

Chief Seattle's Real Message

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“There was a time when our people covered the land as the waves of a wind... but that time long since passed away with the greatness of tribes that are now but a mournful memory.”

—*Attributed to Chief Seattle*

Controversy surrounds the speech Chief Seattle delivered in 1855 during a land treaty negotiation with Governor Issac Stevens. On one hand, we worship Seattle's eloquent words for their unique insight on the Native American perspective. On the other hand, debate rages over the authenticity of the speech's only existing recording, a reproduction produced by Dr. Henry Smith thirty years after the event. Many facts about Smith's situation still remain clouded.

Despite the mystery surrounding this famous speech, its contents can be understood in terms of what Mary Louis Pratt calls a “contact zone.” In Pratt's article *Arts of the Contact Zone*, she introduces this zone as the chaotic space in which cultures collide. Essential features of the contact zone include autoethnography, the representation of one's own culture that responds to representations made by others, and transculturation, the selective absorption of the dominant culture by a marginal group. These features of autoethnography and transculturation emerge prominently in

Chief Seattle's speech, shedding more insight on the interactions between the Native Americans and the Euro-Americans; however, in the context of the unique circumstances surrounding the text, Seattle's speech ultimately demonstrates the inherent dangers of representation and misrepresentation in the contact zone.

Under the assumption that Smith's recreation of the speech accurately translates Chief Seattle's original speech, the text qualifies as an autoethnography of the Native American people. Pratt describes, “autoethnographic texts are representations that the so-defined others construct in response to or in dialogue with [ethnographic texts]” (588). As Chief Seattle's speech originally addressed Governor Issac Stevens, Seattle claimed the rare opportunity to address Euro-American representations of American Indians.

Traditional Euro-American representations of the American Indians consistently degraded them to the level of “savages.” From the beginning of their contact, Europeans contrasted their civilization with the savageness of the Indians. In 1604, while blaming the Indians for introducing “the corrupt baseness” of smoking to Europe, King James sarcastically asked:

What honor or policy can move us to imitate the barbarous and beastly manners of the wild, godless, and slavish Indians?... Why do we not as well imitate them in walking naked as they do?... Why do we not deny God and adore the Devil as they do? (Vaughan 60)

This view of the beastly, godless, and devil-worshipping nature of the Indians continued for a vast part of the contact, shaping the violent interactions between the natives and the settlers.

This view also led to the notion that the Native Americans had no claim to the land. In a sermon given by Robert Gray, he asserted, "The Lord hath given the earth to the children of men, yet the greater part of it is... wrongfully usurped by wild beasts... by reason of their godless ignorance" (Vaughan 61). The continual claiming of Indian land, even to the time of the Chief Seattle's land negotiation with Governor Stevens in Washington, demonstrates the widespread acceptance of Gray's view among the Euro-Americans. In his speech, Chief Seattle counters these Euro-American representations of the Native Americans. In response to the portrayals of savageness and godlessness, he emphasizes the nobility and religiousness of his people.

In particular, Chief Seattle condemns the violence that occurred between the two races and elevates his people above the mutual savagery. Seattle acknowledges the involvement of his race in the statement, "Youth is impulsive. When our young men grow angry... they are often cruel and relentless, and our old men and old women are unable to restrain them" (520). However, he carefully creates the distinction between the "impulsive" youth and the wiser "old men and old women" who wish for peace, displaying the complexity within Indian society. Chief Seattle also points out that the Euro-Americans were equally at fault for the violence. He refers to the time "when the white man began to push our forefathers ever westward" and how his "paleface brothers [hastened] our untimely decay" (521). While acknowledging the violence, Seattle suggests that his "paleface brothers" were the true savages who slaughtered vast numbers of Indians during the westward push. Meanwhile, Seattle expresses his "hope that the hostilities... never return" (520), given the extent that they have hurt his people. In doing so, he completes the reversal of

representations; the Euro-Americans are the barbarians waging war while the Natives are the victims begging for peace.

Chief Seattle also responds to the charge of "godlessness" circulated by the conquerors by comparing his religion with Christianity. He exclaims,

Your God is not our God! Your God loves your people and hates mine! ... If we have a common Heavenly Father He must be partial, for He came to His paleface children. We never saw Him. He gave you laws but had no word for His red children... (521)

These statements highlight the absurdity of expecting the American Indians, having been isolated from the Europeans for thousands of years, to have adopted the same religion. In place of Christianity, Seattle introduces the religion of his people: "Our religion is the tradition of our ancestors..." (521). He points out several areas in which his religion is superior to Christianity. He says, "Your religion was written upon tablets of stone... so that you could not forget... Our religion... is written in the hearts of our people" (521). Similarly, "Your dead cease to love you... Our dead never forget this beautiful world that gave them being" (521). These comparisons pose a direct challenge to the earlier portrayals of the Indians as godless and devil-worshipping. Furthermore, Chief Seattle also responds to the Euro-American belief that the Indians had no claim to the land by expressing their profound attachment to it. He declares, "The very dust upon which you now stand responds more lovingly to [our] footsteps than yours, because it is rich with the blood of our ancestors (521)." In direct opposition with Euro-American representations, Seattle

demonstrates that the Natives, like the Europeans, have a complex religion and culture.

Continuing with the assumption that Smith's recreation of the speech was accurate, we find that in addition to being an autoethnographic text, the speech has elements of transculturation, another essential component of the contact zone. Pratt defines transculturation as "processes whereby members of marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted by a dominant or metropolitan culture" (591). Although Seattle tended to emphasize the differences between Native Americans and Euro-Americans, the Euro-American idea that the Native Americans were going to become extinct surfaced throughout his speech.

This idea of the inevitable extinction of the Native Americans as a race originated from the colonists. According to Colin Calloway, "The idea of a doomed race on its way to extinction took root as early as the 1600s and was well established by the nineteenth century in the pages of U.S. history texts" (Ring 179). This idea served the colonists quite conveniently. It justified what Ring calls the "transfer of real estate," the process in which European settlers gradually moved into established Indian communities as the Indians "disappeared" (Ring 179). Apparently, killing and stealing from an already-doomed race was easier to accept.

Throughout his speech, Chief Seattle indicates his acceptance of this belief that the Native Americans would become extinct. He refers to their "untimely decay" and laments, "It matters little where we pass the remnant of our days. They will not be many" (522), although he does not provide any concrete reasons for these sentiments. Instead, Seattle settles with the warning, "When the last Red Man shall have perished... these shores will throng with the invisible dead of my tribe... The White Man will never be alone" (523). In

accepting the ultimate defeat of the Indians, Chief Seattle adopted an element of the dominant, Euro-American thought, demonstrating the transculturation that Pratt predicts.

While the contents of Chief Seattle's speech, as recreated by Dr. Smith, demonstrate both autoethnography and transculturation in a contact zone, their presence alone does not confirm the authenticity of the speech. In fact, numerous historical details question its legitimacy. Considering, for instance, that the original speech was given in Lushotseed, translated in Chinook Jargon (a language with around 300 words) and then into English from thirty-year-old notes (Clark par. 13), we should view the speech with at least some degree of suspicion. In fact, Dr. Smith admits in the publication that his version fails to reproduce Seattle's exact statements (Chief Seattle 519). The results of a detailed study by Jerry Clark at the National Archives and Records Administration also challenge the authenticity of the text. Clark states,

The lack of a Duwimish-language text of the speech, the absence of notes by Dr. Smith, the silence on the part of persons known to have been present..., and the failure of the speech to appear in the official treaty proceedings create grave doubts... (par. 18)

In addition to a lack of historical evidence, an analysis of the Chief Seattle himself also casts doubts on the very existence of the speech. The only two paragraphs of Chief Seattle statements on the official record present him as compliant and reserved: at one point, Seattle says, "My mind is like yours, I don't want to say more" (Clark par. 15). William Abruzzi suggests that Seattle was selected for the negotiation over local leaders precisely because he demonstrated this allegiance, not

opposition (44). This picture of Chief Seattle, which sharply contrasts the forceful, passionate tone of Smith's text, suggests that the speech produced by Dr. Smith may not have taken place at all.

Regardless of the final verdict on the authenticity of Seattle's speech, it is safe to conclude that Dr. Smith played at least a significant role in the formation of Chief Seattle's speech. As Dr. Smith belongs the dominant culture, the speech can no longer be considered as a pure autoethnographic text; elements of ethnography inevitably contaminate the speech. The transculturation present in the speech suffers a similar fate; we can no longer take Chief Seattle's acceptance of the extinction of the Indians as an actual absorption of dominant material by a marginal group. Indeed, the speech itself can be considered as an instance of what I propose to call pseudoautoethnography, an autoethnography presented through the filter of members of the dominant group. A pseudoautoethnographic text attempts to represent both the dominant and marginal cultures, but it cannot be considered as a true response to dominant representations; it becomes, in itself, a component of the dominant representation of both cultures.

Pseudoautoethnography, as in the case of Chief Seattle's speech, comes with the danger of masking the true perspectives of marginal groups in favor of dominant interests. Abruzzi asserts, "Throughout American history, whites have fabricated Indians into images that served their own interests" (44). While the image of Indians as a race of "savages" doomed for extinction undoubtedly aligned with the interests of the colonists, Chief Seattle's speech involves newer interests:

With the growth of large environmental and countercultural New Age movements, a new Indian image has emerged. Native Americans

have become the repositories of a traditional wisdom to those challenging institutionalized beliefs... (Abruzzi 44).

These movements use the image of Indians to achieve their goals, and, in doing so they distort the original perspective of the Native Americans. Abruzzi also notes:

Significantly, each new version of Seattle's speech, beginning with that of Dr. Henry Smith and ending with the latest reincarnation of Ted Perry's script, has been created entirely by non-Indians. Not one Native peoples has translated Seattle's speech into their own indigenous language (44).

Crucially missing in this exchange is the attempt to address both metropolitan and marginalized audiences that Pratt discusses (588). The true interests of the Native Americans become lost as Euro-American culture continues to fabricate images of Native Americans through figures like Chief Seattle.

In sum, while autoethnography and transculturation offer valuable insights into cultures and their interactions, we must also remain wary of misrepresentation in the contact zone. Chief Seattle's speech appears to shed valuable light on Native American reactions to the representations of the Euro-Americans, but the increasingly larger role that Dr. Smith is believed to have played in the production of the speech challenges the validity of those reactions. Especially considering the potential for pseudoautoethnography to serve dominant interests, we must continually question imagery associated with other cultures. Perhaps then, one day, we can begin to understand Chief Seattle's real message.

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