**Postcards: Entertainment or Exploitation?**

**Foreword**

Dear reader,

The following is a scrutinous analysis of a cluster of early 20th century Oklahoma postcards that depict images of Native American peoples. I recognize that my position as a white woman writing this piece is a privileged one, as people who have looked like me have historically been destructive to the livelihoods of people of color, especially those who are natives of the United States. The goal of my words is not to amplify my voice over others, it is instead to address a specific instance of cultural insensitivity towards Native Americans, explicitly towards the Pawnee, as well as tribes that are left unlabeled on the cards.

**Introduction**

A tourist staple spanning continents, postcards in Oklahoma are especially intriguing in that the public is granted access to a digital archive of these cards from the twentieth century via the Oklahoma Department of Libraries’ online collection.

Out of this collection consisting of 491 postcards, ta handful of them portray images of Native Americans. The use of such pictures on postcards, however, reinforces the white idea of exploitation of indigenous people in North America. It is through the analysis of three specific depictions of Native Americans on Oklahoman postcards, that the caricaturistic commodification of the people native to America becomes evident. These pictures on the postcards exploit the archetypal image of ‘the native’, invariably favoring the United States government as the beneficiary of the resulting economic gain, the imposition of erasure, and the enforcement of a white-lensed stereotype. This commodified entertainment form, in turn, takes on the position of a paper-trail of native appropriation and exploitation in Oklahoma.

**History**

But what is it that makes these twentieth-century Oklahoma postcards so distinct from the others? To answer this question, one must understand why postcards possess such importance to people today. So much so, that collecting these forms of media has become a type of entertainment for the now elderly generation. A hobby that has the potential to die with them.

Postcards first began their boom throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The United States Postal Service began selling these cards in the mid 1800’s, but these weren’t the same eye-catching pieces that you would expect: these cards were completely blank. This might seem contradictory, given that nowadays people often associate a postcard with its picture. The reason for this blank side, however, was because postcards were not originally intended for individual consumption, but instead were a means through which businesses could advertise their products (Meikle, 2016). It appears, at their core, postcards were an avenue in which businesses could achieve some sort of profit, and not the kind of entertainment product that postcard collectors seem to view them as today. About a century later, these unique forms of communication would shift to the well-known picture-model of a postcard. These would become so popular that, in the year 1913 alone, the United States Postal Service documented that they had managed 968 million postcards (Meikle, 2016). In terms of profit, if each postcard was worth at least one cent, then it seems as if the government would be making over 9 million dollars from postcards alone. For this very reason, the period from 1905-1915 was deemed as the “Golden Age of Postcards” (Fixico n.d.).

**Postcards and People**

After conversing with local Grinnell postcard collectors, it seems as though to them, postcards exist as a type of communication that connected families and friends before motor vehicles ever could. Nowadays, when people receive a postcard, it is the result of someone they know travelling and having the desire to share the experience through both words and an image. This usage seems as though a shift from the 1800’s advertising phase, transforming postcards into a vacation-oriented contemporary phenomenon.

A picture containing text

Description automatically generatedDuring times when travelling was not common-place, people used the United States Postal Service to send letters or postcards to those whom they wanted to contact. For these reasons, postcards took on a variety of meanings, providing the flexibility needed to communicate messages of various importance. Cards containing well-wishes, holiday greetings, baby announcements, or even news of a death were all avenues in which the postcard predominately operated. What made these sorts of mail better than letters, you might ask? The answer lies in the obvious: the picture.

The front of a postcard, the part that attracts your eyes, is what people told me makes these cards so connective for them. But during the height consumption of postcards, there was something special about being able to share a photograph alongside a personalized message: the images placed a picture in your head, one that you didn’t have to conjure up through your imagination while reading. In other words, postcards morphed from an avenue of advertisements to a form of mobile entertainment that people could enjoy looking at. In thinking of postcards as entertainment, though, it is important to note the ‘who’ in these scenarios. Who was buying these pictures and whose picture was being bought?

**Depictions of Native Americans on Postcards**

While postcards seem to be a hobby that individuals can engage in as a form of leisure in a contemporary context, specific cards from twentieth-century Oklahoma cannot and should not be seen as sharing this same privilege. Where these postcards disembark from the realm of acceptable entertainment is when they appropriate images of Native Americans with the intention to benefit the United States government as well as to disadvantage the people who were being photographed. Of these multiple forms of exploitation, three of which can be most clearly seen through the images on three separate postcards. These types of misuse include the utilization of images of Native people to stimulate economic advancement, to promote an aura of erasure of individual tribes, or to further stereotypes instituted through the white gaze. These themes surrounding the use of such images are exacerbated by a postcard’s familiar goal to provide an entertainment product for the American public. Whilst other postcards from these archives include photos of historical buildings or scenes found in nature, these three postcards question where the line should be drawn between entertainment and exploitation. The depictions of Native Americans on these postcards contribute to the idea that Native people were seen as comparable to things such as a building: objects meant to be looked at.

To understand the context surrounding these cards, one must comprehend the history of how some tribes, who were not native to this part of North America, came to reside in Oklahoma. The relationship of indigenous people and Oklahoma, in turn, further irritates postcard’s colonialist capitalizations on indigenous trauma.

When Andrew Johnson signed the Indian Removal Act of 1830, “some 60,000 Native Americans were forced westward into ‘Indian Territory’” (*Andrew Johnson signs the Indian Removal Act into law*,2021). This act of inherent dispossession removed tribes, such as the Chickasaw, Seminole, Cherokee, Choctaw, and Creek from their native lands into other places supposedly designated for them by the government (Manifest Destiny and Indian removal - American Experience 2015,). Where these groups of people were forced to move: contemporary Oklahoma, also known as the “final destination of the trail of tears” (Cornelison & Yanak, 2004). The amalgamation of the history of the American government exploiting Native Americans for land as well as indigenous relationships to Oklahoma exacerbate the use of Native images on postcards, specifically in three examples that showcase three types of exploitation.

**Financial Exploitation**

Looking at the first postcard, the image displays a group of eight Native Americans in Oklahoma generically titled ‘Indians on Miller Bros. 101 Ranch’. According to the Oklahoma Historical Society, this ranch was occupied by George Washington Miller and “earned most of its notoriety from the Wild West shows that it staged” (O’Dell, n.d.). Based on the historical background of this location combined with the clear staging of this image, it can be inferred that the people in the picture were actors in such films. And the postcards: advertisements for such films. This idea goes back to postcards' original purpose of being solely advertisements for different businesses, in this case, a movie. From a financial viewpoint, white people in power have historically utilized Native Americans to make a profit in terms of removing native peopleA group of people in traditional dress

Description automatically generated with low confidence from their land. Now, the exploitation further extended to films on Oklahoman land, the place that was deemed to be Indian Territory. In addition, it is important to note that these postcards were being distributed by the United States Postal service, a sector under the U.S. government. Coupled with the knowledge that that these postcards made up a multimillion-dollar industry, white people in power were not only was directly profiting from the film and the depictions of generic native people in them, but the government was also making money from the monetization of the images of the native people on postcards. The land that made up Oklahoma was the same area that Native Americans had been forced to move to due to the Indian Removal Act. And now, these people were being exploited again. What aggravates this idea further is that the ranch depicted in the postcards was actually “leased from the Quapaws” (O’Dell, n.d.). Due to the reality of the land being bought off another tribe, Oklahoma’s role in dispossession, the filming of a ‘cowboys versus Indians’ style movie, and the government making money from all of these means, the levels of financial exploitation are numerous. Thus, the United States government’s use of the images of Native people to stimulate economic advancement resulted in the financially exploitation of native people on multiple levels.

**An Exploitation of Erasure**

Another example of appropriation, this time in the form of erasure on the second postcard, also takes place on this same ranch filming location. On this postcard, the picture displays a Native American woman carrying a child. The title at the bottom of this A person carrying a child

Description automatically generated with medium confidencespecific postcard reads, “Indian Sq\*\*\* and Papoose on Miller Bros 101 Ranch”. The title’s inclusion of such a derogatory term to describe a Native American woman is not only demeaning and inappropriate, but it is also a generalization. This is much like the last postcard which grouped eight individuals as ‘Indians’, as opposed to sharing any information about which tribe they belonged to. In terms of the second postcard’s depiction of this woman, there are also no defining words present in the title to describe who this person was or what tribe they belonged to. In this way, this postcard contributes to the erasure of specific tribes in favor of universalizing the term “Indian” or, in this case, a slur for a Native American woman. Since this woman was probably an actor on this ranch as well, it is important note that these films were often othering in the fact that they were consistently labeled as ‘cowboys vs Indians’. This theme seen throughout wild west films further subscribes to the erasure of individual groups and encourages this false idea of Native Americans being not only one group of people, but also as being the enemy.

**Exploitation through the White Gaze**

A group of men in clothing

Description automatically generated with low confidenceIn addition to these other instances of exploitation, the third and final postcard exploits Native Americans through the white gaze. In this particular postcard, a group of Pawnee people are showcased, and their name is included in the title. According to the Pawnee Nation’s official website, “Pawnees ceded their territory to the U.S. Government in the 1800’s and were removed from Nebraska” (Pawnee Nation, 2023). After withdrawing, the Pawnees then moved their tribe to the state of Oklahoma. While this postcard does not take place on the same ranch as the other two, is still looks a bit theatrical in the staging of the photo in that the people look like they are posing. The reason for this being white people would see what sells: a group of stereotypically staged Native Americans. The commodification of the images of the ‘generic native’, much like this one, affirmed people’s stereotypes of indigenous people as well as profiled one tribe to be the same as all others. Despite the inclusion of the name Pawnee in the title, the fact that the government made money (both in acreage and dollars) from the images of the Pawnee after they had been relocated displays the inherent exploitation of native people by the government through the lens of white authority.

**Conclusion**

The first sentence of the Oklahoma Historical Society page titled *American Indians* reads, “American Indians living in Oklahoma have a complicated, interesting, and unique history” (Fixico n.d.). These adjectives trivialize the plight of tribes who were dispossessed by the United States’ government from places they had called home and subsequently forced to move to Oklahoma. American Indians living in Oklahoma have been murdered, deprived, and exploited all for a means of advancing ideals of settler colonialism in American. These three extremely vague adjectives display a lack of remorse by those in power in Oklahoma. In addition, the site does not mention any sort of ideas surrounding the Native Americans persevering even after the white settlers took from them. Despite postcards intent to exploitation these people financially, contribute to their erasure, as well as gawk at them through the lens of the white gaze, Native Americans persisted.

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