

Reflections of Culture

Maybe words if written in the proper way will allow me to explore and expose, with thoughts, my false connection to past and future. Ours is a linear culture that by design, and years of construct, will not allow it's self to see its faults. I hope this paper will allow my mind to explore itself, and recognize how it came to exist and how it forces its own existence.

Starting my journey, I see myself as an astronomer looking at the beginning stages of a star, a star that has burned out millions of years ago. My linear mind has trouble grasping the concept that birth and death can exist at the same time. I want that glimpse; I want to look through that telescope and see the building block of my mind. It is necessary to me to see my own construction and know of what I am a part of. I think my mind has to understand the culture that has fathered its connection to its own reality.

I must recognize the beliefs and understandings that define or allow for my position in this white capitalist culture. I truly don't know the extent of how my life is so intertwined with my culture. I have to borrow the eyes of another culture to see my own culture. I know that there is no one indigenous culture, but common elements that connect indigenous people from many lands (Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas). There are some threads about respect and understanding and cultivating a relationship with the natural world.

The more I use what I think are the eyes of the indigenous people (outsiders to my culture) I see the connections to our world and the more meaning their culture gives to

me. I want to learn to use my own eyes to see my part in my culture. Understanding more of my past and future will become a “**now**”, a nonlinear construct of time; a nonlinear connection to my world. I’m a vision; I am a perfect reflection of my culture, I want to know why.

The Indian and the white man perceive the world in different ways. I take it that this is an obvious fact and a foregone conclusion. But at the same time I am convinced that we do not understand the distinction entirely or even sufficiently.... But I may be more acutely aware of it by virtue of my experience than most.

(N. Scott. Momaday, Man Made Of Words) Pg.50

Outsiders are always more aware of dominant culture than those who belong to the dominant culture. Some of this is survival—having to know the oppressors’ desires and needs both better than one’s own and better even than the oppressor himself. Some of this is from saturation—being surrounded by exploitation so much that one loses their identity. This is an identity of culture and an awareness of self. For example, Native American people having to attend public schools that do not teach their cultural views in order to survive in the dominant world. It is very hard to get a job without a high school diploma and the process of getting this type of education teaches and enforces the values of the dominant culture. Natives are being forced to give up their cultural heritage and are still not given a place in the dominant society. It becomes hard to tell what one’s own thoughts are and what others are (when the others are being echoed in every aspect of society). You know whose foot is on your back, but you don’t always know who you are

stepping on. I am a fish in water, but I want to be out of the water—gasping and realizing that the whole world is not water as I had once assumed. How do I see myself seeing? How do I deconstruct my thoughts to find their origins? To unpack them step by step. When does this journey begin?

The contemporary white American is willing to assume responsibility for the Indian—he is willing to take on the burdens of oppressed people everywhere—but he is decidedly unwilling to divest himself of the false assumptions which impede his good intentions. He is an ambiguous, even contradictory, man. He is rather like that historian of the Pequod War who reached for an analogy and got hold of a stereotype. (Momaday 72)

False intentions prelude false connections. You can sympathize with people and even look them in the eye with good intentions, and at the same time be a part of the system that is oppressing them. Intentions do not equal impact. White people can want to learn all about Native Americans, but these are the Native American of New Age Books, the Wild West, and the Trail of Tears. They are not modern. They are not like us. They are purer, more sophisticated and full of awe like children. Whites cannot connect to the angry Indian who is pissed to see yet another dream catcher hanging from a rear view mirror, the urban Indian lawyer with no “Indian name,” the grandmother living in SECTION 8—not a teepee.

The Indian in the city was victimized by the very things which define urban existence. He could neither understand nor be understood because of his knowledge of English was inadequate... But an Indian knows so

well what it is like to have incomplete existence in two worlds and security in neither. (Momaday 72)

Whites cannot handle Indians that made shrewd business decisions when negotiating treaties with the limited power they had--asking for hills and valleys not just because of a connection to the places but the knowledge of the minerals and the cost of the rights in those hills. So there are the Native American of white imagination and then there are the real people, changing with time and circumstance.

Even when I look across the world it is the canyon country of my boyhood that I see. There, among cowboys and Indians, is an enchantment that comprehends the richness and variety of the continent itself. The Wild West signifies geography and a time in our experience that defines the American imagination. (Momaday 154).

American imagination, the Houser of the eyes that take from the land and in visions what the land has to offer. The idea that I own the land, the idea that I own my imagination. I'm here to conquer this wild frontier; I'm here to conquer my imagination. I live in a cabin I built from trees; I drink from the river, and I take game from the prairie. What do I owe this land? I'm here to conquer this wild frontier, with the use of my words and my false connections to what surrounds me. I can conquer this land, I can conquer my fear, if I kill it, I won't have to understand it.

There is no pure Indian like those captured in old western photographs, and perhaps even those weren't real, often wearing garb incorrectly or patched together from various tribes collected by white photographers wanting to cater to the white imagination

of the buyers. Some subjects may have posed for economic reasons while others may have liked the novelty of being captured on film. It is hard to know how much choice was involved. Some argue that there is still something real in those photos, that the subjects' reactions are still seen showing us something about the white imagination and the limits of its control. Maybe the faces do reflect that knowledge of the oppressor in a way that he does not see himself.

When reading authors such as N. Scott. Momaday, their stories and traditions of a culture so much alive and so rich with connection, it is hard for me not to see the oppressive ugliness of my white culture on this Native way of living. I am slowly recognizing my part and, in doing so, I realize I cannot disconnect from white culture because I am saturated with it to the point that I often do not realize that it is one culture, one value system—not just the way things are for everyone. When I do realize that I am seeing something through my white cultural lens and not just seeing things as they are, I am able to make room for more perspectives.

. I must start my journey through a realization that my words were created by an oppressive culture. By understanding the origin and creation of these words I can look at the system and power behind my words. Both my words and my language give me a particular framework for viewing and making sense of the world in a way that makes sense to dominators, not to those from more collectivist cultures. This understanding makes me aware that I can continue to unconsciously support this domination or I can make choices and decisions to shift the paradigm. When I take responsibility for my culture, I can help other people from the dominant culture see it too. We can be responsible for making room for more than one way of seeing, understanding, and being.

