

American Heritage

There is no equivalent of the Shoah Foundation in American Indian communities, but even if there were, who would we record on videotape, ghosts? We have our survivor stories, having endured the lasting damage from the actual genocide of our ancestors, but they are not first hand stories of death camps and forced removals. Those stories have long gone to their graves, with the restless bones of the victims who endured them, a good number probably in some east coast museum at this point, or becoming parts of repatriation packages. Either way, those bones are not talking to anyone about the heads of their children being smashed against walls and bayoneted, though period woodcuts tell that story in black and white as vividly as any narrative Steven Spielberg might reconstruct for American cinema.

The stories we have are quieter, less immediate in large scale, but no less damaging in their effect or in their sense of loss. My mother saw the world through her own filters, which had been provided by her parents and grandparents as well, likely supplemented with the teachings of the reservation Baptist Church and those of Indians who had been shipped off to Carlisle Indian School to make something of themselves. She had framed her life the way they had taught her, as an Indian stuck in a "White Man's World," and she felt it was her duty to perceive and retransmit the world through that mindset. It took me a long time to discover the damaged nature of the stories. I had naturally been unaware as a child that I was, like most children, a

willing recipient of a world view presented by the first authority figure I had known. Why would I doubt the person who had safely guided me away from the poison of snake-berries and who had taught me how to balance myself over the hole in the outhouse to avoid falling in? When she said it was a White Man's World, I listened.

The last of my mother's siblings, her younger sister, passed away unexpectedly two years ago. My mother and I went to the funeral and as we drove to the cemetery to see my aunt out of this world, she turned to me and said, mysteriously, "I guess I am the cheese." When I, not knowing an appropriate response, said nothing, she clarified by adding "the cheese stands alone." It had always been her way to offer succinct and obscure observations on the world. Sometimes, it was like living with a William Carlos Williams poem, or a fortune cookie, or a horoscope. At other times, it was like glimpsing another world removed not so far from my own, but a mystery, just the same. She was acknowledging the closing of an era in her abstruse way, offering me a new and subtle warning about the White Man's World, but by then, I was an adult, and had grown accustomed to keeping her reality filters in mind whenever I listened to her, attributing some of her comments to the nature of her world view, when in fact, I should have been listening as clearly as I had when I was a child.

She told me of seeing, at the age of eight, that same sister just born, sitting on the kitchen table being cleaned off by their older sisters under the bare bulb that hung from the ceiling next to the fly strips, their mother resting on the floor and their father somewhere else, unmentioned. Other times, she told of the way she and her

sisters were shipped off every summer they were still in school, from the ages of 12 until they got real jobs, to live with white families as servants, from the day after school ended until the day before the school year began. When they returned, in early September, she said my grandfather held out his hand and they were to pass him their entire summer's pay before he would let them back in the house. He told them he was preparing them for the life of adult Indian women in America, that they would always be subservient to people who considered them inferior. She continued cleaning and serving for wealthy white people until the age of 62, and though I was an adult, she still tried to give me money she didn't have, so I would not drop out of college. She was convinced that the only way to escape a life as difficult as hers had been was to master the White Man's World she was convinced she had lived in all her life, totally acknowledging that she was forever on the periphery of said world.

She told me her father built her brother the house across the family lot on the reservation, and that her brother still came home to eat the meals she cooked, long after he had moved out. She told me that her brother used to threaten to kill her if she had not cooked his meal correctly, and that their father overlooked these threats. She then added that the first time her brother introduced her children into the threat, she beat him with a baseball bat until his eyes would not open. She allowed herself to be subservient only as long as the survival of her children was not a part of the equation but even our learned subservience was complicated, multi-layered.

My family and I are enrolled as members of the Onondaga Nation, but our history, for better or worse, is inextricably tied to the history of the Tuscaroras. When the Tuscaroras eventually settled in Western New York, having asked the Haudenosaunee if they could join its confederacy of five nations, Onondaga, Mohawk, Seneca, Cayuga and Oneida, two Onondaga women left their homeland and traveled with the Tuscaroras to western New York. This settlement occurred some time before 1800, but even this event is not entirely clear, and various credible sources offer significantly divergent narratives of the Tuscarora migration to New York and their current place just south of Lewiston, New York, on a five mile by seven mile patch of land. The general consensus of sources suggests that the Tuscaroras became affiliated with the Haudenosaunee sometime between 1722 and 1724, but the source of their removal, contact with aggressive colonists, began approximately 90 years before.

As is the way within Onondaga and Tuscarora matrilineal culture, we had all received our identities from the women of the family. We were Onondagas in Tuscarora territory, which complicated our lives to a considerable degree. My mother, and her mother before her, had married Tuscarora men, and as such, always held tenuous relationships with the men in their lives. Growing up, my mother, her sisters and her mother lived in a dangerously patriarchal house. Her parents, as was the prevailing ideology at Tuscarora, were staunch Christian church-goers and her mother accepted the western idea of women's roles for the early twentieth century, pretending to ignore the balanced role women had in other nations within the Haudenosaunee. They

pretended on the surface to ignore or forget their roles, but in no way was that true at their cores. They knew they were survivors generations removed, but still survivors of a holocaust.

Holocaust. You could probably not find another word with more specific cultural resonance. When I have mentioned this word in the context of Indians in America, I've received puzzled looks. David E. Stannard's examination of contact history, American Holocaust, is apparently not as well known in this country as it should be. It seemed that to much of the American population, the word only belonged to one group of people. Out of curiosity, I pulled down a dictionary to see the "official" definition of the word. It clarified that in the twentieth century we saw the invention of holocaust with a capital H, invoking the word as a definition for a specific event. The dictionary ranked this event as the third entry for this word in the entire history of humankind, following variations of mass destruction and disaster. The capital H event occurred in the twentieth century, in Europe, largely against people of one ethnicity, and people from a few other groups then deemed socially unacceptable. The horror of this event is undeniable in the scope of human history. Beyond this entry, the dictionary also contained a passage below the actual numbered definitions, under the title "Usage Notes." The paragraph explored the relative merits of using the word, suggesting that though the word has several definitions which are more abstract and do not necessarily denote a particular group of humans killing another particular group of humans, the history of Europe's twentieth century has forever changed popular perception of the word.

This passage suggested that a large percentage of the population would find certain usages in poor taste because they were not ugly enough to warrant the use of the word, despite the fact that the more abstract definition is concerned with destruction on a broad scale. The dictionary included examples of holocaust incidents among groups of people. Beyond the formally named 20th Century Holocaust of European Jews, Cambodians, Africans and AIDS victims were listed with varying merits. American Indians were strangely absent from any of these examples. This was, after all, the American Heritage Dictionary. How could the editors have overlooked such a key example from within America's own borders?

I began to question my own history. My own history. Was there no American Indian holocaust? There certainly was not one with a capital H, in anyone's minds, but perhaps this is because no capital H could appear without explicit evidence. There were no photographs from 1700, no radio transmissions, no Leni Riefenstahl, no SS Officers making home movies of bodies being dumped into pits, no quieted furnaces or empty barracks to visit with solemnity and recognition, as Alain Resnais does in the landmark film, Night and Fog, but does the lack of official documentation mean the event did not happen? Sure, there were people like William Bradford and his entourage, even as early as Plymouth Plantation. Bradford claimed in his highly subjective account, the Early American Literature standard, Of Plymouth Plantation, that God had obviously meant this land for them, the Pilgrims (with a capital P). The evidence he offered up? The "fact" that the beings already living there were Godless, and God

could not have provided such wondrous land to the Godless, making a leap in logic that these people were closer to animals than humans. Bradford's observations are usually cast as the author being "a product of his time," in American Literature classes, softening the possibility that Hitler might have gotten a jumpstart of inspiration from across the ocean. Isn't the first step in any holocaust the denial of human status to those who are about to be eliminated?

If those perpetrating the demise of my ancestors were not so good at keeping records, my ancestors themselves had an even greater disadvantage. A difficulty present in reconstructing the histories of oral cultures is the fluidity of that history. This is not to say that historians from writing-based cultures are any more truthful in their reporting of past events, but the documents they left behind at least could later be examined for incongruity with other evidence. In an oral culture, once the story changes, the old stories are gone for good and those earlier versions live only as long as the last person who remembers them. The history of nearly anything is always up for grabs and self-serving interpretation, and I do not know anyone who has not modified at least one event from the past to suit their needs. Doubt and Ambiguity or perhaps their cousins Faith and Narrative saturate the arcs of many lives. My story contains two separate strands, Tuscarora and Onondaga, of these historically malleable abstractions.

The sources I have found to document the period of Tuscarora history before the western New York settlement are not easily accessible and are, at best, vague or not reliably traceable. I knew

of the migration and the approximate years, but I had never heard these stories in my entire life. The few citations I had found over the years stated briefly that the Tuscarora, after having been nearly wiped out in their homelands in present day North Carolina, made their way north to officially ask if they could join the Haudenosaunee, the league of Five Nations in New York, having originated in the same area. The migration was cast as a homecoming, as it were: the welcoming back of the Sixth Nation.

One of the documents I recently found suggested a different interpretation of the migration. The narrative, a scholarly discussion from an online source, asserted that the Tuscaroras had constructed wampum belts documenting continued encounters with the white settlers who had first removed them from the places they had lived for a very long period of time. When the Tuscaroras retaliated against this removal, they were effectively driven by force. They were then constantly harassed wherever they tried to thrive on the edges of their previous homelands.

In a severely deteriorated state, already removed to Pennsylvania, the Tuscaroras constructed treaty wampum belts asking that their homes not be burned, that they not be captured and sold into slavery, and that they not be killed whenever they leave their encampments to hunt or to gather wood or haul water. They were not living in a death camp, per se, but instead, the world around their small sanctuaries had become one giant, all encompassing death camp. In essence, these belts asked simply that they be allowed to survive. The dire pleading nature of these belts moved some Indian witnesses

from other nations to act on behalf of the Tuscaroras and they sent the belts to the Haudenosaunee, and the Haudenosaunee responded by agreeing to embrace them as members of the confederacy. Is this the true story, or is the homecoming told through the Tuscarora community the true story? Who am I to say?

The Tuscarora Nation is currently a place that is heavily Christian. There are no longhouses within its borders. It has been suggested that missionaries effectively infiltrated the vulnerable community when the members first arrived in western New York, struggling to survive. Present repercussions of this forced ideology even continue to influence the attempts at regaining the nearly eliminated indigenous identity. Now forms of traditional culture are briefly and randomly glimpsed, at times arbitrarily resurrected or changed for political convenience. What is one day a game, the next day becomes a ceremony, named as such by people who want to prevent the game from being played because it might reveal political affiliation. Ultimately, who can argue, having such fragmentary knowledge of our own history as we do?

In that light, a history of a homecoming seems suited to a group of people trying to keep some version of their culture alive. And on the other side, some historian's research relying upon documents of the era, well, that has its own problems. It suggests that the person recording the original accounts had no agenda, when in fact the picture of Indian nations in disarray and highly fragile states certainly suited the argument for the elimination of tribal identity and for aggressive programs of assimilation eventually formalized in

the Dawes General Allotment Act of 1887, whose sole purpose was the systematic dissolution of separate and specific identities among the indigenous peoples living within the formally recognized borders of the United States.

While the history of the Onondaga Nation is a little more clearly documented in Dean R. Snow's volume, The Iroquois, from the nation's concrete and formative involvement in the origin of the Haudenosaunee, to the first contact deaths by smallpox in 1635 and beyond, my own relationship with the official nation has been tangential and peripheral at best. I had asked my mother over the years who we were related to, over at Onondaga. I knew all 250 of our close relatives at home, but I had no clue about our genetic affiliations from our official homeland, the Onondaga Nation, outside of what is now Syracuse, New York. She consistently gave one of her abstract William Carlos Williams answers.

She said that they used to visit relatives at least once a month, when she was a little girl, but they were probably dead now. She seemed to dismiss the obvious--that those people she had known as a child had likely grown to adulthood, at least some of them, anyway, and had children of their own, but I guess she believed reconnecting with these people would be relatively fruitless, given our century and a half history at Tuscarora, but conversely, she also never wanted us to forget that we were not Tuscarora, that we were Onondaga.

Every year when I was a child, around the fifth of June, we received money from the Onondaga Nation, which was issued to every person on the roll books, as part of some treaty agreement. I never

knew and to this day do not know what the "June Money" represented, but even when I was three, my mother gave me my share and reminded me it was something we were getting because we agreed to lose something else. It was usually somewhere between two and six dollars. This probably doesn't seem like a lot, but we were deadly poor in that period, frequently reduced to lettuce and mayonnaise sandwiches for supper because that was all we could afford. Our dubious suppers didn't matter to my mother, though. She wanted us to understand that this money represented a relationship our nation had with the United States and that a collective memory relies upon individual memories as well as those of the group. And so here I am, a fairly literate and educated Onondaga man from the Tuscarora Nation, harboring only the sketchiest of cultural history, but we go with what we have, and who we are and what we have are the fragmentary voices of the children of the children of the children of the children of the children of the survivors of the American holocaust.

Shortly before my mother's eightieth birthday, an idea that had been buzzing around in her head for years moved to the forefront. She insisted I get my tribal ID card from the appropriate place. I had one issued from the Tuscarora Nation, but my family members had been increasingly trading theirs in for cards issued at Onondaga, where we were officially listed on the Nation roll book. I had tried three times in the years before, without much luck, because the person who issues the cards does the work on a volunteer basis and so gets to them as he can. I think my application had been lost all three times, but I gave it one last try, not knowing she had taken steps to ensure

it would not get lost that last time, pulling a convoluted set of strings to be certain my papers would not get misplaced a fourth time and when she turned eighty, I had my correct tribal identification. She became "the cheese" standing alone that same year when her last sister left us.

She talked of her siblings rarely after they had left us or of her history the older she got. It was almost as if they had not existed. Even when questioned directly, she gave fairly perfunctory answers. I think, as I would visit and relentlessly ask her about her youth, trying also to get her to confess to being one of the fewer than ten people fluent in Tuscarora, she knew that I recognized what was happening as her generation left us. We were becoming holocaust survivors one more generation removed, losing yet another piece of our remembered history, but as she had with the "June Money," she wanted me to always know who I was, officially, in the eyes of the United States, and that to forget the relationship, regardless of what else I might or might not know, could cause serious problems for the official status of any of us. History and memory to her were incidental. National identity was another matter entirely, involving the question of where we were born, or any other anomalies that might show up in our official United States lives. She needed to know that I had my documents in order.

On her 81st birthday, a Thursday, she and I had made arrangements for Sunday. I'd recently had a new novel published and some colleagues had invited me to participate in a discussion of it, as they had the year before with an earlier novel. I had ingredients to

pick up before I got back to my mother's house. She was going to teach me to make frybread. We had tried this for the previous year's book discussion, but she'd grown impatient with my ineptitude and made me step aside so she could finish it more quickly. I tried explaining to her that it wasn't so much that I had wanted to bring frybread to the discussion, but that I had wanted to learn to make it. She laughed, saying it was a matter of feel and that I was trying to learn too late to ever be as good as she was. It was critical for me to learn, as frybread is not only official "national Indian food," but every family's frybread is a little different, has its own signature style, and so the way you find your way home is to taste the particular frybread you grew up with. I needed to know how to make it, and was not sure if anyone else in my family had learned my mother's exact methods. "And besides," she sighed, "why are you feeding this to white people anyway? They're not going to like it. Let me put some sugar in it, make it more interesting for them."

My mother always maintained that the cultures were so different that her frybread would not cross culinary borders without some modification. She likened me to her frybread and was confident that I had only completed my education because I was able to remove myself from the reservation influence. She could never understand why anyone ever read anything I wrote, that nobody could possibly be interested in the reservation life she had negotiated for so long. I left her house at 9:00 Thursday night, with a plan to be there with a full grocery bag of ingredients by 2:00 on Sunday, which she assured me would be plenty of time to get this lesson over with.

Sometime Friday morning, my mother had a massive stroke from which she never awakened and we brought her to rest with her siblings and parents and grandparents and great-grandparents a little over a week later. As we lowered her into the ground, I thought of all the things I did not know, and what little I did. Shortly after she left us, some people from around the reservation gave us photographs they had of her in her youth, pictures I had never seen.

She was vibrant, smiling, a young and beautiful Indian woman who had found some period of time where she was not on her knees, scrubbing someone else's floor. There she was, standing with some other young Indian women, smiling, posing before a backdrop of Niagara Falls, in high fashion for the era. If the young woman's face were not clearly hers, I would have sworn this was not my mother. She had always been sure to show me the difficult life of Indians in America, convincing me by fear instead of example that I had to learn to thrive in that White Man's World she saw surrounding us and not the subservient one she inhabited the entire time I had been alive. She felt that if her children were to live a life solely within the context of an Indian community, we would surely be as exterminated as all those Indians who had come before us.

What holocaust was this, I wondered, closing my American Heritage and putting it back on the shelf. At what point does America give us our own capital H, or do we just have to take it for ourselves, rewriting or respeaking history in the way it has been rewritten around us for over 500 years?

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