

REVERSING THE GAZE: “THE WHITEMAN” AS OTHER**Sam Pack, Ph.D.**

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Abstract:

The tradition of anthropology is rooted in an effort to make sense of the “other.” In fact, the Western concept of the primitive is what makes anthropology intellectually possible. Anthropological literature literally abounds with “our” interpretations of “them.” For all its intentions of neutrality and objectivity, the anthropological gaze has generally traveled in only one direction. Rarely did researchers stop to consider that the objects of the gaze also have a tradition with which to make sense of their “others.” Perhaps my most radical contention in this article is also the most basic: they do to us what we do to them. The key difference, of course, is that perceptions of whites by Indians are not widely expressed, overt, and systematized but suppressed, covert, and internalized. (KEY WORDS: anthropology, tourism, indigenous, staged authenticity)

Introduction

Despite evidence of Native American depictions of the “Whiteman” since the period of first contact, relatively few of these stories were collected “because researchers generally felt that this did not represent true Indian culture” (Evans-Pritchard 1989:89-90). A notable exception was Julius E. Lips’ *The Savage Hits Back: Or the Whiteman Through Native Eyes*,¹ which catalogued figurative portrayals of the Whiteman throughout the colonial world (1937). A more recent account is Keith Basso’s *Portraits of “The Whiteman”* in which the author demonstrates how Apaches make sense of the “other” through elaborate verbal joking (1979). Increasingly, and appropriately, commentaries on Indian views of whites derive from Indians themselves (i.e. Deloria 1969, Lame Deer 1972, Rose 1992). The overwhelming majority of the names given to themselves by indigenous peoples mean “the People.” Conversely, they often define everybody else in negative terms. The Witoto of the Amazonian basin, for instance, have traditionally referred to themselves as “the People of the Center of the World,” and to other groups as “the People of the Animals” (McEvelley 1991:269). In a similar fashion, Basso claims that in all Indian cultures “the Whiteman” serves as a conspicuous vehicle for conceptions that define and characterize what “the Indian” is *not* (1979:5).

1. Images of “The Whitrman” as tourist

Today, the most common encounter between whites and Indians is through tourism. The advent and proliferation of mass tourism in the second half of the nineteenth century provided many opportunities for indigenous groups to market and capitalize on cultural Otherness. Villages featuring “exotic”—that is, non-Western—peoples and their cultures became popular attractions at international exhibitions in North American and throughout the world (Nicks 1998:301). Patricia C. Albers and William R. James have demonstrated the ways in which photography and tourism have reinforced as well as advanced a stereotyped image of the Indian in the Western Great Lakes (1983:123). But this is a reciprocal process in that Indians also form and accept stereotypes of the people they encounter. Not considered in these encounters are processes that enable the discovery of the self in the other and the other in the self. Jill D. Sweet, for example, reports on the ways some Pueblo Indians have developed their own categories to classify and describe the tourists who enter their world: (1) New Yorker or East Coast type, (2) Texan type, (3) Hippie type, and (4) “Save-the-whale” type (1989:69-70). Through such mocking imitation—or what Sweet calls “burlesque”—that which is perplexing or threatening about others becomes comical and harmless (1989:63): Indeed, an implicit love/hate relationship between whites and Indians is manifested in tourism.

On the one hand, Indian artisans rely upon tourists for income while, on the other hand, they must endure a litany of unbearable questions in the process (i.e. “Is this a *real* dream catcher?” or worse, “Are you a *real* Indian?”) Very quickly, these artisans realize that the only way to survive—and thrive—in the touristic exchange is to play the role expected of them. The tourist narrative is a story of a quest for contact with authenticity and gains its authority from the journey into and return from the realm of the other (Dilworth 1996:120). Thus, the touristic encounter becomes an event through which the tourist establishes his or her subjectivity in relation to—or perhaps at the expense of—an “other.” However, the reverse is also true; that is, by playing a role tourists are familiar with or even expect, the Indians are able to control the mode of interaction. In other words, Indian artisans otherize the tourists by allowing themselves to be otherized.

Historically, the tourist has always been the subject and the receiver of information while the Indian is always the object of the gaze, a commodity to be consumed visually. The tourist is not just buying the item for sale but, more important, the story that goes with it—which, more often than not, is partially or completely fabricated. A Zuni marriage vase, for instance, is nice enough to look at but the real source of appeal is the mythology of the vase in Zuni culture, which the buyer will eagerly share with her friends once she returns home. Woodrow Crumbo, a Creek-Potawatomi artist, offers his thoughts on the commodification of Indianness in the touristic encounter in his 1946 watercolor, *Land of Enchantment*. In the painting, a Navajo mother and her daughter are attempting to sell a traditional Navajo blanket to a family of white tourists. The two groups are a study in contrasts: while the tourists are colorfully and, in the case of the woman, outlandishly, dressed in department store Southwestern attire, the Indians are humbly covered up blankets. More significantly, the white family—who are all wearing eyeglasses—carefully inspect not only the merchandise for sale but the sellers themselves. The Indian woman and girl (and even their pathetic horse), meanwhile, deflect the tourists’ gaze by staring obsequiously at the ground.



Figure 1. *Land of Enchantment* by Woodrow Crumbo (1946)²

The humor of *Land of Enchantment* centers on the female tourist. The obese woman is obviously a hearty consumer of all things Indian, as indicated by the turquoise jewelry adorning her neck and wrist. Her large size, the excess of her accessories, and her tight-fitting attire all draw attention to her as an object of display. She is not just an observer of Indian culture but, like the native artisans she purchases souvenirs from, an active participant therein. Buyers like her see a connection between Indian identities and Indian art, and envisioning themselves as being in a position to have influence over both adds to their sense that buying Indian art is a philanthropic endeavor rather than a private indulgence (Mullin 2001:166).³ In addition to the impending sale of merchandise, the painting implies that another exchange between the two groups has already taken place. The fact that the Navajo girl is holding a doll of a white cavalry officer opens up a crack in the hegemony of the exchange, and it suggests that she is not simply an object of exchange but is also a subject capable of creating meaning (Dilworth 1996:124). By reversing the touristic gaze, the Indians refuse to become objects to be commodified. Instead, Crumbo turns the tables by repositioning the tourists as the ones who are subject to scrutiny.

2. Images of “The Whitman” as Anthropologist⁴

Anthropologists have always written about the people with whom they have conducted their research. Indeed, the expressed purpose of the anthropological enterprise is to formulate opinions through empirical research and share these findings with others in some written form. As ethnographers have been creating narratives about natives, so natives have been creating narratives about ethnographers:

Whatever the period, Native Americans have always reviewed the white man’s national and personal characteristics and dramatized his actions, follies, and motives through art, performance, stories, and jokes. They have caricatured the fire and brimstone of the missionaries, the financial gouging of the traders, the hypocrisy of the great white chiefs, and the credulity of the anthropologists (Evans-Pritchard 1989:96).

Perhaps the most scathing indictment of anthropologists by a Native American has come from Vine Deloria, Jr.:

Anthropologists can readily be identified on the reservations. Go into any crowd of people. Pick out a tall gaunt white man wearing Bermuda shorts, a World War II Army Air Force flying jacket, an Australian bush hat, tennis shoes, and packing a large knapsack incorrectly strapped on his back. He will invariably have a thin, sexy wife with stringy hair, an I.Q. of 191, and a vocabulary in which even the prepositions have eleven syllables...This creature is an anthropologist (1969:78).

Deloria is certainly not the only native voice to condemn anthropology. Recent writings by Native Americans and other indigenous people criticize and even ridicule anthropology and attempt to subvert the power of the discipline’s practitioners to misrepresent them.⁵ Popular perception still holds that “the anthro” is a figure who pries into things that are none of his business, misrepresents native people to the larger society that surrounds them, and drags off stuff that they were using—or their dead relatives, or important ceremonial objects—and sticks it all in a museum (LaVaque-Manty 2000:75). Needless to say, Deloria’s biting comments do not reflect the commitment of anthropologists to assert the rights of indigenous peoples throughout the world.⁶ Three decades later, it may be the anthropologist’s husband who has the stringy hair, but the point remains: anthropologists are still perceived by Native Americans as reproducing self-confirming and self-referential systems of arcane knowledge which have little empirical relationship to, or practical value for, Indian people.⁷

Stories abound of how anthropologists have been duped or otherwise lead astray by their native informants.⁸ Madronna Holden shares the true story of a visiting anthropologist who visited the Coast Salish of the Olympic Peninsula to hear and collect their folklore only to find himself the unsuspecting victim of an elaborate joke (1976). The tale recounting numerous and magnificently carved war canoes which came down from the North to do battle with the local people amidst much bloodshed was in fact a native euphemism for the finding of an adequate toilet and the “great battle” referred to the elimination of one’s body waste (1976:271). Holden does not mention whether the original version of the tale found its way to publication before the anthropologist realized he had been deceived. If so, it certainly would not have been the first time. At the beginning of the twentieth century, anthropologists marveled at their good fortune of being the first to document the Navajo Blessingway ceremony. It was not until years later, however—after the academic community had virtually unanimously accepted the published account—was it discovered that the participating Navajos had intentionally performed the ceremony backwards (Rony 1994-95:27). Similarly, anthropologist Maurice Boyd interviewed multi-heritage Kiowa informants for his *Kiowa Voices* books. Later, some of these informants confided to an Indian anthropologist that they “made up” songs and stories because “he wouldn’t know the difference” (Mihsuah 1998:3). It should come as no surprise then that Susie Yellow Tail, a Crow Indian, regards ethnographies as “Indian joke books” (Medicine 1987:191). Not even the “best” of us are spared from informant deception. A Comox Indian woman spent two hours narrating a text for Franz Boas. It was not until years later that the preeminent anthropologist discovered that the text turned out to be nothing more than a string of unrelated questions and answers (Bernard 1994:168-69). When Boas realized that he was duped, he noted it in his diary.

In a more crushing blow to the field, Derek Freeman recently exposed Margaret Mead's seminal book, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, as a sham. He argues that one of the most influential anthropological studies of the twentieth century was based on mischievous joking by Mead's informants (1999:131). The Samoan custom of "recreational lying" was an inevitable response to an outsider's embarrassing inquiries about their sexual behavior (Freeman 1999:139).

3. Staged Authenticity

Dean MacCannell labeled the conformity by natives to the expected images of tourists "staged authenticity" (1973). This is certainly an apt description for a group of Papua New Guinean villagers who dressed up and acted as "savages" to accommodate a Swedish tourist making a video (Kulick and Willson 1992:143)⁹ The authors interpret the villagers' actions as re-enacting "their image of our image of them" (1992:149).¹⁰ Generally, humoring the tourist takes more subtle forms. Deidre Evans-Pritchard reports instances of Navajo males hanging out at a trading post and joking with each other only to assume a wooden, stoic stance whenever a car full of tourists rolled in (1989:98). Thus, the stereotype of the silent Indian is being used "as an aggressive weapon against the very society that imposed it."¹¹ Staged authenticity was an essential component of Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West Show. After their defeat at Wounded Knee in 1890, Native Americans could no longer be construed as a military threat and they were rapidly becoming romantic figures for many white Americans. Cody sought to fill this void with his show and its ensemble of Indian performers, which served as kind of a traveling zoo featuring endangered species. Audiences could witness the post-conquest spectacle of cowboys and Indians dramatically reenacting battles from a safe distance. Therefore, the Indians in the show were perceived as an integral part of a tableau showing an exotic, faraway world populated by human beings who represented various degrees of savagery and civilization, with the Indians at one extreme and Buffalo Bill at the other (Kreis 2002:199).

Cody's shows depended for their success on their authenticity, and "Everything Genuine" was a staple of his promotional literature (Browder 2000:58). Far from being treated as mere side show entertainment, this show was accorded the elevated status of a national educational institute.¹² The main attraction of the Wild West Show was that Native American experience was not only performed but also enacted by the Indians themselves. Cody recruited solely from the Plains tribes, principally the Sioux, and appealed to their participation by offering a tempting economic incentive. Although Iron Tail would have preferred to wear his customary civilian dress, he gladly donned the "scalp-lock, blanket, and all the glittering toggerly" in exchange for the fifty dollars a month plus expenses which Buffalo Bill paid him to "remain Indian" (Wexler 2000:202). In Buffalo Bill's costume trunk, Iron Tail evidently had both buried a "real" Indian and found a real American way to continue to be an Indian—namely, by *posing* as one. Today, many Native Americans continue to creatively manipulate familiar stereotypes to their own advantage. Cherokee Henry Lambert has "dressed in feathers" and charged tourists at the Smokey Mountains National Park for taking his photo for over forty years—putting all six of his children through college in the process (Bird 1996:7).

In a similar fashion, Pueblo and Navajo silversmiths in New Mexico express and manipulate stereotypical images of Indians held by tourists in making and selling their work (Evans-Pritchard 1989:89).¹³ On a grander scale, Harald Prins describes what he calls the "paradox of primitivism": "while it reduces indigenous peoples to 'noble savage' stereotype, it also provides them with a model of self-representation which they can (and do) exploit for their own political ends" (1997:243). As Stephen Greenblatt points out, the issue is not simply the assimilation of the Other but rather *who is assimilating whom* (1991:4). Contemporary Indian people are divided in their opinions of the value of such staged representations of otherness today.¹⁴ Many still earn their living catering to the tourist industry and argue that as entertainers they are involved in a valid profession. Others contend, however, that the stereotypes—both positive and negative—reinforced by tourist-oriented presentations work against present-day Indian struggles for social, economic, and political autonomy (Nicks 1998:213). Gerald Vizenor calls pandering to whites for economic gain a "reverse striptease": the colonizer *dresses* the Indian in a ragged array of fetishized objects and articles in order to experience the titillation and the terror that in a more customary striptease would be produced by *undressing* (1987:181).

As long as people in mainstream society think of Indian cultures as something that existed only in the past and of Indian peoples as having no role in mainstream history and society, critics argue, Indians will never be taken seriously. Accommodation to the imagined “exotic other” by Native Americans serves not only as a source of mutual intelligibility and entertainment value but as a form of self-defense. There is an irrefutable element of cultural resistance involved. By masquerading the public self as the private self, staging authenticity allows native people the opportunity to preserve the latter by restricting access and thereby remain “hidden” from tourists, anthropologists, and other outsiders.

Notes

¹ This ethos of retaliation is also expressed in a contemporary context in Jim Hubbard’s “Shooting Back” series with homeless children and Native American youth respectively (1991, 1994).

² Accessed from <http://www.rsu.edu/faculty/semmons/images/sally/jpg>. Viewed July 18, 2003.

³ Ironically, many white gamblers express the same sentiment about gambling in Indian casinos.

⁴ Needless to say, anthropologists have our own less than flattering opinions of our informants. In the most (in)famous example to date, Bronislaw Malinowski’s diary, which was written while he was conducting fieldwork on the Trobriand Islands, includes multiple entries in which he lashes out at the Trobrianders (1989).

⁵ Sami singer Mari Boine ridicules anthropology in her CD jacket by including “anthropological” pictures and accompanying captions like “Lapps report for anthropological measurement” and “Family renowned for their Christian dispositions.” The final photo depicts one of Boine’s childhood photos captioned “Mari, on of the rugged Lapp-girl types.” Thus, she challenges anthropological representations of the Sami as objects of study by republishing these pictures on her own terms (LaVaque-Manty 2000:75).

⁶ Although there is no denying anthropology’s colonialist past, there is also no point belaboring the sins of history. Even Deloria acknowledges the discipline’s contributions to indigenous peoples: “Some immensely useful work has been done by anthropologists on behalf of American Indians” (1997:210).

⁷ At the eighty-eighth annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association in 1989, a group of scholars—mostly anthropologists—convened in a session titled “Custer Died for Your Sins: A Twenty Year Retrospective on Relations between Anthropologists and American Indians.” The purpose of the session was to explore the question: what has transpired in the relations between anthropologists and Native Americans since the publication of Deloria’s book? Addressing this question eventually turned into a volume titled *Indians and Anthropologists: Vine Deloria Jr. and the Critique of Anthropology* edited by Thomas Biolsi and Larry J. Zimmerman (1997).

⁸ In a refreshingly candid article titled “Lies My Informants Told Me,” S.R. Nachman draws on his own experience with the Nissans of New Guinea and offers interesting insights into the problem of informants lying to anthropologists (1984).

⁹ Edmund Carpenter observed the same “self-fulfilling” behavior two decades earlier: “...the instant [the Papua] saw [our] cameras, they rushed about for props, then sat in front of the cameras, one chopping with a stone axe, another finger painting on bark, a third starting a fire with bamboo—Santa’s workshop” (1972:98-99).

¹⁰ Today, staged authenticity among natives is often intended for self-consumption. The Gebusi of Papua New Guinea, for example, dress in mock traditional costume to perform parodies or spoofs of traditional practices (Knauff 2002:110). Ancient customs such as sorcery divinations, the use of magical spells, or belief in mythic spirits are pantomimed and made fun of with slapstick humor to the great enjoyment of the assembled audience, who are all fellow Gebusi. In the process of having chosen new practices to replace old ones, the Gebusi have exchanged physical cannibalism for a cultural one.

¹¹ These words are from Abrahams’ 1970 study of how blacks adopted and manipulated white stereotypes of blacks, turning them into psychological weapons to fight back (cited in Evans-Pritchard 1989:98).

¹² Many reviews even presented the show as a lesson in anthropology. The reviewer for the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, for example, stated: “No better opportunity was ever offered the people of the East to witness the various features of wild Western life and to study the habits and customs of the Aborigines than is now afforded by” the show (cited in Browder 2000:61).

¹³ A Hopi friend of mine who is a craftsman told me that the “cruder” he makes his kachina dolls, the “better” they sell. However, as gifts for other Indians, he makes them look “nice” (personal communication).

¹⁴ Rick Hill, a Tuscarora artist, scholar, and museum curator, offers his perspective:

There’s a difference between culture and commerce, and Indians understand that really clearly. They understand that the purpose of Indian Market is to put as much of the white man’s money into our pockets as possible. It’s not to convert them about the truth of our existence, but to make an income. The non-Indian doesn’t understand, because they think they are buying Indianness. They don’t realize you can’t buy that” (Abbot 1994:80 cited in Mullin 2001:166).

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