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BELONGING AND PERSPECTIVE:
AN INTERPRETATION OF TWO NATIVE AMERICAN SHORT
STORIES

A few years ago the 100th anniversary issue of National Geographic Magazine was published with a nice holographic cover showing a picture of the fragile Earth on the front and that of the growing world of McDonalds on the back. I read an article about Hungary in it, and I came across a picture in the top left corner of a page. The text below the picture reads as follows: "...Hungarian style, Nándor and Ilona Budai possess... attractive clothes—even a Soviet-made car for picnics in the country (top left)."¹ The picture showed a middle-aged couple with two children. They were eating canned food and all around them—even on the top of the car—they had a lot of cartons of orange juice and apple drink. I thought that there was something disturbing about the article and the picture. I found the journalist's image about "Hungarian style" completely incongruent with my ideas. Likewise, this article brought to mind two questions of viewpoint and perspective: how do two different cultures see one another?, what is significant in another's culture? In order to answer these questions I chose two Native American writers whose short stories raised similar questions. The points of view in Kimberley M. Blaeser's "From Aboard the Night Train" and Patricia Riley's "Adventures of an Indian Princess" are different.

¹ *National Geographic Magazine*, 174 (December 1988), pp. 928—929.

The former is narrated in the first person singular and the latter in the third person singular, but the narrators are both Native Americans.

Being a Native American is an important determining factor from the Eurocentric point of view as it is expressed in Elaine Showalter's article.² Native Americans presently occupy a marginal status and they belong to a "muted group" as do, according to E. Showalter, feminist writers. If we accept that Native Americans and feminists are both muted in a way that they fall far behind the expectations of the Western Eurocentric value system,³ it is even more difficult for a female Native American to accept the Western Eurocentric value system and its standards and to fit into them.

In Patricia Riley's story the same events are viewed through various perspectives. Arletta, a Native American foster-child, is taken to a trading post by her white foster-parents, Mr. and Mrs. Rapier. Symbolism is connected with the name "Rapier", it is a particularly vicious sword since it is double edged. The parents want to impose their value system on Arletta. They know the girl would love the place as they have "sophisticated knowledge" about it from Hollywood movies. The parents think the place to be realistic but the girl realizes how fake everything is. The Indian in strange clothing is disturbing to Arletta but for the parents he is so authentic that they want to take a picture of the girl and the Indian.

To make the picture more accurate Mr. Rapier walks back to the trading post and buys some genuine Indian arts-and-crafts and puts them on the girl. The girl knows how false these things are and she is shocked by seeing the vendors and the Indian man who also insists on her standing beside him for the photo. The fake Indian man and the vendors have fallen victims to commercialism which appears in the form of the Coke-machine at the trading post. They are exploited by the need to manufacture commodities and offer their services for money in order to survive. Charles Hudson concludes that "If the Indians could not produce commodities, they

² Elaine Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," in *Modern Criticism and Theory*, ed. David Lodge (New York: Longman, 1988), pp. 330—53.

³ Paula Gunn Allen, "'Border' Studies: The Interaction of Gender and Color," in *Introduction to Scholarship in Modern Languages and Literatures*, ed. Joseph Gibaldi, 2nd ed. (New York: Modern Language Association, 1992), n.p.

were on the road to cultural extinction... He had to produce a commodity which was valuable enough to earn him some protection".⁴

The goods bought at the trading post have no value for Arletta. The beads are ugly and large and not elaborate. They were made in Japan, a country with an ancient culture that has different standards than the Eurocentric value system, but it has also been oppressed and exploited by the adulation of the dollar. For the girl the disproportionate arrangement of the beads expresses the disruption of the inherent relationship between nature and man; animal and the Indian hunter.

The differences between Mr. and Mrs. Rapier's and Arletta's perspectives are compelling in their dialogs, questions and responses. The whole situation is too sweet for Arletta; like syrupy soda. On the way home she begins to feel sick and asks Mr. Rapier to stop. He responds by turning the air-conditioning on, so he interpreted Arletta's request in his own way. He does something but not the thing Arletta wants him to do.

In the car Mrs. Rapier says to Arletta: "You've just worn yourself out from the heat and playing Indian".⁵ This sentence can have two interpretations at least. Perhaps she knows that the whole situation that is set up by her and her husband is a fake game, and it proves how cruel they are because they force the girl into this situation. The second possibility is that living and acting like an Indian is only a game or a play; it is like a show in a circus, and this view expresses Mrs. Rapier's feeling of superiority over the way Indians act.

At the end of the short story Riley extends her scope of observation as she mentions a little black girl who was involved in almost the same situation. In a Safari Park the Rapiers took a picture of her dressed up in African clothes, or what they thought was African clothing. The girl was standing next to a papier-mâché lion. The Rapiers could understand neither the African girl's nor the Indian girl's culture.

⁴ Jane Tompkins, " 'Indians': Textualism, Morality, and the Problem of History," in *"Race," Writing, and Difference*, ed. Henry L. Gates (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 67.

⁵ Patricia Riley, "Adventures of an Indian Princess," in *Earth Song, Sky Spirit*, ed. Clifford E. Trafzer (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1992), p. 140.

In Kimberley M. Blaeser's short story the author remembers her stay in Paris, as well as her childhood. In France she saw a celebration and the first day she could not understand anything. She says about it "... I never forgot that first night, when the whole world was happening without me."⁶ She was there but she did not belong to that place. The next day she went back to the carnival with friends and she enjoyed it. In Paris the loss of belonging to a place was temporary, but she realizes the significance of the situation. "And yet I feel these scenes add up to something, some meaning or lesson about all life and I try to put it into words for myself but I can't."⁷

Later on this feeling deepens. The various stages of this process are described in the short story and these phases show how her perspective changes. Starting from the Paris experience there are further shifts between Paris and urban America. The sudden switches express how her mind becomes more and more obsessed with the idea of finding a place where she belongs. In Martin Heidegger's concept every human being is preoccupied with finding some way in which he can feel "Dasein", literally the sense of "being there".⁸ The author of this short story seeks this attachment as well.

The place where she is from is not the same as it used to be. She recollects images of the past and she relies on dream states as an escape from reality. But the dreams do not bring peace and relief. She cannot find her place in her dreams which gradually become nightmarish. She remembers the way they lived and the animals they watched. Her past haunts her: "I feel my past alive on the other side of the screen, hiding in the shadows of the bushes, about to jump out. With that hope or expectation pressing against all my organs, pressing against my very skin, I reenter the present night."⁹ She has to face the present.

The present is frustrating. A gambling hall is opened where everything and everybody work like a mechanism. The hall is the place where

⁶ Kimberley M. Blaeser, "From Aboard the Night Train," in *Earth Song, Sky Spirit*, ed. Clifford E. Trafzer (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1992), p. 26.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁸ See R. May, et al., *Existence—A New Dimension in Psychiatry*, (New York, 1958).

⁹ Blaeser, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

absurdity becomes reality, where the apprentice medicine man is the dealer. For the people who work there the hall is not terrible at all, they are even proud of having a job and wearing nice uniforms. For her these people are paper-doll images. People who are exploited by commercialism make paper-doll images of themselves and sacrifice their own culture. These paper-doll people with tabs, as it is mentioned in the story, have been spoiled to such a degree that they would seem unreal without the tabs.

The gambling hall is a symbol of the consumer society in which people are alienated from each other, and their ancient culture; from animals, from plants, from everything that is human. They insert one coin after the other into the slot-machine and listen to the fake Elvis Presley singing.

In the two short stories there is a strong similarity in perspective. The Indian background, the white American culture and the Eurocentric values are depicted through the consciousness of the two Native American characters. The difference is in the response to the alienated and hostile world. Arletta cannot express her objection and her astonishment orally. Her stubborn face and her gestures express the rejection of the values offered by the Rapiers. Only at the end of the story does she dare to object to her foster-mother and the objection pleases Arletta:

"Arletta!" Mrs. Rapier screamed. "Look what you've done! You've ruined all those lovely things we bought. Aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

Arletta flashed a genuine smile for the first time that day. "No, ma'am," she said. "No, ma'am, I'm not."¹⁰

Kimberley M. Blaeser's character is more deeply affected. The loss of belonging some place evokes spiritual hollowness in her. The author describes how the dominance of Eurocentric culture leads to the detachment of human beings and to the loss of common awareness of those people who once belonged to each other in a culture.

The conclusion of the essay is that a surface perspective is not satisfactory because it will lead to labels like "'marginal', the 'poor', the 'victims'".¹¹ If this perspective is followed, Indians will be viewed as people having a romantic life in the forest or as savages dancing around a fire; and

¹⁰ Riley, p. 140.

¹¹ Allen, p. 304.

Hungarians as the ones who ride on horseback, eat goulash, and do not have peanut butter in the stores. If you observe characters and cultures from this perspective, the characters and you will never belong to that culture.

Being at a place is not enough to appreciate its culture and perceive its significance. Only attachment to a place gives an abiding identity "because places associated with family, community, and history have depth."¹²

¹² Charles Reagan, and William Ferris (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), p. 1138.