

History is Dangerous

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I'm not a historian. I don't remember dates well, I grow bored quickly in history museums, and the little I did learn in high school and college about world history has been lost. I particularly dislike studying wars. Once, caught daydreaming out a window in my high school history class, I was forced to admit my disdain for war stories. The history teacher, a tall balding man in short sleeves, lectured me severely about the value of history for avoiding the repetition of past mistakes, "It is only through the careful study of the past that we can direct our future wisely." "If that's true," I countered, "then why did we fight in the Second World War? Would we not have learned better from the first one?"

As a displaced Chiricahua Apache, I was raised outside of the Oklahoma plains my relatives call home. In the Deep South where I was born, the Civil War dominates everyone's thoughts, even today. No, the Second World War just was not a concern of mine. The only images I can conjure up from memory are a strange combination of Hitler's face, bomber planes, and concentration camps. Later, it was the concentration camps that finally made that war real for me.

Like many visitors, I went to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. because it was new, it was talked about, and I had the feeling it would be a powerful experience. I entered the museum in the early afternoon with my family and we did not emerge until after closing. My daughter and I read every text we could, we watched all the footage; we looked at the artifacts, the clothing, the photographs. In all of this, what affected me the most was the interpretation of the death camp experience. We heard the voices of survivors, we saw camp bunk beds, and we smelled the rotting shoes on display.

As I left the museum, walking through a meditation room that was so elegant, so sparse, it was religious in nature, I recognized my affinity to this horror. It was my family too, my relatives who were hunted like animals, who were shipped in freight trains, and who

were herded into small camps to die. The holocaust belongs to Indian people too, except that we don't talk about it. We live in denial, we celebrate our victimization. Our history is dangerous.

The second event which made war real for me was my first visit to Apache, Oklahoma. I went with my father, leaving my daughter and husband behind. I was in my early twenties and new to most everything that makes an Apache person Apache—Mountain Spirits, community, fry bread, and Fort Sill. After all our tribe is named after the place of our imprisonment—The Fort Sill Chiricahua Warm Springs Apache Tribe of Oklahoma.

On this first visit to Fort Sill, my uncle, who works on the base, took us to the places Apaches know best, the Geronimo guardhouse, the museum, and the cemetery. In the cemetery, my relatives are buried with other members of the tribe who died while being held as prisoners of war. That afternoon, my father and I located the grave of my great-grandmother Tah-Tzil-Toey.

Born in 1864, Tah-Tzil-Toey's life spanned a period of great upheaval for our tribe. As a young woman, she would have known what it is like to speak her language and occupy her people's land. By the time of her death at age 41, she had spent half of her life as a prisoner of the United States government. Tah-Tzil-Toey was buried far from her home in a place where her children's children would never speak their language. I felt strangely at home and at the same time lost in this setting, surrounded by family, memories and death. My father took a picture of me beside Tah-Tzil-Toey's grave. I am looking off into the distance.

Answering the past

"Now mam, do you know where you're at right now? This isn't Lawton."

It is more than a decade since my first Fort Sill visit. Armed with my curiosity about the holocaust and

prisoners of war, I have returned to Fort Sill. My life has changed a great deal in the interim. I finished my doctorate; I divorced, married, and divorced again; my daughter is a teenager, and this time I travel alone, without my father or uncle.

The bus driver who brought me to Fort Sill this evening does not really want to drop me off. I am loaded down with a suitcase stuffed with my camera, tape recorder, and quantities of clothes and books. My fellow passenger, a petite blonde wearing a jogging outfit decorated with sequins, seems unsure of herself. A curling iron hangs from her shoulder bag as she waits to ask for instructions to find her man. I grab my belongings and stride towards the nearest lit building, lost in a flat plain marked only by stark looking dormitories, parking lots, and marching soldiers. It is not long before I let a passing recruit in fatigues pick up my suitcase and carry it to the commissary down the road.

I have come to find some recollection of home, yet the feeling of alienation and the surreal permeate my every move. While I wait to catch a van which will carry me to a housing unit for the evening, a young man stops and asks if I have a ride. He seems more sure of himself than the anxious fatigue-clad soldiers crowded in line waiting to buy candy and cokes. The man's name is Skip—he's a drill sergeant on base.

"You know, I don't mean to be rude, but you stick out like a sore thumb around here. See, this side of the base is for basic training and these guys don't see many women this way. If you stayed standing here by yourself, some of these guys would start saying things to you. And they wouldn't be polite."

I find out from Skip that basic training recruits from all walks of life and backgrounds arrive at Fort Sill ("The second-largest base in the free world") as the first stop on their way to becoming a true soldier. Lines of marching recruits file by in mass, led by a sergeant who sings a chorus to which they reply. I can only make out a few words—something about "the best in the U.S.A." and "Yaba Daba Doo." I watch a young Indian woman selling beadwork on a table outside of the store. As she quotes prices to curious soldiers, I wonder if anyone cares about her safety here among the herds of men.

Once I make it to my lodgings (Skip ends up giving me a ride over) I check into a building which is in definition a hotel, but which is known as a Billeting Office. My status is as a "Transient," my arrival time is logged as "19:00 hours" and my quarters are "assigned."



1. Gravesite of Tah-Tzil-Toey, Fort Sill Cemetery, 1994. Photo: Nancy Marie Mithlo.

Not many people understand why I chose to sleep on base ("Lawton is just down the road, and why aren't you renting a car?"). I make the excuse that the Fort Sill Museum where I am doing research is nearby, so its easier to stay on base. The truth is that it is very difficult to be here. Fort Sill never sleeps. The sounds of helicopters, planes, tanks, cars, and people are ever present. At night the bed shakes from the artillery war games going on out on the plains.

Fort Sill was established in 1869 as an outpost to battle Southern Plains tribes. My tribe was not among those being fought. Unlike the Kiowas and Comanches that allowed us to settle on their allotments in 1897, the Chiricahua Apaches are not a plains people. Our original homeland encompassed large areas of southern New Mexico and Arizona and extended into Mexico. Due to displacement from this area in 1886, when members of the tribe were taken as prisoners of war, we no longer have a land base. Our identity today stems from our biological and spiritual connection to our ancestors. A sense of answering to the past permeates everything about us. Like the museums that portray our history, we are confined to a specific time when the whole world knew who we were.

A type of cultural shorthand exists in which tribes can be easily identified by association with an event or person. For example: the Menominee—termination, the Cherokees—removal. For us the equation is—Chiricahua Apache—Geronimo. The longevity of Geronimo's reputation is amazing. Two feature films on Geronimo were aired the fall of 1993. A parcel of our homeland, Warm Springs, is currently up for sale by landowners who, in the past, have advertised it as the place where Geronimo bathed his war wounds. The whole town of Truth or Consequences in southern New Mexico sponsors an annual Geronimo days extravaganza and recently, local papers have issued articles on the tribe's gaming efforts in Arizona titled "Geronimo's Tribe Hopes to Open Casino" (*Albuquerque Journal* 1993).

This one-dimensional personality of the tribe is all the more confusing when we realize that Geronimo was not a "Chief" and at the time of his surrender to U.S. troops in 1886, the majority of the tribe was not in support of his activities. Chatto, leader of the U.S. scouts who pursued Geronimo, stated, "We continue to object to having been and being considered on a level with Geronimo and his band. We, the faithful

portion of the Chiricahua tribe, serving as scouts, did hard work and good work, but of this, very little is known" (Chatto n.d.)

Even the Director of the Fort Sill Museum, Towana Spivey (1990), is cognizant of the emphasis on Geronimo glamour at his facility. Stating that he wants to "get off the Geronimo kick," nevertheless, he concedes that you can't talk about prisoners of war at Fort Sill without talking about Geronimo. One of the museum's visitor brochures titled "Fort Sill Lives With History" describes a building called the "Geronimo Guardhouse." It reads:

Known in earlier times as the "Geronimo Hotel," through its portals have passed Geronimo and many of the famous war chiefs of the Southwest (Anon. 1975).

Instructions are likewise given to Geronimo's grave, where a monument is situated. Oral history of the tribe maintains that neither was Geronimo held as a prisoner in the guardhouse, nor are his remains actually interred at the monument site.

The Fort Sill Museum stands in a unique situation relative to the Chiricahua Apaches. The museum over-



2. The "Geronimo Guardhouse" flanked by historic artillery, 1994. Photo: Nancy Marie Mithlo.

sees the management of the graveyard on the base where many Chiricahua people are buried and where any direct descendants of the original prisoners of war can still be interred. In addition, the museum has a reputation for making concessions to the neighboring tribes by purchasing items for the collection from local Indians and accommodating them in requests for photo duplications. The post itself recently approved a site for the placement of a sweat house on the base for use by American Indian military personnel.

The Fort Sill base today is an active field artillery center and school. The reservation encompasses 95,000 acres and hosts 1,400 homes for military families. For almost twenty years, the Chiricahua people held as prisoners of war called Fort Sill home. In 1913, the tribe was released and allotments offered to individual families in the nearby town of Apache, Oklahoma. Only thirteen families stayed on in this area. One of these thirteen families was my group, the Mithlos. Another, the Haozous family, are my husband's people. Numbering 350 today, the Fort Sill Chiricahua Apaches were lead until October 1995 by then tribal chairwoman, Mildred Cleghorn, who was born a prisoner of war.

I chose to return to Fort Sill, this place which brings so many mixed emotions, to try and understand something of history. I don't mean the celebratory type of history, but the real stuff, especially the imprisonment. I want to understand how our tribe, known as the fiercest of all Indian people, could become so complacent in the generations since we occupied our homelands.

The fact that our identity belongs strictly in the past is a source of great frustration for those of my generation. The most productive group of tribal members from age 25 to 65 are not culturally "official" Chiricahuas because we did not experience imprisonment and we do not speak our language. A generational gap of identity results in which leadership roles are not being passed to succeeding generations. Men of fifty years of age are referred to as "boys" and their opinions are often dismissed as inferior. Meanwhile, high esteem is granted to those who thoroughly know the tribal history, whether they are tribal members or not. The development of what may be termed a national character is restricted by an exclusive value placed on the past.

Nationalism, from the perspective of Native Americans, is generally a favored term of self-reference. The phrase "sovereign nations within a nation" has real meaning to native communities that enjoy a direct "nation to nation" relationship with the federal gov-



3. Sign posted at Fort Sill Base, 1994.
Photo: Nancy Marie Mithlo.

ernment. Unlike the often negative connotations of nationalism in reference to a dominate state apparatus, a sense of national identity for Native Americans is not in itself dangerous. However, an unattainable identity is. Museums, as official "carriers" of historic narratives play a vital role in reinforcing the primacy of a one-dimensional national character. The privileging of the past has led to the detrimental consequence of our tribe not having a future.

Living history

It is early morning. I am sitting on a bus that takes recruits to and from hospitals on base. One after another of the wounded drag themselves on board—tattered and crippled from the war games I heard going on last night. My John Lennon shades and gold hoop earrings appear out of place in this sea of green fatigues and bruises. As the bus circles the base, I see soldiers out in the field who are laying on the ground in a circle, pointing their rifles outward as an officer examines their positions. Around the corner, we pass



4. Towana Spivey, Director, Fort Sill Museum, 1994. Photo: Nancy Marie Mithlo.

a group of men preparing packs near a corral enclosing a lone burro. What are these men preparing for? Who are their enemies?

Before dawn this morning, I pulled on my running shoes and explored the base on foot. The bare hills I crossed led from small pockets of warm air in the valleys to winds so strong I had to lean forward to keep balance. Peeking into a building that appeared to be a community center, I stumbled into a meeting room with literally hundreds of soldiers listening intently to an aging officer at a platform. I leave quietly, returning to my exploration of the four lane road outside named Geronimo Road, which is adjacent to the Geronimo Lodge, which, I soon discover, features a poorly-made portrait of Geronimo himself inside.

Fort Sill, as an active military reservation, builds most of its prestige upon its past. As one brochure describes it:

The military reservation at Fort Sill stands as a lasting tribute to the memory of the brave men and women who pioneered this wilderness, and opened the western frontier for our nation. It was an era of great expansion in our country. Men were probing the boundaries of the unknown and pushing them

back. The establishment of this remote outpost on 8 January 1896 is the story of the indomitable spirit of the American, who, with hopes and dreams for a better life, pursued them against all odds (Anon. 1988).

If one simply equates Native Americans with the land they inhabited and were intimately tied to, it becomes clear that we were the "unknown" that was to be "pushed back" and "probed." As a society, we still have not acknowledged the complete destruction of unique native cultures that absorbed the impact of Western expansion. The Fort Sill story embraces this denial as a part of its history.

Recently, the Fort Sill military base has become something of a stage for the drama of contested representation. One summer when I was home visiting relatives, I attended the first of what would later become an annual event called Heritage Fair. The brochure advertising this event reads:

Since the establishment of Fort Sill in 1869, the military, civilians, and Indians have played a major role in the history of southeast Oklahoma. It is this heritage that we seek to preserve and interpret for posterity (Anon. 1990).

An irony becomes apparent when one realizes that the Chiricahuas were kept at Fort Sill against their will as prisoners of war. Even though their living conditions were an improvement over previous stations in Fort Marion, Florida and Mount Vernon, Alabama, they were political prisoners held unjustly in much a similar manner to the Japanese internment camp prisoners during the Second World War. I felt that the preservation and interpretation of these events in the context of a Heritage Fair represented a glorification of these injustices. I wondered how one could possibly interpret the prisoner of war experience for posterity. Certainly the Japanese would not participate in this type of interpretation, and neither would Jewish holocaust survivors. Why, then did we?

The Heritage Fair, or Homecoming as some call it is a basic variation of the "living history" model of museum interpretation. The first annual Heritage Fair which I attended at Fort Sill in 1990 featured several living history groups of public and private sponsorship. Groups and individuals portraying territorial law enforcement marshals, frontier women, traders, settlers, and cavalry were represented along with a handful of Kiowas and Apaches. Our tribal historian asked me to watch over a table of Apache artifacts and reference materials the morning of the homecom-

ing while he attended to other business, and being a voice to our tribe's politics I agreed.

What I soon found out was that the Chiricahua Apache representation at the fair was a disputed matter among our group's descendants. My family in particular, who are not listed on the Fort Sill Chiricahua rolls, but are registered with the Comanches felt that those who participated in the fair were "dancing on the graves of our ancestors." Although members of my family have served in the military, and others worked on the base, this "celebration" of our past was highly suspect. I remember that my aunt and uncle escorted me to Fort Sill the morning of the homecoming and only left me after they saw that a Kiowa family they knew was demonstrating on the grounds as well.

It was a strange experience, seeing the disbelief that visitors expressed when my tribal chairperson, who was exhibiting her crafts, explained that she had been held a prisoner on the base. It was as if they had encountered an endangered species or walked through a time warp. It began to appear that our tribe was on display like animals in a zoo.

While women sold fry bread, children played, and older folks visited on the grounds, I wandered over to a broad field where men on horseback and uniform were proudly showing off their skill in hitting targets with lances while galloping at great speeds. It was only when I took a look at the props and let my mind wander that I became alarmed. Who could those dummies hanging by rope and being lanced to death represent but my ancestors? What exactly was on display if it were not genocide?

That evening members of the tribe danced at Fort Sill as Mountain Spirits. The Mountain Spirit dancers have special powers to bless the participants at a gathering and are some of our tribe's holiest figures. When the women related to the group asked me to join them (as women do dancing in a circle around the Mountain Spirits), I declined, making the excuse that I had forgotten my dance shawl.

Among the tourists and military families, I didn't know exactly what to feel. Should I feel proud that Fort Sill now allows my people to dance when they forbid it only a few generations ago? Should I be pleased that the Fort Sill museum recognizes the "official" version of history, the clean, ready to be consumed tourist version of my tribe's past? I turned to see my uncle standing beside me, watching as I was. We left together without saying much.

This memory of how my tribe commemorates the imprisonment experience with the Fort Sill Museum continues to bother me. Why do other racial groups

preserve their dignity, while we are so quick to overlook the genocide and put ourselves on display? Why is it that I constantly refer to my identity in terms of the imprisonment as well? ("I am a Chiricahua Apache, my grandfather was born a prisoner of war") Is it right to interpret and preserve the imprisonment?

Slow death

I am awake again at dawn, running down Geronimo Road, the smell of sugar and grease in the air around me. This morning, I notice that the traffic from the highway to the center of the base runs on a timed schedule. At exactly 8:00 a.m., military personnel in uniform direct lines of cars and trucks through the major intersection. Hoping to avoid the congestion, I cut down to a creek that runs under the road. A heavy fog hovers over the stream, moving slowly in the direction of the traffic. Bare trees drape their branches over either side of the water, their arms touching.

As I follow along in the fog, I imagine that Apache ghosts are checking into work today. Perhaps their spirits drift in and settle promptly at 8:00 on the desks of some major power brokers on base, distracting or confusing them. Maybe one sergeant will become thoughtful. Maybe he will learn something from the past.

Today I will visit the graveyards. I will go to the place where my father or even I could be buried by the United States army because our ancestors waged war against the government for the protection of our homelands. We lost all of our lands, yet the United States government will continue to bury us.

Our tribe is really no different. We have no educational fund for our young, yet we have a burial fund. This emphasis on death must have a meaning. If someone, or some culture is dead, then it is no longer a threat. If a culture is defined, if one's way of life is confined to the past, then isn't that just another form of a slow death?

What these trees and dirt must bear witness to! Did they see my ancestors walk by here? Did the creek know how my great grandmother laughed, how many children she had, if she was happy when she died? What would she think of the Geronimo Lodge? Would she be pleased, or would she take offense at the bad rendering of Geronimo's unforgettable face in that clumsy portrait inside?

I remember my husband's aunt speak of her visit to Mount Vernon barracks in Alabama where our tribe was held as prisoners before their arrival at Fort Sill.

She spoke with emotion and she spoke from the heart, "That's what I feel so strongly when I go around there. I walk down there and I think 'Ah...they walked on this road.' And I know what it was like, because I can feel it" (Darrow 1988). I hear these words and I think I understand how just feeling something is probably the most effective way of learning.

The Fort Sill Museum Director, Towana Spivey, takes the greater part of two days hosting me during my visit. Spivey, Museum Director for twelve years, is an ardent advocate of the importance of education and interpretation at his facility. As we talk in his office on the old post quadrangle, sounds of children's laughter from the day care next door drift in through open screen doors. The flooring is the creaky wooden kind, and Mr. Spivey's voice is a deep Southern drawl.

"If you deal with Fort Sill history, you deal with Indians." Spivey talks at length about building trust with the local tribes. A quarter Chickasaw himself, Spivey chooses to emphasize his role as a historian and museum director over his ethnicity. The Fort Sill Museum has been active in negotiations on behalf of local tribes in pursuing the return of sacred objects and currently is developing an advisory committee to deal with issues like the cemetery sites. Many tribes, such as the Comanche, regularly visit the museum and conduct honoring ceremonies at important leader's gravesites. This combination of official advocacy mixed with unofficial leadership roles represents a true "Oklahoma brand" of cultural representation.

My conversation with Spivey this morning primarily concerns the Heritage Fair. Unknown to me, at the time of the first Heritage Fair, an Apache family's infant son died. After the dances, Towana Spivey helped the family dig a grave and bury the child. A tombstone decorated with flowers and a small bell marks the most recent addition to the Fort Sill Apache cemetery.

I asked Mr. Spivey if he saw a distinction between the participation of tribes at the Heritage Fair based on their race, and the participation of the living history people based on their occupation as soldiers, traders, or law officers. He pointed out that the soldiers were different races (for example—the buffalo soldiers) and the civilians were various ethnicities (for example—many Southern Plains people were German).

I argued that these examples overlook the fact that the living history model of interpretation at Fort Sill glamorizes a certain time period (in this case 1870 to 1900) in which my relatives were prisoners of war.

Their participation in the Heritage Fair is not based on their skills in warfare, nor do they expose the Chiricahuas' status as prisoners of war. If we memorialize this time period, then aren't we in some way condoning it? In commemorating it, aren't we giving it validity?

Spivey counters that his museum is trying to cut through the stereotypes. There were good times and bad times, good people and bad people. That's what makes up history. "It's easy to point fingers and criticize . . . [but] if you understand what happened and why it happened, even though it was something bad, then perhaps that will help you avoid doing it again" (1994).

Shades of my history teacher enter. I think of all the wars on this planet of ours. The violence in our homes, the violence on the streets, the violence in Eastern Europe, and I understand that history has neglected its duty to instruct. The buildings may still stand, the trees may offer testimony, the water in the creek still flows, but we humans have not learned a thing.

Preserving inhumanity

I recently read that the Auschwitz Museum is being contacted by a number of Holocaust survivors who wish to have their remains buried at the site of the concentration camp. Many of the people who lost entire families to the holocaust—fathers, mothers, grandparents and siblings—now desire to be buried with those they loved. Although no final decision on the burial issue has yet been made, there are plans to construct a place of mourning for Jewish visitors.

In order to answer questions such as burials at Auschwitz-Birkenau, a group of experts has come together to consult with museum officials on preservation efforts. While some advocate heavy reconstruction of the site, others feel that the camp should be allowed to fall into ruins. This committee has also been charged with the task of modifying nineteen stone plaques placed in front of the Birkenau monument which commemorate in nineteen different languages the millions who died at the hands of the Nazis. After two years of deliberation, the committee's new plaques include the following text; "Let this place remain for eternity as a cry of despair and a warning to humanity" (Ryback 1993).

I immediately feel a bit protective when I read the Auschwitz Museum's commemoration. Will history really serve to instruct? "Hope you have better luck with this history-learning idea than we Apaches did. All they want us to do now is dance."

Compared with other "minorities" in the United States, Native Americans have a unique history and a unique relationship with the government. What is often overlooked, however, are the ways in which American culture possesses Native Americans as their own. The majority of the public will not allow us to grow up, vent our rage, and begin living our lives with dignity. No, Indians are just too cuddly for that treatment.

The nation wants to own Indians. This is why it appears appropriate for otherwise intelligent college students to use racial slurs as team mascots. The adoration of Indians is responsible for all kinds of problems. Guru medicine men, Indian princesses and other forms of "wannabes" are well known examples of the Indian mystique. In the race to appear attractive to commercial interests, too much was glossed over. Cultures can be sold and bartered, they can be emulated, they can be the topic of film. We can be held, defined, and finally buried.

The trip to the cemetery with Spivey was uneventful. We had already said all there was to be said. My family was not with me, the afternoon was hot and I was having a hard time getting the film in my camera to advance. I was ready to leave Fort Sill. Who wants to be a commodity? I was tired of being insulted at every turn by Geronimo and war game paraphernalia. I took a last look at the row of tombstones marking my family's graves and turned to leave. My history does not endear itself to me. I refuse to commemorate genocide.

Most people view the use of stereotypical, frozen-in-the-past images in museums as simply politically incorrect in an age where "collaboration" with the natives is required. I argue that what we are dealing with extends far beyond the boundaries of the latest fashion of museum curation. Once historic criteria become ingrained in a group's psyche, it is difficult, if not impossible to act as a dynamic, empowered people. Collaboration means nothing in the context of a historically pure narrative. The refusal to acknowledge contemporary thought as valid in and of itself is simply another acculturation device.

I am not suggesting that all history museums be abolished, nor do I think that the discipline of history is inherently colonialist. From my perspective as an anthropologist and a Native American, I believe that the privileging of a "safe" history is detrimental to tribes such as mine that desperately need to develop a sense of dignity based on who we are, not who we were. If historic models are utilized, perhaps they could be modified to reflect the native experience. In

my Chiricahua history museum I could reenact the decimation of a U.S. troop by a small band of Apache warriors. We could all dress in period clothing, invite the community and call it a homecoming. This would be historically accurate. It would demonstrate the "contact of cultures."

I suggest this alternative to try to understand why the Oklahoma brand of living history is so placidly accepted, when a reenactment of a concentration camp would be unheard of in this country. Couldn't the concept of the holocaust museum be just as appropriate for recognizing the genocide of American Indians? Why are we always celebrating the survival of Native American culture, instead of truly understanding just how much we have lost and how we have lost it? It is this type of representation I am interested in and as far as I know, no museums are talking about my people truthfully in this manner. Perhaps museums are not the right vehicle for this type of work. Perhaps it is up to our intellectuals, writers and artists to tell these stories.

But before any of this work can be pursued, we have to acknowledge our own holocaust. Like any addiction, we must first recognize there is a problem and name it. Our absolute worship of the past, supported by the consumer version of "living history" is a toxic state of denial in which to live. The privileging of the past has stolen our future. ❖

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