

Native Americans and the Appropriation of Cultures

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DURING THE SPRING of 1991 I was a guest of the Brighton Festival of Literature in England as part of a ten-day Native American residency. My hosts, sensing my homesickness, took me to a Pow-wow in Uckfield, a small town surrounded by rolling fields of yellow mustard, country pubs, and history. It was a scene, however, transported from America—a sprawling brick elementary school, linoleum hallways, a gymnasium for the dancers, traders with booths, a fry bread concession, and the sound of drums reverberating through the corridors. There was beadwork for sale, and the songs were high northern style (Lakota), and women in traditional Plains dresses were making a tremolo as they ringed the host dance drum in the center of the arena. The dancers wore outstanding regalia, including full eagle-feather war bonnets and antique moccasins, and they carried sacred pipebags. In every aspect I might have been in Bismarck or Anadarko or Calgary, but this was England, and beneath the painted faces were sunless complexions and cockney accents.

It wasn't real Native America, but rather a foreign "virtual reality" of cultures and lifestyles that continue to survive despite acculturation, racism, and assimilation. It was also an appropriation of culture—a Halloween farce with little intrinsic value or meaning beyond the surface exploitation. Here were people playing "Indian" in much the same way minstrel shows once portrayed African-Americans for the amusement of themselves and others, with the accompanying stereotypes. Moreover, it is an affront to Native people when sacred objects are in usage outside of their traditional environments—objects such as pipes, fans, rattles and drums, which are being appropriated by "New Age"

members of a spiritually bankrupt society. However, an individual can observe this activity and shake his head while walking away from it.

Quite another experience makes me think that shaking one's head is not enough. As well as being a writer and professor of traditional Native American arts, I am also a working artist who is always pleased to find a gallery or store that promotes the works of Native people, from traditional to contemporary. Santa Fe, New Mexico, is the leading market in North America (if not the world) for Native art, but there is an insidious white cloud looming over the city.

On the Plaza in downtown Santa Fe, Native artisans spread blankets and display their jewelry, pottery, and traditional arts in the shade of the portico of the historic governor's mansion, a low-slung sprawling adobe building which dates to the 1600s. Here sun-baked tourists with baby strollers and hip packs peruse the merchandise, or lounge in the plaza square park, a tree-lined natural area evocative of a traditional New England commons. Ringing the square are two-storey adobe buildings with overhanging balconies festooned with ristras of red chili peppers and garlic bulbs. Branching off in all directions from the Plaza are narrow shop-lined streets, providing artificial shopping like the "Lanes" in Brighton, England, and exemplifying the chic commercialization of America and Native America. Santa Fe is a New Age paradise. If you need a tee-shirt with a naked bear or a sage "smudge stick" (large or small, prices vary, and some stores even offer "Jumbo" models for \$6.50 and I suppose when it comes to spirituality, Jumbo is better than economy), Santa Fe is *the* place to buy culture and reduce your spiritual deficit.

Now let us stand back to examine the dynamics of the Santa Fe Plaza, and the subtleties of racism and the American class struggle. With a little careful observation, it is easy to identify the fly-ins versus the campers—the former being those who have come to Santa Fe to buy "art" and the latter being families struggling for a parking space and a bargain coffee mug. The fly-ins occupy hotels and are typified by dark glasses, purple cowboy boots, and antique silver concho belts. They don't tuck in their shirts. The campers don't tuck in their shirts either, but theirs have slogans

on them. There is also an in-between third class of Karmic bums who wear other people's clothing, including slogans, usually from some third world indigenous conference at an obscure university. These people have jumbo dogmas, and four-wheel drive.

The class struggle is obvious—the fly-ins shop on the side of the Plaza opposite the Native people in the shade of the governor's portico, spending big money in high rent stores for exactly the same turquoise and silver available a hundred yards away where the campers with ice cream cones are mingling and snapping photographs of "real Indians."

The balding hippies are stuck in-between in the park, unsure of the status that lurks on one side and the bargains that compel from the other—most of the time they don't really want to buy, they just want to learn how to make their own jewelry, because it's more sensitive to draw upon your own energies and create with artistic visions from your past lives. It's sort of like that Native American / Tibetan / African thing, you know, with a credit card. The fly-ins are like that, too, but they need the status of the bag the store gives them to display with their carry-on luggages, so that when they deplane in St. Paul or Cincinnati, everyone, so they enjoy imagining, knows they've been shopping in Santa Fe. The campers are pretty happy with a red chili tee-shirt or a bumper sticker. The new-agers mellow with jumbo-ness.

Notwithstanding the legitimate dealers of fine arts, the real affront to Native American is the insensitivity of the so-called upscale stores: from their peach scented potpourri as one enters to their display of modern reproductions of 19th century 7th Cavalry blue tunics embellished with Native beadwork and twisted fringe. Native beadwork and twisted fringe. (Gee, that's a nice memory for Native people—Custer, Sand Creek and Washita, Wounded Knee. One can imagine a store in Poland selling sequined brown shirts and inlaid storm trooper boots.) Further adding insult to injury, some stores feature only the reproductions of Plains Indian objects and clothing by non-Natives, thereby denying Native artists outlets in some of the most upscale Santa Fe markets. Thus, tourists and collectors who come specifically to Santa Fe to buy Native American arts are buying repro-

ductions fashioned by whites, while the Native people are sitting across the lawn, watching the transfer of funds from one white pocket to another.

So one wonders about these vast money exchanges. Do people really know what they are buying, or is it simply enough to buy in Santa Fe from a blond sales staff modelling velvet Navajo skirts from the rack as the aroma of patchouli oil wafts through the store? In Santa Fe, like many other cities pretending fashion, apparently the style of the sales people matters more than their intelligence or knowledge.

During a week-long "fact-finding" tour of the shops and galleries of Santa Fe, wherein I visited well over one hundred stores, I asked simple questions of personnel regarding objects for sale. In most instances, the staff member retrieved the piece from the showcase and read me the tag. Other times, I didn't even get that much attention. At no time was the sales person a Native American, and at no time did a sales person have any idea of geographic or culture areas of specific Native arts. On one occasion a buyer for a major store couldn't even distinguish between northwest and northeast from a basic junior high geography perspective, and couldn't readily identify the southwest tribes represented in her inventory. It's as if the old axiom "the only good Indian is a dead Indian" has been changed into "the only good Indian is a saleable artist," as long as the product conforms to a tourist market of what Indian art is and the sales staff doesn't have to answer questions. The vast majority would not know a knick knack from a Mi'kmaq (an eastern tribe of the Wabanakis, also known as Algonquins).

Another interesting observation (with no analysis here) is the absence of males in the outward store dynamics. The managers are women, the buyers are women, the sales teams are women, and in an area characterized by a complex mixture of Anglos, Native Americans, Mexicans, and Hispanics, they are all white. No people of colour, at least not admittedly.

The gender balance is reversed when it comes to serious galleries handling antiquities and fine Native arts. Men are the owners and managers, and the support staff are exquisitely dressed women, who are rather like grounded flight attendants

delivering drinks while the pilots glide through the big money clouds. Santa Fe is thus not only a superficial female ascension to power, but a male-dominated economy. The losers are the Native artists struggling to sell their work according to female capriciousness, ruled by jaded male brokers, the Hugh Hefners of art.

Perhaps my standing as a professor of traditional Native arts and the author of a beadwork book gave me access to one operation. The owners proudly described how they have contracts to clothe the stars and explained their in-house design and fabrication of suede and polished leather-fringed jackets with beadwork patches. Most notable of their customers was country western singer Travis Tritt (whom I'd never heard of). I was shown the "bead room," a space about 14' x 14', with four little tables and work lamps, and four women bent over doing beadwork. The walls were covered with plastic bags of beads in a rainbow of colours, hanging from hooks. It strongly felt like a sweat shop atmosphere. All the women were white, and one of them had sought me out six months earlier to learn beadwork, and I had taught her. Here she was now, but it got worse. I was escorted out the back door and down a narrow alley to another door, and inside we found a former storage closet (where one might find, say, office supplies). It was 6' x 8' space, and there was a table in the center, a single light, and two people bent over beading. My heart sunk to find two of my former students from the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe. One, a Lakota (Sioux) woman, had a baby during the middle of her semester in my class, and had been living in poverty trying to maintain her grades. Her boyfriend, an Arapaho sculpture student, had dropped out of school to support the family. Both of them had spent time in our home, sharing dinner, laughing, looking into the future with hope and creativity.

Is the picture becoming clear? The upscale store catering to a wealthy Anglo clientele, the white workers in the main building in a larger room, the "Indians" stuffed in a closet down a back alley. Average price of a blue suede jacket with beaded patches on the shoulders, cuffs, and pockets: \$4,000.00.

Out of the earshot of the manager and owner, I asked them what they were being paid (\$6.00 an hour) and how they were

treated: "They say we work too slow. We have to do a jacket a day, each." She told me I shouldn't tell the owner they were married to each other, or they might be fired from their jobs. I could sense their embarrassment being found in a closet sweat shop in one of Santa Fe's most expensive stores by their former teacher, doing beadwork for Travis Tritt. Their total take-home money as a couple is \$360.00 a week after taxes; their new baby is in expensive day care; and they are still living in half-furnished subsidized housing. They don't know how they will be able to finish their studies, and they are in their thirties.

This is the invisible racism of America today—greed and "class" division. The appropriation of culture for profit, and attitudes of superiority, ultimately result in Native people "selling" themselves short to survive within a society which controls market spending, trends, and wage levels—from the invisible America of the reservation, to major urban centers with significant Native populations. The balance of wealth and power is dramatically tipped to insure that Native people are not in decision-making positions, unless of course we have something someone wants very, very much.

No place in America exemplifies this as much as Santa Fe—the Hollywood of the Indian arts world, complete with its own "Rodeo Drive"—Canyon Road. Here we find a double-edged sword! Canyon Road meanders up and away from the city, narrow and reminiscent of the old burro trade trail it once was, lined with small adobe dwellings which are now some of the most valuable real estate in the southwest. Like the Santa Fe plaza, Canyon Road is a Mecca for tourists and high-rollers. The once simple Spanish style homes are now galleries with some of the most expensive and sought-after Native American antiquities. While the average tourists shake their heads in disbelief over the prices, the really big deals are happening in the back rooms. (Got this back room dichotomy down by now?) Here you can find a leather, beaded, fringed Plains-style warshirt, *circa* 1880, for a mere \$90,000.00. A pair of Blackfoot moccasins for \$7,000.00. Sacred pipes. Medicine bundles. Beaded Turtle amulets with a child's umbilical cord inside. Crow (Absoroka) medicine fetishes.

Of course, no one walks in and pops fifty grand; they wheel and deal while the average citizen wonders how someone can pay the price of a small suburban house for a Cheyenne woman's dress. Even more amazing is the fact that these galleries are never low on inventory—from Ghost dance paraphernalia to Parfleche meat cases—so often sacred objects of religious or funerary nature. (There are laws which prevent the sale of some objects, including those with feathers or parts of endangered species, and it is rare to see such items on open display—but peek into the back room of the gallery!) Adding to the problem is the growing number of fakes on the antique market, most of which are made by non-Native forgers for a wealthy clientele which really knows nothing about Native art, buying for the “investment potential.” The gallery salespeople are little more than commissioned brokers, who hook clients and reel in dollars. In several galleries I viewed painted rawhide cases purported to be antique Parfleche, with six figure prices. The surfaces were rough, with no visible wear or patina, and caught up in the membrane fibres were fresh elk hairs. The Parfleche may have been a year old. But the gallery people swore it was antique.

Thankfully, a subtle message is being sent out that the brokers may not realize, which will hopefully shake up the modern market. Native art is art, not just a *craft*. If an antique pair of fully-beaded moccasins commands \$5,000.00 why shouldn't a contemporary pair, skillfully executed be worth \$4,000.00?

So why is Faye working in an airless closet for \$6 per hour? The time is rapidly approaching when contemporary Native artists will demand fair prices, not just based on labour and materials, but also on creative vision and expression, or will refuse to sell. The current Santa Fe hourly rate for an auto mechanic is \$48.00, a full day's labour for Faye just to have her spark plugs changed—not including parts.

Adding further to the forgery market is the flood of Mexican or Taiwan silver and turquoise jewelry, which some store owners pass for Native after the stamped “made in Taiwan” has been ground off. Often these pieces are priced at the same level as, or lower than, the Native makers' work selling under the portal of the Governor's mansion.

As if all this appropriation of Native culture, wide economic disadvantage, and often fraudulent practices and discrimination weren't bad enough, now comes each fall the annual "Spanish Festival" in New Mexico which celebrates the Spanish conquest of the southwest. It is complete with gilt-armoured re-enactors and the burning of Zozobra, a fifty-foot-tall effigy symbolizing the burning of Indians by the Conquistadors. Native people do not attend this "celebration," not only because of its offensiveness, but for reasons of personal safety at the hands of the mobs. Appeals from Native leaders, including the Governors of the nineteen Pueblos surrounding Santa Fe, have not succeeded in ending the racist displays.

The illusion of freedom in America is just that. Native American popularity—both culturally and materially—peaks approximately every 20 years, a cycle which mainstream culture uses to redefine Native people and arts. Between the peak periods, Native people are part of the invisible America, and during the peaks Native people are conveniently profitable. Their images, arts, and values are corrupted and forged by a society claiming 99% of the original Native land base, and who will not stop short of acquiring even our spirituality for eventual mutation into a New Age pantomime—an adult Boy Scout ritual with a Visa card as the price of admission.