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Final Research Paper

Cultural Consumption:

Native American Transculturation in the Modern Age

For years, celebration of the Native American culture was virtually unheard of in the United States. In the late 19th century, Native American children were taken from their parents and homes and thrust into Indian boarding schools. At the hands of the nuns and priests (for many of the schools were religiously affiliated), the students faced verbal and oftentimes physical abuse – this, coupled with being forced into a foreign environment, and being told their culture was inferior and they must assimilate, proved to be damaging psychologically, mentally, and emotionally. Native American culture as a whole was considered a “problem.”

With the turn of the century brought about new reforms for the boarding schools, and although this was deemed a success by the general population of philanthropists, conditions were still far from desirable. Students were still abused, and indoctrinated to believe their heritage was “primitive” and “savage,” and the only way to succeed was to assimilate into white society – a society that would scarcely accept them because few Native American children could pass racially. This cycle would continue, it would seem, until the 1920s, when a singer of Native American descent would gain popularity in both the United States and Europe.

Tsianina Redfeather Blackstone was a performer in every sense of the word. She carried herself as a graceful Native American woman, dressing in full regalia and singing indigenous-inspired songs that could double as poetry. Alongside Charles Wakefield Cadman, a white composer, the pair gained popularity – especially Tsianina, whose image was popularized as the stereotypical Indian Princess. One song of Cadman’s, “From The Land of the Sky-Blue Water,” which was originally a poem, encapsulated the element of purist Native American culture portrayed by Tsianina:

From the Land of Sky-blue Water,
They brought a captive maid,
And her eyes they are lit with lightnings,
Her heart is not afraid!
But I steal to her lodge at dawning,
I woo her with my flute;
She is sick for the Sky-blue Water,
The captive maid is mute.

By adopting this persona of an Indian Princess, she was marketed to the public – which was largely made up of white, upper-middle class society – and as a result became very successful. This song was also a benchmark number in Tsianina’s career. Along with Cadman’s arrangement, I examined performance pictures of Tsianina – specifically, those with her in full regalia to visually present her marketing point.

According to the *Americana Journal of American Popular Culture*, Tsianina Redfeather Blackstone was born in December of 1882 in Eufala, Oklahoma, and of Cherokee and Creek descent. When she was very young, she was sent to the Eufala Government Indian school – a boarding school – where she learned to play the piano. It was her talent for music that would lead to her move away from the reservation and pursue music as a career. Along the way, she was introduced to several influential mentor-

like people: Edward Fleck, whom she studied piano under; John Wilcox, whom she studied voice, and who then introduced her to Charles Wakefield Cadman, with whom she would gain the majority of her success. She was also a part of the Carlisle Band, so named after the Carlisle Indian School – yet according to the Americana, there is no concise evidence of any affiliation. With the Carlisle Band, many people – both native and non-native – came out to see the performances. According to the band’s promotional flyer:

...people who went to hear the Indian musicians chiefly to see the Indians do the war dance and satisfy their curiosity about Indians being wild, were disappointed, but agreeably surprised to hear high-class music rendered in artistic manner by the Indian Band. (“The U.S. Indian Band”).

The article states that the band was “torn between emphasizing the exotic appeal of an all-Indian band and downplaying that difference in order to stress the group’s musical skill and training.” This confliction, I argue is evident in Tsianina’s success. On the one hand, she is showing herself to be a culturally proud, talented performer, but on the other hand she is selling a persona – an “Indian princess” to sing and entertain a typically white audience. The American and European people flocked to see the princess in full regalia, two braids, a buckskin headband around her forehead, sing love songs or indigenous-centric poems, and the audience was truly captivated by this woman, for she was a window to a world thought lost.

Another zone of popular culture that was fascinated with Native American culture came from literature. Oliver LaFarge’s Pulitzer prize-winning novel, Laughing Boy was a love story between two Navajo Indians, and was widely regarded as an accurate portrayal of the Navajo tribe. In a time when little was known about the Southwestern tribe this could be considered an accurate statement, but the sudden fervor from anthropologists and

tourists associated with the American Southwest and the indigenous tribes of the area certainly added fire to LaFarge's work. Although authenticity would certainly be an issue, as Oliver LaFarge is not of indigenous heritage, the question of interest comes to mind. Why were so many non-Native figures in pop culture interested in the culture? What led to this heightened level of intrigue? Did LaFarge essentially "cash in" on the fervor toward Native culture?

My purpose in this paper is to delve into the transition of white society's view of the Native American culture, as well as examine the impact Native Americans had on popular culture in the 1920s. My research has led me to the produced image by icons of popular culture – such as Tsianina Redfeather Blackstone as well as the novel Laughing Boy. My interest in this topic stems from my interest in the development of stereotypes, and how it has been used as a tool for socialization in American history; either as an art of resistance or merely another form of expression. Why was Native American cultural identity, which was previously viewed as a "problem," become attractive, and as such, changed into a commodity? On the other hand, how did the Native American community receive Tsianina Redfeather Blackstone's image?

Bearing all of this in mind, I argue that the aforementioned transition is due primarily to the state of American culture during the Roarin' Twenties. This compulsion to gravitate toward that which has not only been repressed and considered a deviation from the norm, but also somewhat controversial stems from lack of a culture. While it is true that American culture itself is unique, most of white America functions on not having a "good" culture. Take, for example, the way America has treated immigrants, people of color, and other minorities- this paints a very negative view of America. Thus, with the

1920s and age of modernism came a new age; the age of reinvention swept America with the momentum of a plague, and the changing nature of popular culture is centered around the “next best thing.” People were swept up by a new era of consumerism, blindly following the pursuit of happiness by attaining the “American Dream.”

The senses of the American people were bombarded by advertising – billboards, jingles, magazines, anything to assault the ears or eyes to sell a product. Society was responsive; sales for various hygiene products skyrocketed with new advertisements, as well as vacation spots, or even what sort of suits to wear. Stuart Ewen describes the effect of images on the American people in his book Captains of Consciousness, in which he discusses the origins of consumerism:

In a society where instrumental images are employed to petition our affections at every turn...educational curricula must... encourage the development of tools for critically analyzing images. Going back some time, the language of images has been well known to people...image making as a communicative activity must be understood by ordinary citizens as well. (16)

Yet this infatuation with social consumption stood to rob the American people of their discerning eye toward critical image-making. The image of Native Americans as an attractive culture – which was pushed by traveling ads for the southwest heavily – led society to believe that Native Americans were to be consumed, or rather, commoditized to be sold.

But advertising is no the sole culprit of this commoditization. The surge in anthropological studies of Native American culture added to this transition from suppression to attraction. Anthropology and cultural studies were making headway with Edward Sapir’s work, and it just so happens that the rise in advertising geared toward tourism in the American southwest began to gain momentum almost in unison. Based on

this, I argue that the rise in anthropology and interest in Native American culture was affected by the advertisement of touring the southwest. The timing is essentially perfect for the two to work hand-in-hand to assist the other; tourism did increase, and more budding anthropologists flocked to Edward Sapir and New York to study – however, this does not fully answer the primary question: What caused the shift from an “Indian Problem” to a popular commodity?

The Native American culture is a rich history, albeit somewhat draped in mystery. As time has gone by, more is learned about the different tribes’ backgrounds; from their interactions with colonists to involvement in political activism of recent times. One facet of history that had been overlooked for some time was the treatment of Native American children in boarding schools, which remained a difficult topic of discussion until the 1960s. Captain Richard H. Pratt’s speech, aptly entitled “Kill the Indian, Save the Man,” is one of the most explosive catalysts for the education of Native American children. The government’s “assimilation or extermination” campaign was carried out with brutal force, yet some anthropologists praised Pratt on his “new” view of the Indian:

A great general has said that the only good Indian is a dead one, and that high sanction of his destruction has been an enormous factor in promoting Indian massacres. In a sense, I agree with the sentiment, but only in this: that all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man. (Pratt, “Kill the Indian, Save the Man”)

Though the death of one’s identity and culture is not the physical death, it still carries tremendous consequences. In David Wallace Adam’s essay “From Bullets to Boarding Schools: The Educational Assault on the American Indian Identity,” he writes about the extreme emotional disturbances experienced by the Native American children; many were prone to depression and acting out, or running away from the school, even damaging the

assailing school itself. Adams also talks about the identity crisis many children faced upon returning to the reservation, for most of the children's parents could no longer interact with them; they had 'lost' their heritage, in a sense. The abuse faced by the students would perpetuate over generations and despite the alleged reforms the boarding schools faced, many students were still abused physically, mentally, and emotionally, which manifested itself later as substance abuse. But just a few years later, this stripping of a culture would be transformed into cultural attraction; the society, which had fought to "kill the Indian," now flocked to Princess Tsianina's performances and read Laughing Boy. This puzzling conversion can be somewhat answered by looking to the effect of popular culture.

For some time, popular culture's influence on society at large had been considered minimal, or rather, that pop culture did not carry as much clout as politics or social issues, for example. Yet in the 1920s, the culture had changed to be much more materialistic and modernized than in generations before. Now, pop culture was a tangible thing; it was in the billboards, pumping through the radios, and now it was conducting the masses' interests. Not only did white society become infatuated with the Native American culture, which can be seen as a genuine culture in contrast to white society, a spurious culture, but also this infatuation was predominantly affected by stereotypes from Hollywood, as well as other forms of media.

Although she was very talented, Tsianina Redfeather played into one of the core stereotypes about Native Americans: the idea of the Native Princess. Tsianina was a real life Pocahontas on stage: her genuine, authentic regalia, and trademark two braids down the sides of her head painted her as what a Native American woman looked like, according to Hollywood. In films such as *RedSkin* and even films or plays featuring

Pocahontas, the indigenous women were typically very pretty in the face, and wore the traditional clothing (usually buckskin) and always had long dark hair that was either flowing freely or in two braids. Tsianina was the visual stereotype, whereas Oliver LaFarge provided an imaginative love story that cast the Navajo people as being greatly in tune with the land and nature. These stereotypes have been reproduced over time and are still prevalent today, and I argue that this time of filmmaking innovations and the rise of Hollywood assisted in the creation and cementation of Native American stereotypes.

Despite Oliver LaFarge's status as an outsider of the Native American culture, LaFarge was genuinely interested in the culture itself. He was a white man, but spent time on the Navajo reservations in the southwest and interacted with members of the community. LaFarge attended Harvard University, where he specialized in anthropology and archaeological research. Later, he became president of the National Association of Indian Affairs and president of the Association on American Indian Affairs (Encyclopedia Britannica). The question of authenticity is raised by LaFarge's involvement with the native community as well as his status as an outsider. Simply because LaFarge is a white man, does this negate all the work he did with Indian Affairs? And if so, does this mean Tsianina Redfeather is a more authentic representation of indigenous culture simply because she is indigenous? I argue that authentic representation is not bound by race or ethnicity; rather, it is by self-education and learning about a culture and feeling the connection to the culture. If a culture can be understood properly, it can be represented properly. While it is true that Tsianina Redfeather went to an Indian boarding school, she worked with and was influenced by a white mentor, whereas LaFarge started out steeped

in white society and was impacted by the native community. However, the formations of stereotypes were not solely their faults.

With the 1920s came not only the age of consumption and materialism, but also the age of disillusionment. World War I left a devastating mark on the world at large, but perhaps one of the more hollowing after-effects of the war was the number of veterans left with an emptiness. Those that had gone to war returned with disenchantment for the ‘American Dream.’ While some were out buying new automobiles and feeding the consumer culture, others were struggling to put their lives back together. The 1920s was an age of cultural bankruptcy, between the disheartening views of the world from the Great War veterans to the empty, gilded dreams of new America. I contend that because of this lack of a genuine culture, the urge to possess such is the driving force behind the consumption.

The urge to consume stems from an inherent, inexplicable emptiness derived from deficiency when wholeness is desired. Social life of the 1920s revolved around pop culture because there was no culture to celebrate. Life for the average American had changed drastically with the modern, postwar age, and because of this hollowness, the pursuit of a genuine culture led society to cling to Native American culture – the “untouched” genuine culture. The irony is, older indigenous cultures rejected the notion of materialism – yet the trademark of the 1920s are material goods. The consumption of an anti-materialistic culture, thus transforming it into a commodity, is not a new phenomenon in America. The same form of transculturation takes place today, with my generation’s fascination with counterculture. “Alternative” used to have meaning; today, to be “alternative” is to fit the norm. The youth is infatuated with the underground culture that

used to be criticized and uncelebrated, which appears to be the tradition of the society. For a period, a form of culture that does not assimilate or conform to popular American ideals is discounted, and subsequently desired later.

The commoditization of culture is a direct response to the requirement of an authentic culture, which may be unreachable at this point in time. American society has been intensely bound by its consumerism, so much to the point that it is all society has. So it was true in the 20s, and so it is true today, only with different icons to look to for guidance. Oftentimes, influential people in pop culture – such as Tsianina and LaFarge – produce an image to be sold to the masses, and despite altruistic attempts, the consumed product is a misrepresentation, which fosters stereotyping and social constructs. I do not suppose that neither LaFarge nor Tsianina were malicious in their representation of Native Americans. Both made an attempt to portray Native American culture, but because their creations were consumed by a materialistic, culturally bankrupt society, the message was lost amidst the formation of stereotypes that have permeated pop culture for far too long. Perhaps Tsianina and Laughing Boy were the vintage versions of what MTV throws at my generation daily, but regardless, the impact of popular culture not only affects American society, but the cultures American society has consumed as well. The indigenous community has been fighting against the stereotypes Hollywood has propagated for decades, yet they still exist. Should America gain a cultural identity that extends beyond commoditization, and society at large is educated about the implications of consumption as well as what a true genuine culture is, the cycle will cease to continue.

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Tsianina Redfeather Blackstone. Personal photograph by author. 1922.