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Small X²/I Group

Humanities

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An Analysis on the Satire “The Museum of the Plains White Person”

Satires have long been effective for a wide variety of topics. In 1981, satire was used to bring forth change in museum policy on American Indians. “The Museum of the Plains White Person” was a satirical speech given by Rayna Green criticizing museums’ methods of collecting sacred objects and bones. As a Native American herself, she also felt that the Smithsonian National Museum was not putting enough effort and resources into researching Native American culture. As director of the American Indian Program at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of American History, she sought to inspire change. Her satirical speech suggests the ridiculous creation of a new museum, The Museum of the Plains White Person, in which Indians are given an insight into the life of white people. In “The Museum of the Plains White Person”, Green uses vague language and reduction to highlight the disrespect and ignorance Americans show to Native American culture.

During the speech, Green uses vague language to describe the methods in which they are collecting the bones of white people to implicitly attack current museum policies of disrespecting the bones of Native Americans. This is combined with a nonchalant tone of their shady actions and faulty reasoning. The usage of these elements makes clear the cruelty of the museum collectors. For example, Green sarcastically glorifies the bone collection for her hypothetical museum, but their only justification is that “all museums must have a bone collection” (Green 1). Notice that the language is very vague and does not elaborate on why this statement is true. She

goes on to say that a national campaign has begun to “acquire” a majority of white people’s bones permanently. But she never mentions how the bones are acquired, leaving readers with a sense of unease. Green disperses many such statements throughout her speech, making bold claims with no real justification. Her persona is analogous in the real world to the museum policy creators and the researcher in the American Indian Program. So by painting her persona in a negative light, she is portraying the researchers of the American Indian program as cruel because they are doing terrible things (like stealing bones from graves) without proper justification (like saying that all museums must have a bone collection). This method of exposing the museum policy’s cruelty is very effective because it induces guilt to her audience, the people who control the museum policies relating to American Indians. Her vague language also reveals the absurdity of the policies by treating American culture the same way she feels policy creators are treating Native American culture. She tries to get the reader’s approval as justification for many of her claims, sidestepping the use of evidence completely. For example, when talking about the procedures the Museum of the Plains White Person is going through to handle the bones, she says, “As you know, they cannot be given back once they have been handled. We do need to study them for years” (Green 1-2). The usage of the phrase “as you know” leads the reader into feeling they are forced to agree with Green’s argument. Green’s persona does not even consider the rights of these white people. Her persona does not consider the cultural value that the bones of their dead might serve in the white people’s society. By making such a ridiculous statement, she makes a strong argument that current museum policies are unfair to Native Americans by ignoring their rights. Overall, Green’s usage of vague language is effective in addressing the problems with current museum policies because her satire is mocking the lack of thought that is

put into current museum policies and the lack of respect museum policy creators have for American Indians.

Another key element that Green utilizes in this piece is reduction. Green oversimplifies white culture in her goals for her museum. Her inaccurate portrayal of white culture angers her audience (because the audience understands the true nature of white culture). She uses this strategy to imply that she feels the same anger when museums inaccurately portray the true nature of Native American culture. For example, when explaining how they are going to inform Indians about American food, she says that the museum team plans to “reconstruct a McDonald’s in its entirety. In that we’re going to have true-to-life plastic exhibits of white bread, mayonnaise, iceberg lettuce and peanut butter” (Green 2). Her construction plan for the food exhibit assumes that all Americans eat primarily McDonalds, which is a gross exaggeration. The obvious erroneousness of this statement makes the audience feel angry for misrepresenting white culture. But her true intention is for the audience to understand that she is imitating the actions of current museum policy creators. The policy creators listening to this speech will feel guilty for oversimplifying white culture. She also implies that museum creators that study archaeological digs do not attempt to truly understand American Indian culture. For example, Green claims that after a dig in Los Angeles, her team thought that Los Angeles “changed rulers regularly. It’s a big thing they used to call a neon sign – and it says QUEEN FOR A DAY. We are going to do some more excavation to determine just how ... they transferred power” (Green 2). Obviously, the sign has nothing to do with how Los Angeles changed rulers. It was probably a sign for a company or store that had nothing to do with the government. Green’s ridiculous claim makes readers realize that museum creators are not looking deep enough into their findings. They could

also be misinforming the public, which is dangerous. In all, her oversimplification of American culture implies that current museums are not doing enough to truly understand Native American culture.

Overall, Green's effective usage of vague language and reduction in her satire on museum policies collecting Native American property. While explaining the methods the team is undergoing for making the Museums of the Plain White Person, she utilizes vague language to show that policy creators are rash and disrespectful. This is harmful for the well-being of Native Americans. When explaining the conclusions she is making about white people, she uses reduction to simplify white culture, showing that museums are not making enough of an effort to understand Native Americans. Her satirical criticism was powerful to bring about change.