

Unexpected Cowboy, Unexpected Indian: The Case of Will Rogers

Amy M. Ware, *University of Texas at Austin*

Abstract. This brief examination of the early-twentieth-century United States expands academic interpretations of ethnic performance in the popular realm. The case of Will Rogers—Cherokee entertainer, writer, and political pundit—is particularly useful in understanding the representational conflicts, then and now, between cowboys and American Indians in the popular realm. Rogers himself was unexpected; he was both a cowboy and an Indian, a conflation that baffled and titillated his urban fan base. Throughout his early career, from approximately 1903 to 1919, Rogers and his audience grappled with these seemingly conflicting roles of cowboy and Indian, characters steeped in a seeming ethnic conflict yet embodied simultaneously by Rogers. The celebrity's strong ties to Cherokee ranching culture influenced the way he presented himself, yet such performances confounded his fans. In the end, Rogers's self-representation as a cowboy limited the public's recognition of him as an Indian.

Around 1904 Will Rogers (1879–1935) posed for a publicity shot that would begin a shockingly successful career in nearly all facets of American popular and political life. A brief examination of that photograph shows Rogers's self-manicured image and visually confirms his ties to cowboys, both real and imagined (fig. 1). His classic western stance, fringed chaps, cowboy boots, and rope brand him as such. Rogers's citizenship in the Cherokee Nation, however, profoundly complicates this photograph. Is this an Indian or a cowboy? The question is an important one because it challenges outsiders' expectations—then and now—of who (and what) an Indian can be in the popular realm.

In a short but provocative essay, Cherokee writer Thomas King explores the implications of Rogers's seemingly paradoxical public image.

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Figure 1. Vaudeville publicity shot, ca. 1904. Courtesy of the Will Rogers Memorial Museum, Claremore, Oklahoma

While on a 1994 road trip to photograph Indians across the nation, King and his brother Christopher stopped at an Oklahoma McDonald's featuring a statue of Will Rogers in the parking lot. Considering Rogers's cowboy appearance, King (2003: 42) realized that "tourists pulling into the parking lot and seeing the statue for the first time would never know that this was an Indian as famous as Sitting Bull or Crazy Horse or Geronimo." And why? Because

everyone knew who Indians were. Everyone knew what we looked like. Even Indians. But standing in that parking lot in Oklahoma with my brother, looking at the statue of Will Rogers, I realized, for perhaps the first time, that I didn't know. . . . Will Rogers did not look like an Indian. . . .

Yet how can something that has never existed—the Indian—have form and power while something that is alive and kicking—Indians—are invisible? (53)

King's blunt question raises other central, yet barely audible, questions in scholarly discourse surrounding American Indians in popular culture: What qualifications do scholars use to decide who, in the popular realm, qualifies as an American Indian performer? To what extent do audience interpretation and expectation define who is an American Indian performer and who is not? In what ways—to echo Edward Said (1994 [1978]) in *Orientalism*—do such audience interpretations affect the lens through which scholars (as members of that audience) scrutinize these public figures?¹ Finally, and perhaps most important, what agency do American Indian public figures have in identifying themselves in the face of all these outsider assessments?

King is not exaggerating when he compares Rogers's fame to that lavished on Geronimo or Sitting Bull. Indeed, Rogers was a household name in the United States by the time of his death in 1935 (Yagoda 1993).² Despite Rogers's far-reaching influence throughout the Progressive Era, however, this essay focuses solely on his early career, for it was during these years—from 1903 when he joined Texas Jack's Wild West Show to 1919 when he moved from New York to Beverly Hills—that Rogers honed his best-known image and persona.³ It is also during this period that Rogers would have most closely attended to the public's perceptions of him, since he was, at this time, a showbiz novice with high hopes. This essay suggests that behind this public image lie broader histories of Cherokee ranching, true tales of Indian cowboys, and the complicated attempts by Native people during this period to carve out autonomous public spaces for themselves in U.S. popular culture.

In framing his work *Indians in Unexpected Places*, Philip Deloria (2004: 11) writes that non-Native expectations of Indians in the early twentieth century reflect “colonial and imperial relations of power and domination.” He goes on to emphasize a distinction between “the anomalous, which reinforces expectations, and the unexpected, which resists categorization and, thereby, questions expectation itself.” Deloria would likely agree that Rogers was anomalous only in the level of fame he achieved and that he acted in unexpected ways according to the scholar’s own definitions.⁴ The case of Will Rogers furthers Deloria’s work by placing an *unexpected Indian* in unexpected places during the early years of the twentieth century.

In the popular realm, representational conflicts—between lived experience and constructed image—were common decades before 1904, when Rogers emerged in vaudeville. Celebrity trickery thrived through the second half of the nineteenth century, a winding road paved largely by P. T. Barnum during the preceding century. In *The Arts of Deception* James Cook (2001: 28) argues that this entertainment shift was the result of middle-class angst over the increasing chaos of the nineteenth-century city: “Their [deceptive entertainments] puzzles held out the promise of truth, but they also helped socialize their audiences to a brave new world in which the very boundaries of truth were becoming more and more puzzling.”⁵ The evasive self-representations Rogers put forth—both consciously and unconsciously—placed him in a middle ground not often occupied by Native people during this period. By juggling his cowboy image and his Cherokee upbringing, Rogers titillated the American populace.

Such performative anxieties haunted other urban American Indian public figures during these years. Zitkala-Ša, Charles Eastman, Luther Standing Bear, Carlos Montezuma, and many others at times performed an Indianness that gave them a power they hoped would incite change in and understanding of Native America. These performances may have come with a price, as Deloria (1998: 125) posits in *Playing Indian*: “To what extent had acting like Indian Others formed a part of their identities around the very images they attempted to change?” This article poses a similar question of Rogers, though he looked not like an “Indian” but like a “cowboy,” an appearance that carried with it similar—if conflicting—cultural connotations. Rogers’s physical image has been interpreted largely by his non-Cherokee fans—and that image does not and did not jibe with colonial expectations of generic Indianness. Just as playing Indian “did not call its adherents to change their lives,” playing cowboy did not disconnect Rogers from his Cherokee upbringing (184).

Roped In: Scholarly Binds

Too often in scholarly discourse, Native people working in popular culture are used as props for understanding non-Native ways of thinking about Indians, for revealing the subtle and egregious recolonization of Indians in the nuanced realms of popular culture and mass media. Such understanding—initiated by Roy Harvey Pearce (1953) and further cemented by Robert Berkhofer Jr. (1978), Richard Slotkin (1973), and others—is indeed crucial to generating change in the popular presentation of Native peoples (Bird 1996; Kilpatrick 1990). However, these studies often leave the words, actions, and intentions of real, live American Indian public actors on the sidelines, revealing that academics, too, are confounded by the complications wrought by unexpected Indians, who undoubtedly were and are more common than the expected sort (if we assume that such an expectation comes from the public at large).

This is not to suggest that studies of Native performers during this period do not exist. As mentioned at the start of this essay, Deloria's *Indians in Unexpected Places* gives voice to many long-overlooked Native folks who joined the United States' popular arena. In discussing his methodology, Deloria (2004: 12) states, "I've taken as a touchstone the experiences of Lakota, Dakota, and other Native people of the northern plains . . . in large part because it matters historically that Lakota people were among the last to resist militarily and among the first to enter modern representational politics in significant numbers." Indeed, such regional study distinguishes this cultural history from others that pull together Native people from an overwhelming variety of tribal affiliations. Similarly, two of the most prominent publications on the Wild West shows in the past decade—L. G. Moses's *Wild West Shows and the Images of American Indians, 1883-1933* (1996) and Joy Kasson's *Buffalo Bill's Wild West* (2000)—have dealt expressly and deeply with "show Indians," Native people also primarily from the Northern Plains region who participated in Wild West shows. Though I do not challenge these works or their centrality in understanding Native actors in their own right, I do hope that by adding Will Rogers—a Cherokee from the Indian Territory—we can further diversify our understandings of not only how Native people navigated the public sphere but also how they did so in ways specific to the tribal nations from which they arose.

With the exception of Ben Yagoda, whose coverage of Rogers's life is intricate, biographers of the celebrity confirm attempts to make Rogers a melting-pot (mixed-blood) American, disregarding his solid Cherokee cultural ties, a distraction that Maori theorist Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999: 74) calls "a very powerful tendency in research to take this argument [over

notions of authentic Indianness, in this case] back to a biological ‘essentialism’ related to race, because the idea of culture is much more difficult to control.”⁶ For example, P. J. O’Brien (1935: 24) asserts: “Rogers undoubtedly drew upon all three strains, Irish, Scotch, and American Indian, to fashion the character that was so beloved by the world. From the Irish came his sense of humor. . . . The Scotch added a keen sense of business . . . and from the Indian came the dignity and reserve that prevented him . . . from descending to the level of a merry-andrew.” Donald Day (1953: 3) begins *Our Will Rogers* this way: “He was, in blood, more Irish than Indian, but he was such a showman that he played up the Indian and let the Irish take care of itself.” Considering the severely limited economic opportunities facing Native peoples at the turn of the century, it is questionable at best that Rogers would foreground his Cherokee blood to garner a career boost. What Rogers did, I assert, was something slier than Day’s simplistic statement allows. There is indeed evidence that Rogers publicly tied himself to the Cherokee Nation to make himself appear more exotic. There is also the basic truth, however, that Rogers was *in fact* a product of the complicated cultural history of his tribe. And there is no evidence that Rogers struggled with his identity.

Thankfully, recent scholarship has initiated a consideration of Rogers as the Cherokee he always considered himself to be. Lary May’s *The Big Tomorrow* (2000), which examines 1930s radicalism in film, was one of the first scholarly analyses of Rogers as a Cherokee. May suggests that Rogers embedded radical political ideas in a rural-sounding style that reflected traditional values.⁷ More recent examinations by scholars embedded in the Cherokee Nation’s history and literary traditions further complicate the celebrity’s tribal connections. Daniel Heath Justice offers “a historically rooted and culturally informed reading of the Cherokee literary tradition,” (2006: 7) one that situates Rogers’s journalism alongside the work of other Cherokee writers (his ancestors, contemporaries, and successors). Justice determines Rogers to be a “stealth minority with access to a forum and a platform inaccessible to other Indians of his day” (ibid.: 124). Most recently, Tol Foster’s (2008: 267) advocacy for a regional approach to the literary study of the Indian Territory incorporates Rogers as a central figure: “Tribal figures like the Cherokee writer Will Rogers are historically situated actors who utilize the counternarratives of their communities as a theoretical base from which to conduct anticolonialist and cosmopolitan critique.”⁸ Ultimately, these works place Rogers squarely and appropriately in a Cherokee context. Each, however, focuses on Rogers’s later and more established career, when he carried the cultural and financial capital to say and do what he wanted, more or less.

This article adds to these conversations first by providing a magnified study of a particular period in Rogers's career, one that had higher stakes than did his later work. While Rogers's ties to the Cherokee Nation were strong throughout this period, his audiences' confusion reflects the ways his Cherokeeness may have been "lost" over time. Second, by placing an American Indian celebrity—his words, work, and life—at the center of this analysis, I hope to further recent shifts away from employing such public figures as only lenses through which to understand non-Native America. Rogers, and the many other public Indians like him, should be understood on their own terms.

"America's Favorite Cowboy": Cowboys, Indians, and Indian Cowboys

Those living at the turn of the twentieth century witnessed the riding cowboy's decline; cowboys' lives and occupations were more often sedentary than nomadic. The laborers would soon begin driving (not riding) to work from their nearby homes, where they likely lived with their growing families. Concurrently, rodeos maintained the performative aspects of this life, and Wild West shows romantically showcased cowboys riding, roping, and fighting Indians.⁹

For American Indians across the United States, life was also undergoing profound change. By 1904, when Rogers began his work in vaudeville, the 1890 massacre at Wounded Knee and the 1898 passage of the Curtis Act (among many other legislative and military events) left American Indians largely contained on reservations, their sovereignty and persons often threatened by fences that forbade passage.¹⁰ Still, they, like their mythical cowboy counterparts, would negotiate the forces of modernity, forming pan-tribal organizations, performing on lecture circuits, and publishing in major American periodicals (Deloria 2004; Maddox 2005). And, like cowboys, Indians were envisioned publicly through a nostalgic nineteenth-century lens. Both groups were expected to look a certain way, live a particular way, and act according to standards set by the paintings, novels, and wars of the preceding centuries.

Similarities aside, the popular distinction between cowboys and Indians was profound. Through an accretion of fantastical representations (late-nineteenth-century dime novels, Wild West shows, and early silent films) and historical events (the Plains Indian Wars, the congressional closing of the frontier, and increased industrialism) the difference became codified (Calloway 1996; Kasson 2000; Smith 2003). Despite historians' clarifications that U.S. military clashes with American Indians far surpassed any

battles between cattlemen and Native peoples, the cultural perception of angst between cowboys and Indians prevails. As Peter Iverson (1994: xii) notes in *When Indians Became Cowboys*, “With the passage of time and in the environment of a changing region, they [cowboys and Indians] have had more in common than either group often realized and the general urban public could possibly perceive.”¹¹

Like the term *Indian*, which offers little tribal specificity and references a colonial collection of diverse peoples, the term *cowboy* is abstract, loaded with its own set of colonial baggage. Many Americans assume the mythic cowboy to be white, despite a good deal of historical evidence to the contrary. When broadened, this cowboy hero becomes one embodiment of Frederick Jackson Turner’s thesis: he is the ultimate free man.¹² Because this mythic cowboy represents the individualistic dream of the white American populace, his opponent becomes the mythic Indian, whose communal customs threaten those of white Americans. Through the expectations and longings of the American people, reinforced by popular culture, the cowboy lost his complexity as a worker and became an empty yet abundantly powerful image.

However, any occupation may be held by folks from a variety of ethnic and national backgrounds. It is therefore unreasonable to assume that Indians would not—then or now—be cowboys. The extant evidence on actual cowboys shows these laborers to be much more complicated than their mythic foil. In his study of African Americans in the West, Quintard Taylor (1998: 156–57) notes that by 1890, only sixty-one thousand workers (a surprisingly small 2 percent of the labor force in the West) worked solely in the cattle industry. Of that number, Taylor notes that sixteen hundred were nonwhite (black, Asian, and/or Native American). This number, albeit small (likely due in part to the census takers’ ineffectiveness), portrays cowboys as an ethnically mixed lot. All cowboys have stories; they did not and do not ride onto the range from nowhere.

Assumptions that Indians did (and do) not interact with ranch and farm life suggest that Native peoples remained isolated from the cultures surrounding them. As James Clifford (1988: 284) points out in his study of a 1976 Mashpee Wampanoag land claims case: “Indians had long filled a pathetic imaginative space for the dominant culture. . . . Their cultures had been steadily eroding, at best hanging on in museumlike reservations. Native American societies could not by definition be dynamic, inventive, or expansive.” Ironically, actual Indian people became anomalous, contradicting non-Native expectations. However, as Deloria (2004: 6) astutely contends, “a significant cohort of Native people engaged the same forces of modernization that were making non-Indians reevaluate their own expectations of

themselves and their society.” Rogers, and many members of the Cherokee Nation of which he was a part, participated in such modernization.¹³

A brief description of Will Rogers’s father offers one cowboy-cum-rancher’s story. In the early 1890s, after railroads dissected the Cherokee Nation, Clement Vann Rogers oversaw the slow transformation of his substantial cattle ranch into a wheat farm. In 1898, when he was fifty-six, Clem left the dwindling business to his son, Will, and moved to nearby Claremore, a fast-growing railroad town, where he became a founding director and vice president of the First National Bank at Claremore (Collings 1986; Keith 1938; Yagoda 1993). Though a successful businessman—a trait stereotypically associated with whites during this period—Clem distinguished himself from non-Native peoples, particularly as his livelihood related to tribal sovereignty.¹⁴ He was opposed to the tribe’s leasing practices, which allowed non-Native cattlemen to use the vast grazing lands of the Cherokee Strip. Frustrated with white intruders’ refusals to pay leasing fees to the tribe, for example, Clem in 1885 asked Principal Chief Dennis W. Bushyhead, his brother-in-law: “Are we powerless to enforce our own laws? Are we to submit to such great wrongs by white men not citizens? Dennis Bushyhead, there is not a single law in this country enforced. . . . We are *fast fast* drifting into the hands of white men” (letter qtd. in Collings 1986: 57). Clem Rogers’s economic status did not diminish his ties to the Cherokee Nation’s status as a sovereign state. Indeed, his success may have strengthened his commitment to work within the nation to assure the continuity of his economic position. Foster (2008: 284) notes in his analysis of Rogers that “with the dissolution of Indian Territory in 1906 and creation of Oklahoma in 1907, Rogers’s family had to buy back their land, having lost Native title to it.” In the end, all these social and economic changes led Clem’s son on a meandering search for fruitful work elsewhere. In 1902 Will left the territory.

“I Am the Only Territory Boy Here”: The Cherokee Kid and the Wild West

Will Rogers preferred the itinerant life of a cowboy to the sedentary ranching life. His drive likely arose from his childhood, when he performed duties on his father’s ranch more typical of cowboys than ranchers. B. T. Hooper, a Cherokee cowboy working on the Rogers ranch through the 1880s, remembered that Will “insisted on taking part in the big roundup held each year by the ranches of the Verdigris Country.” (Collings 1986: 42). The herds were later taken to St. Louis and Kansas City, accompanied by a diverse group of cowboys. These men included Cherokees, Creeks, African Americans,

and at least one Chinese man who ran the chuck wagon (82). Dan Walker, for example, was a black cowboy who taught Will Rogers how to rope and ride. Cherokee line-rider Ed Sunday worked for Clem and was later elected to the Cherokee National Council. Jim Hopkins O'Donnell was a white cowboy from Bastrop, Texas, who later accompanied Rogers to Argentina (Rogers 1996: 494–95, 558–59, 567). Though this is a limited list, it exemplifies the ethnic and racial diversity of the men working on Clem's ranch.

The celebrity-style cowboy also beckoned Rogers, as it did countless youths during this period. He attended the Chicago World's Fair in 1893, where he saw Mexican performer Vicente Oropeza, billed as one of the greatest trick ropers of all time. Oropeza, also a rancher's son, learned to rope in Puebla and traveled with Buffalo Bill for approximately sixteen years (Rogers 1996: 522). Though he had roped since childhood, Rogers took up roping (and trick roping, specifically) vigorously after this trip (Yagoda 1993: 24). While in Chicago, Rogers surely encountered the myriad exhibitions of American Indians, some promoting an assimilationist ideology and others reinforcing the savage stereotype.¹⁵

The World's Fair's exploitation of American Indian peoples would not be Rogers's last encounter with such racialized pigeonholing. In 1895 Rogers entered Scarritt College in Missouri, the first school he attended outside the Indian Territory. The three other Cherokees at the school were his only friends, and he was nicknamed Wild Indian (Yagoda 1993: 25). Later, in 1897 and 1898, while attending Kemper Family School (later renamed Kemper Military School), also in Missouri, Rogers generally got along well according to Arthur Martin Hatch, who taught Rogers and compiled his recollections of the boy after Rogers's 1935 death. Still, his nickname was Swarthy, a derogatory reference to his phenotype. In one recollection, Hatch (1935: 16) describes an argument Rogers had with one of his peers: "Once a classmate referred to a certain Indian chief as a thoroughbred. Will's voice rose to a high pitch in resentment as he explained that 'full-blood' was the proper term and that it spoiled his whole afternoon to hear someone call a fine Indian a thoroughbred." Tellingly, Rogers quit Kemper without warning and headed to Ewing's Ranch in Higgins, Texas, where he drove cattle to Kansas for this and other ranches in the Southwest for six months before returning home (Rogers 1996: 79). In the meantime, his father had vacated the ranch and moved to Claremore, renting the land to tenant farmers from Illinois. When Clem offered the ranch's management to Will, he accepted.

Rogers also entered the emerging world of rodeo during this period, performing primarily in trick- and steer-roping contests. The Cherokee cowboy traveled the country competing in roping agility. Rogers attended

many of these contests with friends from the Cherokee Nation. Ambiguous public reactions to cowboy ethnicity reflected some knowledge of the inter-ethnic realities of rural ranching life that was replaced in urban environs by a faulty opposition between cowboys and Indians. Paradoxically, the effects of the popular cowboy-versus-Indian dichotomy were also present. Some newspaper articles simply recount the details of the contests. When Rogers traveled to Des Moines in 1901, for example, the *Iowa State Register* noted, “Rogers, the cowboy from the Cherokee Nation, roped his steer in 12 seconds, a record that it would be hard to beat” (Rogers 1996: 225). The ethnicities of roping participants reported at the 1901 Confederate Veteran’s Reunion in Memphis, however, were divided along the lines of cowboy (white) and Indian or mixed blood; that all were cowpunchers, however, seems not to have been an issue. (As one might expect, African Americans were excluded from the descriptions of these roping events.) Newspaper descriptions state that the “outfit” of cowboys performing at the 1901 Memphis show included “a sprinkling of half breeds, all fresh from the spring round ups in the vicinity of Claremore, Indian Territory” (Rogers 1996: 215–16). In this, one of Rogers’s first public appearances as a performance cowboy, he was labeled a “half breed,” or of mixed white and Native ancestry.¹⁶ At a time when popular depictions of cowboys and Indians played within the racial dialectic that runs throughout American history—white *or* black, Indian *or* white—Rogers was assigned the role of genetic hybrid in Memphis, an uncomfortably ambiguous position in the public eye.

In February 1902 Will Rogers surprised his family and friends by leaving home for Argentina, where he aimed to become a gaucho. Such a dramatic undertaking—Rogers sold his cattle and traveled to Argentina via New Orleans, New York, and England—exposes his near obsession with what he considered an authentic cowboy lifestyle. Once there, such a rugged career did not seem so dreamy. After traveling in Argentina, he came to a more mixed conclusion in a letter to his sisters: “As I now see things I don’t expect to make any money here, but I would not take a fortune for my trip. Here is a bit of advice for my old comrades. ‘Just stay where you are boys, that is the best country on the globe for a person who was raised there’” (Rogers 1996: 279–80). Such a mixed reaction foreshadows his ultimate decision to work in performance. Struggling for stable work and nearly out of money, Rogers soon left Argentina for South Africa. There he broke horses for a trainer before finding more lucrative employment moving mules from Durban to Ladysmith. While in Ladysmith in December 1902, Rogers followed signs toward Texas Jack’s Wild West Show. “I went to work for him as soon as I showed him what I could do with a rope and

he said he would take me so I am on the road with him now," Rogers wrote his father (384).

In most shows for Texas Jack, Rogers played a trick-roping cowboy, a profitable and satisfying path for a man who wanted to "play cowboy" if he could not be one in real life. He was billed as "The Cherokee Kid, the World's Champion Lassoer."¹⁷ Rogers was, according to his own description and to those who met him during his early career, a Cherokee. At times, however, he did more than trick rope on the Wild West circuit. He wrote to his sisters in December 1902: "The play is partly a circus act and then they played blood curdling scenes of western life in America, showing encounters with Indians and robbers. I was an Indian but I screamed so loud that I like to scared all the people coming out of the tent" (*ibid.*: 387). Rogers's description of the show as a "play" and "circus act" indicates that it was imaginary to him.

Audiences—even those in South Africa—required what they considered an accurate depiction of Native Americans. In a letter home, written in early 1903, Rogers mentioned that "[Texas] Jack is talking of sending some one home for some fullbloods and a . . . few more cowboys and to get a lot of Saddles and costumes and things and if he does he will send me" (*ibid.*: 389). The producer's interest in hiring "fullbloods" is in line with studies by L. G. Moses and Joy Kasson that describe how "show Indians" fulfilled certain viewer expectations: "Real Indians, the public came to believe, lived in tipis, slept in tipis, wore feather bonnets, rode painted ponies, hunted the buffalo, skirmished with the U.S. Calvary, and spoke in signs" (Moses 1996: 1). Rogers, a mixed-blood Cherokee whose tribal culture was immeasurably different from the Plains Indians stereotyped in these shows, did not fit this category. Thus, in the midst of what Kasson calls the Wild West's "memory showmanship," Rogers began his stint as a "fancy lasso artist," a role that, inside the fictional world of these western narratives, meant he was not American Indian.

In February 1904 Rogers decided to return to the Indian Territory in time for "the opening—not closing—of that 'St. Louis Street Fair'" (Rogers 1996: 464). Rogers worked, ironically, as a cowboy performer on the Pike with Frederick T. Cummins's North American Indians show, or Indian Congress (Rydell 1984). While this role in the show complicated the public's recognition of Rogers as an American Indian—how could he be an Indian if he played a cowboy?—it remained closely connected to his Cherokee identity, even while it alienated him from other Native performers on the Wild West circuit. Indeed, he wrote his sisters when he arrived, "I am the only Territory boy here," indicating his cognizance of tribal and territorial belonging, even when among other Indians and cowboys (Rogers 2000: 57).

In what would basically be his final foray with the Wild West shows, Rogers traveled to New York City in April 1905, where he was a part of Zack Mulhall's New York Horse Fair at Madison Square Garden. One unidentified clipping from Rogers's scrapbook describes a fictional exchange between Rogers and his close friend Lucille Mulhall, also a champion trick roper:

"Did you ever see such complexions?" remarked Cowgirl Lucille [*sic*] Mulhall, a handsome blonde, to Cowboy Bill Rogers as the cavalcade turned into Central Park at Fifty-ninth street.

"Umph!" replied the favorite son of the chief of the Cherokee Nation, a white man, "these New York gals need a bit of God's sunshine." (Rogers 2000: 108-9)

Oddly, another clipping, from New York's *Morning Telegraph*, describes Rogers as "a full blood Cherokee Indian and Carlisle graduate" (117). These incongruities may have been the result of a joke between Rogers and Tom Mix, who worked as a cowboy in the show. Mix was featured in the program as Tom Mixico, a name Mix claims was Rogers's invention (Milsten 1935: 70). The two men worked to misrepresent each other publicly, reflecting performers' desires to titillate through alluring obfuscation. Mix created a description of Rogers that surely confounded the press: "Rogers is a full blood Cherokee Indian [1], born on the Cherokee Strip [2], and educated at Notre Dame [3] and Carlisle, Pa [4]. His father is now chief of the Cherokee Indians [5]" (Rogers n.d.: 72, brackets in the original). Those working close to Rogers knew him to be Cherokee, while fans and their journalistic compatriots seemed confounded: Rogers was neither chief (though, to the writer's credit, there was a Cherokee chief named Will Rogers at the time, though he was no direct relation) nor white, nor a "full blood," nor a Carlisle graduate. At this point, Rogers's public persona remained ambiguous.

These odd newspaper descriptions reflect non-Native misunderstandings of regional tribal diversity. Without that knowledge, journalists often relied on assumptions about Rogers's tribe. To many Americans, the Cherokee represented the quintessential model of Indian assimilation. Throughout the late nineteenth century, as the Plains Indian Wars raged, newspapers debated the Indian Question. In an 1867 *New York Times* editorial, the board wrote, "But that the Indian is susceptible of civilization is abundantly proved by their [the Cherokee's] experiment. If one tribe can flourish and do well, be rendered not only inoffensive but useful, why cannot all the others?" (Hays 1997: 63). Rogers's opinions on such representations would not be revealed until his success in vaudeville, but the national sentiment that the Cherokee and their tribal neighbors were basically white—or were

somehow better than other Indian peoples—likely distinguished Rogers from other “show Indians” working the Wild West circuit.

Will Rogers’s role in his first performances—and in the early rodeo network—complicated the historically simplified but visually extravagant Wild West storylines. Audiences’ easy digestion of these shows further congealed long-held assumptions about Native people’s inferiority and, simultaneously, exhibited Natives’ pacification. Most Native performers’ physical appearances, costumes, and acts reinforced these expectations. As performers, Native actors became spectacles: people (indeed, objects) that once seemed frightening became harmless within the safety of the ring. While I agree with scholars Deloria, Kasson, and Moses that “show Indians” possessed a level of autonomy within the workings of the show itself, they largely lost that independence through audience interpretation.¹⁸

I am not asserting that Will Rogers was a fully autonomous performer in the Wild West shows, talking out of both sides of his mouth. But during his Wild West years, at least, he did fall into the fissures of this dichotomous system. He played a cowboy and was described, more often than not, as a Cherokee. His experiences show that the performance opportunities offered to different tribal people varied. Like the Sioux or Apache, for example, about whom fanciful stories of primitivism and violence filled the pages of non-Native newspapers, the Cherokee were stereotyped in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as assimilated. Melodramatic descriptions of various Plains tribes turned on the fear of outbreak; thus these Native people often became the focus of the Wild West shows, where they would “play Indian” for the world. These performances not only simplified the history of the American West but also leveled the diversity of Native America.

“More or Less a Shatterer of Tradition”: The Vaudeville Stage

In *The Voice of the City* Robert Snyder (2000: 43) notes, “Vaudeville was created largely by people from immigrant and working-class backgrounds who supplied both its talents and audiences.” Indeed, it was often ethnicity—otherness—that marked vaudevillians as distinct. Eddie Cantor, Bert Williams, W. C. Fields, and many others used racial and ethnic expectations to pull their punches. Because of these popular plays on immigrant and racial stereotypes, Rogers’s role on vaudeville from 1905 to 1915 was something of an anomaly. He originated from a rural area of the United States, he did not perform ethnic or immigrant comedy, and he joked while he performed his acrobatic roping routines. His typical performances stood

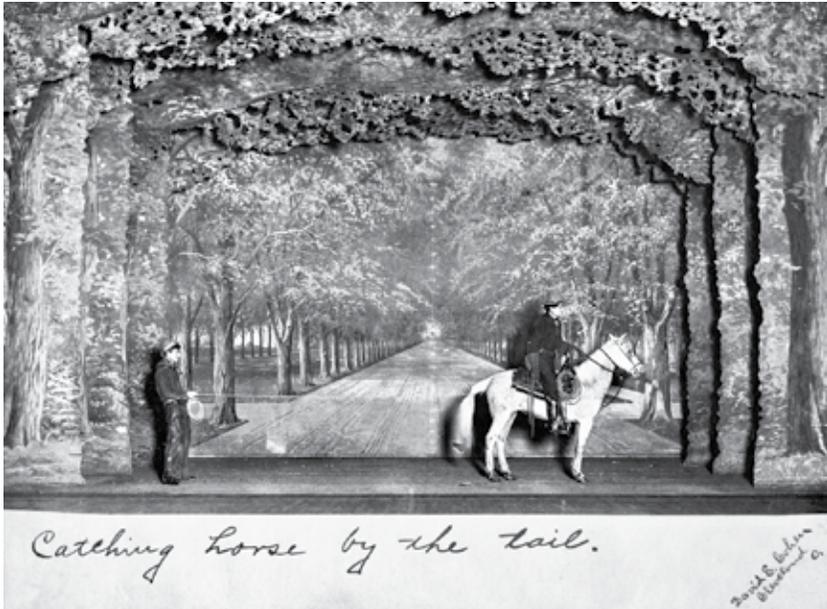


Figure 2. Will Rogers (*left*) ropes the tail of a horse that partner Buck McKee is riding onstage. This shot was taken by David E. Cohen at the Empire Theatre in Cleveland on 18 September 1905. Courtesy of the Will Rogers Memorial Museum, Claremore, Oklahoma

somewhere among the dumb acts (dancers, animal stunts, and the like), the comedy sketches, and the monologists. At first, Rogers performed only horse catches and trick roping onstage (fig. 2). Later, however, he incorporated shrewd political commentary into his roping performances. Rogers's symbolic resonance with audiences did not so much work to subvert Victorianism (as vaudeville is often characterized) as to smooth the gap between urban and rural, native and immigrant. That he played largely at big-time theaters that “aimed more at the middle class” further supports his connection with well-off audience members coming to grips with the changing nature of American life (84).

While Rogers played under various titles during his early years in vaudeville—the Cherokee Kid, the Master of the Lariat, and the Lariat King, to name a few—he became known as the Oklahoma Cowboy in 1911 (Rogers 2001: 213). As Arthur Frank Wertheim and Barbara Bair explain, “Basically, Rogers’s new billing Americanized him, even though Rogers was neither an Oklahoma resident nor a practicing cowboy, but an enter-

tainer who lived in New York" (213). Regardless, his cultural hybridity confounded journalists who ultimately slipped him into a fairly stable cowboy role. After Oklahoma's 1907 entry into the Union, Rogers was less frequently demarked as the Cherokee Kid and more often described in major newspapers as "the quaint and picturesque cowboy," "a genuine Oklahoma cowboy," "the lasso expert," or "the Cowboy comedian." Rogers's role in vaudeville mirrored Oklahoma's entrance into statehood: his shift from Cherokee Kid to Oklahoma Cowboy in many ways symbolized the completion of American settlement within the contiguous United States. One particularly telling review of this solidification of his mythic cowboy status notes that "Mr. Rogers has a set of teeth which carry him through an Indian massacre without a scratch, so attractive are they in a rakish smile. He is a tanned-up, lean and richly witty cowboy who does not lose his ranch manners in an opry house" (Rogers 2001: 58, 115, 263, 373).

Rogers remained in New York after Mulhall's New York Horse Fair and in June 1905 signed a contract with B. F. Keith to perform at Union Square Theatre. He joined the Orpheum Circuit in 1908 and, at the pinnacle of his vaudeville career, played New York's Palace Theatre. To authenticate his act, Rogers bought supplies from home through his father, with whom he communicated regularly. "Papa," Rogers wrote his father in September 1905,

send me about 35 ft of small light hard twisted rope like the boys use there to rope with any of them would know get one from one of them that they have used if you can as it will be better. Light hard twist. to throw not to twirl. also two good red or big check flannel shirts size 15 1/2. and one of those pretty striped Osage Blankets that you buy at Ruckers [the general store in Claremore] for a saddle blanket. (Rogers 2000: 201-2)¹⁹

His reliance on props from the Indian Territory both enlivened his act and contributed to his ironic position as an Indian playing a cowboy in vaudeville. The cowboy that Rogers played onstage became the mythic sort; the type he actually was, based on his continued maintenance of tribal ties throughout his life, carried with it complicated connections to colonialism and tribal history.

During these years, reviewers and interviewers often compared Rogers to the Virginian, the title character of Owen Wister's enormously popular 1902 novel. "To meet Rogers and talk with him is as good as reading a half dozen articles of Owen Wister's 'Virginian,'" the *Lowell (MA) Daily Courier* reported (*ibid.*: 236). The association did not sit well with Rogers,

who seemed to take issue with such inaccurate portrayals of cowboy life. In another interview, Rogers was asked whether he read the book:

We wuz all sitting out on the ranch one night in the summer soon after that book came out. [W]e were mightily interested in this yere story until we got to the part where that main guy—that Virginian, with his black hair and brown eyes—catches his pal cattle rustlin' and hangs him. Say, we threw that book away. . . . There wasn't a man in that ranch that night but didn't say that if it had been a pal of his he would have helped him rather than hanged him. . . . There ain't no such West as them fellers that wrote say there are. (336)²⁰

The novel annoyed Rogers because of its false representation of the American West. That Wister described western life for more literate audiences paradoxically contributed to Rogers's success in vaudeville's high-end theaters and, later, on Broadway. Indeed, it helped cement in audiences' minds that Rogers was the romantic sort of cowboy—honest, homely, and homespun—Wister helped popularize.

Rogers's comments are equally significant in placing him among his Native contemporaries. For example, his description mirrors a similar moment in Colville novelist Mourning Dove's 1927 novel *Cogewea, the Half-Blood: A Depiction of the Great Montana Cattle Range*. The title character is disgusted while reading a 1909 western by Therese Broderick titled *The Brand: A Story of the Flathead Reservation* (the same reservation in which Mourning Dove's novel takes place): "The story, interesting to the whites, was worm-wood to her Indian spleen." *Cogewea*, in the end, "found solace in consigning the maligning volumn [*sic*] to the kitchen stove" (1981 [1927]: 91, 96).²¹ Further, two significant Cherokee writers, both from Rogers's hometown, dealt with ranching life in their work. First, John Oskison, who attended grade school with Rogers, published his best-known novel, *Three Brothers*, in 1935, a novel that describes ranching life in the Indian Territory. Second, playwright Lynn Riggs published, in addition to his plays, *Cowboy Songs, Folk Songs, and Ballads from "Green Grow the Lilacs"* in 1932.²² These connections reveal not only an overlooked literary genre—the Native western—but also influential historical actors: Indian ranchers and cowboys.

Despite the popular connections between the Virginian and the vaudevillian, Rogers never publicly denied his Cherokee affiliation; at times, foreshadowing statements made in his later career, he boasted about it. In a smattering of articles published during this period, Rogers mentioned that he was part Cherokee: "Well I reckon I'm about as real an American as you can find. My father and mother were part Cherokee and I've got enough

mixtures to make me kind of a scramble or hash.” (Rogers 2001: 56–57). What becomes apparent in these examples is that Rogers was more aware of his Cherokee ancestry than his other biological bloodlines, though he does note his mixed blood. Throughout his life, when given the opportunity, Rogers often mentioned his ties to the Cherokee Nation. Foster (2008: 288) notes of such a statement by Rogers, “His account of his lineage pokes fun at the post-Dawes Commission anxiety that is placed (still) on the blood quantum of Indians.”

Aspects of these early self-presentations, however empowering to the Cherokee Nation, at times revealed tensions among Native Americans during this period. In a telling interview with a Cleveland reporter in September 1906, Rogers elaborated on his Cherokee heritage:

“I’m a quarter-breed,” he said to me, “and it’s the thing above all others that I’m proud of. I’m a Cherokee and they’re the finest Indians in the world. No ‘blanket Indians’ about them. We are civilized and educated. Why, the government don’t allow the Cherokees to go to Carlisle and the other big schools for Indians. They’re the ignorant kind. We have our own schools, and the boys’ and girls’ seminaries in the Territory are just as fine as any in the country.” (Rogers 2000: 315–18)

Such tribal supremacist talk goes a long way in unearthing Rogers’s role in his own typecasting. As he describes it, he and other members of the Cherokee Nation were “good” Indians—or, to use his own words, “civilized and educated”—superior to those “show Indians” and others living on fenced-in reservations across the country. Why would he downplay his larger connections to Indianness? There are several possible explanations.

First, it is likely that his early school experiences and his visits to and involvement with the 1893 and 1904 World’s Fairs affected his understanding of American Indians elsewhere in the nation (as well as their relegated roles in popular culture). Perhaps the most obvious interpretation of his statement is that Rogers, like most Americans of his day, believed it to be true; he was twenty-six years old, and his experiences, though worldwide, were limited to performance and labor. His travels allowed him to witness the treatment of Native peoples globally and nationally; but while he wrote of the mistreatment of indigenous people throughout his time abroad, he did so with crass concern for their lack of assimilation. Likewise, his views of American Indians in the United States were limited to Wild West performances and stories of intense skirmishes (and, at times, full-on battles) between Cherokees and tribes of the western Indian Territory, particularly the Osage (Kaho 1941).²³

Further, it is plausible that Rogers placed the Cherokee Nation above

all others because he recognized the realities facing American Indian performers of the day. He may have found it professionally advantageous to cast himself as a mixed-blood Cherokee because conceptions of biologically mixed-blood Indians often moved them closer to whiteness. This level of whiteness made his cowboy performances more authentic given the public assumptions at the time. As Eva Marie Garrouette (2003: 55) contends in her study of Indian identities, “After all, ‘having Indian blood in you’ is rather different than ‘being Indian.’” Rogers’s public depictions of himself coincided with the social science of the day, which “proved” that biology superseded culture. That Rogers occasionally described his *Cherokee* identity—not his American Indian identity—reinforced the stereotypes of the tribe discussed earlier. As such “scientific” racism waned, Rogers’s statements on larger American Indian political issues changed dramatically (Beider 1986; Kevles 1985; Stocking 1968). As he gained popularity, Rogers consistently and radically advocated for Indian rights (Foster 2008; Justice 2006; Ware forthcoming). Still, at this point, Rogers may have used his biological mixture to boost his success.

What also surfaces in Rogers’s comments is the then-current struggle between tribal and pan-Indian identities. Adjustments toward more collective understanding and political action among various tribal peoples and nations in the United States remained vicarious and controversial during the early years of the century. The “incorporation of America,” as Alan Trachtenberg calls it (1982), was beginning to affect Native people’s views of themselves. The rise of Indian intellectuals, a positive (if unforeseen) by-product of the harsh, federally supported Indian boarding-school system, led to the creation of the Society of American Indians in 1911 and the publication of an array of books and essays by Native peoples increasingly espousing an “Indian” way of seeing the world.²⁴ Though this was in many ways advantageous and led to American Indians writing their own stories as well as the later creation of the National Congress of American Indians, the Red Power Movement, and other pan-tribal organizations, at the turn of the twentieth century its effect was just beginning to be felt. While the Indian remained a static figure for the non-Native populace, it was not a static category for the tribal peoples themselves.

To take this final point to what I feel is its most plausible conclusion, we must revisit Rogers’s citizenship in the Cherokee Nation. From a politically prominent family—on both his maternal and paternal sides—Rogers was, by proxy if nothing else, an advocate for a Cherokee nationalism that was challenged at every turn during his youth.²⁵ His father, whose positions in the Cherokee Nation ranged from Cherokee district judge to Cherokee Council senator to Cherokee representative to the Dawes Com-

mission, instilled in Rogers through example (if not discussions at home) the importance of maintaining a distinct tribal nationalism.²⁶ Such a notion of national belonging was, for Rogers, based in kinship and was distinct from the nation-state nationalism that, as Daniel Heath Justice (2006: 23) suggests, “is often dependent upon the erasure of kinship bonds in favor of a code of patriotism that places loyalty to the state above kinship obligations.”²⁷ Defining Cherokee nationalism is a tricky process and too complex to detail here. However, it is instructive to note Andrew Denson’s (2004: 6) discussion of Cherokee delegations to the U.S. Congress during Rogers’s youth (and his father’s career in politics):

In demanding the [continuance of the Cherokee] nation, Cherokees not only reminded their neighbors of tribal rights and treaty promises but tried to explain to them that the Indian nation was compatible with an expanding modern United States. . . . While many in the United States saw the Indian nation as a doomed relic, Cherokee leaders were able to imagine a modern future for it. . . . Anything but an anachronism, the nation would make it possible for Cherokees and other Native people to participate in modern life, because it would give them the power to choose the terms of their participation.

In this context, Rogers considered himself a Cherokee above all else and, in public, felt free to distinguish himself from members of other tribal nations within the United States, regardless of his troubling diction.

Rogers’s espousal of a distinct Cherokee identity, while at times problematic, reveals a deep-seated adherence to his tribal family. Once in vaudeville, he embodied the popular cowboy but remained Cherokee, as evidenced in his letters home and communications regarding his status as a tribal member.²⁸ He was indeed, as the *Milwaukee Journal* described him, “a shatterer of traditions” in that he not only catered each show to please returning audiences (the meaning the reviewer intended) but also challenged perceptions—now and then—of Native people working in the public realm in the early twentieth century (Rogers 2001: 298).

The Poet Lariat: The Cowboy Philosopher Meets Ziegfeld

Like vaudeville, Florenz Ziegfeld’s Follies and Frolic presented a variety show. In lieu of crude silent skits—those involving acrobats, contortionists, animals, and the like—individual performers (some of the first stand-up comedians among their ranks), singers, elaborate production numbers, and, of course, the famous Ziegfeld chorus girls were featured. Ziegfeld’s

shows also took place in a more geographically and economically refined venue. The audience paid higher entry fees and was typically white and middle class (Ziegfeld and Ziegfeld 1993: 62). In turn, performers received higher wages and were freed of the severe travel schedule required of most vaudeville performers.²⁹

Both the Frolic and the Follies walked the line between respectability and controversy. “The girls of the Frolic wear a little less each year,” Rogers remarked in a September 1916 article for a New York newspaper. “I only ask that my life be spared until I see three more Frolics” (Rogers 2005: 84). Comments such as these, also used in his onstage performances, made the explicit nature of the show palatable. Like his role in vaudeville, Rogers’s seeming rural innocence soothed an audience at times uncomfortable with the show’s content and presentation of “mechanized choreography,” as Joel Dinerstein describes the show in *Swinging the Machine*. Dinerstein (2003: 193) interprets Rogers’s role in these productions:

Will Rogers entered the scene with his trusty lasso to establish control. . . . Rogers lassoed the two circles of women while singing the words, “I would like to corral [you].” Once Rogers had the Tiller Girls lassoed, the music was torqued up into a whirling, nearly out-of-control tempo; the women stayed together in their circles and Rogers ably maintained his role as ringmaster. Rogers’s persona here synthesized the engineer of mechanical order with this solitary Western hero.³⁰

While I agree with Dinerstein’s interpretation of this performance—indeed, Rogers often performed in this type of Ziegfeld production—I posit that Rogers’s role was complicated by his comedic monologues. His actual voice provided an aural mundanity to an otherwise automatic show. Indeed, it was during Rogers’s stint on Broadway that his cowboy persona broadened: he continued to cast himself as a hokey westerner, but his jokes and knowledge of political events made him oddly cosmopolitan. The result was a comedian most people connected with. While the audience was bombarded with women-as-machines, working in chorus lines or moving through set-designed machines, Rogers appeared onstage and comforted those in the audience who were uncomfortable with this new aesthetic (fig. 3). He seemed far removed from the cacophony of the city, yet he was wandering through it. Again, this playing at the margins, pushing the boundaries, showed Rogers to be a man of many faces.³¹

Although audiences did not always recognize Rogers as Native, his coworkers did. Eddie Cantor, for example, spent a good deal of time with Rogers during off-hours. He described several interactions with Rogers in



Figure 3. Will Rogers with the cast of the Follies of 1924. Courtesy of the Will Rogers Memorial Museum, Claremore, Oklahoma

his various publications. One story in particular reveals Cantor's knowledge of Rogers's tribal ties:

I never think of Will Rogers without recalling the first time I took him into a kosher restaurant. It would be the equivalent of Rogers's taking me into an Indian wigwam and serving this lox-and-bagel boy bison-on-the-hoof. But Will, I was glad to see, liked the food so much that several times a week . . . we would, as he put it, "kosher up." And when he was leaving the Follies of 1918 to make pictures for Samuel Goldwyn, he said, "Eddie, they ain't never gonna believe it in Hollywood."

"Believe what?"

"That this Cherokee cowboy had become a Jewish Indian." (Cantor 1963: 142-43)

Cantor (1957: 106) also recollected that Fields's nickname for Rogers, who was often the butt of Fields's crude jokes, was Injun. That Rogers's coworkers recognized his ethnicity is important. It reveals a difference

between Rogers's public cowboy persona, which was shaped largely by the media and unfamiliar fans, and his more authentic personality, which seems to have been connected to his tribe.

Rogers's onstage commentaries were typically devoid of controversy. It was during these years that he became well known for saying, "All I know is what I read in the papers," a remark that acquitted him of controversy. That he ably walked this line should not be seen as mere fence-sitting; he was able to please all types of audiences with his entertainment, despite his strong political opinions, which would be revealed after he had accumulated the cultural capital to pronounce them. Finding this middle ground reflects the nature of politics in the Cherokee Nation, where relatives often competed with each other for political posts (Rogers's father ran for a Cherokee senate seat against his cousin Jesse Bushyhead). The trustworthy groundwork he laid in vaudeville and on Broadway, where he seemed to be a nonpartisan observer, ultimately gave him the leeway to represent American Indians, as well as national and international affairs, as vastly more complex than they were made out to be in the popular vocabulary of the day. To cite Foster's (2008: 289) detailed examination of Rogers: "Rogers, who gained such fame as the voice of common America, instead becomes the voice of the trickster, deflating the rhetoric of ever-progressing societies with insights literally based in the experience of Indian country."

Rogers's transition during his Broadway years from stage roper to head-scratching cowboy comedian lends itself to a deeper understanding of the ways American Indians compromised their identities while maintaining an allegiance to home. He worked the fissures of the representational system to both chide the status quo and, simultaneously, gain increasing popularity with the American public.

"Your True friend and Injun Cowboy"³²: Conclusions

In early 1907, while Will Rogers performed as a trick-roping comedian in the vaudeville circuits of Brooklyn, Baltimore, and Pittsburgh, the twenty-seven-year-old submitted his "evidence of identity" to the commissioner of Indian affairs in Washington, D.C. (Rogers 2000: 346–49). Rogers was a member of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma according to both the Nation and the federal government: he was born in the Nation to prominent Cherokee parents, he had lived there until he was twenty-two, and he had received both an allotment and a tribal enrollment number—through censuses taken by both the Cherokee Nation and the Dawes Commission—years earlier. This additional application was for federal reparations due the Eastern Cherokees, particularly those who experienced forcible removal from the

Southeast by the U.S. government in the late 1830s.³³ These resistant tribal citizens successfully sued the government for the expenses they incurred while making their new land suitable for living (Wardell 1938: chap. 7).

When asked on his application to recount his relations from the Cherokee Nation East, Rogers listed the names of several maternal relations: "For my Mother Mary A. Rogers, My Grandmother, Elizabeth Scrimsher, My Aunt Sarah Catherine Scrimsher, My great Aunt Polly Smith, My Cousin Watt Smith" (Rogers 2000: 346). Other portions of the application reveal Rogers's extensive knowledge of his ancestry. On one line Rogers wrote, "My Grandfather Mathew Scrimsher lived in the Cherokee Nation East in 1835"; on another he noted, "[I am] On the Cherokee Authenticated roll of 1880 and am a Cherokee Allottee" (348).³⁴ Even while performing in vaudeville throughout the United States, there was never any question in Rogers's mind as to what nation he belonged. But to much of his audience (then and now), he was the quintessential American cowboy.

All types of disguises, Philip Deloria (1998: 7) writes of whites playing Indian, carry with them "extraordinary transformative qualities . . . call[ing] the notion of fixed identity into question." Typically, whites' Indian performances place American Indians in the past, carrying out a performative colonialism that denies actual Native people autonomy over their own image (Bender 2002; Deloria 1998; Deloria 2004; Lepore 1998; Strong 1999). Rogers offers a contrast to this usurpation of Native identity. While his audience often perceived a white cowboy performer, Rogers did not see himself so simply. As his career evolved, Rogers increasingly resisted this simplistic categorization. During his early stage career, however, he remained ambiguous about such representations. Through his stage costume Rogers was at once recognizable, though only as a simplified version of himself. In many respects he became an Indian mimicking white conceptions of cowboys.

When considered through Gerald Vizenor's lens, Will Rogers loses his hokey demeanor and becomes central to understanding the liminality that marked Native identities in the early twentieth century. To counter the colonial development of the nontribal, generic *Indian*, Vizenor (1994: 5) suggests that the "postindian ousts the inventions with humor, new stories, and the simulations of survivance."³⁵ This theoretical depiction of a "postindian warrior of survivance" fleshes out this particular argument and connects Rogers to American Indian intellectuals and entertainers during this period. Rogers fits into this paradigm of the postindian on at least two counts. First, he tricked, however inadvertently, his non-Native audience simply by acting like an actual (nonstereotypical) Cherokee cowboy. Because he did not fit into the preconceptions of Natives that most Americans held, he was

placed into that ethnic category only as an addendum. Second, he created, I suggest, a new method of “survival” during a period of flux in Native political and cultural history. By presenting himself, often autonomously, on the Wild West circuit, in vaudeville, and on Broadway, Rogers offered a method of cultural survival and endurance not available to many other Native people of his day.

Rogers’s impact on American Indian intellectual history has largely been overlooked, even by those examining Rogers’s Cherokee ties. His disconnection from other Natives working in the public realm during this period does not mean that he was alone in his public ambiguity. His contributions both contrasted with and complemented the work of those Native intellectuals striving for a public recognition of American Indians. Rogers’s Native contemporaries, such as Charles Eastman, Zitkala-Ša, Luther Standing Bear, Chauncey Yellow Robe, and Alexander Posey, connect to Rogers in their attempts to balance American expectation and tribal identity. As P. Jane Hafen (1997: 32) writes of Zitkala-Ša, “Her Yankton Sioux awareness is an omnipresence revealed even through the structures of popular sentimentality.” Like Yankton Sioux intellectual Zitkala-Ša, whose artistic work culled material from traditional tribal life and larger American popular genres, Rogers integrated Cherokee ranching traditions into American popular forums during this period. Further, both of these artists selectively chose which assimilative techniques to absorb and which to refuse. In Zitkala-Ša’s “An Indian Teacher among Indians,” for example, the narrator’s mother warns her daughter about the potential treacheries of whites: “My daughter, beware of the paleface. . . . It is the same paleface who offers in one palm the holy papers, and with the other a holy baptism of firewater. He is the hypocrite who reads with one eye, ‘Thou shalt not kill,’ and with the other gloats upon the sufferings of the Indian race” (Zitkala-Ša 1976 [1921]: 94). The narrator returns to boarding school, but with an important reminder of the balance required when living among non-Natives.

Other Native intellectuals of the day, such as Dakota activist and writer Charles Eastman (1980 [1911]: 88), expressed feelings of entrapment between assimilation and resistance:

As a child, I understood how to give; I have forgotten that grace since I became civilized. I lived in the natural life, whereas I now live the artificial. . . . Now I worship with the white man before a painted landscape whose value is estimated in dollars! Thus the Indian is reconstructed, as the natural rocks are ground to powder, and made into artificial blocks which may be built into the walls of modern society.

Each of these artists worked in a syncretic fashion, merging his or her tribal heritage with modern expectations. As D'Arcy McNickle's (1973: 10) contends, "Indians remain Indians . . . by selecting out of available choices . . . that do not impose a substitute identity."

Rogers was not far removed from his colleagues. It seems that through these years Rogers struggled with balancing what was real to him—his Cherokee-ness, his connection with ranching—and what was not—his connections to a romanticized (and whitened) West and his similarities to other tribal peoples from vastly different cultures and regions. That he should be included in current understandings of what it means to be a Native working in the popular realm in the first half of the twentieth century, however, is without question.

Notes

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- 1 As Edward Said (1994 [1978]: 2) writes: "*Orientalism* is less preferred by specialists today, both because it is too vague and general and because it connotes the high-handed executive attitude of nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century European colonialism. Nevertheless books are written and congresses held with 'the Orient' as their main focus, with the Orientalist in his new or old guise as their main authority. The point is that even if it does not survive as it once did, Orientalism lives on academically through its doctrines and theses about the Orient and the Oriental."
- 2 From the first decade of the 1900s to the 1920s, the focus of this article, Rogers worked the vaudeville circuits and headlined the Ziegfeld Follies as a political comedian and trick roper. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s he starred in seventy-one movies, hosted a regular radio show, and penned over four thousand syndicated editorials. Rogers was also influential in the political realm throughout his career, befriending bipartisan political figures who called on his rural humor and spokespersonship to further their political careers. On occasion, his influence threatened major political leaders. When FDR heard of Rogers's 1932 gag presidential run, Roosevelt (1932) sent him a short but revealing note: "Don't forget you are a Democrat by birth, training and tough experience and I know you won't get mixed in any fool movement to make the good old Donkey chase his own tail and give the Elephant a chance to win the race."
- 3 Rogers returned to Broadway for a time in the early 1920s. By that time, however, he had turned his artistic attention toward journalism and film primarily.
- 4 Unfortunately, Rogers is largely missing from Deloria's text. Deloria makes passing reference to Rogers on page 78.

- 5 Though Cook (2001: 26) suggests that this period of trickery ended in 1900, the titillation of the allusive continued well into the twentieth century, seen most obviously through vaudevillian and circus entertainments, which remained popular through the first decades of the twentieth century.
- 6 On the same page Smith (1999: 74) emphasizes that “at the heart of such a view of authenticity is a belief that indigenous cultures cannot change, cannot recreate themselves and still claim to be indigenous. Nor can they be complicated, internally diverse or contradictory. Only the West has that privilege.”
- 7 May (2000: 13) notes that “more than sixty years after these events [of the 1930s], it seems almost impossible that a rope-twirling Cherokee Indian became the most popular figure of the Depression. . . . The reason lies in the manner in which scholars have explored the relationship between politics, Will Rogers, and filmmaking.”
- 8 Foster’s (2006) dissertation offers further examination of Rogers’s relationship to the scholar’s regional approach.
- 9 The phrase “America’s favorite cowboy” was often used in reference to Will Rogers. For one example of many, see the narrator’s introduction of Will Rogers’s 30 April 1933 Good Gulf radio show (Rogers 1983: 71).
- 10 This act, which matched the sentiment of the assimilationist Dawes Act of 1887, dissolved the tribal governments and divided the tribally held lands of the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Muscogee, and Seminole in the eastern Indian Territory.
- 11 Taking another approach, Jan Penrose (2003), in her examination of all-Indian rodeos, suggests that the nature/culture binary influences conceptions of race and hence boosts the popularly accepted antagonism between cowboys and Indians. Using this lens, Indians were (and, I would argue, still are) considered wild and natural by many non-Natives; Natives provided a nonwhite contrast to the supposedly more socially and technologically advanced colonizers. Indians must, in this scenario, be settled and tamed by cowboys, who, logically, could not be American Indian.
- 12 Turner (1920: 12) includes cowboys in his frontier chain of being: “The Atlantic frontier was compounded of fisherman, fur trader, miner, cattle-raiser, and farmer. Excepting the fisherman, each type of industry was on the march toward the West, impelled by an irresistible attraction. Each passed in successive waves across the continent. Stand at Cumberland Gap and watch the procession of civilization, marching single file—the buffalo following the trail to the salt springs, the Indian, the fur trader and hunter, the cattle-raiser, the pioneer farmer—and the frontier has passed by.”
- 13 In fact, relocation and/or restriction to a particular land base led many Native nations to move toward alternative subsistence methods—ranching and farming—for survival and self-sufficiency. At the turn of the twentieth century, many Native people who before resisted assimilation created distinct forms of cultural syncretism. In many cases, tribal traditions interacted with ranching life in unique ways. Morgan Baillargeon and Leslie Heyman Tepper (1998: 9) write of Northern Plains and Plateau tribes, “As ranchers, stock contractors, and rodeo participants, they maintain the unique relationship that their ancestors had with horses.” For a variety of examples of this maintenance of tradition as it pertains to Native ranching and cowboy life, see part 1 of this text.
- 14 It is important to note that Clem Rogers and other Cherokees who worked large

tracts of tribal land did not represent the vast majority of Cherokee citizens or follow their subsistence patterns. As Duane Champagne (1992: 210) describes: “Although some of the former Indian planters were heavily engaged in the cattle business, the Texas cattlemen were the primary entrepreneurs in the industry. . . . The Cherokee, the Choctaw, the Chickasaw, and the Creek remained internally stratified primarily between large landholders and small-scale subsistence farmers.”

- 15 For a full description, dripping with the biases of the day, see John Joseph Flinn’s 1893 guide to the fair. In the Anthropology Building, for example, “The popular features of the Ethnological exhibit are those which illustrate by living example the principal families of native American Indians, who have made their temporary home on the Fair grounds, living in the exact way their forefathers lived before the white man invaded their hunting grounds” (40).
- 16 For a discussion of why “half breed” assumes a mixture of Indian and white blood, ignoring intermarriages between Indians and African Americans, see Miles 2005 and Miles and Holland 2006. The half-breed label reflects a well-studied historical trend that assumes the interdependency of culture and blood. As Theda Perdue (2003: x) suggests, however, this conceptualization of blood quantum is mired in colonial relations between whites and Natives: “This assumption suggests . . . that people of European descent behaved in certain ways, not because they had learned those behaviors, but because the behaviors were innate. Furthermore, even if we dismiss the notion of innate behavior, it implies that the culture of Europeans was stronger than those of Native people so that individuals of ‘mixed blood’ were more likely to behave like the Europeans of their ancestry than like the Indians with whom they lived.”
- 17 Discussions of the origin of this nickname conflict. Rogers (1949: 23) himself wrote, “Of course I thought to be a regular Wild West I had to have a name so I christened myself ‘The Cherokee Kid’ and had letterheads made.” Ben Yagoda (1993: 58), however, suggests that Texas Jack dubbed him the Cherokee Kid.
- 18 Each of these scholars refers to various instances of Native resistance to stereotypical storylines. By and large, however, the audience’s interpretation depended on the colonial narrative presented to them.
- 19 Rogers wrote ungrammatically. Indeed, this became a trademark of his later journalistic writings. I have attempted to present the writing as it appears in the original, adding clarifying notes only when necessary.
- 20 Rogers refers here to chapter 31 of *The Virginian*, “The Cottonwoods,” in which the Virginian hangs his longtime friend Steve: “You have a friend, and his ways are your ways. . . . Then one day you find him putting his iron on another man’s calf. . . . And the years go on, until you are foreman of Judge Henry’s ranch and he—is dangling back in the cottonwoods. What can he claim? Who made the choice?” (Wister 1998 [1902]: 259).
- 21 I list the full-length title here (as opposed to the more common *Cogewea* or *Cogewea, the Half-Blood*) to emphasize that this novel is a western, one with an Indian woman as its central character. Thanks to James Cox for reference to and information about *The Brand*.
- 22 Oskison sent Rogers a copy of his book with the inscription “For Will Rogers—in memory of our school days together at Willie Halsell, and of a period in the old Indian Territory that we both knew and, I hope, loved. Cordially—as one Cherokee to another—Yours, John Oskison.” The book is part of Rogers’s library at the Will Rogers Ranch in Pacific Palisades, California. Steven Gragert,

director of the Will Rogers Memorial Museum, shared this information about the inscription with me. Two of Riggs's plays—*Green Grow the Lilacs*, later the basis for the musical *Oklahoma!*, and *The Cherokee Night*—arguably fall into the western genre.

- 23 As Kaho describes, the Battle of Claremore Mound occurred in 1818, as members of the Cherokee Nation settled in what had once been Osage territory.
- 24 Eastman 1980 (1911), Zitkala-Ša 1976 (1921), and Standing Bear 2006 offer a few examples. While their books are often specific to the Great Sioux Nation, of which they were a part, their content often lumped tribes together, contributing further to this generalizing effect.
- 25 Space forbids a detailed discussion of Rogers genealogy here. He was related to—among many other well-known families—the Adairs, through his mother, and the Vanns, through his father, both prominent and highly political families in the Cherokee Nation. In fact, Rogers's given name, Colonel William Penn Adair Rogers, references his ties to the Adair family. For details on Rogers's genealogy, see Lowe 1997.
- 26 Pat Lowe, formerly of the Will Rogers Memorial Museum, kindly provided me with a meticulous detailing of Rogers's daily life. However, references to Clem Rogers and his role in the Cherokee Nation are made not only in Yagoda 1993 and Rogers 1996, 2000, but also in general histories of the Cherokee Nation during the period (Carter 1999: 108; Wardell 1938: 233, 285, 321n22).
- 27 Thanks to Daniel Heath Justice for offering sound criticism on this point.
- 28 These letters home are collected at the Will Rogers Memorial Museum in Claremore, Oklahoma. Many are available in Rogers 1996 and 2000.
- 29 Rogers received \$600 a week during his first year, \$750 the next (Yagoda 1993: 147). As a comparison, he received \$75 a week when he started on vaudeville in 1905 (this number excludes the 5 percent Keith commission); by 1907 Rogers received \$300 a week, a salary more typical of vaudevillians (89, 110).
- 30 For further interpretation of Ziegfeld's role as "social interpreter of machine aesthetics" (Dinerstein 2003: 188), see chapter 5 of *Swinging the Machine*. An alternative to the production Dinerstein describes is recounted by Yagoda (1993: 142): "The curtain rose on a series of life-sized drawings of women, placed in descending order of clothing, culminating in a nude. One by one, real-life counterparts stepped through the drawings. 'By the time the last bit of lingerie is reached and the nude approached,' the *Evening Mail* reported, 'there is a general shifting of seats to improve the view, when through that particular drawing steps Will Rogers as a masked marvel of the Western range.'"
- 31 Rogers was referred to in countless publications as "the poet lariat." Ben Yagoda (1993: 148) writes that it was playwright and critic Channing Pollock who bestowed this title upon Rogers.
- 32 "Your True friend and Injun Cowboy" is from a letter written by Rogers to his future wife Betty Blake from Oolagah, Indian Territory, in January 1900 and is quoted in Collins 1992: 23.
- 33 Though most historians recognize 1838, the Trail of Tears, as the date of removal for the Cherokee, tribal removal was complex and was tied to tribal factionalism. The first Cherokee removal took place in 1808, another in 1817, a third in 1835, and the final removal in 1838. To further complicate the story, many Cherokees stayed in the east, forming what today is called the Eastern Cherokee Nation. For a detailed discussion of the "removal crisis," see Champagne 1992: chap. 5.

- 34 It is noteworthy that Rogers cites his inclusion in the 1880 census. The Authenticated Roll of the Cherokee Nation (1880) was conducted by the Cherokee Nation itself and not by the Dawes Commission, which would later create its own rolls, relying heavily on the tribe's. As Kent Carter (1999: 108) writes in his study of the Dawes Commission: "In 1880 the Cherokees had taken a very complete census that was generally considered to be 'a fair and just roll of citizens' that was 'carefully and correctly made.' It was the only tribal roll that was specifically confirmed by Congress as a basis for enrollment." For in-depth discussion of Rogers's relation to these censuses, see Rogers 2000: 56–57.
- 35 Vizenor (1998: 15) defines *survivance* as "more than survival, more than endurance or mere response; the stories of survivance are an active presence."

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