



The Green River Pageant And The Americanization Of The American Frontier

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The racial roles we play as Americans have tended to be repeated over the course of American history; I should say, we have tended to repeat them. And we regret this and tell ourselves that we will start fresh, the past will stop now, and will not hold us any more than it holds an innocent child. Then we repeat our race roles again [Malcolmson in Staurowsky: 15].

At the turn of the twentieth century, a popular form of theater known as American Historical Pageantry utilized young people and immigrants to present patriotic, historical scenes of particular communities to teach proper American codes and values, or as Scott Malcolmson notes in the quote above, to retell and repeat a recycled past. Used as a tool by Progressives,¹ American Historical Pageantry brought together community members, both young and old, in pursuit of paying homage to local and national American heritage through dramatizations, dance, and music. Combining education, entertainment, and community involvement, American Historical Pageantry flourished. As a theatrical medium, pageantry sought to represent a community's history through a fusion of the arts, such as drama, music, and dance. Pageantry did not end with this era, but continues to be utilized as a way of educating and assimilating audiences and pageant participants in what it means to be a "productive American."

In this article, I examine one contemporary Western United States pageant and its commemoration of Pinedale, Wyoming's local history. Written in the early 1950's, *The Green River Pageant* is performed every year

¹ Arising near the end of the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century, Progressive ideals embraced the notions of education, cohesion, and patriotism to battle capitalistic trends of industrialism that was pushing private power over public power. In particular, many Progressives worried that the increase of economic wealth and population growth would increase leisure time for the lower classes and promote them to engage in "questionable" activities. The moral and spiritual lives of America's citizenry were in jeopardy and a means of correcting the sinful preoccupations was an absolute necessity. Community centers geared towards education was the answer, and American Historical Pageants fit perfectly within Progressives community educational goals.

and highlights patriotic images and symbols of mountain men and pioneers, and also conveys messages of “proper American” identities, rules, and national values, just as those pageants of the turn of the twentieth century. I analyze the pageant in order to shed light, not only on the pageant as a product of history (as these pageants regard time as mutable and transcend any one time period), but also on its construction and presentation of the “ideal” American, particularly the ideal American child, to the discrimination of indigenous cultures who are considered, in a Frederick Jackson Turner sense, “conquered.”

American Historical Pageantry

According to Linwood Taft, a pageant is “much wider in its scope than is an ordinary dramatic performance,” comprised of “an individual or a small group of people as is the regular theater drama, the pageant is, or should be, the non-commercial, non-professional, more or less spontaneous expression of some phase of the life of a community” [Taft: 2-3]. American pageantry, more specifically, historical pageantry, attempted to follow the style of the English pageant. Born out of the arts and crafts movement promoted by William Morris, pageantry developed into a popular art form that could be produced by every community and make dance, theater, and music accessible to everyone. Pageants presented the progressive notion of bringing the theater back to the masses. Inspired, in part, by the Little Theater Movement, pageants attempted to “democratize art, making it the thing of the people instead of that of the few professionals,” in order to do away with vulgar presentations given by most commercialized theatrical venues and to “combat the more glaring evils of the professional theater” [Meredith: 26]. It was a dramatic movement that would, as David Glassberg suggests, “revitalize the drama from the bottom up by developing a popular aesthetic different from that of commercial amusements” [Glassberg: 111]. Many communities across America established and funded their own pageants in order to promote their community histories and values. By bringing people together as a community the hope was to break down ideological differences in race, class, and gender.

A pageant differed from conventional theater in that a pageant was a large episodic presentation of the ideal past and future. Usually performed in a large open outdoor space to “reproduce with great reality those [authentic conditions] that might have existed at the time of the original incident being performed” [Brown in Glassberg: 119], pageants celebrated a person or event particular to a specific community, and revolved around ideas of freedom, progress, peace, and liberty. Characterization within pageantry is, mostly, constructed around the portrayal of legendary American “heroes” or the personification of symbolic ideals. For example, Linwood Taft’s *A Pageant of Thanksgiving* includes, among others, the characters: Hope, Despair, Spirit of Thanksgiving, Joan of Arc, St. Augustine, Columbus, Pilgrims, Serbia, Russia, Belgium, and France Taft: [110-112].

Amateurs were used in every aspect of a pageant production: acting, directing, designing, playwriting, marketing, and producing. A strong

advocate for the production of historical pageants, Constance D'Arcy Mackay, who would become head of the Division of Community Drama within the War Camp Community Service, wrote in 1915, that all over America a desire was growing for the development of a theater that could be easily given "that is dependent on its picturesqueness rather than on any sweeping dramatic climax which demands professional art from amateur players" [D'Arcy Mackay: 7].

Most pageants were written by someone from within the community. The cast was chosen from among local citizens, and other citizens volunteered to do costumes, props, set, marketing, and so on. The pageant, typically, was presented on or near the site where the events being depicted actually occurred. Pageants usually began with some form of symbolic dance to set up the scenario of the pageant and then moved into a representation of a "friendly" meeting between the Euro-Americans and American Indians.² The next scene usually depicts some aspect of a war or turbulent time in the community's history, and ends with the "hope of tomorrow" in the form of another symbolic dance.

Pageantry, also, was a pedagogical tool used to teach children, and immigrants, the "proper" way to live as an American. The goal was two-fold: to promote and teach American values, while, at the same time, celebrating America's heritage. Pageantry began, mostly, in the schools through the playground movement and in the settlement house clubs and, eventually, filtered through the community, until pageantry became a large, almost corporate undertaking.³ Naima Prevots notes that pageant leaders⁴ wanted to develop a popular art in every community, "to make dance, music, and theater accessible to all and develop American thematic material

² I use the term American Indian, though I agree with Perry G. Horse that it is a matter of preference. Horse notes:

. . . when I hear the term *American Indian*, I immediately think of people like myself who are citizens of America's indigenous nations. When I hear the term *Native American*, I pause ever so slightly. I know the term includes me because I was born in this country, and I am an American citizen by dint of the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924. I know too that anyone born in this country can rightfully claim to be a native American.

What we are dealing with here are the peculiarities of linguistic meaning. There is a great deal of arbitrariness in the meanings associated with words. That is, the connection we associate with particular words is not an a priori connection. Rather, it is through agreement and usage among speakers to substitute *Native American* for *American Indian*, or to use the terms interchangeably, then we make a meaningful connection. Aside from that, it seems to be largely a matter of preference [Horse: 62].

I also use American Indian because that is what is used at Arizona State University in the American Indian Studies Department.

³ I find it interesting how the progressive educational settings, like evening classes, lyceums, Chautauqua's, and pageants, were in themselves institutions. Parallel to Althusser's notion of ideological state apparatus, these institutions functioned as ideologically loaded centers to promote values and idyllic behaviors in children and immigrants that were needed in order to be a "true" USAmerican citizen.

⁴ Naima Prevots suggests that the leaders of American Historical Pageants were "settlement house workers, civic leaders, playground organizers, suffrage activists, educational reformers, and innovators in theater, dance, and music" [Prevots: 1]. Among pageantry's chief supporters were the Drama League of America, The New York Drama League, The Dramatics Departments of the Red Cross, Y.W.C.A., and different churches [Meredith: 25].

. . . They also wanted to use pageants as part of the process of social reform" [Prevots: 2].

Prevots suggests that though there was sincerity in the belief that the art would provide an exchange of ideas leading to permanent improvements in society, the American view became skewed and "tarnished when juxtaposed with existing conditions" [2]. Instead of working through differences, American pageantry was merely a tool within the social and educational movements of the Progressive era to promote the adherence and demonstration of dominant white USAmerican ideologies in the guise of "playful" theatrical events. David Glassberg notes that historical pageantry was "a way to reinforce their [middle class] particular definition of civic identity, social order, and the moral principles they associated with the past—to preserve Anglo-American supremacy in public life" [Glassberg: 2]. In these educational settings, USAmerican, or rather, white, hegemonic "progressive" values that were already prevalent were being taught as natural truths and expected to be actualized in the "programmable" bodies of children and immigrants to "aid" them into becoming model USAmericans.

By presenting idyllic and sanitized versions of USAmerican history, pageants construct history in order to refigure the conflicting landscapes that existed at the turn of the twentieth century. Within the context of educational progressivism, pageantry actively engaged people, more importantly engaged children and immigrants, in their own patriotic USAmerican education. Linda Nochlin notes pageantry had an impressive influence over those who participated within them. She states, "the effects it had on performers were as important as those it had on the audience. This can be said of no other performance art form . . . In participating in the pageant, they became conscious of their experience as a meaningful force in history" [Nochlin: 91].

Refiguring USAmerica in order to make the "social sympathies what we will" [Meredith: 20] occurred, but it occurred to the marginalization and exclusion of those who conflicted with the dominant idyllic view of American society, namely minority groups. Representations and exclusions of people of color from the pageants only added to their marginalization and domination. Racism and continual misrepresentation of classes, ethnicities, and sexes plagued the pageantry of the United States. In particular to this article, Glassberg notes that few pageants included local American Indian populations because few towns had "full-blooded Indians" willing to participate [Glassberg: 114]. Though almost every pageant included a scene representing American Indians, pageant masters used local Boy Scout or Improved Order of the Red Man organizations to fill the roles. Virginia Tanner observed, "America has never done the Red Man justice. It remains for her in Pageantry to finish him off completely" [Tanner *in* Glassberg: 114]. The marginalization and exclusion within pageantry never attained its goal of cultural and racial "communion," but only promoted the continual domination of minority groups.

The Green River Pageant

Proudly advertised on various websites and in local newspapers as “a family thing” [Brooke, “Meet Me on the Green”] the Green River Pageant is said to be a:

Way to relive the history of the mountain man and the Rocky Mountain fur trade as it *occurred* in the Upper Green River Valley. . . Set against the backdrop of the beautiful Wind River Mountains, Pinedale’s dramatization brings together mountain men, American Indians, Father Joseph DeSmet, and many others who played a pivotal role here [Brooke, “Meet Me on the Green”].⁵

The Pageant has the reputation of being the longest lasting pageant in the Rocky Mountain region. Written in the early 1950’s, The Green River Pageant was first re-enacted on the site near the original rendezvous location on Horse Creek, where it meets with the Green River in Wyoming. According to one source, due to the Pageant’s growing popularity, it moved in 1960 to a special area behind the Pinedale, Wyoming rodeo grounds that included bleachers for spectators and plenty of parking (“The Green”) where it has been presented annually ever since.

I attended the Green River Pageant in July of 2006. A two-hour presentation of various scenes of the area’s history from the fur trade, Christian missions, to the settlement of the area by emigrants, the Pageant glorifies and highlights Euro-American accomplishments in the US American West. As I took my seat on the gray, weathered boards of an old rodeo arena,⁶ I noticed a large group of pageant actors coming in and out of the tipis and the double doors of the façade fort. The majority of these players were children. Dressed in light tan, fringed buckskin dresses and fringed tunics and leggings, these children were running back and forth carrying props onto the stage. Wanting a closer look at these individuals, I got my camera out and zoomed in on them and their activity. Along with their buckskin attire, they all had long, black hair either pulled into low pigtailed or braided on either side of their heads (complete with the single feather standing on the back of the young men’s heads). A couple of the children came running towards me; I zoomed in on them and realized that their bodies were painted a bronzyish-red. As I watched the two children run in front of me, streaks of perspiration trickled down their faces and legs which left white trails among bronze paint. I immediately scanned the rest of the actors, each of them were painted bronze to look “Indian.”

⁵ Emphasis added.

⁶ The performance area is an old rodeo grounds that is now only used once a year for the pageant. The stadium seating faces a round arena that is overgrown with prairie grass and purple sage flowers. A rusted pipe fence encircles the arena delineating a clear space between audience and stage. At the back of the staging area is a cluster of five Lakota style tipis, it is to symbolize an American Indian village. The tipis are made of white canvas, decorated with blue, red, yellow, and green “Indian” symbols, white poles stick out the top of the tipis and white strips of fabric flap in the breeze from the top of the poles. In the middle of the five tipis is a rock fire pit with a fire lit. To the left are four more tipis and a lean-to structure covered by a blanket. A solitary tipi sits to the extreme right corner of the staging area. All along the back of the area is a replicated stockade wall of a fort. Just behind the left and right sides of the stockade are watchtowers. And in the middle of the wall are large double doors.

This pageant, just as those performed at the turn of the twentieth century, used non-American Indian actors—in particular to this pageant, children—to represent (and appropriate) American Indian cultures.⁷ According to the program, these child actors are to represent both Lakota and Shoshoni cultures; however, there is no clear delineation as to who is whom as they are all dressed alike, referred to by the umbrella term “Indian” during the pageant, and intermixed within the area of the stage set up with stylized Lakota tipis. The painted bodies, black hair, and classic “generic” Plains American Indian dress of these white actors brings with it a familiarity and accessibility about American Indian persona to the audience and child actor. Through the familiarity of the images, non-American Indian children learn to selectively take the American Indian identity as their own.⁸ Ellen J. Staurowsky discusses the images of American Indians as mascots at sporting events in her article “Privilege at Play.” I believe that her argument of the manufactured images of American Indians, though geared toward sporting events, is also at play in this pageant. By contributing to the relegation of the American Indian to a constructed past, “casting them in limited, and limiting social roles” the images become a ploy to keep the American Indian image in “the familiar,” in a comfortable place where the stark and gruesome reality of their existence, both then and now, can be “white-washed” and left out of the narrative. For non-American Indian children and spectators this image is safe, full of societal value, and a fondness that Ellen J. Staurowsky notes is not for the American Indians as human beings but for the manufactured images themselves.

The entire pageant is narrated by an announcer who takes the audience through the history of the Green River area between 1820 and 1840, while the people on stage never speak, but pantomime his words. The agenda of this pageant is to promote, educate, entertain, and celebrate a specific place, period, and people. The pageant’s ultimate goal, according to the souvenir program, is to not only tell the history of the Green River area and how the rendezvous came about, but to perpetuate this important period of American history so vital to the development of the West by reenacting annually in pageant form some historical incidents from that distant day.

To all those who made their Rendezvous in Sublette County, we of today gather to honor them by commemorating those occasions of over one hundred years ago. Tread gently, for you walk upon hallowed ground.

The program calls upon the audience to view performance with reverence and an almost spiritual grasping. To honor those who tread the ground before us, the pageant marks incidents that are to instill, and in their own words, “perpetuate” pride and a sense of ancestry among the participating descendants and viewing audience members.

⁷ Based on several brief interviews I conducted with pageant participants, I found that the majority of the actors were of Euro-American descent with no ancestral link to the cultures they were representing.

⁸ Staurowsky also notes that this identity is not only easily achieved by children, but by adults who actively seek to make the American Indian identity their own, they can “construct American identity as they imagine and in a fashion that suits their purpose” [Staurowsky: 24-25].

The pageant begins, just as its predecessor in the twentieth century, with the appearance of the first white men to the area, not with the American Indian cultures in the area prior to the arrival of the European Astorians. The incidents begin and end with the advent, expansion, and domination of the Euro-American. Though the actors portraying the Lakota and Shoshoni are on stage during the entire pageant, they are objects rather than subjects. Very few of the Lakota or Shoshoni are given mention in the performance, and even less in the program.

The physical embodiment of stereotypical notions of American Indian and child forces the pageant participants to transmit a specific cultural memory that is a product, as Diana Taylor notes, of certain taxonomic, disciplinary, and mnemonic systems [Taylor: 25]. Performance, according to Taylor, transmits cultural knowledge. This knowledge falls into the categories of the archive and repertoire. As the production of knowledge is always a collective effort, it too is a collective effort between archive—the written record where memory exists “as documents, maps, literary texts, letters, archaeological remains, bones, videos, films, CDs, all those items supposedly resistant to change” [86]; and the repertoire—the enactment of embodied memory, “performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, signing—in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, non-reproductive knowledge” [20]. The archive and repertoire work alongside each other and other systems of transmissions, writes Taylor, as weddings need both a signed contract and the performative utterance of “I do”; re-enactments transmit cultural memory by relying on written records of historical events and the performance of commemorating those written records. As each generation bodily enacts through repertoire the archive of the Pageant, a shared knowledge arises that is continually transmitted. The embodied knowledge is learned and internalized as a specific cultural memory, an authentic memory shared by the community and a product of the repertoire’s discourses in playing Indian.

In fact, this “playing” Indian is the precise title Philip Deloria gives his book about white appropriation of American Indian cultures. *Playing Indian*, Deloria states, represents unequal power relations, and is the foundation for the performing of domination and power in USAmerica while at the same time the “Indians’ essential place in the national psyche, . . . and suggested a history of conquest, resistance, and eventual dependency” [Deloria: 186]. Because this performance exists within the borders of where non-American Indian and American Indian meet, this border can create multiple escape routes for those who wish to avoid accountability for the negative impact these images have. This desire to cross into the cultural border is not a new phenomenon, as mentioned by Deloria, who explains that since the Boston Tea Party in 1774, whites have used the American Indian to create and constitute their own identity. As with any border crossing, whether figuratively or literally, there is always a border that is compromised. As Staurowsky states, “imitation is clearly not the sincerest form of flattery. Rather, imitation can be read as a disguised assertion of power” [Staurowsky: 21].

It is all about dressing up, painting up, and playing. The fact that it is deemed appropriate to paint the actors’ bodies bronze and don black

braided wigs, caricaturizes the Shoshoni and Lakota cultures and endorses the idea that anyone can participate in the American Indian heritage. The claim to this identity, according to Charles Fruehling Springwood, is for a tactical purpose of enhancing non-Indian peoples "personal voices with the cultural-racial capital of Indianness" [Springwood: 59]. Though I do not believe the children who participated in this pageant realize they are engaging in racial capital or tactical cultural appropriation, the playing of Indian is also not questioned, it is an accepted part of this pageant and culture. Within this type of venue they are not taught to critically question the messages they receive or present "or to recognize the inherent contradictions that exist within those messages" [Staurowsky: 13].⁹

This commemorative event is to entertain tourist members of the audience, but also to celebrate heritage for locals. Heritage, state Rowan and Baram, is "a complex notion, involving the past, contemporary social understandings of places, and the active construction of the past" [5]. Heritage's "potential for both good and evil is huge. On the one hand, it offers a rationale for self-respecting stewardship of all we hold dear; on the other, it signals an eclipse of reason and regression to embattled tribalism" [Lowenthal in Rowan & Baram: 5-6]. In other words, heritage is a particular version of the past that belongs to a particular group, this commemorative heritage event creates a reality and an active construction of a past and the understanding of it in this specific region from a Euro-centric perspective. Just as earlier American Historical Pageants, this pageant continues the proliferation and promulgation of USAmerican-ness. In likeness to the pageants of the past, the Green River pageant is performed in a large open outdoor space, celebrates a group of people and events particular to the community, and revolves around ideas of freedom, progress, peace, brotherhood, and liberty, and the USAmerican way. Drama, in the form of pageantry, here still serves a social, religious, and patriotic purpose in the guise of an educational setting. It provides a space for children to embody and practice the performative values and characteristics displayed by a "true," natural, and productive USAmerican.

The pageant script and the images it promotes are romanticized views of westward expansion, the necessity of manifest destiny and the highly American attitudes towards Other. More importantly, the images are a distinctly white rendition of the founding of the Green River area and ideals of the Other. This male-dominated retelling of the area leaves little room for marginalized peoples: women, children, or the Shoshoni and Lakota. In fact, the role of the Shoshoni and Lakota in the Pageant is inconsequential to the story of the formation of the Rendezvous and the Green River area; they are merely scenery filler, a backdrop to the white man's triumphant story of taming and civilizing the wild, both Indian and the land. What is learned is

⁹ Staurowsky goes on to mention that children within the United States are taught to be "remarkably uncurious as to whether these depictions of American Indians are accurate from the outset, what role the U.S. government played (and continues to play) in enacting its own hostile agenda directed toward American Indians, or the validity of this supposed transformation of friendly Indians into fighting Indians" [14]. I find this statement to be evident at the Pageant, as both children and adult re-enactors display no questioning of painting themselves in bronze make-up or donning black wigs. Each of the American Indian re-enactors seemed to portray this image with ease, even feeling as if they could better understand how the "Indians" lived because they donned a costume and played tag for a couple of hours.

not the history of the Rendezvous or the history of the Green River area, but a reinscription of the master narrative, the enduring myth surrounding the mystification, mythification, and subjugation of the American Indian cultures.¹⁰

This performance works at constructing the image of American Indians, and, consequently, of children, as innocent beings of nature. The Shoshoni and Lakota are infantilized as only one adult male makes an appearance as an American Indian, though there may be close to thirty children¹¹ (both male and female) and six adult females. In the images of both an ideal child and an "ideal" Shoshone or Lakota, the result is one that requires and justifies the altruistic sacrifice of the Euro-adult. It informs us of the USAmerican ideology of innocent, dependent, yet patriotic and well-behaved child, and the child-like Other—the parenting of both innocent, dependent child and uncontrollable Other in rearing both to productive adult. These narratives are transferred and super-imposed onto the image of "Native" to infantilize American Indians while it valorizes the paternalism necessary to rear the children and "civilize" the American Indian. The narratives justify this treatment, both in the 1800's and in the frame of this contemporary pageant's USAmerican world view.

At no point during the pageant was there any mention of disease, war, hostilities, or forced movements and schooling among the battles that raged across the West. No mention of the rape, racism, or any of the other inhumanities that occurred. It seems as if the limited role that the "Indian" actors inhabit also somehow implies the eradication in the present of American Indian presence. As if by showing how things "were" for the Shoshoni and Lakota when European presences began emerging in the West, they are implying that the American Indian is no longer. In North America, Stephen Germic cites that the invention of extermination of Native cultures "enables and discloses a nationalist ethos of exclusionary coherence which scripts others out of the national narrative by elaborating a universal subject whose hegemony is formed and maintained through his idealizations and appropriations of Native identities" [Germic: 353]. The pageant of westward expansion is a pageant of conquest. It celebrates neither dependents nor the conquered, but the conqueror. The true representation of an ideal and proper USAmerican is one who overcomes all obstacles and "civilizes" the Others around 'him,' a caretaker of expansion, Protestant money-making ventures, the strength in independence, and one that cannot be American Indian. This is what remains once the performance is over.

The Green River Pageant is a highly disturbing white fantasy of the founding of the Green River rendezvous. Education, commemoration, and "understanding" of the traditional hallmarks of the American Historical Pageant are the masks for the true purpose of the event—continuation of the master narrative of Euro-American dominance and superiority in

¹⁰ Étienne Balibar writes that the "history of nations . . . is always already presented to us in the form of a narrative which attributes to these entities the continuity of a Subject" [Balibar: 86].

¹¹ There were only three young men to represent Euro-American children. The majority of the actors consisted of white, adult men who portrayed the trappers, traders, missionaries, and settlers that came into the area.

USAmerican public life. Under the guise of history, local celebration, and family event, and in the performing bodies of its actors, the pageant reinforces the narrative of the goodness of manifest destiny upon the West, Euro-American values and ethics, the inevitable displacement of the indigenous peoples, and their healthy integration into the Euro-American culture. This Pageant endorses a notion of “how it was” for visitors and community members alike year after year.

The USAmericanizing codes of expansion, conqueror, and glorified heroism are written on and through the bodies of the child actors in this pageant and exemplify the continuing efforts of USAmerican citizens to construct an ideal citizen, one based on and around Protestant ethics and one that is entirely Euro-centric. This concept is deeply rooted in the history of this county, in the efforts of Progressive American Historical Pageantry organizers, and is a process that still defines our present and our future. What makes this pageant so important is not to highlight it as just another racist performance, but to note that it has remained unchanged and unquestioned by the community for so long. An acceptance for what is presented among audience, re-enactors, and event coordinators envelops the pageant with a cloak of protection as a benign historical artifact and historical performance of pageantry, one that cannot be blamed for any racial or historical misinformation or misguidance. Protected from having to questions its own authenticity, cultural output, or racial position, the pageant has gone on year after year teaching children not necessarily accurate historical information, but information and preservation of the master narrative of European-American dominance and superiority, true “American” values, and westward expansion.

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