CAPTIVE MINDS: NEW WORLDS AND OLD METAPHORS

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By 1890, the American frontier was officially closed, Native American¹ lands had been stolen by or sold to the United States government, and the massacre at Wounded Knee had signalled the end of Native American military resistance. The government described its official policy as assimilation, the alleged goal being to prepare Native Americans to become citizens of the United States. Part of this plan included a requirement that students at schools run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs be given English language names. The policy, however, was not carried out in any sort of a consistent way, and it generated considerable controversy. What was at stake was not merely the accurate translation of family names and first names. The naming process was part of the larger politically charged debate over citizenship, land ownership, and, even more important, over the meaning of "America" at the turn of the century.2 The following analysis focuses on "Simon Pokagon on Naming the Indians," an 1897 text by a Potawotami Chief, as a starting point for exploring contexts and subtexts of the debate about American national identity that continues in the late 1990s.

I use the term "Native American" when speaking of contemporary practices and perspectives about the many groups of people who lived on the North American continent at the time of European colonisation. In parts of the paper where I discuss nineteenth century and earlier texts, I refer to "Indians" because that was the term that writers and speakers of the period I quote used. Both "Indian" and "Native American" are contingent names, problematic in two ways in that both imply the category "European" or "European American" immigrant as the point of comparison. The groups of peoples we call "Native Americans" included diverse nations of people from four distinct language groups. Even though the name "Native American" is more accurate than "Indian," even this word is misleading because all of the inhabitants of the continent were themselves at one time immigrants.

²See Ronald Takaki's discussion of the Dawes Act of 1887 in *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*, (Boston, Toronto, London: Little, Brown, and Company, 1993), pp. 234-238.

Pokagon was one of the native Americans who contributed to this debate.³

Until recently, most historical accounts have portrayed nineteenth century Native Americans as victims, either of fate or of imperialist aggression. What has usually been left out are the multiple ways in which many of these people took an active role in resisting white cultural hegemony even after a time when it seemed certain that their cultures would disappear. Whether or not non-Native readers are aware of this resistance, however, depends on which texts they find available and assume are worth reading. It also depends on *how* the texts are read, in particular on learning to think from the perspective of the colonised rather than the colonisers. I agree with literary critic Cheryl Walker, who writes in *Indian Nation*, that the alternative is to "continue to write the history of conquest as the history of fate, and to add our own literary trophies to the ever-mounting pyramid of skulls."

In the *American Monthly Review of Reviews* Simon Pokagon responds to an article published several months earlier by Frank Terry, the white superintendent of the United States Boarding School for Crow Indians in Montana. In his article, Terry notes that "the ideal English surname of to-day is a meaningless word of from one to three syllables... It would be an easy matter in constructing names for Indians to make them conform to this ideal...Wherever change can be made it should be in the interest of decency and humanity..." He then describes a wide range of examples where Native Americans were given names that he believes are "uncouth, un-American, and uncivilised." At one level,

³ Simon Pokagon, "Simon Pokagon on Naming the Indians," *American Monthly Review of Reviews* 16 (September 1897), pp. 320-321.

⁴ Cheryl Walker, *Indian Nation*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 40.

⁵ Curiously, Terry introduces the adjective "meaningless" to describe English language names, and then uses this characterisation to argue that Indians should have no objections to adopting them. White Americans often have referred to what they perceive as "meaningless" syllables and words in Native American ceremonies. See Frank Terry, "Naming the Indians," *American Monthly Review of Reviews* (15 March 1897), p. 306.

⁶ Terry believes some names are problems because the Indians feel ashamed of them, such as Lafayette Corner-of-the-mouth, Guy Bad-boy, and Maggie Broken-ankle. In other cases this "uncouth people" should not take on "genteel" names such as Samuel, Robert, James. Other names such as "Kills- the- one- with- the- blue- mark- in- the- centre- of- the- chin" are simply "ridiculous and should not be perpetuated." Ibid., p. 304.

Pokagon's response to this article supports the ideology of progress underlying Terry's argument. But if we examine the subtext more closely we see that it does not exactly support the goal of assimilation. Embedded in the apparently accomodationist narrative is a more subtle narrative of resistance that uses irony in order to parody, and thus to question, white claims to cultural superiority. Pokagon's ironic, muted approach is a mode of agency that Walker characterises as the "subjugated discourse" of the marginalised. For Pokagon, this approach contributed to the larger process of negotiating strategies for the survival of Indian peoples at a time when they were outnumbered three hundred to one by non-Indians.

Let's begin by looking at how the text overtly supports the goals of assimilation. Perhaps the most obvious indication is that Pokagon's own words are framed with a photograph and a written introduction by the editor of the journal. The photo is an oval framed portrait of a smiling Victorian gentleman with short hair, and wearing a suit. Beneath it is a text that tells us that Pokagon is an Indian who proves that the "noble red man" is not just a myth from a romanticised past, but a reality in the present. "Simon Pokagon," we are told, is a remarkable Indian chieftain known for his eloquence and knowledge, one of the most honoured guests at the Columbian World's Fair of 1893. His father was the Indian chief who, in 1833, sold the land that is now the city of Chicago.9 His present home is in Hartford, Michigan. As readers we are asked to admire the fact that Simon Pokagon both looks and speaks like many white Americans. In the same way that many nineteenth century slave narratives were prefaced by documentation from

⁷See also Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," Modern Literary Theory: A Reader, Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh, eds., (London, New York: Edward Arnold, 1992). Walker's "subjugated discourse" is similar to Homi Bhabha's "discourse of mimicry" in that both have the effect of destabilising colonial power. Subjugated discourse, like mimicry, is ambivalent in that it approaches, but does not exactly reproduce sameness. However, Walker's term refers to the agency of the marginalised subject, whereas Bhabha analyses the discourse of colonial authority that desires a "reformed, recognisable Other" to reflect and thus sanction its power. For both Walker and Bhabha, the slippage at the boundary where the colonised mimic meets the coloniser becomes a site for undoing the colonial authority, p. 235

⁸ Simon Pokagon, "The Future of the Red Man," Forum 23 (August 1897), p. 698.

⁹See also Ibid., p. 707.

middle-class whites who attested to the reliability of the black first person account, the *American Monthly Review of Reviews* preface establishes Pokagon as a reliable narrator, the "civilised" author of the letter that follows.

If the assimilated "Simon Pokagon" of the preface is a man whom white people admire, the narrator Pokagon in his response to Frank Terry is not as easy to categorise. This text at one level supports what the editor says, but at another level it questions and parodies mainstream culture. The narrator writes that "Simon Pokagon" was the name he was given by a priest when the Po-kagon Potawotami band to which he belonged was converted to Christianity. His name, we note, is precisely the sort that Frank Terry recommends Indians use. The surname is a shortened version of his tribal name, and the first name is a Christian name assigned by the priest. Pokagan then explains a significant difference between European-American and Indian naming practices. Whereas European-Americans understand names to be permanent markers of individual identity, American Indians traditionally had a different but equally personal relationship to their names. A person's name, he says, was "expressive of some act done by the person, either good or bad, 10 and subject to change according to the acts of the individual, and by native custom was never inherited by our children..." Several issues were at stake here. First, there was the issue of who controlled the naming process. Names in Indian traditional practice were based on individual agency, not on the alleged benevolence of the United States government's authority. The second, equally important issue, was the Indian meaning of the name in relation both to personal and communal history. Whites in mainstream America usually ignored this relationship, choosing instead names that merely sounded pleasant.

¹⁰ Pokagon's use of the dualism "good and bad" here may be interpreted in several ways. For his white readers, it may have been a reminder that as an assimilated American, he was a Christian whose language and thinking included Western moral categories. For Indian readers, however, "good and bad" would not have been understood as oppositions, but rather as equally vital parts of a complementary dialogue. See Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), p. 96.

¹¹ Pokagon, "On Naming," p. 321.

Up to this point in the letter it seems that Pokagon's primary interest is in meeting the needs of his white readers for background information about Indian naming. In the next paragraph, however, the meaning of his text becomes more complex. He says the name "Chicago" is a "pleasant word in and of itself without any further meaning," and the city is the "pride of America." In Indian tradition, however, "Chicago" has a different significance. 12 The word is derived from the Indian word she-gog-ong, which translates into English as "skunk won." Pokagon notes that the Indians called the land by this name because of the skunks and skunk cabbage that once thrived there. Perhaps the city's current residents should think that the city was named correctly when they breathe the morning vapours rising from the Chicago River, he speculates. He continues the irony in the next line where he adds, "In my humble opinion [the city] would never have reached its present greatness" if the name had been translated into English. If we take what he says literally, we are led to believe that people are in effect better off without too much knowledge to distract them from the important things in life. In late nineteenth century America this would mean the goals of industrial expansion and technological progress. These goals were what Americans celebrated at the Columbian Exposition. In the next line he adds: "...it is certainly very important that any one starting out in a new life should have a name as free from meaning as paper unwritten upon."13 Readers are reminded of the ideologies surrounding the European-Americans' arrival in a "new world" and the illusion that they could leave European history and traditions behind.

What they did, in fact, was to transfer their old world metaphors onto a geographical landscape that was new only to them. Christopher Columbus's description of the Arawaks of the Bahama Islands betrays the ideological lens that led to kidnapping, enslavement, and conquest:

¹³Op.cit., p. 321.

¹² For a review of American anthropological research on Native American place names, see Thomas F. Thornton, "Anthropological Studies of Native American Place Naming," *American Indian Quarterly*, Spring, 1997, Vol. 21(2).

They are well-built, with good bodies and handsome features...They do not bear arms, and do not know them, for I showed them a sword, they took it by the edge and cut themselves out of ignorance...They would make fine servants...With fifty men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want.¹⁴

The European "settlers" who followed Columbus were able to justify conquest as destiny because they imported their old world metaphors of Christian good and evil, liberal individualism, and technological progress. ¹⁵ Names such as "Chicago" were *not* without a past. Neither were the Native American lands that the colonisers stole. Yet they used their old metaphors to justify the conquest. Their metaphors helped turn the "gentle Indian" into a "demon", a "vicious savage," and finally by the 1890s when they could look back with nostalgia, he became a "noble red man on the verge of extinction."

These metaphors found expression in a range of written and visual texts widely circulated throughout nineteenth century America. Many of Pokagon's readers may have been familiar with three images that serve as particularly good examples: John Vanderlyn's 1804 "Murder of Jane McCrae" dramatises the popular Puritan written narrative of Indian captivity. In this painting, a long-haired white victim begs for mercy from two scowling red murderers who tower above her, hatchets in hand ready to take her scalp. The portrayal is anything but a neutral documentary about a "new life" in America. In the tradition of Renaissance painting, long hair represents virginity. The muscular

¹⁴ Quoted in Howard Zinn, A People's History of the United States, (New York, Cambridge: Harper and Row, 1980), p. 1.

¹⁵The Spanish, English, Dutch, and French comprised the largest groups of sixteenth and seventeenth century immigrants to the Americas. Of these, the English, whose primary aim was to settle the land, were most hostile to indigenous peoples. French and Dutch relationships were based on trade and were therefore less violent. For a discussion of Anglo-American ideology, expansionism, and the development of racism in the United States, see Richard Drinnon, Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire-Building, (New York, London: Meridian, 1980).

¹⁶ The image is reproduced in colour in Robert Hughes, American Visions: the Epic History of Art in America, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), p. 183.

physiques, high foreheads, and aquiline noses of these Indian scalpers remind the viewer of Greek gods. Whereas the savages in this painting are perhaps "noble red men" who may have been perceived in need of Christian conversion, by the late 1820s, the Indian of the popular imagination was beyond hope of redemption. By this time the "savage Indian" had become the Enemy in the national discourse of Manifest Destiny. In 1826-27, his image was carved into the Capitol Rotunda in Washington, D.C. in a commissioned bas-relief by Enrico Causici entitled "Daniel Boone Struggling Against the Indian." In the carving, Boone displays the calm confidence of a David, confronting an enormous Goliath, an Indian who growls at him with bulging eyes and barred teeth. A second, smaller Indian lies dead in a crumpled heap on the ground between them.¹⁷ With calm, methodical confidence, Boone raises his rifle, not only to halt his attacker, but also to symbolise the triumph of Anglo-American ideology. A third image that would have been known by Pokagon's readers was George Caleb Bingham's 1851-52 painting, "Daniel Boone Escorting Settlers Through the Cumberland Gap." In this text, Biblical imagery is again used to promote the American civil religion of Manifest Destiny. The message here is about religious redemption as well as cultural superiority. Accompanied by his wife, a Madonna figure on a white horse, Boone marches toward the viewer. Rifle poised on his shoulder, he is clean-shaven, determined, and calm. Behind him, the shadowy contours of his followers, white settlers moving west, remind viewers of Moses and the Exodus into Egypt. Most Americans of the time would also have been familiar with John Filsen's 1784 written narrative of the "Adventures of Col. Daniel Boon (sic)", originally published as an appendix to The Discovery, Settlement, and Present State of Kentucky. In Filsen's allegedly autobiographical record of the story narrated to him by the actual Boone, Boone is an agent of Manifest Destiny who dispassionately recalls the precise numbers of Indians he has killed on a particular day. He battles Indians in the name of protecting defenseless

¹⁷Ibid., p. 184.

women and children, and for the greater good of technology and the march west. 18

Pokagon's letter does not remind the readers of familiar narratives of red/white conflict such as these. Rather, the narrator draws attention to conflicts between honest and dishonest groups of Indians. In the case of the Pokagon band, he notes that in the past "different bands and tribes, through shrewd and able attorneys, sought to impose upon us by sharing the moneys due [us from the sale of our land to the U.S. government]."19 He implies that he is grateful to the United States government for its policy of assigning permanent names. The written records made it possible for the Pokagon band to prove that proceeds from land sales were rightfully theirs, thereby "saving time, money, and much trouble." The goal as overtly explained here is in keeping with the values of the mainstream. What seems to matter most is efficiency and progress as well as legal justice. Pokagon's white readers most likely found what they perceived as their virtues reflected back to them in his text. Perhaps they were able to rest assured in the moral superiority of Western "civilised" ways which protected "noble" from "savage" Indians.

However, the need for protection Pokagon describes here only seems to be the result of threats from other Indians. Behind his apparent assertion that white legal structures protect honest Indians is the reality that this "protection" is needed because of problems introduced by whites. The buying and selling of land for profit was not an issue in traditional Native American cultures which did not subscribe to the notion of private property. Permanent names are therefore useful in helping solve problems created by Anglo-American society's pervasive, systematic disruption of land use practices of all Indian groups.

Nonetheless, at the historical moment in which Pokagon writes, the act of taking new names in English can be seen as a strategy, though a limited one, for preserving Potawotami ways.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 192. Filsen's account is reprinted in *American Lives: An Anthology of Autobiographical Writing*, Robert F. Sayre, ed., (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), p. 217.

¹⁹Pokagon, "Naming the Indians" p. 321.

Given the alternative of direct translation of names from Indian languages, it is more respectful of indigenous traditions. The attempt at direct translation not only misrepresents the narrative purpose and communal function of Indian names, it also implies that language translation is merely about substituting one set of words for another. Accurate translation, in contrast, would demand the translation of an entirely different view of history, the landscape, and human existence. The point, however, is not necessarily accurate translation, but rather the need to function in white society without losing Indian identity. The practice of taking new names in English responds to this need.

Indians preserve their old ways in that a name considered permanent by white authorities can, from an indigenous perspective, be understood as only one of several names a person might have. As such it can be integrated into a larger communal narrative. For Pokagon, not only does it represent the immediate experience of needing to negotiate property sales, it also is part of a larger story in which Indians must confront each other in new ways related to Anglo-American power structures. The use of permanent English language names influences relationships with whites in another significant way as well: having a name that Anglo-Americans understand helps reduce the chance for patronising, racist remarks such as the one we as readers might note that Terry makes when he describes translated names as "uncouth, un-American, and uncivilised." Hence it draws attention to the need for whites to negotiate with Indians as equals rather than to reinforce the ideology of Indian-hating. Paradoxically, the practice of adopting names in English might be seen as one strategy for protecting the boundaries of Indian culture and language from further white encroachment.

We find irony in the letter's closing paragraph as well:

It has afforded me much pleasure in life to know that the rivers, lakes and nearly all the waterways of America retain the names our fathers gave, and that those of our race who have long since gone to the spirit land have been honoured by

having a majority of the States of this mighty Union given Indian names pure and simple.²⁰

Although what the text says is that Pokagon's people are honoured by their white neighbours, we can listen to what is not said in the text itself, but which had been said through extreme government violence seven years earlier. In 1890 at the massacre of Wounded Knee, three hundred Native Americans had been left on the open field for a week and then thrown into mass graves. According to the "sacred hoop" tradition of Plains Indians, without a proper burial ceremony for the dead, the "sacred hoop" that gives unity to all living and nonliving things is broken.²¹ Whether or not Pokagon was consciously thinking of this particular event as he wrote his letter is less important than the fact that Wounded Knee was a culmination of a four hundred year process of disrupting the harmonious relationship between people and the land signified by the sacred hoop. Yet as he writes, memories of the Indian past are still alive on the landscape through hundreds of place names that white Americans acknowledge. We need to read the irony in Pokagon's remark that Indian names for states, rivers, and lakes are "pure and simple." His analysis of "Chicago" has just demonstrated that Native America names are neither pure nor simple. Nor are the memories of place names such as "Wounded Knee."22 In sum, the apparently "pure and simple" name of Simon Pokagon as an exemplary friend to the white man is complicated when readers pay attention to the irony in his letter.

We might ask whether we in the late twentieth century read too much resistance into this nineteenth century text. After all, Pokagon's reputation as a white man's friend came from his numerous articles, speeches, and other interactions with whites, not from just this particular letter. Recall that in the editor's preface we are told that Pokagon was "one of the most honoured and

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Allen, p. 73.

²²As late twentieth century readers, we might add that neither "Indian" nor "Native American" has ever been a pure and simple name. Both names arose out of historical, politicised interests of the people who invented them.

conspicuous guests at the World's Fair" in Chicago in 1893. White readers might have remembered that he had opened the fair on Chicago Day by ringing the new Liberty Bell. He had also given a speech at the fair entitled the "Red Man's Greeting." In that speech he stated:

We must give up the pursuits of our fathers...We must teach our children to give up the bow and arrow...and, in place of the gun, we must take the plow, and live as white men do...Our children must learn that they owe no allegiance to any clan or power on earth except the United States. They must learn to love the Star and Stripes, and, at all times to rejoice that they are American citizens.²³

What many of Pokagon's white readers may not have known was that he had been asked to speak at Chicago Day only after he had expressed anger over the exclusion of the views of Native Americans at the fair. He also had written a birch-bark document, "The Red Man's Rebuke" to protest that exclusion, and he had sold copies of it at the fair. The tone of the birch-bark document is distinctly more pessimistic about Native relationships with Anglo-American culture than the speech he presented orally. It is markedly more direct in its criticism of white Americans than is his letter on "Naming the Indians."

Walker characterises this *direct* approach as "transpositional" to distinguish it from the muted *ironic* "subjugated" discursive mode of agency. Transpositional discourse, she says, "[levels] the playing field. [Its] narratives are generally reciprocal, egalitarian, ethical, utopian, universalising, horizontal, and direct."²⁴ "The Red Man's Rebuke" begins with a direct challenge to the ethical legitimacy of European-American colonial authority:

In behalf of my people, the American Indians, I hereby declare to you, the pale-faced race that has usurped our lands and homes, that we have no spirit to celebrate with you the great

²³ Quoted in Walker, p. 202.

²⁴Ibid., p. 18-19.

Columbian Fair now being held in this Chicago city, the wonder of the world.²⁵

Whereas in "Naming the Indians" Pokagon emphasises conflict among Indian bands and tribes, in this document he names the U.S. government as accountable: "May the great chief of the United States appoint no more broken down or disappointed politicians as agents to deal with us, but may he select good men that are tried and true." Nor does he avoid contesting the popular image of Native Americans as savages in the Daniel Boone mythology exemplified in visual images by Vanderlyn, Causici, and Bingham:

You say that we are treacherous, vindictive, and cruel; in answer to the charge, we declare to all the world...that before the white men came among us, we were kind, outspoken, and forgiving. Our real character has been misunderstood because we have resented the breaking of treaties made with the United States...²⁷

Analysis of Pokagon's "Naming the Indians" together with "Red Man's Rebuke" reminds us that white cultural hegemony has never been total in American history.

One hundred years after Pokagon's letter, direct political resistance by Native Americans has influenced U.S. government policies at least in terms of legal rights. The 1975 Indian Self-Determination Act marked the end of official assimilationist policy, and schools formerly run by the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs were turned over to tribal leadership. It is no longer against the law either to teach traditional Native languages in these schools, or to teach traditional spiritual practices. Neither Native Americans nor their traditional practices have vanished, and according to census records Native Americans are in fact growing faster than any other ethnic group in the United States.²⁸

²⁵Ibid., p. 211.

²⁶Ibid., p. 216.

²⁷Ibid., p. 214.

²⁸Ibid., p. 203.

These developments do not mean, however, that the story is now approaching closure. Contemporary Native writers insist that their people continue to experience "great difficulty in communicating the essence of what they believe to the larger society."29 Despite the current focus on cultural diversity, stereotypical media images of Native Americans continue to flourish, in particular in the American commercial film industry.³⁰ What matters is the issue of who assumes responsibility for the direction of change. To a large extent, the initiative has been taken by those who identify themselves as Native Americans or mixedbloods. Since the 1970s novelists such as Paula Gunn Allen, Louise Erdrich, N. Scott Momaday, and Leslie Marmon Silko, and historians and critics including Vine Deloria, Jr., Gerald Vizenor, and James Welch have expanded the process of negotiating cultural meaning that Pokagon's writing in the late nineteenth century exemplifies. These writers draw on the approach Pokagon described about his work of cultural preservation: "In order to approximate the future of our race, we must consider our natural capabilities and our environments, as connected with the dominant race which outnumbers us."31 Contemporary Native writers, too, address two different world views through literature written in English. Like Pokagon, their writing is layered with meanings shaped in both worlds. Like him, they express ambivalence about Anglo-American culture.

For many Native American writers and scholars, this ambivalence includes attitudes toward an increasing number of non-Indians in Native American studies. In the 1980s and 1990s these numbers have increased, mirroring larger current social and political debates surrounding multiculturalism, postmodern and postcolonial challenges to the literary canon, and the writing of revisionist historical narratives. On the one hand, we must question who writes about whom, and in particular ask, "To what extent do non-Native scholars and writers appropriate Native texts for our

²⁹Op.cit.

 $^{^{30}}$ See, for example, Russell Duncan, "Risen from the Dead: American Indian Mythmakers," *American Studies in Scandinavia*, 30.2(1998), p.53.

³¹ Pokagon, "The Future of the Red Man," p. 698.

own benefit?" As philosopher of science Donna Haraway notes, there is a "serious danger of romanticising and/or appropriating the vision of the less powerful while claiming to see from their positions." On the other hand, the practice of avoiding engagement for fear of unintentionally appropriating the "other's" vision holds our minds captive to the same old dualistic constructions of "us" and "them" that legitimised the ideology of Manifest Destiny. Paradoxically, we risk recycling the metaphor of the "noble savage" in our attitudes. At stake is the question of how and for what purposes indigenous texts are interpreted.

Recent historical developments have made the question of Native American identity and culture a painful one in American society. Thinking readers and writers increasingly acknowledge that the meaning of "America" is constructed through multiple rather than uniform experiences, histories, and discourses.³³ Such shifts allow for dynamic, multilayered ways of responding to cultural and literary texts, contexts, and subtexts. I hope that my analysis of "Simon Pokagon on Naming the Indians" contributes to that process.

³²Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women,* (London: Free Association Books, 1991), p. 191.

³³Arnold Krupat, *Ethnocriticism*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992). Krupat uses the term "cosmopolitanism" to refer to the process of recognising cultural and social heterogeneity, p. 3.