

The Death of the Medicine Man: A History of the Rhetoric Used Towards Medicine Men at the Turn of the Century

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While there has been extensive research done on portrayals of Native Americans within American, and even international media, the role of Medicine Men within these portrayals has been marginalized. This appears to be a major oversight since Medicine Men represent the healers, political leaders and priests of their tribes—guiding many of their culture’s decisions. Within this paper both quantitative and qualitative analyses were conducted on newspaper and book portrayals of Medicine Men between 1880 and 1920.

The findings of this research show that there was a significant decrease in the number of times Native American’s were represented, while there was a massive increase in the number of references to Medicine Men. Newspapers increasingly focused their negative attacks on Medicine Men since they were perceived as the “power structures” within Native American societies. These attacks followed three basic strategies: to point to the failure of Medicine Men in holding their cultures together, to comicalize them and to represent them as anti-modern.

I argue that this change in representations coincided with a negative rhetorical turn in the use of the term “Medicine Man.” Before 1890 the term held no special negative connotation, but it soon came to mean something significantly more negative. By 1900 the term was used to connote a lack of scientific prowess or being a “quack.” Those who peddled bad medicines were termed “Medicine Men.”

These two factors, I argue, led to a rhetorical genocide that was committed against Native American cultures. By attacking the rhetorical “power structures” within Native cultures newspapers and authors were destroying the eroding their identity. Medicine Men, then, represent the source of much Native American identity, since they have the power of politician, priest, healer and historian for their tribes. What occurred was cultural genocide through rhetorical genocide.