

# JOHNNY DEPP, LAST OF THE COMANCHE

*Passing down the 'cowboys and Indians' tradition to a new generation*

"... The motion picture community has been as responsible as any for degrading the Indian and making a mockery of his character, describing him as savage, hostile and evil. It's hard enough for children to grow up in this world. When Indian children watch television, and they watch films, and when they see their race depicted as they are in films, their minds become injured in ways we can never know." — Marlon Brando, Oscar speech, 1973

Tonto's first appearance was on the 11th episode of the radio show *The Lone Ranger* on Dec. 7, 1938. The radio broadcast identified Tonto as a chief's son in the Potawatomi Nation. The choice to make Tonto Potawatomi seems to come from the station owner's childhood affiliation with Michigan. Tonto was created by a nonnative, which in my opinion, is undoubtedly Tonto — nonnative.

What does Tonto mean in Spanish and Italian? Stupid.

Sure, even before the creation of the fictional Tonto, or stupid, Native people had the power to define our own destiny in regard to image and how we are perceived in the public eye stolen from us. Just like the land you now stand on. But, it's now 2013 and we still have little to no control over Hollywood's redface exploitation.

To make it clear, as an actor, I have always respected Johnny Depp. *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, *Cry-Baby*, *Dead Man* — all are some of my favorites. But, I never have and never will be a fan of redface, blackface or any other kind of costume mockery of a people and their unique, diverse cultural identities.

Depp's role, aside from Tonto being fictional himself, is based upon many historical inaccuracies. A painting by Kirby Sattler entitled "I Am Crow" inspired Depp's newfound Tonto image. Treaty and Indigenous people are etched into the past in this production. Distant. Irrelevant.

Indigenous communities suffer from economic oppression, frequently lack adequate access to safe drinking water and healthy living conditions and are not "honored" by the use of normalized stereotypes. Paint. Feathers. Chants.

Is Depp's 2012 "adoption" by the Comanche Nation as production of *The Lone Ranger* began an attempt to quell potential backlash from his redface role? How about an interest in buying land, adjacent to Wounded Knee, for \$5 million to gift back to the Lakota Nation, recently reported in *Indian Country Today*? Indeed, a kind gesture to use privilege to try and help people.

But, considering the impoverished living conditions we Native Americans often face, imagine what opportunities

\$5 million could give a Nation. Or \$225 million (the cost to make *The Lone Ranger*). New schools, safe drinking water, scholarship programs, community gardens, cultural and environmental protection projects, housing, proper prenatal care for mothers and infants.

According to Cornel West, true justice is allowing suffering to speak. Never assume what is good for Native people. It gives no "honor" to us to peddle a stereotypical image of our culture that encourages and reaffirms to a new generation that it's OK to play cowboys and Indians.

"Nature is indeed out of balance," Tonto muses in the film.

But, suppose, as Saginaw Grant playing Chief Big Bear tells the Lone Ranger, "It makes no difference. We are already ghosts." ■



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