

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Imagining Geronimo: An Apache Icon in Popular Culture. By William M. Clements.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8471248c>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 38(3)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Clark, D. Anthony

Publication Date

2014-06-01

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/>

Imagining Geronimo: An Apache Icon in Popular Culture. By William M. Clements. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2013. 320 pages. \$39.95 cloth.

Retired Arkansas State University folklorist William Clements' *Imagining Geronimo* chronicles appearances of Geronimo in press accounts, fiction writing, cinema, portraiture, and debates regarding his conversion to Christianity, as well as at Theodore Roosevelt's inauguration and world fairs. Extending the earlier work of the late University of Texas El Paso folklorist C. L. Sonnichsen (1986) and University of New Mexico cultural history Paul Andrew Hutton (2011), Clements unearths "a nebulous figure from American history who . . . has spoken to a range of opinions and mindsets" (11). Clements contends "that the image of Geronimo has been far from static since the mid-1870s" (4); "the evolution of his image," he suggests, "has not been straightforward or linear" (55). Jam-packed with Geronimo appearances from the mid-1870s through the second decade of the twenty-first century, *Imagining Geronimo* likely is a key volume to which readers hungry for Western lore will turn for time immemorial.

Among Clements' more interesting chapters is "Toward the Canonization of Geronimo," in which he surveys media appearances of Geronimo both before and after his passing in 1909. In regional and national press coverage of the late-nineteenth-century Southwest "Indian wars," Clements finds the familiar storyline of red devils on the warpath, incompetent and savior white leaders, and a defeated people worthy of civilization's respect. From press accounts Clements shifts to examine Indian memories of Geronimo. His designation of these as "Native American opinion" seemingly authorize him to repeat slights and smears of Geronimo, and, from the "fairly uncontaminated perspective . . . of Narcissus Duffy Gayton," specifically allow him to recap a scathing indictment (31–35). Transitioning from print media accounts and denunciations of the living man in memory, Clements next locates representations of treachery and goodness that appeared long after Geronimo's death in 1909. Doing so, he recaps a grand narrative of American culture that ends with Geronimo's "canonization." In a survey that includes Eve Ball's interviews with Chiricahua individuals in the 1950s, various "critics of injustices in American society" (47), Chris Eyre and Sherman Alexie's 1998 *Smoke Signals*, the 1940 cries of US Army paratroopers that have been subsequently repeated by children at play and in the 2011 motion picture *Adventures of Tintin*, and the regard shown Geronimo in 2009 by the US Congress one hundred years after his passing, Clements finds a "revisionism . . . as extreme . . . as that which it challenges" (42). Closing the "Toward the Canonization of Geronimo" chapter with reaction to conflating Geronimo with Osama bin Laden in the 2010 US military

raid on bin Laden's Pakistani home allows Clements to suggest "the continuing flexibility of his image" (52) and that mixed opinion about Geronimo intimates that Geronimo's malleability will continue to oscillate unabated between cruelty and virtue (55).

In gathering in one place so many Geronimo appearances from so many cultural genres, the author has accomplished a herculean feat. Yet Clements' book leaves me wishing for more and different analysis. To his credit, he resists the common practice of "settling" the matter of whether Geronimo was a good or bad "Indian." This finding is among the volume's strengths, but it also reveals Clements' analytical limitations. Working largely from the metanarrative of consensus history and a 1950s myth-and-symbol approach to cultural analysis amended for the popular, Clements recovers in popular Geronimo appearances recurring themes in the history and popular culture of "America." As evidenced by a site of investigation that he designates synonymously as "the American imagination" (14), "mainstream consciousness" (57), "the post-colonial imagination" (272), and, most tellingly, "the Euro-American mind" and "the American myth" (155), this is an analysis of popular culture and media that assumes the metaphoric quality of a single phenomenon into which he integrates the conflicting appearances of Geronimo. Refracting Clements' findings of Geronimo appearances through a unified multiracial and multicultural "American" lens renders them symbolic interactions largely empty of any relation to power. This is most clear when he seamlessly assimilates "Native American opinion" into the American mind and imagination (31).

To build upon *Imagining Geronimo*, analyses of Geronimo appearances might take up and extend cultural historian Susan Scheckel's analysis of American nationalism in *The Insistence of the Indian* (1998). Scheckel found in cultural texts a white American nationalism that, in its earliest manifestation, mediated the violence targeting Indians as obstacle to its own realization. In certain ways akin to the Indian fashioned during the closing decades of the nineteenth century, Scheckel's Indian is absorbed in the earliest construct of American national identity, when the United States simultaneously dispossessed Indian nations of land and both enslaved and exploited "free" labor were dominant forms of capitalist accumulation. Thus, extending Scheckel both in terms of time and scope, subsequent analyses of "Geronimo" might take up the political economies created from the relation between national industrialized and financial global capital and federal, tribe, and state government policies. It is the place of the Indian in these relations where popular appearances of Geronimo likely mediate tensions to reconstitute various imagined communities, including those that identify with and against capitalism. In light of the current historical moment and political economy of financialized global capital, for instance, cultural analyses of "Geronimo" could explore how popular culture

provides the grounds on which the wellsprings of coercive and ideological power are reimagined, regenerated, and resisted in popular culture expression and disseminated through social media and the variety of ways Indian tribes both leverage federal recognition and oppose federal Indian control law.

Take the example of *Geronimo E-KIA: A Poem by the 1491s*, performance art by a self-situated sketch comedy group (2010). Clements' positioning of *Geronimo E-KIA* in a unified American mind leaves him observing the performance simply as another mythical, symbolic Geronimo that represents the tradition of his revisionist extremism in the American imagination. Alternatively, widening the scope and site of analysis from a unified American mind to a prevailing political economy brings into view the logics of unencumbered symbolic assimilation in which now bin Laden is "Geronimo," another dead Indian over which right-thinking people prevail. This Geronimo can be interpreted, too, in symbolic interactions that convey psychological resistance. *Geronimo E-KIA* disrupts the hegemony of red devilishness by reclaiming Geronimo from its conflation with the apparent savagery of terrorism, not by reconstituting the Geronimo of freedom-loving Americans everywhere, but by drawing attention to an alternative American history of terror and survival. This is a call for a redistribution of symbolic power that allows for a measured cultural separatism and, carried to its logical ends, displaces neoliberal selfish individualism and unchecked capitalism with a plurinational and communitary state of belonging.

These are some ideas for reimagining imaginings of Geronimo under different analytical terms. There are other possibilities, of course, for contextualizing, framing, and making sense of how and why Geronimo resonates. There is no good reason to shy away from popular cultural analyses that call attention to "domestic dependent nations" and "Indian tribes and Native entities," or alternatives to distributions of power located in the relation of nation states and free markets, or unregulated capitalism and selfish individualism.

D. Anthony Clark
Arizona State University

The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America. By Thomas King. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012. 272 pages. \$24.95 cloth.

First and foremost, Thomas King is funny. His humor is insightful and irreverent, and his commentary biting. He pulls no punches when it comes to discussing the history of Indian and white relations in North America. He is