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Forced Cultural Assimilation

*“Kill the Indian, Save the man.”*

Assimilation is the process by which a person or persons acquire the social and psychological characteristics of another group. The process of assimilation has been around since the early 1900’s but wasn’t adopted as an official government policy until the 1950’s. A way assimilation was enforced in the United States was through residential schools. The race the Europeans were trying to assimilate to their beliefs and culture were Native Americans. A residential school is an Indian Boarding School established to educate the Native American Youth on the European standards of how to be physically and mentally.

Anonymous post to A Program of Partnership with Native Americans newsgroup, “History and Culture: Boarding Schools.” Accessed September 18, 2016. <http://www.nrcprograms.org/site/PageServer?pagename=airc_hist_boardingschools>.

The first source of research used was an educational post on a newsgroup. This was written to give a brief summary on the what Native American children had to go through and the reasoning for why everyone thought Residential schools were okay. This was a very eye-opening resource, especially since the way the author had written it had seemed purely informational, not opinionated at all. The author had written this piece of writing through the “biographical lens,” because they had focused on society, belief, and self expression. In this case, the Native American’s self expression was suppressed by the Europeans.

The first lense used to analyze this source is the “Postcolonial Lens.” Colonization is the exploitation of one ethnic group by another. This text represents both colonized and colonial cultural groups. The colonized group in this case is the Native Americans. The colonial group is the Europeans who were new to the land. The Native Americans were oppressed for their different beliefs and traditions. So, the Europeans would go to Indian Reservations, an area of land given to and run by Native Americans from the United States government, (Which may seem ironic considering the land belonged to the Native American’s in the first place,) and take Indian children from their homes and their families and send them to schools. At these schools they would learn to read and write. Along with literacy skills, they would have the beliefs of Christianity forced on them and would be made to forget their own beliefs. Some ways they would do this was by making the children wear standard uniforms, were given new “white” names, banning any traditional foods, and forbidding them to speak their native languages. Another thing they would do is they would cut their hair. Which, was a big deal. A Native American’s length of hair represents their connection to the Creator, (God.) So, if they cut it, that meant they were cutting off their connection to the Creator. If they didn’t follow these strict rules, the children were beaten, restricted in food and diet, or deprived of some privileges. Along with these strict rules, there was also the chance of the children catching sickness while being at these schools, such as; tuberculosis, measles, trachoma, and pneumonia. Some children did suffer death. Some parents would try to help their kids, but it was useless. Until, the “Indian Child Welfare Act” was passed in 1978. This allowed the parents of the children to deny their children’s placement in off-reservation schools.

The second lense used to analyze this source is the “Psychological Lens.” In this source, there was plenty of expression of emotion, such as repressed wishes and fears. This text goes into showing the ways the Native American Youth were treated and through this lens, it is easy to infer the children were petrified and baffled as to why this was happening to them. They were taken away from their families, forced to believe in something they didn’t, and perform activities they didn’t feel was right. As stated in the text, “On Memorial Day, some students at off-reservation schools were made to decorate the graves of soldiers sent to kill their fathers.”

Clark, C. Blue, Dr. *Assimilation Era*. 2006. Accessed September 18, 2016. http://digital.library.okstate.edu/Oakerhater/essay.html.

The second source of research is a technical/research report. The report was based on how the political side of reservations were affected by the residential schools. The report had been written through a social power/marxist lens. This is because the economics and place of power in the society of the reservation were affected by the residential schools. Which caused differences to be a factor in deciding what would be fair and what wouldn’t be.

The first lens used to analyze this was the new criticism/formalism lens. This lens was used to understand that there was some oppositions, ironies, and complexities within this text. In the text, it was said that Harriet Beecher Stowe was an instructor for a class in one of the residential schools. Which is ironic. She could write a book about African “Americans” being put into a situation where they are forced to do something and have to change themselves completely in their new environment. Which started when they were taken away from their homes. Weren’t Native American children in a similar situation? Only they didn’t get a historically famous book for awareness written about them.

The second lens used to analyze this was the biographical lens. This lens was used to understand that people formed to come up with a resolution that they thought was great. Which was to sent all Indian children to residential schools. For example, “The early founders of the American nation believed that assimilation for the Indian was possible and necessary...sought to teach American Indian children “the English language, the principles of Christian religion, and the arts of civilized life.”

Gale Research. “Native American: Response to Christianization.” *Encylopedia.com*. Last modified 1997. Accessed September 18, 2016. http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-2536601275.html.

The third source of research used was a piece of writing from a webpage. In this writing, it focuses more on how the “whites” and the “natives” interacted and the process of Native Americans converting to Christianity and how that affected their life after-the-fact. This resource was very concentrated on religion and interaction, which is very good. Especially for discussing assimilation in the first place. The author had written this through a biographical lens, because society was involved with enforcing beliefs and how if natives did convert, they felt hesitant to express themselves.

The first lens used to analyze this text was the “New Criticism/Formalism Lens.” This lens was used to see how complex the whole issue was and how much irony was involved. Christianity was nicknamed “white man’s medicine” by the Native Americans. Their reaction to this situation as a whole was varied. Some did join and others didn’t. The people who didn’t convert had good reasoning behind it. People of the tribes did express these reasons at meetings. As said by Petalesharo, principal chief of the Pawnee Indians, “The Great Spirit made us all-he made my skin red, and yours white; he placed us on this earth, and intended that we should live differently from each other. He made the whites to cultivate the earth, and feed on domestic animals; but he made us, redskins, to rove through the uncultivated woods and plains... We worship [the Great Spirit], but we worship him not as you do... We differ from your religion..” The ironic part of this was how the Europeans wanted the Native Americans to convert to Christianity in hopes that they will feel apart of something bigger and greater than their own culture. After doing so, they felt the opposite. “Those who called themselves Christian often chose a lonely path, for they were frequently harassed and persecuted by their own people and betrayed by their white “brothers.” Converting was seen as “succumbing to the victimization of their oppressors.”

The second lens used was the “Social Power/Marxist Lens.” This lens was used to see how much differences there was in the society between the Europeans, the assimilated Native Americans, and the traditional Native Americans. The separation and differences were so obvious. As said in a anecdote attributed to the Fox Tribe, “Once there was an Indian who became a Christian. He became a very good Christian; he went to church, and he didn’t smoke or drink, and he was good to everyone. He was a very good man. Then he died. First he went to the Indian hereafter, but they wouldn’t take him because he was Christian. Then he went to heaven, but they wouldn’t let him in-because he was Indian. Then he went to Hell, but they wouldn’t admit him there either, because he was so good. So he came alive again, and he went to the Buffalo Dance and other dances and taught his children to do the same thing.”

Herne, Louise. Telephone interview by the author. Northfield Mount Hermon, MA. September 18, 2016.

The fourth source of research used was a telephone interview with Louise Herne. Louise Herne is a Bear Clan Mother for the Mohawk Nation of Akwesasne. A “Clan Mother” is a very high position to have in her community, almost as high as the chief. The position of clan mother survives in families with lots of daughters. Louise was born and raised in Akwesasne. She is a mother of 5 and a grandmother of 7. She does a lot of advocacy work for women and children and also teaches Indigenous Studies at Universities in both the United States and Canada. The interview had consisted of questions involving her feelings, perspective on, and experience with cultural assimilation. Louise’s perspective had seen viewed through a Biographical Lens.

The first lens used to analyze this text first was the “Postcolonial Lens.” This lens was used to truly understand how oppressed Native Americans were and continue to be even to this day. When Louise thinks of assimilation, she automatically pictures Residential Schools and how “they took our grandparents.” Cultural assimilation through her eyes is like “A big blind fold being placed on our people.” She also goes on to describe it all as a big lie. When asked the question, “ What has your perspective been on the whole issues and how has it affected you?”, Louise goes on to say that, “It makes me bitter and gives me bad thoughts. Our people were brainwashed and molded by someone else. The way we look, talk, dress, has been affected. The Europeans knew that we are the barrier of this land. Knowing that, they tried to convert us all and make us forget the fact we’re the barrier so they could take our land without any trouble from anyone. But, I know and so do a lot of others know, we are the barriers and we will always be. They did a nice job trying though. Their attempt goes against their own democracy that we continue to live by today.” The next question asked was “Was anyone in your family or anyone you know taken to a residential school? How was their life affected after that?” Louise said, “Yes, my grandmother was taken, she was part of the first generation of kids taken. She was taken at 6 years old and returned back to Akwesasne at age 17. My grandmother was a very mean, strong women. The school had taught her to read and write. With these skills the school had taught her, she started to read about everything she went through from a different perspective for what it actually was. She understood what the government wanted, so she went against it. She converted back to Mohawk and continued her life. She had 10 kids.”

The second lens used to analyze this text was the “Psychological Lens.” This lense was used to understand what events had happened to Louise to understand why her opinion and perspective is the way it is. When asked the question, “At what point in time did you realize what was going on or learn what was happening in our community?” She answered this question with a story from her childhood, “When I was six, it was the first time we had ever gotten a TV in our house. I was watching a John Wayne movie, John Wayne was a killing a bunch of Indians because he was a cowboy. I was sitting there yelling and cheering, “KILL THOSE INDIANS, THEY’RE BAD GUYS!” When I said that, my mom told me to be quiet, then she told me I was Indian. I started crying right then and there. I realized I was different.” This childhood memory was a life changer for Louise. Louise is known to be a very accepting, comforting, and intelligent woman. People do go to her for her opinion on what they should do if they have a problem. When asked the question, “Are people who experienced assimilation first hand coming to you? How do you help them resolve their thoughts?” Louise went on to describe the process. She says, “I tell them it’s all about healing and their return to their culture. We’re all in this together as people, we can reverse the conversion, they can change and people are willing to help them to do so. We can do this by making sure they’re involved in our traditions, songs, and rituals.”

When picking which subject to research, I knew deep down I want to write about this. I am Native American and I am catholic. I know Louise personally because I played on the same lacrosse team as her daughter, Tsieboo. I have talked to her about how I feel about cultural assimilation on several different occasions before this. I am very interested in this subject because I feel the more I know about it, the easier it will be for me to find who am I and what my beliefs are. This is a very defining topic for myself, but I also hope it is for readers as well. It’s good to know what has happened in our country, whether it’s seen as good or bad. I am a product of this, and I do not love nor loathe. It’s just one interesting thing about myself that I will spend the rest of my life trying to figure out.