

## NATIVE AMERICANS: FROM MISTREATMENT TO DIFFERENTIAL TREATMENT

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**Abstract:** Native Americans also widely called American Indians are the aboriginals of the whole continent of America. Unlike other minority groups living in the United States of America (USA), they have experienced every phase of European settlements, from the 14<sup>th</sup> century to the present. Proud of their rich diverse cultures, most Native Americans used to live in tepees, specific conical tents, in wide open spaces surrounded by majestic mountains, rivers and giant trees, and in total harmony with the fauna. When the Europeans started settling permanently in New England (Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island), Native Americans taught them how to raise crops and how to hunt games. However, the number of Native Americans decreased drastically because of imported diseases, war and coercion tools as the Europeans' civilizing onslaught kept destroying their peaceful ways of life compelling them to live on reservations all across the USA. While exploring the way Native Americans have influenced the American society, this paper aims to demonstrate that the reservations policy is no preferential treatment but just a different way of treatment from a long eradication process.

**Keywords:** Native Americans, reservations, Thanksgiving, USA.

### LES AMÉRINDIENS : DU MAUVAIS TRAITEMENT AU TRAITEMENT DIFFÉRENTIEL

**Résumé :** Également communément appelés « Indiens d'Amérique, » les Amérindiens sont les aborigènes de tout le continent américain. Contrairement aux autres minorités vivant aux États-Unis, ils ont été témoins de toutes les étapes de l'établissement des Européens, du 14<sup>e</sup> siècle à nos jours. Fiers de leurs diverses cultures, la plupart des amérindiens vivaient dans des tipis, tentes de forme conique à l'aspect particulier, dans des espaces immenses entourés de montagnes majestueuses, de rivières et d'arbres géants, et en totale harmonie avec la faune. Quand les Européens ont commencé à s'établir en Nouvelle-Angleterre (Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island), les Amérindiens leur ont appris à cultiver la terre et à chasser le gibier. Cependant, le nombre des Amérindiens diminuèrent de manière considérable à cause des maladies importées, de la guerre et des mesures de coercition à mesure que la civilisation européenne continuait d'agresser leurs paisibles styles de vie qui les forcèrent à vivre dans des réserves à travers les États-Unis. Tout en explorant la manière dont les Amérindiens ont influencé la société américaine, cette étude démontre que la politique des réserves n'est pas un traitement préférentiel, mais un traitement différentiel, tout simplement, émanent d'un long processus d'éradication.

**Mots-clés :** Amérindiens, réserves, Jour de l'Action de grâce, États-Unis.

## Introduction

The USA is the fourth largest country in the world with a total area of 9,372,610 Km<sup>2</sup> and a land area of 9,147,420 Km<sup>2</sup>, equivalent to 6.1% of the total world's landmass of 148,940,000 Km<sup>2</sup> (Worldometer, n. d.). The USA is the world's melting pot. All people, whatever their religions, cultures, races or sexual orientations, can find their warm places and make their dreams true in this country as all their differences melt away as if the USA was a colorful alloy of iron and carbon. However, the USA never was such a rich empty land that was just calmly and kindly waiting for Europeans first and then for all the other peoples from all across the world. Human beings full of love, character and passion, buffalos, caribous and other components of nature had been living in the USA for thousands of years (Pritzker, 1998). The aforementioned human beings were of mongoloid race with yellow, brown or red skins (Gordon, 1979:6). The figure below retraces the migration routes of Native Americans who first inhabited the country after leaving Asia.



Figure 1. The earliest Native Americans' migration routes from Asia to the New World (Gordon, 1975).

Many historians mostly agree that Native Americans came from Siberia in Asia into North America and that at that time, these two regions were probably connected by a land bridge where today the waters of the Bering Strait are found (Gordon, 1979; Orenstein, 1986). On another side, there is a theory based on certain fossils found in New Mexico that ancient peoples arrived here directly from Europe via Iceland and Greenland (Pritzker, 1998:xi). One must go back over the ice age to faithfully relate Native Americans' history but due to the limited knowledge on the field, their history is always connected to the travels and discoveries of Italian explorer Christophus Columbus. According to Orenstein (1986), in 1492, Columbus set sail from Spain in search of a sea route to Asia. His sole ambition was not to seek new lands but to obtain access to gold, silks and spices. His disorientation aimlessly led him to the New World (the American continent). From ever since that day a European discovered the New World's Mother Nature teeming with its green fertile lands that promised boundless wealth and endless opportunities, Native Americans' destiny commenced to change into a long, painful and dramatic way (see Malick, 2005). This paper will hinge on three points. First, I will draw attention on the first encounter of Native Americans and Europeans. Second, I will survey the blatant prejudices against Native Americans herded into reservations (tracts of public land set aside as for use), which originated from their 14<sup>th</sup> century encounter with Europeans. Third, I will highlight Native Americans' diverse influences on American society. These three research areas will be investigated with figures for illustrations and comments on motion pictures for visual references.

## 1. The Encounter between “Saints and Savages”

Why dub Europeans as “saints”? In all colonized areas of the world, European colonists had held in one hand a gun and in the other a Bible. For them, the gospel could overlook flogging, torture, land grabbing and massacre of non-European peoples. Nonetheless, it had a divine mission to supervise indoctrination and alienation for the sake of domination. On another thing, the “savage” label stuck on Native Americans came from the “saints” themselves. Furthermore, in American literature, this derogatory word spans the colonial era up to the antebellum period (see Hawthorn, 1850). Motion picture directors also fictionalize the same condescending attitude towards Native Americans (Malick, 2005). Indeed, many settlers thought the Native Americans were savages and their way of life had little value (Orenstein, 1986). European pioneers had quickly followed Columbus to the New World, especially the Spanish, the French, the Dutch and the English with no difficulty and prospered until. This was only possible thanks to Native Americans’ unprecedented generosity and genuineness to share land, to teach survival techniques and life skills to exploit their soil. One undeniable unique example is the celebration of Thanksgiving that is modeled on a 1621 harvest feast shared by the English colonists of Plymouth and the Wampanoag people through their chief or sachem named Massasoit whose son, King Philip would lead a bloody war against the colonists many years later (Silverman, 2023; Philbrick, 2006:9).

It all began when a few colonists went out fowling and that a moment later a group of tens of Wampanoag made a sudden appearance at the settlement’s gate without any trouble arising from it. The two groups of different social fabrics socialized peacefully. And as the colonists had hunted small games and feasted on them, the Wampanoag contributed with venison and vegetables. In the aftermath, they all happily shared, danced and drank. This was disorderly but it secured friendship and sealed a treaty that lasted till the first mass killing occurred between them (Silverman, 2023). In the spirit of promoting unity, editor Sarah Joseph Hale’s activism urged President Abraham Lincoln to proclaim on October 3, 1863, during the Civil War, a national day of Thanksgiving to be celebrated on Thursday, November 26. President Franklin D. Roosevelt proclaimed in 1942 that from then on Thanksgiving would be celebrated on the fourth Thursday in November (Silverman, 2023). Religious in the beginning because the Pilgrim Fathers intended to give thanks to God for all the bumper harvests and the other blessings, today, Thanksgiving has become more inclusive and social as Obama (2016) put it in the evening of his last Thanksgiving celebration as 44<sup>th</sup> US President:

Thanksgiving reminds us that no matter our differences, we are still one people, part of something bigger than ourselves. We are communities that move forward together. We are neighbors who look out for one another, especially those among us with the least. We are always, simply, Americans.

Obama (2016)

In 1676, fifty-six years after the Mayflower landed and after the first celebration of Thanksgiving, another less-known ship named Seaflower left the coast of the New World with 180 Native American slaves on its board. The Plymouth Colony governor, Josiah Winslow, whose both parents were passengers of the Mayflower, had provided to the Seaflower captain an official certificate in which he explained that those Native Americans composed of men, women and children had participated in a revolt against the colony killing many people

(Philbrick, 2006:10). The peaceful encounter of the Europeans and Native Americans suddenly turned into a warlike encounter between “saints and savages”. In addition to the *Seaflower*, several other ships had also left the New World to transport slaves into the West Indies (Philbrick, 2006, p. 10). The Pilgrim Fathers’ quest for freedom became Native Americans’ enslavement and deportation. With Josiah Winslow as their chief, the colonists’ attacks perpetrated on Native American warriors ignited a tinderbox of tensions that became known as the King Philip’s War (1675-1676) or the Great Narragansett War because of the great numbers of warriors from the eponymous tribe involved in the war (Warren, 2023). The third quarter of the victims of the war were Native Americans. That conflict was twice as more destructive than the War of Secession and seven times more destructive than the War of Independence in terms of proportion (Philbrick, 2006, p. 12). This was in no way the end of Native Americans’ plight but the beginning of an imperialistic policy that never ended. The killing spree initiated by the colonists finished in removing Native Americans depriving them of what they cherished most, the tribe and Mother Nature. The forced removal, displacement and cultural genocide of Native American peoples led to low self-esteem, extreme poverty, oppression, depression, loss of identity, substance abuse, violence, lower life-expectancy, low educational achievement, limited employment opportunities, poor housing and, to cap it all, mass suicide amongst a wide range of other chaotic situations (Kande, 2017, p. 41; Bachman, 1992).

## 2. Blatant Prejudices on Reservations

Among all the evil things done to Native Americans on their own soil, removal was the worst. As far as Orenstein (1986) is concerned, the Cherokees were removed by force from their homes and forced to march overland to Indian Territory, Oklahoma. The difficult journey took three to five months. Some 4,000, one quarter of the Cherokee nation, lost their lives. This obnoxious crime is called “The Trail of Tears” (Orenstein, 1986). By 1492, the year when Columbus discovered the New World, its Native American population was between 15 and 20 million people. They constituted 100% of the whole continent. In 1967, a little over 1% were Native Americans in the USA of the 200 million Americans (Gordon, 1975:3). According to the Census Bureau numbers in 2012, there are 5.2 million Native Americans and Alaska Natives making up approximately 2% of the US population. There are currently 566 federally recognized Native American tribes in the USA and 325 Native American reservations (“American Indians and Alaska Natives by the numbers,” n. d.). Some researchers’ skepticism of the accurate numbers given by the Census Bureau stems from the fact that many who call themselves Native Americans want to identify themselves as such for personal reasons, a great number of people also just want to benefit from the government’s aid and others are merely of mixed races. Mixed races include sometimes a few drops of real Native American blood in the veins (Pritzker, 1998). Therefore, the reduced number of Native Americans comes from the aborted several attempts to get rid of tribes once for all. According to Atlas, approximately 300 languages were spoken in the USA before colonialism. Navajo is the most spoken Native American language with 170,000 speakers (Andrews, 2020). If we refer to the fact that each tribe spoke their own language, we can assert that there were as many languages as the number of tribes. So much more than 300 languages were probably spoken in the USA centuries ago. The extinction of Native American languages is purely a linguicide committed by the colonists who, after radically killing tens of millions of Native Americans along with their cultures and languages, had condemned them to pauperism and family dislocation. The poverty rate for Native Americans living on

reservations is 29.4% compared with the US national average of 15.3%. The reservations poverty rate for Native American families is 36% compared to the national family poverty rate of 9.2% (“American Indians and Alaska Natives by the numbers,” n. d.). Besides their being in dire straits because of financial misfortune, the linguistic evoked above has resulted in family dislocation as the following figure eloquently illustrates.

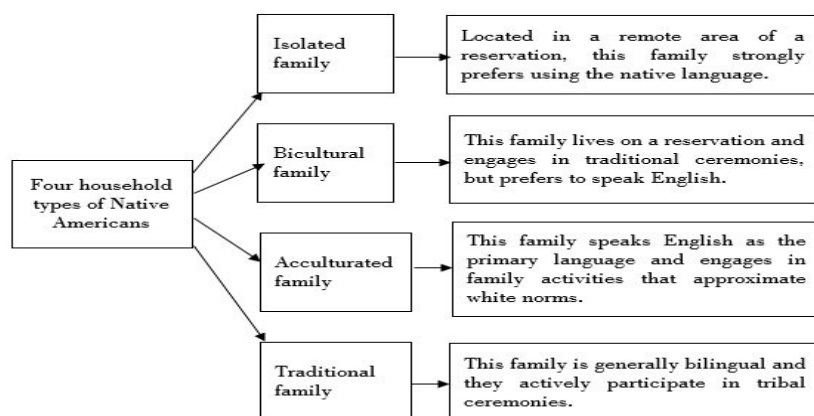
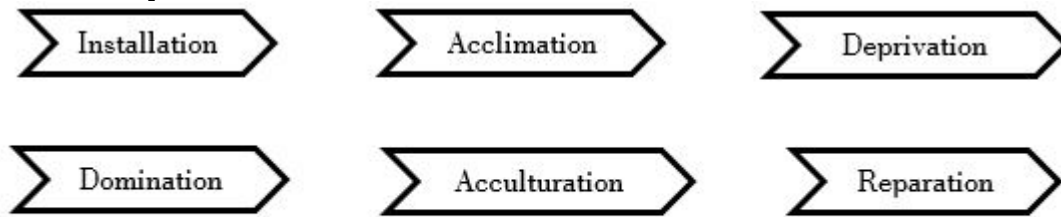


Figure 2. Native American households' heterogeneity on reservations (Bachman, 1992).

The figure inspired by Bachman's (1992) seminal study gives an example of Native American households' heterogeneity on the Blackfoot, Sioux and Navajo reservations, to list a few, as demonstrated by Reed D. Riner (1979) in *American Indian Education*. Native Americans' loss of family homogeneity principally emanates from the colonists' illegal land grabbing. Gilio-Whitaker (2021) assumes that one-third of all currently federally recognized tribes have lost their federal land bases as a result of colonization and forced Native Americans to migrate to reservations where alcoholism, crime, diseases and premature death were their lots. He also adds that there were well over 1,000 tribes in existence prior to the formation of the USA (Gilio-Whitaker, 2021). The reservations were created in one of these three ways: by treaty, by executive order of presidents or by an act of Congress. However, the government has failed miserably in its management responsibilities. Federal policies have led to massive land loss and gross negligence in resource extraction on reservation lands gave way to cancer (Gilio-Whitaker, 2021). When Native Americans reluctantly left their lands and move to reservations, they lost their nomadic ways of life that knew no boundaries, their natural means of subsistence and their freedom to cultivate arable lands. Sometimes also the results of the proximity of hostile tribes were disastrous (U.S. History, n. d.). In the educational field, schools often forced Native American pupils to dress and shave like European pupils would. These practices often led to further tribal divisions because in each tribe there were some members who welcomed these acculturation endeavors and others who did not for honor and pride reasons. Finally, friends became enemies and the divide to rule policy kept gaining ground (U.S. History, n. d.). The US policies that forced English in the education system to Native Americans' great displeasure were reversed in 1972 when the Congress passed the Indian Education Act which made it legal to teach children indigenous languages and gave the tribes the authorization to control schools. This was further enforced in 1990 when the Congress passed the Native American Language Act (Andrews, 2020). Always in terms of reparation of the prejudices done to Native Americans, other examples abound. To restore Native Americans' trust in the USA after all these centuries of pain, the US government actually made a difference in terms of reparation attempts. Orenstein (1986)

gives several examples of it. The Dawes Severalty Act (or General Allotment Act) of 1887 gave Native Americans the opportunity to own their own lands for agricultural purposes (U.S. History, n. d.). The Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 helped Native Americans to be full citizens. In 1928, 31<sup>st</sup> President Herbert Hoover selected Charles Curtis, a member of the Kaw Nation, as vice-presidential candidate. Thanks to the efforts of the Indian Claims Commission established in 1946, \$818 million were awarded to Native Americans in damages for unfair treatment. In 1980, the US government awarded \$81.5 million to the Penobscot and the Passamaquoddy tribes of Maine. Then, \$122.5 million were also awarded to the Sioux of South Dakota (Orenstein, 1986). Basing on rational and humanitarian reasons to compensate the Native American peoples did not escape notice in the other minority groups. In a 1965 interview with *Playboy*, the prominent leader of the Civil Rights Movement, Martin Luther King, Jr., quoted this as an example to repair the damage caused to African Americans deported from Africa to be used like depersonalized cogs in the vast plantation machines of the American Deep South: “Within common law, we have ample precedents for special compensatory programs, which are regarded as settlements. American Indians are still being paid for land in a settlement manner.” (King, 1991, p. 367). On analyzing all the above facts that relate the stark realities Native Americans had to face when the European colonists stepped down from their clinker-built ships with wooden hull planks laid in an overlapping fashion, I may assert that Native Americans’ paradise turned into hell because of the unhuman treatment inflicted upon them. The following illustration elaborates the different steps of such a treatment.



*Figure 3.* The different steps of European colonists’ dehumanizing treatment of Native Americans.

In a moral perspective, betraying one’s hosts’ trust after being welcomed by them and after being taught life-saving skills, then depriving or dispossessing them because you have more advanced and lethal weapons, afterwards dominating them in the “squeezed” sense of the word, and using subterfuges to acculturate them in order to end up recognizing one’s mistake and feign reparation, is solely derogatory to human personality and dignity. Human beings must not and should not be treated in even the worst ways than simple animals hunted for their meat or milked for the butter or cheese you can get from their fully endowed udders. Though the US government has deployed efforts in the direction of amending their mistakes, in the conscience of mainstream America, stereotypes unfavorable to Native Americans’ ancestors remain stagnant. In television dramas and films, one of the cinema’s oldest genres about the American West also known as the Far West or the Wild West, one can see cowboys spinning revolvers with dexterity and Native Americans, whose clothes are decorated with beadwork, and their hair with eagle feathers, riding horses and yelling. Sometimes, TV shows depict Native Americans such as the Apache and Comanche as fearsome, warlike and armed with tomahawks, bows and arrows, and sharp knives, ready to scalp their enemies who enter their territories. Films such as *Buffalo Bill, Hero of the Far West* (1964), *Blood on the Arrow* (1964), *The Scalphunters* (1968), *Big Jake* (1971), *Cuchillo* (1978), *The Mountain Men*

(1980), *Stagecoach* (1986), *Two for Texas* (1998), *Crossfire Trail* (2001), *Last Cowboy Standing* (2009), *Outlaw Johnny Black* (2023) and so forth, picture cowboys as more civilized than Native Americans. Unlike Western film genres, *National Geographic Society* makes a difference with good quality documentaries on Native Americans who have been living in Alaska for centuries. The channel shows their respectful traditions with nature handed down from generation to generation, their feelings, survival techniques, and hunting and fishing skills in below zero weather conditions.

### 3. Influences on American Society

Even though motion pictures portray Native Americans as “savages”. This does in no way mean that they have never contributed to the American society. Three major Native American contributions deserve consideration because these have positively wielded influence. Many commonly used things in the USA were inventions of Native Americans. The English language in general, has plenty of words borrowed from Native American languages. Numerous US states have Native American names, which pays tribute to the first occupants of the American continent. The three following tables show these three Native American contributions in mainstream America.

<i>Inventions</i>	<i>Definitions and uses</i>
Aspirin	A white crystalline derivative $C_9H_8O_4$ of salicylic acid used for relief of pain and fever.
Bunk beds	One of two single beds usually placed one above the other.
Canoe	A light narrow boat with both ends sharp that is usually propelled by paddling.
Maple syrup	Syrup made by concentrating the sap of maple trees and especially the sugar maple.
Moccasin	A soft leather heelless shoe or boot with the sole brought up the sides of the foot and over the toes where it is joined with a puckered seam to a U-shaped piece lying on top of the foot.
Snow goggles	A piece of wood with two narrow slits used especially by Eskimos for protection against snow blindness.
Stickball	Baseball adapted for play in streets or small areas and using a broomstick and a lightweight ball.
The three sisters	Growing corn, beans, and squash together in a mutually beneficial arrangement.
Tepee	A conical tent usually consisting of skins and used especially by American Indians of the Great Plains.
Tobacco	Any of a genus ( <i>Nicotiana</i> ) of chiefly American plants of the nightshade family with viscid foliage and tubular flowers.

Table 1. Ten Native American inventions (Mark, 2023), Merriam-Webster (n. d.), and National Park Service, 2023)

<i>Loan words</i>	<i>Tribal origins</i>	<i>Meanings</i>
Anorak (n)	Inupiat	A beaded garment worn by women. Now, we view anoraks more like coats to be worn when the weather gets cooler.
Bayou (n)	Choctaw	A creek, secondary watercourse, or minor river that is tributary to another body of water.
Caribou (n)	Mikmaq	An animal with “snow-shoveling” hooves.
Caucus (n)	Algonquian	To counsel and to advise.
Chipmunk (n)	Ojibwe	Any of a genus ( <i>Tamias</i> ) of small striped North American and Asian rodents of the squirrel family.
Eskimo (n&p)	Innu	A member of a group of indigenous peoples of southwestern and northern Alaska, Greenland, eastern Siberia, and especially in former use arctic Canada.

Hickory (n)	Algonquian	A warm fermented milk drink made from hickory nuts.
Husky (n)	Inuit	Dogs to pull sleds across the snow.
Igloo (n)	Alaskan tribes	Dwelling build by Native Alaskan tribes and designed by placing bricks of ice and snow together.
Moccasin (n)	Many tribes	A soft leather heelless shoe or boot with the sole brought up the sides of the foot and over the toes where it is joined with a puckered seam to a U-shaped piece lying on top of the foot.
Moose (n)	Abenaki	It literally describes an animal that “strips bark from a tree.”
Opossum (n)	Virginia Algonquian	Any of a family ( <i>Didelphidae</i> ) of small- to medium-sized American marsupials that usually have a pointed snout and nearly hairless scaly prehensile tail, are typically active at night, and are sometimes hunted for their fur or meat.
Papoose (n)	Massachusetts Algonquian	A baby carrier, but Indigenous people still use it to mean a Native American child, and it is often a term of affection.
Pecan (n)	Algonquian	A nut delicious in pies. It was initially used in a more generic context.
Raccoon (n)	Powhatan	A creature that “scratches with its hands.” Borrowed by the English language, this word has slowly changed over centuries to become raccoon.
Skunk (n)	Cherokee	Many families hung a skunk over their door frame and sold skunk oil to colonists as a topical medicine for skin ailments.
Squash (n)	Narragansett	Did you know that squashes are some of the oldest known crops? Some sites in the Southwest of America suggest some varieties have been present for 10,000 years!
Terrapin (n)	Algonquian	A little turtle.
Toboggan (n)	Mikmaq	Toboggan was adapted to mean a sled to carry tools or heavy objects. The term is now used in a wider sense to mean a fun ride, a pastime, or a mode of transportation across the snow.
Tomahawk (n)	Algonquian	Literally, this word meant “to knock something down.” Some tribes created these tomahawks by tying a large stone to a handle with animal cartilage.
Totem (n)	Ojibwa an Algonquian	An object (such as an animal or plant) serving as the emblem of a family or clan and often as a reminder of its ancestry.
Woodchuck (n)	Cree	It refers to animals of the weasel family.

NB: n: noun; p: pejorative

Table 2. Twenty-two English words borrowed from Native American languages (Dow [n. d.] and Merriam-Webster [n. d.]

Next to borrowed words, there are idioms as well. For instance, “to bury the hatchet” is an idiom that dates back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century in America. It rose from Native Americans who literally “buried the hatchet” to make peace and show that the conflicting parties were now in harmony. This was known as the hatchet-burying ceremony. In this case, weapons were to be buried or cached in the declaration of a peaceful co-existence (The Idioms, n. d.). Another idiom considered as a slang is “you bet” which originated in the Native American way of speaking but is now popular throughout the world. It is a new phrase and has been in existence since a few decades only. The slang came about when “betting” on things to prove themselves was common and the answer to a bet would always be yes. (The Idioms, n. d.).

Native Americans’ influence on American society does not stop there. 26 out of the 50 US states bear Native American names. For Native Americans, naming is sacred. Contrary to Europeans who give cities names of people, Native Americans consider that the land is eternal. The land itself owns people but not the opposite. This is the reason why US states that have Native American names sound so particular and powerful that well-known

American writers romanticize about it where logical explanation should occur. States such as Massachusetts (Great Hill) and Connecticut (Long River), etc., sound great (Herman, 2015).

## Conclusion

Native Americans are not half-naked and barefooted hollering people living day-to-day in the wilderness with no idea of civilization or technology. Native Americans have a history, a moving one, a history of betrayal, genocide, forced removal to unknown lands and linguicide. They have been living on the American continent for centuries. Had Native Americans' ancestors predicted that the Europeans would dispossess them and kill them until their numbers become insignificant, they would never have shared so many things with the colonists, no Thanksgiving would be celebrated today, and their history would be told in a very different way. This paper has delved into the historical facts that explain why in 21<sup>st</sup> century America, Native Americans still face the same execrable situations as their ancestors in the 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. But turning to progress, it has also underlined that one cannot talk about globalization without naming the essential and neglected contributions Native Americans have made in the American society. Yet, Native Americans' living conditions on reservations deserve new field researches with interviews to make their plight plain for all to see.

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