Culture to Commodification

Benjamin Lebowitz

Within the Creation Story of the Haudenosaunee, a pregnant woman, known as “Mature Flowers,” was pushed into a vast hole from an uprooted tree; this began the crossover from the Skyworld to Earth. During the birth of her daughter’s twins, one boy, who would later be known as The Creator, exited his mother’s body through the armpit, leaving her deceased. With the help of the twins, Mature Flowers returned her daughter’s body back to the Earth, originating the name “Mother Earth”. Tales like the Creation Story of the Haudenosaunee are at the foundation of native cultures dating back to historians' first accounts of indigenous peoples of eastern North America. In particular, the Creation Story of the Haudenosaunee pays critical attention to the original relationship of beings with the Earth. The respect for the land and its ecology was not only embedded into the culture of the Haudenosaunee but also into the Indians of New England. They too treated the land and its gifts with respect and gratitude, but even deeply rooted culture could change. With the invasion of European culture to the eastern seaboard of North America, items such as maize and wampum, once seen with much cultural significance, quickly became commodified, leading to the assimilation of native peoples into the European economic ethos.

The shift of Indians into a more economic mindset can be demonstrated by the evolving treatment of maize in New England society. Before the arrival of the Europeans to New England, Indians both in the North and South had developed systems that would feed their people. While northern settlements relied more heavily on hunter-gatherer systems, those living in the south largely relied on the cultivation of crops. In *Changes in the Land*, the author notes that a fur trader “recorded that the Agawam Indian village near Springfield, Massachusetts, began its year with the month of Squannikesos...whose name meant ‘when they set Indian corn’” (Cronon, 43). The same was even true with almost all of the additional months, drawing their names from the stages of the maize cultivation cycle. This evidently displays the centrality

of maize to the day-to-day culture of native peoples of the region. In addition, corn draws meaning that dates back to the origin of many native cultures. Within the Haudenosaunee creation story, it is said that upon her daughter's grave, "Mature Flowers planted seeds of corn, beans, squash, tobacco, and strawberries" (Hill, 21) allowing her daughter's death to assist in creating new life. Within this small list of crops existed the "Three Sisters" crops of corn, beans, and squash. While these crops were significant in creation stories within native cultures, they also stayed deeply embedded in the day to day practices of natives.

While maize was clearly essential to the day-to-day culture and livelihood of native peoples, the Europeans found it of great use almost immediately. After settling in New England, it became apparent to the Europeans that the food from the Old World could not yet be installed into the ecology of New England. For this reason, the Colonists themselves learned how to integrate maize into their own European version of agriculture, and they too began to see its value both for feeding their people but also as a commodity. This can be best explained by the role played by maize within the Fur Trade. As Europeans sought to supply Old World markets with furs from New World mammals, they first had to secure a steady supplier of these animals. The Indians of northern New England held an absolute advantage in hunting compared to Europeans, so it was their skill that would contribute the most important commodity of the fur trade: the animals. In order to retain their labor however, Europeans needed to find ways to pay them; maize was one of their answers to this problem. While maize was viewed as an important substance in native culture, here it was diminished to a mere payment method. The Europeans had no issue with this; they continually used this method to source more and more animals to fuel the commerce. Cronon writes that "Europeans took hold of the traditional maize-fur trade network and transformed it from a system of binary village exchange to a link in the new Atlantic economy" (94). Due to the expansion of the Fur Trade within New England, Colonists over time influenced Natives to abandon cultural benefit for economic benefit, shown by the commodification of maize.

The evolution from cultural significance to commodification can additionally be portrayed by the behavior of Native Americans towards wampum in New England society. Within the stories of the Haudenosaunee, wampum is regarded first with the mention of The Peacemaker and The Great Law of Peace. In order to uphold the original teachings of the Creator, The Peacemaker worked to unite the Five Nations of the Haudenosaunee. After unification, a wampum crafted with four white squares and one heart became “the emblematic Union of the Great Peace, of the Five Nations of the Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas and Senecas” (Hill, 32). Additionally, Hill notes the Peacemaker’s continued effort to unite all of the Haudenosaunee using the Circle Wampum claiming that it “symbolizi[es] family and duty to each other. If one string breaks or loses a bead, the entire belt is at risk. Similarly, if even one of the Haudenosaunee clan families is hurt, damaged, or in disarray, danger exists for all” (Hill, 38). Wampum here is said to be able to bridge the gap between spirituality and political relations in order to maintain peace amongst all Haudenosaunee people. Additionally, Cronon writes that in New England, natives only exchanged wampum in “well-circumscribed ritual moments” such as a payment between sachems, a gift of marriage proposal, or even as a token of kinship between peoples (Cronon, 95). Both examples from the Haudenosaunee as well as indigenous peoples of New England display the profound culture significance of wampum.

With the infiltration of European culture upon Native Americans, even items so significant as wampum would be transformed into a mere commodity. In order to further proliferate the fur trade between the Old World and New World, Europeans found that “wampum [would be] ideally suited to become the medium for a wider, more commercial exchange—to become what John Locke called ‘money’” (Cronon, 95). What is clear is that the Europeans’ originally viewed wampum purely for its market power, specifically in the fur trade. Therefore, Europeans made a large effort to source materials for wampum and manufacture quantities never before seen in the region. However, cooperation from the native hunters in the northern part of New England was necessary in order to provide the supply of fur-bearing mammals

needed to fuel European demands. Cronon writes that, although Indians of northern New England “were initially reluctant to acquire wampum, within two years it had become the single most important commodity [Europeans] had to offer” (Cronon, 96). With the increased supply of wampum available for exchange, natives eventually expanded their hunting efforts to exchange skins for wampum. Even for an item with so much cultural weight as wampum, the European economic system quickly transcended native cultures, diminishing wampum to a medium of exchange.

The resulting efficiency within the Fur trade led to ecological consequences that hardly could be overstated. With the increased demand for fur-bearing mammals as well as an incentive for natives to hunt for them, historians could speak of many fur-bearing mammals “using the past tense” by the year 1797 (Cronon, 106). The actions of native hunters as willing participants within the fur trade can be directly linked to ecological problems still felt today by the land of New England.

By capitalizing on native peoples’ culturally ingrained value of maize and wampum, Europeans were able to convert Native American conception of goods from a cultural to an economic mindset. For maize, Europeans were quick to understand its value in native society and therefore scaled the economy of maize-fur exchange to a near global market. Furthermore, Europeans utilized cultural significance of wampum, mutating its perception by natives to both a medium of exchange as well as a commodity of materialistic status. The commodification of these goods in native society allowed for the supply side of the fur trade to be fulfilled with innumerable fur-bearing mammals. The effect of these hunting practices, fueled by Native Americans’ newly developed materialistic desires, are unequivocally associated with the indelible effects to the ecology of New England.

Works Cited

Cronon , William. *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*. Hill and Wang.

Hill, Susan M., and Barbara Lorenzkowski. *The Clay We Are Made Of*. University of Manitoba Press.