**dPostcards: 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.

To read more about the Pawnee Nation visit their site: https://pawneenation.org/pawnee-history/

**Introduction**

The Oklahoma Department of Libraries’ digital archive is home to a collection of a twentieth-century tourist staple: postcards. While postcards are often seen as promoting favorable feelings, some images from this digital archive cannot be seen as possessing this quality. . Of the 491 postcards in this collection, a handful portray images of Native Americans, and none of them in a favorable light. Three depictions of Native Americans in particular take on the position of a paper-trail of native appropriation, as they exist as clear exemplifications of exploitation in Oklahoma. The pictures found on these three postcards exploit the archetypal image of ‘the native’, invariably favoring the United States dominant culture [?]. The use of exploitative images on postcards allows the government to benefit through the resulting profit, their contribution to erasure, and their enforcement of a white-lensed stereotype.

**Postcards as an Entertainment Product**

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). At their core, postcards were an avenue through which businesses could make a profit, rather than being the 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 during the “Golden Age of Postcards” (Fixico, n.d.). 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). That means, if each of these postcards were worth at least one cent, then the government would be making over 9 million dollars from stamps alone.

**Postcards and People**

Nowadays, postcards have completely shifted away from the 1800’s advertising phase, transforming into vacation-oriented tourist paraphernalia. When people receive a postcard today, it usually comes from someone they know who is vacationing. During times when travelling was not commonplace, the United States Postal Service-connected families and friends in ways that vehicles couldn’t. Postcards took on a variety of roles, providing the flexibility needed to communicate messages of varying levels of importance. Cards containing well-wishes, holiday greetings, baby announcements, or even news of a death—these were the postcards’ predominant themes. The addition of pictures raised the status of postcards above letters, making them a form of entertainment as well as a means of communication. . 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**

In trying to understand these three specific cards from Oklahoma, it helps to know something about the sequence of events which ended with some tribes that [or which] were not native to this part of North America taking up residence in Oklahoma. t The relationship between 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 land supposedly set aside for them by the government (Manifest Destiny and Indian removal - American Experience, 2015). These nations—known colloquially as “the Five Civilized Tribes”--were forced to move to what became Oklahoma, also known as the “final destination of the Trail of Tears” (Cornelison & Yanak, 2004). The history of the American government exploiting Native Americans for land as well as Oklahoma’s role in this exacerbates the use of Native images on Oklahoman postcards. More specifically, three types of exploitation can be seen as finding illustration in the postcards’ images. .

**Financial Exploitation**

The first postcard (Figure 1) displays [shows?] 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 this information, as well as the clear staging of this image, it can be inferred that the people pictured in this postcard were actors in such pageants.. The postcards were advertisements for such shows.. This use harkens back to postcards' original purpose in promotingdifferent 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 taking their land. Now, the exploitation further extended to films on Oklahoman land, the place that was deemed to be Indian Territory by President Andrew Johnson. In addition, it is important to note that these postcards were being distributed by the United States Postal service, a branch of 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 as ads. Being that the Native Americans living in Oklahoma had already been exploited through the Indian Removal Act, these people were being exploited again through their photos on the same land that was ‘given’ to them. 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, and the government making money from all of these means, the levels of financial exploitation are numerous.

**An Exploitation of Erasure**

https://c1h-word-edit-15.cdn.office.net/we/s/hA3596C17DAD9A003_resources/1033/progress.gifAnother exemplification of appropriation, this time in the form of erasure, can be seen on a second postcard (Figure 2) photographed on the same ranch . On this postcard, the picture is of a Native American woman carrying a child. The title at the bottom of this specific postcard reads, “Indian Sq\*\*\* and Papoose on Miller Bros 101 Ranch”. The inclusion of such derogatory terms to describe a Native American mother and child 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. Similarly, i the second postcard has no defining words in the title which describe who this person was or what tribe they belonged to. 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**

https://c1h-word-edit-15.cdn.office.net/we/s/hA3596C17DAD9A003_resources/1033/progress.gifThe third and final postcard displays the ways in which Native Americans are exploited through the white gaze. In this particular postcard (Figure 3), a group of Pawnee people are showcased, and their tribal affiliation is included in the title. According to the Pawnee Nation’s official website, ￼￼ While this postcard is not seton the same ranch as the other two, is still looks staged, and the people look like they are posing. Presumably, the primary audience for this image being whites, those encountering the photo would see what sells: a group of stereotypically staged Native Americans. The commodification of images of the ‘generic native’ affirmed stereotypes of indigenous people as well as profiling 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 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 that were dispossessed by the United States’ government from places they had called home, and subsequently forced to move to Oklahoma. These three extremely vague adjectives do not mention that Native Americans have persevered in spite of everything that has been taken from them, including control of their images. Despite postcards’ exploitative intentions, despite perpetuation of policies which contribute to their erasure, Native Americans have persisted.

Looking at the Pawnee Nation’s website ??

Works Cited and Consulted

Andrew Jackson signs the Indian removal act into lawHistory.com Editors. (2021, August 30).  - history. History.com. Retrieved March 21, 2023, from [https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/indian-removal-act-signed-andrew-jackson](https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/indian-removal-act-signed-andrew-jackson" \t "_blank)

Bassett, F. (n.d.). *Postcard collection - appendix C wish you were here!: The story of the golden age of picture postcards in the United States*. New York State Library. Retrieved April 2, 2023, from https://www.nysl.nysed.gov/msscfa/qc16510ess.htm

Boxell, M. (2021). From native sovereignty to an Oilman’s state: Land, race, and petroleum in indian territory and oklahoma. The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, 20(2), 216-233. doi:https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781420000808

Carlson, Leonard A., and Mark A. Roberts. “Indian Lands, ‘Squatterism,’ and Slavery: Economic Interests and the Passage of the Indian Removal Act of 1830.” Explorations in economic history 43.3 (2006): 486–504. Web.

Donald Fixico, “American Indians,” *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=AM010.

Oklahoma. (2004). In P. Cornelison, & T. Yanak, The great American history fact-finder (2nd ed.). Houghton Mifflin. Credo Reference:

Manifest destiny and Indian removal - american experience. Smithsonian American Art Museum Retrieved March 21, 2023, from https://americanexperience.si.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Manifest-Destiny-and-Indian-Removal.pdf

Meikle. (2016). Postcard America: Curt Teich and the Imaging of a Nation, 1931-1950. University of Texas Press.

O'Dell, L. (n.d.). *Miller Brothers 101 ranch*. Oklahoma Historical Society | OHS. Retrieved April 3, 2023, from https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=MI029

Özen. (2008). Visual representation and propaganda: Early films and postcards in the Ottoman Empire, 1895-1914. Early Popular Visual Culture, 6(2), 145–157.

*Pawnee history: Pawnee Nation*. Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma. (2020, December 4). Retrieved April 3, 2023, from https://pawneenation.org/pawnee-history