The History of 'Ten Little Indians'

Many of us remember learning and singing the bubbly little pre-school nursery rhyme "Ten Little Indians" as we sat in a circle with our legs crossed, Indian style. And what appeared to be an innocent way to educate and stir young imagination through “comic” song was also a peculiar way of mental conditioning. The coded historical narratives, found in many children’s nursery rhymes, were to circulate an ideology that followed generations; intended to define Indians as “inferior” and “backward.” The song coupled the Anglo-constructed definition of “savage” with American Indian consciousness, but the ultimate legacy of this children’s nursery rhyme was the systematic murdering of Indians, leaving “One little Indian boy livin’ all alone”:

Ten little Injuns standin’ in a line, One toddled home and then there were nine; Nine little Injuns swingin’ on a gate, One tumbled off and then there were eight. One little, two little, three little, four little, five little Injun boys, Six little, seven little, eight little, nine little, ten little Injun boys. Eight little Injuns gayest under heav’n. One went to sleep and then there were seven; Seven little Injuns cuttin' up their tricks, One broke his neck and then there were six. Six little Injuns all alive, One kicked the bucket and then there were five; Five little Injuns on a cellar door, One tumbled in and then there were four. Four little Injuns up on a spree, One got fuddled and then there were three; Three little Injuns out on a canoe, One tumbled overboard and then there were two. Two little Injuns foolin’ with a gun, One shot t’other and then there was one; One little Injun livin’ all alone, He got married and then there were none (Septimus Winner, 1868).

The original version was written by songwriter Septimus Winner in 1868 and performed at minstrel shows—a form of American entertainment consisting of comic skits, variety acts, dancing, and music. The traditional folk tune has a Round Folk Song Index number 13512 to establish the traditional origin of the work. However, today’s modern lyrics are believed to be in public domain, allowing for various renderings of the song to be created, especially in nursery schools. Sure you can change the words to "Ten Little Indians" to "Ten Little Puppies," but it is still degrading when trying to compare spilled milk to spilled blood.

In 1869, Frank J. Green adopted the song as Ten Little Niggers which became a standard of the blackface minstrel shows, especially after the Civil War and later into the 1920’s lampooning black people as “dim-witted,” lazy, “buffoonish” and “musical.” Eventually the song became widely known in Europe, where it was used by Agatha Christie. The song was included in the first film version of And Then There Were None (1945), which largely took Green’s lyrics and replaced the already sensitive word “nigger” with “Indian” (in some versions “soldiers”) as African Americans began to score legal and social victories at the turn of the 20th century:

Ten little Indian boys went out to dine; One choked his little self and then there were nine. Nine little Indian boys sat up very late; One overslept himself and then there were eight. Eight little Indian boys travelling in Devon; One said he’d stay there and then there were seven.
Seven little Indian boys chopping up sticks; One chopped himself in half and then there were six. Six little Indian boys playing with a hive; A bumblebee stung one and then there were five. Five little Indian boys going in for law; One got in Chancery and then there were four. Four little Indian boys going out to sea; A red herring swallowed one and then there were three. Three little Indian boys walking in the zoo; A big bear hugged one and then there were two. Two Little Indian boys sitting in the sun; One got frizzled up and then there was one. One little Indian boy left all alone; He went out and hanged himself and then there were none (Frank J. Green, 1869).

In 1954, Bill Haley and the Comets did a rock 'n' roll version of the song for Essex records. Haley and his Brylcreem split curl and electric hollow-body Gibson guitar, crooned, “John Brown had a little Indian . . . One little Indian boy.” And in 1962, The Beach Boys released their version on their album, Surfin’ Safari. Three Little Indians was the second single from their record; and where the Indian word “Squaw,” originally meaning female or young woman, now a racist and sexist term meaning vagina, is repeated throughout the tune: “The first little Indian gave squaw pretty feather; The second little Indian made her an Indian dollar (Fighting over a squaw); Well the third little Indian gave her moccasin leather; The squaw didn’t like em’ at all.” The song became The Beach Boys’ lowest charting single (number 49), on American radio.

Now, the song is called to attention by recent conversation at a local espresso shop. The waitress, an Italian and speaks perfect English, asked me how my Italian language lessons were going. I said, “Today I am learning how to count numbers.” She replied, “I learned how to count numbers in English by being introduced to the "Three Little Indians" song by my instructor.” She continues, “They are using that song in many Italian schools teaching students how to count.”

Some have argued if you erase the song, you erase a part of history. The thought that songs, poems, and couplets that belittle or denigrate a group of people have no place in today’s global world; and should be eradicated from the languages of humanity. The idea that whites still degrade people of color—any color—with the same centuries old stereotypes of inferiority is demeaning. It is also demeaning to whites as well. Any notion or behavior that has to tear down one portion of the human race for the superiority of another is detrimental to all; and that we can all count on.

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