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Use of Language in *The Museum of The Plains White Person* and How it Creates an Effective  
Satire

In *The Museum of The Plains White Person* Rayna Green successfully uses multiple devices in her satirical piece. The use of reduction, allusions to phrenology and scientific racism, and caricature effectively demonstrate the hypocrisy and cruelty of the white person in both historical and modern day society whilst garnering sympathy from white audiences.

Rayna Green makes use of reduction to demonstrate the hypocrisy of white people whilst gaining sympathy from white audiences. In this case, Green uses a reduction of power or status, putting the white people in a world where the native people are the majority and there is a small and dwindling white population. This reduction is almost a complete role reversal of what occurs in modern day. Her description of her plans for the museum- while in a lighthearted and clearly joking manner, are not inaccurate from the practices white people use for the funding and creation of museums. She proposes holding a banquet for funding, collecting artifacts like clothing and religious artifacts, obtaining information on language and customs, all while not involving the white people in this process and allowing them to appreciate and accurately depict their own culture.

The clear juxtaposition of her proposed idea and what actually occurs in real life to minority cultures and races, all while portraying the white people as the minority, creates a prompt for reflection. It is a fact that no one would wish to have their information about their

culture portrayed in an inaccurate and possibly offensive manner, so doing this to white people forces the audience to realize their hypocrisy. If reading the proposal creates an unpleasant reaction, white audiences must realize that this is how natives must feel as this is actively happening to them. This both causes a recognition of hypocrisy, but also allows readers to gain sympathy for native populations.

The author subtly alludes to phrenology and scientific racism as a way of demonstrating the bigotry and lack of understanding for native peoples. In the second paragraph, Rayna announces her campaign to acquire the bones of white people from across the country. She wishes to show the children and scientists the “different skull shapes” of the white people and study their bones to find information on their daily lives. The idea that one race’s bones, skull shapes, or brain size can indicate their mental capacity is a pseudoscience called phrenology. Phrenology was a prominent justification for colonialism in the colonial and imperial periods, as many believed that the territories they were colonizing were full of inferior peoples with lower mental capacities that could not fend for themselves.

Additionally, Rayna states that “they (the bones, and presumably other artifacts) cannot be given back once they have been handled” In fact, even modern day museum curators and historians use this and scientific racism as justification for not repatriation of artifacts and artwork. Rayna cannot give back the remains once they are handled because “We (historians at Plains Museum) do need to study them for years”, and the idea that if the artifacts are given back they will not be properly preserved and cared for. *The British Museum* makes this claim to explain why some artifacts are not being given back to their original owners. In *The British Museum*’s website, they state that “The British Museum holds and cares for human remains from around the world” (*Human remains*). The use of the word “holds and cares for” instead of

“keeps” creates an idea that these artifacts and remains are protected, and if they were repatriated they will not be as safe and clean as being stored in a museum. Regardless of the fact that it doesn’t matter what the conditions of an artifact are, and that it’s the duty of its owning country to maintain them, the idea that home countries will not properly care for their own art represents the home nations as inferior. This sense of inferiority directly relates to scientific racism, another justification for colonial and imperial rule during the 1400-1900 period. Making the decision to not return artifacts stolen under colonialist rule is to continue the colonialist and imperial ideas that saw colonized peoples as inherently inferior (*Repatriating artworks (article)*). Rayna alludes to the same idea when she speaks about the grave excavation and possession of the bones.

Rayna’s misrepresentation and caricature of the white population may spark anger in white audiences, triggering another period of reflection. In her second collection proposal, Rayna mentions that she wishes to “reconstruct a McDonald’s in its entirety” to act as an accurate representation of white culture and food. While McDonald’s is a popular American fast food chain, it is prominent all over the world and is enjoyed in many places by many races. The idea that McDonald’s on its own can accurately represent white food and culture is inaccurate, and would be the same as claiming that the entirety of Mexico and their food would be accurately represented by reconstructing a Taco Bell. This is simply not true, and if this was done, knowledge of white food culture would lose important complexity. She also proposes creating “true-to-life plastic exhibits of white bread, mayonnaise, iceberg lettuce and peanut butter”, making the claim that these foods are somehow the centers of the white plains person’s diet. While people do eat these foods, placing them at the center of the white person’s diet creates an offensive caricature of white people only eating these plain, flavorless, or boring foods.

This wide oversimplification of complex aspects of culture such as food, clothing, and artifacts is not only offensive to the country or culture in which they are derived from, but also causes an incredible loss of cultural information. Rayna is characterizing the white person as one solid thing, forgetting the individuality of the people in each of these cultures. You cannot group the foods eaten in northeastern America to the foods eaten in the middle south, there is simply too much variety. This same idea applies to white people creating museums of “Native culture” and forgetting the thousands of tribes that existed across the continent and their unique languages, customs, clothing, religious practices, foods, and more.

Rayna Green’s portrayal of white people as the minority, subtle use of colonial and imperial age racist pseudosciences, and caricature of white people as consumers of plain foods, creates an environment for reflection and accountability. The ability to force the reader to realize their hypocrisy and cruelty makes this satire incredibly effective.

## References

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