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Playing Indian

Phillip Deloria suggests that “whenever white Americans have confronted crises of identity, some of them have inevitably turned to Indians” (p. 156). I will be examining three different chapters in which white Americans have turned to playing Indian to reconstruct identity, and why it works symbolically. First examining the role in which white Americans turned to playing Indian in the Boston Tea Party, Patriotic Indians and Identities of Revolution, and (crisis in another chapter).

The book begins by talking about the Boston Tea Party and how Bostonians dressed as Mohawk’s and took over the harbor and dumped the tea into the Boston harbor. “At the Boston Tea Party and elsewhere, Indianness provided impetus and precondition for the creative assembling of an ultimately unassemblable American Identity” (Deloria, 5). As they first imagined and then performed Indianness together on the docks of Boston, the Tea Party Indians gave material form to identities that were witnessed and made real.

“In the national iconography, the Tea Party is a catalytic moment, the first drumbeat in the long cadence of rebellion through which Americans redefined themselves as something other than British colonists. For the next two hundred years, white Americans molded similar narratives of national identity around the rejection of an older European consciousness and an almost mystical imperative to become new” (Deloria, 2). There is never a clear idea of what or who American’s are but who they are not, and they

are not Europeans. They failed to produce a positive identity that stood on its own. Euro-Americans had imprisoned themselves in the logical mind and the social order, whereas, Indians represented instinct and freedom. They spoke for the “spirit of the continent” and whites desperately desired that spirit. So is that why they desire to play Indian so much?

In the beginning D.H. Lawrence says “you can’t change your nature and mode of consciousness like changing your shoes”, well then how can white Americans by trying to play Indian? However when trying to play Indian they glorify what Indian people actually look like or act.

“In each historical moment, Americans have returned to the Indian, reinterpreting the intuitive dilemmas surrounding Indianness to meet the circumstances of their times” (Deloria, 7). Playing Indian is a persistent tradition in American culture, stretching from the very instant of the national big bang into an ever-expanding present and future.

In chapter one, *Patriotic Indians and Identities of Revolution*, shows another example of where non-Natives have inevitably turned to playing Indian. It seems like whenever white Americans come to a problem or if they need something they turn to the role of playing Indian. As an example, “the intruders wore blankets wrapped Indian-style and sported caps and feathers on their heads, they blackened and painted faces, and they grimaced and brandished clubs at the frightened group” (Deloria, 11). This is referring to the Dunbar case in 1734. When the King’s men showed resistance, war clubs rained down upon their heads. When playing Indian they must feel that they are free to act how they wouldn’t normally act. They are free to harm someone without getting caught, and do they do this because they have come to the conclusion that when playing Indian they

think of the savage Indian, and see that when playing Indian it is only necessary to act savagely.

However Americans began dressing as Indian for different reasons. Like the celebration for the May first frolics by the members of the Schuylkill Fishing Company of Pennsylvania. They gathered for a celebration, dinners, songs, tobacco, and prolific toasting with bowls of potent alcoholic punch, which was to celebrate the return of spring. They even had Indian-costumed parades.

There is also the carnival which is one of the ways American identity created the Indian. With the carnival people are allowed to dress up like Indians, which presents rights of reversal. You could dress up as something you wouldn't usually dress up as and act a certain way you wouldn't dare think about, you would dress up opposite of what you would in your daily life. I feel that dressing up or playing something that is not yourself gives you the yearning to be how you wish you could be in daily public life. You would no longer be afraid to act as you truly wished. Playing Indian gives people the double identity to do these things.

In the chapter *Natural Indians and Identities of Modernity* it says that Indians offered patriotic role models for American youth in the birth of the boy scouts, etc. Indians are associated with children, they are at the same level as children then females in the bond fire girls are taught to serve a man which is a fantasy about Indian women, and how they were domestic because they cooked, beaded, and were obedient. Now we're considered the same as women. This is the point of kids going out in the woods building campfires, it's a counter-cultural thing, they don't have enough time spent with nature so they do this in order to be considered real men or they learn to be men...to tough it out.

They are also taught the social control in order to live in modern society. They essentially had to start off at the suppose level as Indians in the levels of society and the kids eventually make their way up the ladder to a higher level in society.

Being Native American it amazes me that the American society actually took to playing Indian. Would they have wanted to play Indian when our people were being killed for the land here, and when we were facing cultural oppression? No I don't think so, they only took to playing Indian when it served them best or as Deloria says they were facing crises of identity, but still it surprises me that they turned to being Indian. I feel that there is something about playing a particular role that can tap into making people aggressive, and this is show by the white Americans in their attempt to play Indian. In each and every attempt there is some aggression show and violence to take what they cannot get without playing the role in their eyes of a savage Indian.

There were two examples where white Americans played Indian either for a metaphorical role or a mimetic. The metaphorical was to play Indian to say something, for their right to rebel against society when they couldn't as themselves but by playing Indian. Then there is the mimetic where they pretended to play Indian to experience it or what they were dressed up as. Both cases were seen in this book. I wonder if for the mimetic play they did it out of envy. Envy for us as a people, and our outstanding will to do what we wished and to live as we did, their envy of our representation of freedom and instinct. However Thomas King says that when playing Indian people steal our stories and change them. That is true, just look at the history we are taught in school as children, we are taught that what Columbus and the early settlers did was right and that the Indian people need to move forward and take the culture of the white man. We are also taught

the point of view of the invaders and not the point of view of the Indian people.