



Things NOT to Say to American Indians

I have always said that the majority of the world's problems are issues of communication. Let's hope this brings a bit of clarity. It's wrong to stereotype any group of people. Stereotyping perpetuates myths and ignorance. It also prohibits getting to really know people as individuals.

For American Indians, stereotyping prevents people from understanding that our history, culture, beliefs, looks, living conditions, language, etc., vary from tribe to tribe and even clan to clan. There is no real standard for who the American Indian is.

Native Americans have been featured in many different forms of pop culture. Unfortunately, since most people only know of them through what they see in mainstream media, the worldwide perception of them includes an incredible amount of errors and misconceptions.

Because there are so few of us in numbers, our voice does not always get heard, and the general population has a difficult time communicating with us both collectively and on an individual basis.

When asked to share my thoughts about some of the common insulting questions and comments I hear on a daily basis that are geared toward my Native American identity rather than my gender, I came up with the following, which are also “Things NOT to say to American Indians”:

- **“I learned all your people’s ways in the Boy Scouts.”**
- **“My great-great-grandmother was a full-blooded American Indian Princess.”**
- **“Funny, you don’t look Indian.”**
- **“I’m not racist; my best friend is Native American!”**
- **“Can I touch your hair?”**
- **“Hey, can I take your picture?”**

In addition, there are several terms and acronyms that American Indians have adopted as “American Slang” that speak to our collective oppression. The issue of “authenticity” is one that the American government has pushed onto Native

Americans, as we have to prove that we are “real” Indians.

FBI: Full Blooded Indian. Because of the European concept of “Divide and Conquer,” we Native Americans have adopted the character trait to discriminate among our own community and put a “higher” status on people who are “FBI.” Taking a DNA or blood quantum is not a part of American Indian culture, but rather a Eurocentric tool to separate and discriminate against American Indians.

OSI: Out of State Indian. This refers to American Indians who relocated from another area.

Plastic: Fake, as in a fake medicine man or woman. Usage: “Don’t waste your money on that plastic shaman.”

Pretendian: Also known as a “Box Checker,” this is someone who knowingly (or subconsciously) believes they are Native American when in reality they are not Indian at all. The impostors use this to their advantage when they are applying for jobs, college, scholarships, internships, etc.



Stephanie Duckworth grew up on Chappaquiddick, a small island off of Martha’s Vineyard. Set apart from the mainland and the mainstream, Duckworth grew up as a member of the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah). When her school counselor told her that “Wampanoag’s don’t go to college,” Duckworth realized she would have to make it on her own. She declared herself an emancipated minor and graduated high school with honors.

Duckworth attended Douglass College-Rutgers University and graduated as a Mabel Smith scholar. She went on to continue her education at the New School for Social Research-Graduate Faculty, where she received a master’s degree in sociology and later earned her masters in non-profit management from Rutgers University-Newark.

While in school, Duckworth maintained her roots to her Tribal community, serving as a youth director during summer breaks and eventually becoming the assistant education director. She has performed hundreds of lectures on Native American education, culture, social and political issues.

Duckworth currently provides both fundraising and business strategic planning services through her own company, Wampum Books. In 2009, Duckworth released her debut novel, “Goddess of the Waters – Poneasequa,” which won the Mom’s Choice Award in 2010.