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The Digger Indian Stereotype in California

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DEALING with the encounters between Whites and Indians in California, the events that provide the framework for this paper are historical. The events themselves have been well documented and researched: varying attention has been given to the social and economic exigencies that impelled men westward, and to the conflicts that arose when Christian farmer/pastoralists met Pagan hunter/gatherers on the frontier. Facets of this history will be touched upon here as well. But it is my thesis that even a thorough recitation of events would not be sufficient to allow understanding of the intensity of Indian-White conflict during the last century. What would be missing might be called a dialectic between "appearance" and "reality." "Reality" is what happened: the aforementioned history in the world of phenomena. "Appearance" partakes of a different world, that of mind and the imagination. The ethnographic reality of California Indian societies, as we have come to appreciate it, will be taken as a given. Contrasted to it will be the appearance many California Indians had for Whites, that is, the images held by them of the indigenous peoples of the state. These images could be gathered under a single term, that of the "Digger."

"Digger" was the term popularly used by Whites to denote Indians—primarily, but not

exclusively, the Indians of Central California. It entered into the local vernacular during the middle of the last century, although its usage appears to have been most common in and around the mining fields of the Gold Rush. Encoined in this seemingly innocuous word were a host of assumptions about the character of Indians, regardless of their specific ethnic affiliation. Thus, despite the presence of Maidu, Nisenan, Miwok, Washo, Yokuts, Monache, Tubatulabal, and others, a survey of the popular literature of the period gives one the impression that the vast territory occupied by these diverse peoples comprised, in fact, the heartland of the Digger Tribe. The term was a gloss, which, once launched into popular culture, assumed a life of its own. This is a key characteristic of stereotypes. They are above all typifications—seemingly common-sense denominators that fix and simplify that which might otherwise appear baffling and complex. "Stereotype" was originally a printer's word, denoting a plate upon which a form of type was cast. Figuratively, *stereotype* has come to mean "something continued or constantly repeated without change," and *to stereotype* means to "fix or perpetuate in unchanging form" (cf. Little *et al.* 1955). Here, obviously, the word will be used in these latter senses. Not only was it a gloss, but "Digger" was also a curse: the use of it often served to encapsulate Indians as being treacherous, bloodthirsty, dirty,

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squalid, lazy, comic, and/or pathetic as the time and place dictated, and such portrayals were often accompanied by violence.

In the *Dictionary of Anthropology*, "digger" is defined as, "the Shoshone, so-called because they dig for roots and eat them" (Winnick 1958). This is in keeping with Heizer's (1974a) contention that the term was initially applied to groups in the Great Basin. He supports this with references to John Frémont's journal of exploration, where "root diggers" were encountered near Great Salt Lake, and the "Digger Tribe" was noted at Pyramid Lake, in Nevada. Also, an 1847 map was consulted which bore the name "Diggers" in an area of West-Central Utah; and H. R. Schoolcraft's first (1851) volume on American Indians referred to Diggers as the tribes of the Great Basin in Utah, Nevada, and Idaho (cf. Heizer 1974a:xiv).

An early reference to Diggers in California is fairly sympathetic. George C. Yount wrote in his diary that:

In their wanderings for a place of encampment, the party first encountered that species of Red Man peculiar to California and the Sierra Nevada Range. From their mode of living on roots and reptiles, insects and vermin, they have been called Diggers. In fact, they almost burrow into the ground like the mole and are almost as blind to everything comely. At the time our trappers supposed they had found the lowest dregs of humanity. But . . . they were in error. They were destined to find a race lower than these [cited in Heizer and Almquist 1971:24].

The last sentence above refers to later American settlers who, in a very short time, had virtually exterminated the Indians:

It is not eight years since the above-named valley (Napa) swarmed with not less than 8000 human beings, of whom there are now left as many hundreds. They have been hunted down by the murderous white man [cited in Heizer and Almquist 1971:24].¹

Despite Yount's relatively compassionate

account, his likening of Indians to moles and reference to them "swarming" over the landscape, may testify to the subtle power the Digger stereotype exerted on the minds of Whites. For very early on, "Digger" became a term of opprobrium—a taxonomic stigma—which could be used to label Indians as base and inferior to the point of denying their humanity. Within a generation of the time Yount and Frémont called diverse Indians "root diggers," the term had spread to, and was almost exclusively reserved for, the Indians of California.

What follows is an attempt to isolate the specific elements, or images, contained within the Digger stereotype. Hubert Howe Bancroft's first volume of *Native Races* (1886) and Stephen Powers' *Tribes of California* (1877) were chosen to provide the bulk of supportive references, as these two works were the sources most responsible for diffusing images of California Indians throughout the educated United States. Often more lurid and sensational parallels to these quotations may be found in any number of popular accounts of the day.

Equation with animality has already been mentioned in connection with Yount's diary. Such likening represents in a fundamental way a denial of a person's humanity. In Bancroft, this equation is presented in a typical manner:

They are small in stature; thin, squalid, dirty, and degraded in appearance. In their habits little better than an orang-utan. They are certainly the worst type of savage I have ever seen [Bancroft 1886:365-366].

Association with filth and verminous infestation were additional images:

In their personal habits they are filthy to the extreme. Both their dwellings and their persons abound with vermin [Bancroft 1886:377].

The following quotation demonstrates as neatly as any the degree to which stereotypic

views may obscure "objective" observation:

Although the [Northern Californians] seldom fail to take a cold bath in the mornings, and frequently bathe at intervals during the day, yet they are never clean [Bancroft 1886:341].

Laziness is another image contained within the Digger stereotype. This quality seems to have been applied to typify the low state of California Indian culture, particularly *vis-à-vis* that of Indians in other parts of the country:

The bestial laziness of the Central Californian prevents him from following the chase to any extent or even from inventing efficient game traps [Bancroft 1886:373].

The indolence and slothfulness portrayed here are congenial to an even more widespread stereotype in American culture, that of Blacks. In the 1850s, the California Indian Indenture Act sanctioned what amounted to slavery for Indians, especially Indian children. Intriguingly, we find numerous references to Indians as having Negroid features. Speaking again of Central Californians, Bancroft (1886:364) notes that:

Their complexion is much darker to that of the tribes further north, often being nearly black, so that with their matted, bushy hair which is frequently cut short, they present a very uncouth appearance.

The indication of mourning practices notwithstanding, these references give rise to speculation as to whether Indians were being symbolically equated to Black slaves, whose status was well established and accepted elsewhere. Often they were compared outright, to their disadvantage. An opinion was expressed in 1851 that, unlike Blacks, the Indian was incapable of "any act or handicraft that involves the slightest exercise in mind and judgement" (cited in Cook 1976:326). Another example, taken from a Sacramento newspaper article of 1863, recalls an aspect of the "happy minstrel" stereotype:

"Our city is visited daily by the remnants of a Digger tribe, whose sole occupation seems to be the eating of watermelon" (cited in Heizer 1974b:312).

Accompanying this derision and contempt is another accretion to the Digger stereotype: that of the Indian as a comic character. The miserable remnants of decimated populations that stayed near White communities became objects of ridicule and standards by which to evince the patent superiority of Anglo-American culture:

Big Ingin Mr. Captain Sutter, alias Lam-puche, the Indian chief of the Yukas, called yesterday to pay his respects to the editor—same as other big Ingins sometimes do. The Capt. is always in trouble—always in want—family all dead as usual—no coat or shoes—and very cold nights. The Capt. is an inveterate beggar . . . we asked the Capt. about the weather, when he replied—"Very dry, no more rain, all gone." We made this inquiry out of respect in Digger meteorology, and of course among this scientific class the question of rain is settled by the authority of Capt. Sutter . . . we gave the Capt. a "quarter" for imparting this important information and he departed a happy Indian [from an 1864 Marysville newspaper article, cited in Heizer 1974b:312].

Unhappily, when Indians resisted in any way the treatment meted out to them, contempt for them was expressed in less humorous ways, and a reciprocal image of the Indian as treacherous and bloodthirsty came into its own.

While considering these aspects, which, taken together, constitute the Digger stereotype, it is important to remember that Anglo-Americans brought with them a long history of contact with Indians on other frontiers. Throughout American history, a succession of contrasting images of Indians has been noted (Fiedler 1968; Ortiz 1977; Slotkin 1973). Briefly, positive images of the "Noble Savage" have been assigned to those times and places when events required Indians as mediators.

Classical Arcadian attributes were ascribed to the Algonkians of the Eastern Seaboard, for instance, by early explorers who wished to attract colonists from the Old World, smitten as it was at the time by Golden Age mythology (cf. Jennings 1975).² Later, the tribes of the Iroquois confederation were extolled for their honor, dignity, and statesmanship during the period when France and England were vying for power, and the arts of diplomacy and alliance making were so crucial. Later still, the so-called Five Civilized Tribes were praised for their enthusiastic and efficient embrace of the newly created model of American democracy. No doubt many citizens of the republic found such a ready conversion to "civilization" to be a stimulating promise of the task at hand, namely, taming the new land.

More specifically, the Noble Savage image seems to have prevailed during periods of negotiability, when Whites were either downright dependent upon native skills to survive, or in some other way recognized the temporary usefulness of the indigenous people.³ Without basic technical assistance from the Algonkians, few, if any, of the earliest settlers would have survived in the unknown land. Without friendly Iroquois, a lucrative fur trade would have been lost, and premature conflict between the French and the British, lacking Iroquois mediation, might have disrupted European colonization for a considerable period.

In California, there are only the faintest glimmerings of such positive imagery. They also occur during periods of negotiability: occasional early explorers, hacienda patrones, and Gold Rush journalists rendered accounts that were favorable to native peoples, but never did their descriptions raise them to the level of "nobility" ascribed elsewhere.

Before the floodgates fully opened in the second year of the Gold Rush, many miners found native skills, knowledge, and especially

labor to be indispensable. Indians provided guidance into the mining areas, food, and labor. In 1848, as many as 50 percent of the miners in the gold fields were Indians (Hall 1978; Rawls 1976); using modified traditional objects as tools, they took, either independently or under direction, "thousands, perhaps millions, in gold from the streams" (Cook (1976:320). Their prosperity was short-lived, however; almost no mention of them is made after 1851. They were no longer needed; commercial entrepreneurship and the mechanization of the mines obviated their usefulness. The brevity of the period of grace allowed them is illustrated in the following passage, taken from the journal of a miner:

In the society of the mines, the group held in lowest esteem was unquestionably the Indians. In the first season it is true these original denizens of the gold country were allowed to work in the diggings on their own or as gang labor for some white boss, but as soon as the mines began to fill up this sanction was withdrawn and they were soon ordered off [Caughey 1948:197].

It is a sad and shameful fact of American history that however detente was symbolically upheld by positive, or at least tolerant, images of the indigenous people, it inevitably collapsed when the balance of power changed and Indians outlived their usefulness. Negotiation would be replaced by aggression, and the Ignoble would replace the Noble Savage to accommodate the ensuing surge westward. By the time the Iroquois had been "chastened" into submission, the Cherokee and others, whose removal was the greatest embarrassment to the ideals of democracy and source of the most serious rift in the political fabric of this country before the Civil War, were out of the way. Being thus vanquished and/or removed, the hitherto noble images ascribed to them would occasionally reappear in the relatively safe domains of art and literature.

That such images danced in the heads of

Americans when they came to California may be seen once again in the works of Powers and Bancroft:

The reader must also lay aside the copper color, the haughty aquiline beak, and the gorgeous barbaric ornamentation of the person. He must lay aside the gory scalp-lock, the torture of the captive at the stake, the red war-paint of terrible import . . . the tomahawk, the totem, and the calumet . . . it is a humble and lowly race we approach, one of the lowliest on earth . . . [Powers 1877:5].

Bancroft reiterates:

Among the Tuscororas; Cherokees, and Iroquois of the Atlantic slope, barbarism assumes its greatest proportions; proceeding west, it bursts its fetters in the incipient civilizations of the Gila; but if we continue this line to the shores of the Pacific, we find this intellectual dawn checked, and man sunk almost to the darkness of the brute [Bancroft 1886:324].

A general impression is that, "for intelligence, they are far behind the Indians east of the Rocky Mountains" (Quaife 1949). Thus, earlier stereotypes from other frontiers conditioned the preceptions of travellers to California. Alongside the "haughty" Iroquois or Cherokee, the native Californians were seen as lowly and brutish.

Both Powers and Bancroft disavowed the use of the term "Digger":

The term 'Digger', vulgarly applied to the race, is opprobrious and unjust . . . there are tribes, notably the Apaches, who subsist much more on roots than do the California Indians [Powers 1877:15].

Yet in numerous passages they indicated a willingness to accept its connotations. In so doing they fell prey to the same tautology as that perpetuated by the pioneers: labelled and treated as brutes, the native people that Powers and Bancroft saw were already degraded and debased. Quite simply, the image of the Indians as they unquestionably "were,"

frequently allowed Whites the conceptual freedom to act toward them in such a manner as to *create* them in living reality: they were human beings *viewed* as animals, hence pursued as animals, hunted and killed as animals. Indians were in a double bind (cf. Bateson 1972) from which there was no escape: those who resisted were killed as dangerous wild beasts; those who did not were considered valueless vermin—pests to be eliminated upon chance encounter or actually hunted for sport.

Why and how did California Indians become "Diggers"? One obvious response to these questions is because California was the last frontier within the continental United States. If so-called Social Darwinism posited a temporal scale which ordered mankind from the primitive to the civilized, Manifest Destiny was its spatial counterpart. It called for the conquest of the wilderness by the farm, the town, and the city, "from sea to shining sea." California represented the second half of that mythic equation. Having crossed the Rocky and Sierra Nevada mountains, or rounded Cape Horn, White Americans would not be denied the gold at the end of the rainbow. Especially not by "savages" who were unaware or indifferent to the treasure that glittered in the streams by their villages, or whose hunting and gathering way of life assaulted the sensibilities of the agrarian ideal. No, the Indian had to be gotten out of the way, for he was an obstacle to the transformation and exploitation of the wilderness, so manifestly destined. And it is a truism, certainly a depressing one, that whoever is to be conquered or removed or killed must first be symbolically opposed.

The most basic act of such opposition is to make the distinction between "I" and "Other," or "We" and "They." The "We" are recognized by their given familiarity; the "They" by their recognizable foreignness.⁴ These are elementary classifications, funda-

mental to all social (or anti-social) life (cf. Durkheim and Mauss 1963; Mead 1974; Berger and Luckman 1967). "They" have already been discussed. The question now is, who were "We"?

The massive influx of people to California differed in character from any other westward migration in American history. Whereas the earliest settlers of the colonies arrived in groups specific to particular countries, and later pioneers were primarily Yankee admixtures, people from all over the world flocked to the gold fields in 1849. It was the most heterogeneous population ever to cut a new frontier. However, despite this exotic composition, which renders gratuitous any gross generalizations about the character of the pioneer, one distinction among them is quite clear: some prospered and most did not.

Such men as Yount, Bidwell, and Sutter were already the proprietors of immense wealthy estates when gold was discovered. With few exceptions, the ensuing rush only augmented their fortunes. Some of the earlier, luckier, or more skillful miners struck it rich; still others made their fortunes through aggressive entrepreneurship. These were the fortunate men who succeeded in fulfilling the promise of frontier America to "regenerate their fortunes, their spirits, and the power of the church and nation" (Slotkin 1973:5). But the great majority were lucky just to break even, finding barely enough gold to provision themselves at the grossly inflated prices of the times. Thousands, even, perished in the attempt. One contemporary wrote that "thousands will curse the day that brought them to the mines" (Christman 1930: 106). Prospects worsened considerably after the easily extracted surface gold was removed in 1849; by 1851, well-financed mining corporations moved in on the major lodes and worked them with machinery. Individual miners without capital were pushed aside.

The literature of the era gives one the

impression that the men who were the most successful in and around the gold fields were also those who were the most sympathetic and moderate in their behavior toward Indians. They seem not to have been the active perpetrators of violence against them, however often they might express a fatalistic resignation to their demise, given the mandate of Manifest Destiny. Another category of men who seem to have been more favorably disposed towards Indians were the men of letters who chronicled the era. They, too, often accepted the content of the Digger stereotype, but showed repugnance of the violence that accompanied it. In their writings there is often a plaintive desire expressed to be back home, doing what one was doing before, and almost always a certain observer's detachment from the chaotic frontier scenes around them.

Both of these categories of men (there were very few women in the diggings) shared one advantage over the majority of miners: by virtue either of wealth or education, they were assured a more favorable position in greater society. The self-made man, also, unless the continuance of his fortune depended on his staying, could leave the diggings to enjoy, elsewhere, the fruits of his success. But what of the others? I submit that given the unquestioned authority with which progress and success were vested, the unshakable belief in the historical mission of America, failing—and those who fell by the wayside were unmistakably labelled as failures—must have been a bitter pill to swallow. The stigma of failure, I am suggesting, was not "swallowed." It was instead transmuted into a bitter hatred of Indians. The conceptual vehicle for this hatred was the Digger stereotype. Josiah Royce, the philosopher and member of a pioneer California family, called the situation in the state,

... a diseased local exaggeration of our common national feelings towards foreigners

... a hearty American contempt for things and institutions that were stubbornly foreign [Royce 1948:218].

In addition to a need for scapegoats, there was also the problem of control, as even the first Spanish missionaries in the state were aware. The natives had to be controlled so that the land could be possessed. Unfortunately, the methods of control often seemed to bring about the very conditions that would endanger it. As Indians were "ordered off" the landscape, traditional subsistence practices were disrupted and habitats destroyed. Many Indians reacted adaptively by developing a taste for horse meat and other commodities in the White economy. Starvation prompted them either to steal or to accept and rely upon such government aid as was offered to them. The image of the Indian as thief and indolent parasite followed shortly. Unceasing violence against Indian persons, particularly the kidnapping of children and assaults upon women, sparked occasional acts of violent resistance against their perpetrators. These outraged the sensibilities and exhausted the limited sympathies of the Whites, and reinforced the image of the Indian as an Ignoble Savage.

The movement here was entropic; that is, it went from a (perceived, desired) state of control toward a loss of control. Hitherto independently subsisting hunters and gatherers began to impinge upon and disrupt the White economy, and native peoples, interested only in being left alone, threatened the White communities at large by their acts of revenge. Out of this state of affairs, a "rhetoric of control" (Rosaldo 1978) arose.

Attempting to locate the source of ideological distortion about an indigenous people in the Philippines, Rosaldo (1978) concluded that:

... civilized society is most likely to infer the social character of indigenous peoples from those acts that impede commerce and

that are completely at variance with civilized social norms. In addition, it seems that inferences about social character lead to deductions about the habitat of indigenous peoples [Rosaldo 1978:240].

Rosaldo fruitfully borrowed ideas presented in Kenneth Burke's *A Grammar of Motives* (1969) for his own analysis of the history of conflict in the Philippines. As its title suggests, Burke's work is an effort to expose the "basic forms of thought which . . . are exemplified in the attributing of motives" (Burke 1969:xv). Drama furnishes the key metaphor, and the basic terms of analysis are dramatic: "Act" (what was done); "Scene" (when or where it was done); "Agent" (who acted); "Agency" (the means of the act); and "Purpose" (why). "Any complete statement about motives," Burke writes, "will offer some kind of answer to these questions;" and out of the internal relationships of these terms, "their possibilities of transformation, their range of permutations and combinations" (*ibid*:xvi), emerges a "grammar which may be used to explore motivation and expression." Of particular importance are the ratios of "act" to "scene" to "agent," which are, "at the very heart of motivational assumptions" (Burke 1969:11).

Rosaldo, then, is led by the notion of key ratios to ask whether there were any correlations between the *acts* (of natives toward Whites), and *agents* (the imputed criminal character of Ilongots); or between the agent and the *scene* (the jungle wilderness) (Rosaldo 1978:242). It should be noted that these ratios are seen as "principles of selectivity" (Burke 1969:18) rather than as direct causal mechanisms.

Thus, in California, the *acts* of stealing, begging, and sporadic violence, the empirical facts of which were often sensationally reported, led to deductions about the *agent*: the lawless, treacherous, indolent Digger. The equation reads: act:agent = "savagery":

"savage." Typifications of perceptions about the *agent* led in turn to deductions about the "scene:" the filthy, vermin-infested squalor of Indian habitations, within the unruly context of the frontier in its entirety, may be said to have furnished a suggestive setting for the perception of the original acts as "savage."⁵

And so the circle is completed. The "Digger," in all his aspects, may be seen as a kind of "negative identification" (cf. Erikson 1966): in California, the "squalid," "dirty," "lazy," "dark," "brutish," "comical," etc., Digger furnished a negative transparency, through which the positive images Whites attempted to hold of themselves in circumstances of real or potential threat or failure, were established. The point here is that a historical situation was created which led to basic, adaptive responses, "acts," which were the fuel for ideological distortion.

In sum, the "Digger" stereotype, first applied to indigenous peoples in the Great Basin, soon came to refer to native Californians, particularly those in and around the mining areas. There, the stereotype became gradually elaborated to include a bundle of connotations, all of which were more or less derogatory. The "Digger" was, in fact, a local variant of the so-called "Ignoble Savage," the conception of which assisted the realization of Manifest Destiny, and exonerated the removal, chastisement, and extermination of native peoples from coast to coast. In California, the doctrine of Manifest Destiny was particularly volatile in the charged and unstable atmosphere of the mines. Lured to California by the promise of quick fortune, thousands were denied fulfillment. The native inhabitants, already perceived as degraded and barely human, provided ready scapegoats for their failure. With the initiation of violence against them, Indians became victims of a vicious cycle of action and perception that resulted in their complete stigmatization and nearly complete physical extinction.

NOTES

1. The earliest Americans in California, many of whom obtained land grants, were in an advantageous position. But they were only able to manage their estates with the willing cooperation and labor of the native peoples. It is no accident that Yount, who received a grant from the Mexican government in 1832, was at least marginally sympathetic toward Indians. They represented money in the bank, and the subsequent hordes of miners and settlers who promoted violence were understandably not well received.

2. The De Bry etching of Francis Drake meeting Coast Miwok, reprinted in the California volume of the *Handbook of North American Indians* Heizer 1978:416), is an example of this classical, Golden Age imagery.

3. This is reminiscent of the mythical "wild man" in Europe, who was sometimes released after capture in exchange for revealing natural secrets (cf. Bernheimer 1979).

4. There is also a "known" aspect to the foreign, a kind of uncritical perception on the part of the knower that sees the alien as something familiar. How often is the racist heard saying, "I know all about Niggers" (or Diggers)? This clearly another kind of "recognition." It imputes transparency to the opaque, and, in so doing, distorts even further the perception of the Other.

5. Just a thought: "scene is to act as implicit is to explicit" (Burke 1969:7). This is a qualitative statement: one may deduce the *quality* of the action from that of the scene, but not the details. Burke (1969:7) cites as an extreme example Expressionist drama, "having as its scenic reflex such abstract properties as lines askew, grotesque lighting, sinister color, and odd objects." This description struck in me an immediate association with the ravaged, unnatural landscape of the mines. Could such a setting have made killing easier?

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