

The Scout / Thoughts about Monuments and Moses Brings Plenty 9/29/13

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People can say whatever they want about my image, and they will, whether it's true or not. And this is not a bad thing. People see what they want to see, and it is a testament to the notion that the world is not simply *full* of stories, but, more importantly, it is *made* of stories. And stories are the natural starting point for any conversation.

The one thing that can not be disputed in my image is the fact that the Scout is not an indian at all, it is a depiction of an indian, a sculpture, created by and for white culture, and it carries a historical narrative of what white people at the turn of the 20th century wanted the indian to be. The artist on the scaffolding is confronting that narrative.

If this truth is acknowledged and embraced, then a real conversation can occur. If not, then we are left with empty outrage and a rickety platform for ornate agendas.

Moses Brings Plenty of the Lakota Nation, acting as a spokesman for indigenous peoples, has pursued the role of the victim in this conversation, refusing to consider anything beyond the surface of the image. In the process, however, and in the context of the work itself, he has positioned himself as a defender of colonialism.

Some years ago, a friend of mine was in Chicago with the writer, Sherman Alexie, who at the time had just published his first young adult novel, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. (The book would later win the National Book Award for Young People's Literature.) As the story was told to me, Sherman was speaking to a group of high school students. He read a long passage from his book that included the word "nigger" and at the very utterance of the word a group of black students immediately protested and began shouting him down. After the presentation, Sherman met with the angry students and the principal of the school. Sherman listened to the students and acknowledged their grievances, even though the use of the word in the context of the book was employed to demonstrate the

heinousness of that invective. In response, Sherman asked the students, as minorities themselves, to consider what it might be like to be a minority *within* a minority, a place where you are not only marginalized and discriminated against, but where that discrimination is itself invisible. A place where an entire society can use the word “redskin” with impunity and without recrimination, a term that to the indian is as offensive as the word “nigger” is to black people.

To this extent, I understand the initial reaction of Moses Brings Plenty, who, like all indians, bears the incalculable weight of a history of suffering I can't even pretend to imagine, in a world that refuses to even try. The billboard registers only faintly on the retinal scrim between pain and consciousness.

I am willing to be mistaken for wasi'chu. I only wish that Moses Brings Plenty might have recognized the work for what it is and taken the opportunity to defend it as a way of disowning an icon that is in no way indigenous to indigenous people, and as a way of advancing a contemporary conception of the indian. But then, there are the problematics of his own career spent reinforcing the dominant culture stereotypes of the indian in film and television.

Perhaps, one hundred years later, it is time for a new monument to a people and a history that need to be seen.