

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Indigenous People in the US

Elisa Leonelli · Tuesday, November 16th, 2021

In the summer of 1985 I was invited to join an Italian journalist colleague to travel across the U.S. to photograph and interview Navajos, Apaches and Sioux in Arizona (Monument Valley, Window Rock, Canyon De Chelly, Fort Apache, Tuba City, Tucson), South Dakota (Wounded Knee, Pine Ridge), Montana (Custer Battlefield). It was an unforgettable experience that I wish to remember here, with some contemporary updates.



Navajo family living in hogan, mud hut. Monument Valley

We used to call them American Indians to distinguish them from the inhabitants of India, and by that we only meant Indians of North America, the United States and Canada, as they had been portrayed in western movies, with tribal names like Apaches, Cherokees, Cheyennes, Comanches, Lakotas, Mohicans, Navajos, Sioux, Inuits, Algonkin, Iroquois, etc. Children all over the world, including us in Italy, played the game of Cowboys and Indians, with feathered headsets, tomahawks, bows and arrows, gun belts and Winchester rifles.



Navajo's flock of sheep. Monument Valley

In the mid 1970s the term [Native Americans](#) was adopted. During the past year, a new acronym was coined, [BIPOC](#) (Black, Indigenous, People of Color). The term [Indigenous People](#), as used by the U.N. (United Nations) in 2007, includes the Natives of Central and South America, such as the Aztecs, Incas, Mayas, the Aboriginals of Australia, the Maoris of New Zealand, and many other original inhabitants prior to European colonization. Read the [latest guidelines](#) from UCLA's D.E.I. (Diversity, Equity & Inclusion).



Window Rock. Navajo Nation, Arizona

In 1994, as the Los Angeles correspondent for the Italian film magazine *CIAK*, I wrote an article about *Geronimo*, directed by Walter Hill and starring *Wes Studi*, and new westerns where the Indians were depicted more authentically than in the past.



Tuba City Warriors. Navajo Nation basketball team

When I visited the Sundance Institute in Utah to research my thesis on Robert *Redford and the American West* for a Master in Critical Studies at USC's School of Cinematic Arts (which was published as a book in 2007), I realized how it's the learning of the ways of the Indians to deal with animals and the natural world that makes a true western hero, not the shooting of rival gunslingers. That is what I aimed to prove by examining Redford's work as an actor and director in movies from *Jeremiah Johnson* to *The Horse Whisperer*.



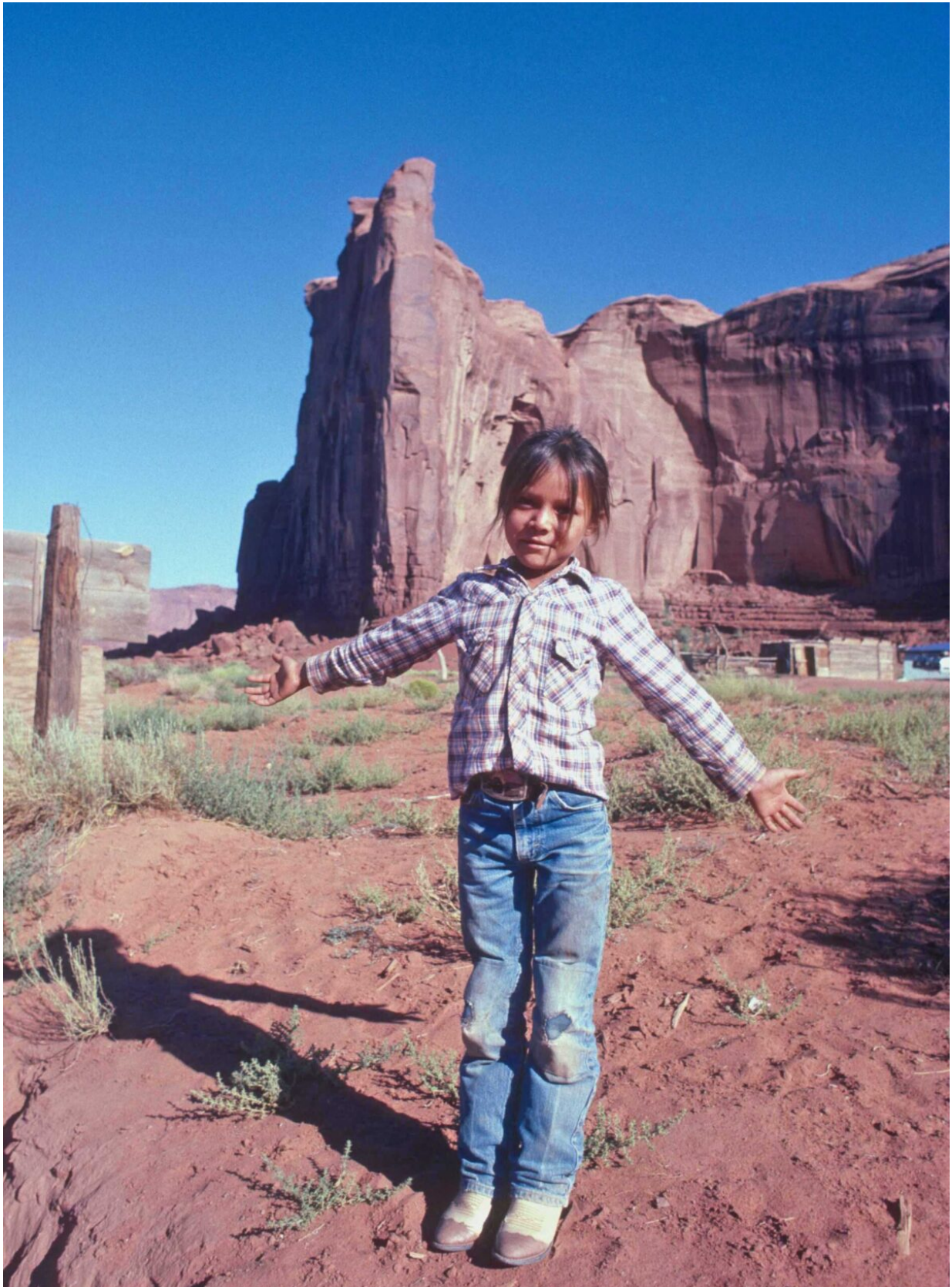
Navajo rider on horseback. Canyon De Chelly, Arizona

There are many other tribal Indian names than those most commonly known. For example, the original inhabitants of Los Angeles are [Gabrielino-Tongva](#). In 2013, [a new park](#) in Santa Monica was named after them.



Harold Kenton, Medicine Man. Fort Apache, Arizona

While researching my article about [The Wisdom of Plants](#), I read *Braiding Sweetgrass* by [Robin Wall Kimmerer](#) about Indigenous People's reverence for trees. Read [her essay "White Pine"](#) in the new book *The Mind of Plants*.



Navajo girl. Monument Valley

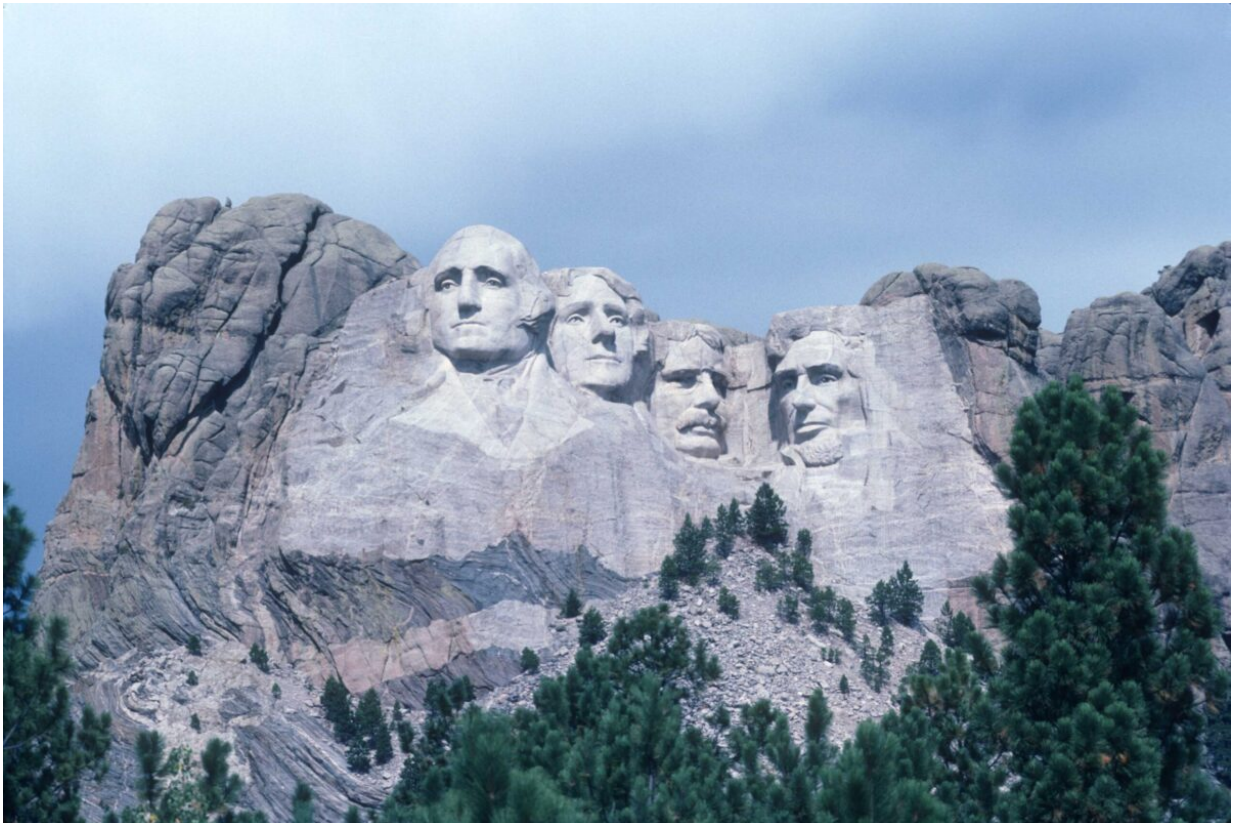
Recently I watched *Beans*, directed by Tracey Deer, about the 1990 protests of the Mohawk community in the town of Oka, Quebec against the extension of a golf course into a sacred burial

ground.



Crazy Horse Memorial. Black Hills, South Dakota

And I read in *YES! Magazine* [an article](#) about a new book, *Required Reading: Climate Justice, Adaptation + Investing in Indigenous Power*, curated by the [NDN Collective](#) based in South Dakota.



Mount Rushmore. Black Hills, South Dakota

[Click on this link](#) to see the complete 1985 photo essay on American Indians, and read the article I wrote at the time, in the [Elisa Leonelli Collection](#) at Claremont Colleges.



Park Ranger Douglas Keller. Little Bighorn Battlefield, Montana

A touching story that I discovered while researching updates for this article is that Park Ranger [Douglas Keller](#), who showed us the cemetery at Little Big Horn Battlefield in Montana, died in 2005 at age 41, due to osteogenesis imperfecta, the brittle bone disease that he was born with.



Indian teepee. Calico, California

And one last image, an iconic [Indian teepee](#), that I photographed on our drive from Los Angeles to Monument Valley.

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