Images of Native Americans in Popular Culture 19th to 21st century
Victoria X. Danner and Dr. JoAllyn Archambault

Introduction
Native Americans have existed as part of the American popular culture since its mainstream introduction in the 19th century. As the images are ingrained into the public imagination through media, art, and politics, stereotypic motifs have emerged as typological models for the Native American in the colonialist imagination which endure to this day. The purpose of this project is to trace the most common depictions of Native Americans in the past fifty years to their historic origins to further understand how ethnic stereotyping endures and reforms meaning in a society.

Why Native Americans?
After being sequestered onto reservations or forced into hiding, Native American representation was left up to the imaginations of the colonists who conquered them. The Native American became an ethnic blank slate upon which colonists imposed their own perceptions, values and ideals, using Native Americans as cautionary tales or exotic commodities. Native American stereotypic imagery can be divided into two main groups: Noble and Ignoble. The Noble Savage is a submissive figure who symbolizes the beauty and purity of nature, wise but ignorant of modern civilization. The Ignoble Savage is animalistic, perverse, violent, corrupt and untamable. Native American stereotypic imagery is unique in that it is centered on a specific point in time – 19th century America.

Approach
A total of 425 individual artifacts ranging in age from 1925 to 2009 were analyzed for this project. Each was examined for their portrayal of certain Native American stereotypes that could be traced back at least 150 years. Each archetype had assigned core traits that each object was evaluated by. The piece shown here as well as the historical images were chosen to exemplify the core attributes of the two main Native American motifs in popular culture.

Noble
- Origins: late 1700s.
- Characteristics: temperate, pure-hearted, naive, gentle, one with nature, submissive.
- Symbolism: nature worship, American romanticism and nostalgia for the Old West.

Ignoble
- Origins: early 1700s.
- Characteristics: violent, corrupt and untamable.
- Symbolism: nature worship, American romanticism and nostalgia for the Old West.

Discussion
As seen from the historic references and their modern counterparts, stereotypic motifs of Native Americans continue to permeate modern society. Familiar archetypes of Native Americans still appear in popular culture. The Noble savage continues to be a prominent featured motif in popular culture as it changed mediums from documents to collective objects. Modern popular culture follows the tradition of the Noble savage and its symbolism of nature oriented wisdom that highlights society’s fascination with what they think of as a simpler happier time. The Ignoble savage on the other hand, has disappeared in popular culture. New images of the Civil Rights movement and social acceptance. Only small artifacts from the early 20th century can be found. Because modern Native Americans are not often featured in popular culture, these old stereotypes maintain their strength without new representations of modern Native Americans to counter or replace them.

Why is it still around?
Ethnic stereotyping becomes cultural when it is mass produced and released to the public. Native American stereotypic imagery continues to permeate our society through subtle depictions where the meaning has been forgone, but not lost. These stereotypic images are instilled into the public imagination from an early age. Because of their subtle and consistancy in the media, they are no longer obvious. By default, people make an association of Native Americans with the frontier, the Old West, violence and racial tension.

With such archetypal characters, this paper will look at the stereotypes of Native Americans not only in the 1920s to 2009, but also in the 19th century. This paper shows how that imagery was perpetuated in the past and what they think of as a simpler happier time. The Ignoble savage, on the other hand, has disappeared in popular culture.

References
Johannes Fabian’s “Time and the Other: How Anthropology makes its Object” 1983.
Mingus, C. “Media Stereotypic Imagery of Native Americans” 2009.
Smithsonian Institution National Museum of Natural History.