genocide resolve the unrest they are believed to have created.¹¹ However, inverting positions is not unproblematic; it requires the transmogrification—the radical and fantastic alteration—of the innocents such that their deaths serve a just cause. Their murderers are then only fulfilling a sacred duty.

The genocide of American Indians over the last five centuries has been documented by the persecutors themselves in myriad historical media: diaries, audiotapes, autobiographies, photographs, books, essays, and newspaper accounts. Although many authors may believe their stories merely convey an objective reality, recent scholarship has illustrated that writers construct history more than uncover it. Writers who describe the past actually fashion history by modifying a chronicle of real events into an intelligible narrative prose; writers must necessarily include and exclude incidents, highlight certain causes, and conceal certain effects.¹² Yet first-person texts, completed by the very people who participated in murder and dispossession, are rarely simple narratives of self-defense, confession, or entertainment as one might expect. Instead, it seems, colonialist histories seek to establish a mythic narrative that gives order and meaning to the world. Through real

events these myths of genocide craft heroes and villains, delimit good and evil, and explain the genuine depths and imagined ideals of humanity.

* * *

One morning, in April of 1871, a confederacy of Euro-Americans, Mexican Americans, and Tohono O'odham warriors killed and enslaved scores of western Apaches who had surrendered to the US Army at Camp Grant, situated in the San Pedro Valley of southern Arizona. The total number of those massacred is still not fully known but probably reached more than one hundred people—almost all unarmed women and children. Eight years after the slaughter, a principal leader and participant, William S. Oury, published an account of the killings in Tucson's local paper, the *Weekly Star*.¹³ Then, in 1885, Oury gave a lecture on the holocaust to the Society of Arizona Pioneers, Tucson's fledgling historical society. In both of these essays, Oury explains that he instigated the killings because the Apaches at Camp Grant had not in fact capitulated but were using the fort as a cover for raiding and depredations.

Although Apaches were killed at a rate of thirteen for every one soldier in southern Arizona during this time, Oury contends that “the Indians had held a carnival of murder and plunder in all our settlements until our people were appalled and almost paralyzed.”¹⁴ Oury lists the deaths of a handful of citizens, and then argues that since these people were clearly—although today it is not clear at all—killed by Apaches, killing any Apache is an act of just vengeance. Noticeably, this discourse is tied to settling Apache country. Oury observes that because settlers in the San Pedro Valley so feared for their lives, they “at last resolved to abandon their crops in the fields and fly with their wives and little ones to Tucson for safety”; these events, in turn, led “to that glorious and memorable morning of April 30th 1871, when swift punishment was dealt out to those red handed butchers and they were wiped from the face of the earth.”¹⁵

Through writing this history, Oury has consequently sought radically to transform his victims into the aggressors. Native peoples become invaders while colonialists become indigenes. Oury was not alone in these attitudes, of course—dozens of writings from his time take an identical line. For example, a week after the massacre, John Wasson, the editor of the *Arizona Citizen*, wrote:

This slaughter is justified on the grounds of self-defense. At the rate San Pedro, Sonoita and Santa Cruz valleys were being depopulated, it was either this course, or death to the remainder of the farmers, teamsters, and mail riders. . . . To say this instance shows a spirit of barbarism in our people, would be a gross slander, and we trust that the weekly reports of murders for, we may say, years ago in Arizona, and their number increasing, will be enough to convince all beyond our readers, that the wonder is not so much that this killing occurred now and as it did, as that it was so long delayed. There never was a murder committed in self-defense with stronger provocation or better grounds of legal justification, than in the case under consideration.¹⁶

In contrast to Wasson's piece here, Oury's essays come not a week after the massacre but years later, in 1879 and 1885. In other words, Oury's writings are not impulsive; they are not merely a self-defense and certainly they are not an apology.

As the years passed, writers of this history adopt and reiterate Oury's thesis of justified murder and Indian savagery. Francis H. Goodwin, presenting a paper to the Society of Arizona Pioneers in 1887, provides a malicious attack on Haské Bahnzin, an Apache leader who was still farming on the San Pedro River at the time—although a mob from Tucson ran him off his land a year later.¹⁷ Goodwin fallaciously accuses Haské Bahnzin of nearly every murder in southern Arizona, and concludes, "We feel like doing to him as he has done to so many of our friends in the past. His victims are countless. The widow and the orphan, still mourn for the dear ones slain by him. Whilst he in all the pride of his savage manhood [no] doubt recounts around his wigwam fire the deeds done by his mighty arm."¹⁸ Over the decades rafts of books, articles, and essays have appeared, yet almost every single text recycles the events from the perspectives of the Euro-American participants.¹⁹ Even an article published in 2002 in the popular magazine *Arizona Highways* absurdly frames the massacre at Camp Grant in reference to a murder Haské Bahnzin allegedly committed in revenge *after* witnessing his family and band ruthlessly slaughtered at Camp Grant.²⁰ While we might tolerate writers' dependence on biased sources if they were the only ones available, in fact, an array of Apache oral traditions and histories are known.²¹ But these are not used; they are not referenced. The event is only told and retold from the viewpoint of the Euro-American murderers turned victims.

* * *

In writing about the massacre, Oury did not engage in telling an objective and dispassionate story. Yet, as mentioned, his essays were not really a self-defense because they came years after such a defense would have been most necessary. Oury, too, was not writing a confession because plainly he did not admit any guilt and he sought no absolutions. And in writing about his participation in death, Oury was not engaged in an act of entertainment or amusement; both the length at which he wrote about these things and his sense of morality, however skewed, suggest that even he recognized the massacre as grandly terrifying. Surely even he read in the local papers a month after the massacre that President Grant labeled the attack "purely murder."²²

Instead, Oury was forging a myth to order and understand the world. Using real events (the massacre) and the channels of history (a local historical society), he sought to establish a narrative that could explain how thousands of Americans could displace thousands of American Indians and, by extension, how he himself could kill. Later writers, using Oury's myth, which itself was based on the myth of manifest destiny and Euro-American entitlement, could then recount the narrative in a kind of ritual telling to reinforce the beliefs that Americans are good and those who impede them are evil.²³ This, after all, could explain why so many Americans swim in affluence while

Indians suffer on reservations. The history of genocide is a myth to transmogrify the oppressed into the oppressor—to discover heroes and villains, to fix good and evil, to justify our place in the world. The historical text becomes the very site at which these radical transformations take place and the rituals of myth are repeated.²⁴

The irony, too, should not be lost that generations of scholars and critics have said that Native people's histories are only myths. Remarkable, then, that historical texts should suffer from the same disorder.

Notes

1. Of the many texts on this moment in history, see Sidney B. Brinckerhoff, "Aftermath of Cibecue: Court Martial of the Apache Scouts, 1881," *The Smoke Signal* 36 (1978): 121–36; Charles Collins, *Apache Nightmare: The Battle at Cibecue Creek* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999); Charles Collins, "On the March with Major Tupper's Command: John F. Finerty Reports the Cibecue Campaign of 1881," *Journal of Arizona History* 40, no. 3 (1999): 233–66; John H. Monnett, "Prelude to the Battle of Cibicu," *Cochise Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (1971): 12–27; John H. Monnett, "The Battle of Cibicu: An Episode of the Apache Indian Wars," *The Trail Guide* 14, no. 2 (1969): 2–20; Ralph Hendrick Ogle, *Federal Control of the Western Apaches, 1848–1886* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1949).

2. "Shot Down by Indians," *New York Times*, 4 September 1881.

3. An ethnohistory project entitled "Community Preservation and Interpretation of the Cibecue Battle," currently in progress and headed by John R. Welch in collaboration with the White Mountain Apache tribe, will soon at least partly resolve this predicament. For two exceptions in the extant literature, see Grenville Goodwin and Charles R. Kaut, "A Native Religious Movement among the White Mountain and Cibecue Apache," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 10 (1954): 385–404; William B. Kessel, "The Battle of Cibecue and Its Aftermath: A White Mountain Apache's Account," *Ethnohistory* 21, no. 2 (1974): 123–34.

4. Ward Churchill, *Indians Are Us? Culture and Genocide in Native North America* (Monroe: Common Courage Press, 1994), 40.

5. David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875–1928* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997); Edward H. Spicer, *Cycles of Conquest: The Impact of Spain, Mexico, and the United States on the Indians of the Southwest, 1533–1960* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1962); George E. Tinker, *Missionary Conquest: The Gospel and Native American Cultural Genocide* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

6. Raphaël Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1944), 79–95.

7. Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonassohn, *The History and Sociology of Genocide: Analyses and Case Studies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 9.

8. Stephen Cornell, *The Return of the Native: American Indian Political Resurgence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 218.

9. Ward Churchill, *A Little Matter of Genocide: Holocaust and Denial in the Americas, 1492 to the Present* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1997); Ward Churchill, *Struggle for the Land: Indigenous Resistance to Genocide, Ecocide and the Expropriation in Contemporary*

America (Monroe: Common Courage Press, 1993); David E. Stannard, *American Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

10. Herbert Hirsch, *Genocide and the Politics of Memory: Studying Death to Preserve Life* (Chapel Hill: University of Carolina Press, 1995), 128; Ervin Staub, *The Roots of Evil: The Origins of Genocide and Other Group Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 249.

11. René Girard, *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1986).

12. Michael Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996); David J. Weber, *Myth and the History of the Hispanic Southwest* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988); Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

13. William S. Oury, "Historical Truth: The So-Called 'Camp Grant Massacre' of 1871," *Arizona Weekly Star*, 3 July 1879.

14. William S. Oury, "Article on Camp Grant Massacre," MS 0639, 1885, Arizona Historical Society, Tucson, 13.

15. Oury, "Article on Camp Grant," 14.

16. John Wasson, "Bloody Retaliation," *Arizona Citizen*, 6 May 1871.

17. John P. Clum, "Es-kin-in-zin," *New Mexico Historical Review* 4, no. 1 (1929): 1–27.

18. Francis H. Goodwin, "A Paper on Eskiminzin and His Band of Apache Indians, 1867 to 1871," MS 0297, 1887, Arizona Historical Society, Tucson.

19. Chip Colwell-Chanthaphonh, "The Camp Grant Massacre in the Historical Imagination," *Journal of the Southwest* 45, no. 3 (2003): 249–69.

20. Leo W. Banks, "Unfriendly Fire: The Killing of a Farmer by an Apache Chief Speaks Volumes About the Desperate Times of 1871," *Arizona Highways* (June 2002): 20–23.

21. Chip Colwell-Chanthaphonh, "Western Apache Oral Histories and Traditions of the Camp Grant Massacre," *American Indian Quarterly* 27, no. 3/4 (2003): 639–66.

22. John Wasson, "Criminal Ignorance," *Arizona Citizen*, 24 June 1871.

23. To return again to the example of the 1881 battle at Cibecue, contemporary historians continue to use language that frames Apaches as aggressors and the army as defenders. Charles Collins, in *Apache Nightmare*, recurrently refers to Apaches as "the hostiles," a term used by nineteenth-century army officials to describe Indians who did not submit to government authority. A "hostile" by definition is one who is an aggressor or a "principal character in opposition to the protagonist or hero of a narrative or drama," according to *The American Heritage Dictionary*. In this way Apaches are subtly made to be the assailants and provokers while the army is portrayed as the hero of an unfolding drama. In the case of the 1881 battle, it clearly was the army that recklessly provoked the conflict, and then ruthlessly pursued Apaches—scared families, innocent men, women, and children—until they surrendered, completely and finally. Yet the army soldiers and officers are steadfastly characterized as the opposite of "the hostiles." See, for instance, Collins, *Apache Nightmare*, 92.

24. The point is not that every historian engages in this process of myth making but rather that those who do create such myths engage in history.