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978-1-107-07081-3 - Indigenous Intellectuals: Sovereignty, Citizenship, and the American Imagination, 1880–1930

Kiara M. Vigil

Excerpt

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Introduction

A Red Man's Rebuke

The American government is one where the voice of the people is heard. It is therefore not a radical step nor a presumption for the native Red Man today to raise his voice about the welfare of his race. The Red Man has been mute too long. He must speak for himself as no other can, nor should he be afraid to speak the truth and to insist upon a hearing for the utterance of truth can harm no one but must bless all mankind.¹

– Zitkala-Sa, *American Indian Magazine*, July–September (1918)

On the morning of October 9, 1893, Potawatomi political leader Simon Pokagon rang a facsimile of the Liberty Bell to open Chicago Day at the World's Columbian Exposition.² He had been invited by Chicago's mayor, Carter Harrison, who imagined that the ceremony might illustrate an important cultural connection between the rise of the great city of Chicago and the region's Indian people.³ Yet as Pokagon, dressed in a suit like most white men that day although distinguished by a feathered cap, struck the bell, his appearance at the Fair offered a far more complex range of meanings.⁴ Although Chicago Day may have been a high point for the mayor and others, commemorating as it did the anniversary of the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, the moment was a very different one for Pokagon.⁵ His appearance at the Fair represented a critical, and urgent, opportunity.⁶

As a public Indian intellectual,⁷ Pokagon aimed to engage the Fair's audiences in rethinking the very premise of the Exposition, namely, that America's origins and history could be represented through impressive displays of architecture, celebrations of scientific discovery, the marketing of new food products, and the articulation of white cultural supremacy through the displays along the Midway. This part of the fairgrounds embodied an arrangement of diverse cultures that followed an evolutionary logic for displaying humanity using a scale that measured human beings according to stages from "less" to "more" civilized. Within a mile-long strip of populist display the Midway relied on discrete ethnographic exhibitions of nonwhite people

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performing in their “native” costumes to reiterate a social Darwinist understanding of progress. Pokagon saw things differently. He sought to show the irony of Indians’ participation in these celebrations of America when they had lost both the political rights and the economic resources needed to claim sovereignty over land and culture.⁸

As Pokagon ascended the stage to begin his opening address, he faced dignitaries who had traveled to Chicago from all over the world. Surveying his audience, Pokagon began, “Where these great Columbian show-buildings stretch skyward, and where stands this ‘Queen City of the West’ once stood the red man’s wigwams;”⁹ His address aimed to fix the site of the Fair in Indian terms. He did not celebrate the Expo, or praise Chicago Day, or recall the events of the 1871 fire. Instead, he looked to an earlier time and lamented the unfulfilled principles that lay behind democratic freedom and the historical legacy of Columbus’s journey to the Americas. His speech continued, “here met their old men, young men, and maidens; here blazed their council fires.”¹⁰

Chicago had once belonged to the Potawatomi. Pokagon’s speech remembered this past, as it baldly criticized American imperialism and the tide of civilized white settlers that washed over – and displaced – indigenous peoples across the continent. His pointed and public counter-history ignited controversy: Who invited *him* to the party? And how dare he take the opportunity to impugn the message of the Exposition, the message – after all – of America itself? Contemporary readers might well ponder the same question. Why *was* a Native American man chosen to open Chicago Day in the first place? Pokagon was a trophy, an authentic connection to the past, a piece of local nostalgia, a gesture toward irony, a figure associated with a primitive freedom that was understood to be American – and more.

This book is not about Simon Pokagon at all. But it is about the storm of meanings, urbanism, industrialism, and imperialism that Indian public performances elicited at the end of the nineteenth century. Surrounding Pokagon’s performance on that October day was an American cultural repertoire that Indians would have to confront, assimilate, master, defy, and perform for the next several decades. This moment was strikingly different from the America that earlier generations of Indian people, living during the beginning of the nineteenth century, had to navigate. For the group of Indian intellectuals who followed Pokagon had to face this new storm of meanings, and their histories demonstrate the limits and opportunities to be found in doing so. Pokagon was hardly the first Indian to grapple with an American public, but he may have been the first to do so under the bright lights of modernity,¹¹ and among the first to embody the profound question Gerald Vizenor has posed to scholars of Native American studies: “What did it mean to be the first generation to hear stories of the past, bear the horrors of the moment, and write to the future?”¹²

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This book aims to provide a collective cultural biography of four Indian intellectuals who followed in Pokagon's footsteps: Charles Eastman, Carlos Montezuma, Gertrude Bonnin (also known as Zitkala-Sa), and Luther Standing Bear. Pokagon's history, like theirs, concerned self-fashioning and the struggle to define oneself for a wide array of audiences. The ambivalence Pokagon's performance produced at the Fair connects him to these other individuals, as a pre-figure, a prototype, a near-ancestral figure.¹³ Pokagon offered the opening scene, a moment of self-representation that foreshadowed the how and why of Native public performances, whether written or spoken, that began to flourish during the early decades of the twentieth century, and that helped define public perceptions of *Indianness*.¹⁴

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, dramatic staged performances of Native Americans for non-Native commercial audiences became popular through Wild West shows, circuses, fairs, exhibitions, vaudeville, and burlesque, as well as in museums and tourist venues. In these acts of nostalgia, Native people were honored as romantic, brave, and spiritual, but doomed to extinction because of their inability to adapt to a modern world. During the century following, Native artists and intellectuals have increasingly taken control of Native performances, molding drama, music, dance, performance art, and film to conform to their own needs and values. Pokagon's opening asks us to turn to a much earlier period in the history of Native performance, and to consider if and how Native speakers, writers, actors, and activists were able to strategically harness the expectations of largely non-Native audiences on behalf of themselves and Indian Country. Unlike earlier Native public figures, like William Apsess (1798–1839), Pokagon found himself working in a time when dominant expectations of Indians situated him in an already-doomed-to-vanish position that seemed to require a strategic performance of Native culture to assert an indigenous present and future. By the turn of the twentieth century, the stakes for Native public figures had shifted when it came to performance and representation. Despite this shift, Pokagon and the Indian intellectuals after him used the forms of writing introduced by European colonizers, in ways similar to that of their Native predecessors, to record their own histories, write petitions, and compose political tracts and speeches.¹⁵ This latter generation of Native intellectual leaders faced a new challenge: how to claim their rights as modern, American citizens who wanted to use citizenship to intervene in the affairs of a government that had already been intervening in Native peoples' affairs for far too long. At the same time, Native leaders were also navigating the occasions when they were called upon to perform Indianness according to primitivist ideologies that aimed to define Indianness only in terms of the past – and a past as largely imagined by white audiences who romanticized the “noble savage” figure who was now in decline.¹⁶ For Native intellectuals at the turn of the twentieth century, their representational politics revolved around how to retain their

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own definitions of indigenous sovereignty while fighting for political citizenship that was not about integration but rather a means for tipping the balance of power in their favor.¹⁷

For many non-Native people in the audience that day in 1893, Pokagon's appearance signified the power of pacification and the closing of the frontier.¹⁸ How better to celebrate American progress and the triumph of modern democracy than by witnessing a Native man strike the Liberty Bell, a visual and aural reminder of the promises of democratic freedom? In addition, Indianness more generally enabled many white viewers, from different backgrounds, to celebrate a particular narrative of American freedom, one that disavowed the violence of colonialism and slavery on which the country's history rested.¹⁹ Pokagon at the Columbian Exhibition tied together: America's founding, the industrial site of Chicago, an ancient Indian past, and a structural and ideological disavowal of the consequences and legacies of the actual Columbian encounter.²⁰

Pokagon's rhetoric demonstrated the inextricable relation between the American nation and Indian people, so that white middle-class Americans could reimagine the so-called Indian Problem. With his gaze fixed toward the fairgrounds, Pokagon continued his critique: "The world's people, from what they have so far seen of us on the Midway will regard us as savages; but they shall yet know that we are human as well as they.... The Red Man is your brother, and God is the Father of all."²¹ As they were confronted by Pokagon's narrative, many listeners might be moved to see the Fair through his eyes. Speaking on this global stage, he sought empathy, sympathy, and understanding as he gave voice to a lost, or rather neglected, history. For although his audience may have desired a romantic version of colonial grandeur, he remembered things differently. His speech highlighted the construction of this cultural space as a merger of spectacle and anthropological didacticism, in which "Columbian show buildings" erected to celebrate modern American civilization resulted in an erasure of "the red man's wigwam," an overwriting of Potawatomi claims to the land. He may have nodded, in his opening remarks, to Chicago as the "Queen City of the West," but Pokagon's speech also critiqued the hegemonic practices of racialization and cultural hierarchization that were built into Chicago Day's events and the Fair's displays, ready to be consumed by fairgoers.²²

Pokagon's speech was not the only act of performance as resistance at the Fair. In fact, when the address was over he walked the fairgrounds with other Potawatomi to sell his published treatise, "The Red Man's Rebuke."²³

For Pokagon, it was not just remembering or living in the moment, but writing for both the present and the future that mattered. Writing, in this sense, is actually a performance, and a central theme of this book. All four main subjects who came after Pokagon were part of a Native intellectual network who utilized different kinds of writing: the memoir, the letter, the tract, the polemic, the children's story, the opera, and so forth. Understanding

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FIGURE 1. “The Red Man’s Rebuke” pamphlet cover (1893).
Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI.

these writings – and the way they emerged out of intellectual circuits – is key to understanding the cultural politics Pokagon epitomized at the Exposition, and how his rhetoric prefigured that of Eastman, Montezuma, Bonnin, and Standing Bear.

In mass producing his “Rebuke,” which was printed on birch bark and sold as a souvenir, Pokagon exemplified the strategies later Indian intellectuals would use to make their voices heard.²⁴ In effect, he is the first member of the cohort that this book follows. His allusions are not accommodationist as much as aggressive and forward cultural politics. His “Rebuke” makes this point plain: “On behalf of my people, the American Indians, I hereby declare to you, the pale faced race that has usurped our lands and homes, that we have no spirit to celebrate with you the great Columbian Fair now being held in this Chicago city, the wonder of the world.”²⁵ So the real legacy of Pokagon at the Fair might be how he expanded the boundaries of oppositional discourse and did so on a stage and in writing. Despite the use of celebratory rhetoric situating Chicago as “the wonder of the world,” the rest of the rebuke lamented the imperial logic of the Fair.²⁶

The “Rebuke” also positioned Pokagon as a representative figure for Indian people. Just as Pokagon was tribally transcendent in his writing, so too were the four figures I trace, who often tended to speak not for the

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tribe or for a specific Indian nation but for their “race.”²⁷ This was a crucial strategy for individuals interested in acquiring the rights of citizenship in the United States, not merely to become a part of the nation but rather to have more tools in their arsenal ready to critique and reshape the nation that continued to threaten indigenous sovereignty. Nowhere did Pokagon’s “Rebuke” specify his connection to the Pokagon band of Potawatomi, but instead he used the more general category of “American Indian” to assert his position and his politics. When he writes, “on behalf of my people,” he means – and was read to mean – Indian people writ large. This type of categorization enabled Pokagon to juxtapose Indianness with American whiteness. For then and now Indianness mattered and so, as Robert Warrior has argued in *Tribal Secrets*, it was less a matter of emphasizing “Indian” in essentialist terms and more a matter of disentangling it from questions of authenticity by looking to different modes of performance; education, writing, lecturing, and performing (acting).²⁸ Furthermore, when the text references the “pale faced race” Pokagon is hailing a white audience. His rebuke becomes even more personal and emphatic by using the phrase “declare to you” in order to appeal to his audience through their shared humanity. Within this personal hailing, however, is always the voice of collectives, both Indian and white, where the dispossession of Indian lands is a real problem given that “we” (Indian people) “have no spirit to celebrate” the Fair or the city of Chicago as any kind of “wonder of the world.” Pokagon’s assertions offered a powerful counter-narrative to the one embodied in the gleaming neoclassical buildings of the White City that were built in contrast to exhibits of lesser, nonwhite cultures along the Midway. Such distinctions could not enthrall Pokagon; he performed at the Fair with a keen awareness that the Exposition’s aims were not his own.²⁹

The Columbian Exposition had certainly succeeded in including if also misrepresenting indigenous people in several important ways: first, through inaccurate ethnological displays that characterized indigeneity as linked to primitivism; second, through staged reproductions of Indian schoolhouses on the Midway that argued Indian people must Americanize or disappear; and third, through the appearance of Simon Pokagon, whose performance, at least in part, pushed back against these other forms of representation. The bold claims of “The Red Man’s Rebuke,” therefore, put forth Pokagon’s argument that European conquest ought not be celebrated but rather seen in terms of infestation and disease as he described early colonists as pests and parasites who infected Native people. Pokagon’s rebuke ends by referring to Judgment Day, when God will say to the white man:

I shall forthwith grant these red men of America great power, and delegate them to cast you out of Paradise, and hurl you headlong through its outer gates into the endless abyss beneath – far beyond, where darkness meets with light, there to dwell, and thus shut you out from my presence and the presence of angels and the light of heaven forever, and ever.³⁰

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Concluding with a reference to Christian theology, with his Potawatomi spin on it, Pokagon urges white readers to consider revising their views on American history in relation to the usurpation of indigenous lands and culture. For Pokagon's "Rebuke" makes clear that Christianity's God will most certainly recognize the sins of Euro-American colonization to grant Native people the power to punish those who have oppressed them, as the red man casts the white man out of Paradise "forever, and ever." Beyond Pokagon's speech and selling his keepsake, there is yet another moment from the Fair that offers a different, and somewhat contradictory, example of the presence and possible futures for Native people at the turn of the twentieth century. For Pokagon was not alone in using *this* cultural space to perform Indianness and to criticize American culture and society, and to use white and Christian rhetoric to do so.³¹

It was Wednesday, July 12, 1893, around ten o'clock in the morning, when the president of the Minnesota branch of the Chicago Folk-Lore Society gave his address to fairgoers, titled "Sioux Mythology." No doubt attendance was high given the topic and the "Indian craze" to see and hear authentic Indian talks during this period.³² The speaker listed on the program, for the International Folklore Congress that day, was Dr. Charles A. Eastman. He was the only other Native person invited to present a formal speech at the Fair. Unlike Pokagon, his address was marked neither by pageantry nor by nostalgia but instead framed by the practical eye of scientific discourse.

Eastman's remarks began by invoking the rhetoric of social Darwinism. Although his key terms appeared trapped in a binary structure, civilized in opposition to savage, this familiar, if also problematic, framing would have gotten the attention of his audience. When discussing the American citizen, for example, Eastman employed subtlety to shift between sacred and secular registers. This shifting enabled him to suggest that in fact, the aborigines of the United States, like all human beings, possessed the same mind "equipped with all its faculties" to make them capable "even in ... [an] uncultured state" of the important "process of reasoning." Eastman's speech worked through the language of white civilization and racial uplift to craft a rational argument for why Indian people ought to have the same political rights as any other American citizen.³³

Like Pokagon's Liberty Bell address, Eastman's participation at the Fair through the Folklore Congress afforded him a space to be strategic in his self-presentation. He was a member of the Sisseton-Wahpeton tribe and he was emerging as a well-known public intellectual, as Dartmouth's Indian no less, so he could draw on all these aspects of his identity to educate his audience about the past and present of Indian people. Considering that Eastman's speech cast Indians in scientific terms it is curious that it also briefly touched on spiritual beliefs. At the end of his talk, after listing the names of Sioux deities in connection to water and land, Eastman abruptly

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concluded with a subtle reference to a comparison between American society and the Sioux Nation. We might wonder if Pokagon sat among the audience trying to make sense of these closing remarks:

These few hurriedly collected facts concerning the mythology of the Sioux Nation will tend to show that the American Indian, *before the coming of the whites*, had a great faith in his “unknown God,” whose colossal power, physical, moral, and mental, was so impressed upon his untutored mind and made him so conscious of his own sinful life, that he felt he was not warranted to approach Him direct, but through some mediator, who will intercede for him with his Great Mystery.³⁴ [emphasis mine]

Eastman's reference to “facts” seems to situate him and his topic within a social scientific discourse more than the study of folklore. When he suggests that the mythology of the Sioux Nation was quite different “before the coming of the whites,” he deftly participates in a cultural logic that similarly underpinned Pokagon's critique of American civilization. Both speeches refer to loss. For Eastman, faith is at stake, and for Pokagon, land. In both instances the “coming of the whites,” which we might read as the arrival of Columbus to the Americas and the occasion for the Fair itself, is to blame for cultural and physical dispossession. Eastman's conclusion also implies that Native people were, prior to colonial contact, more humble in their engagements with the Great Mystery. One might then infer that this relationship was changed and corrupted after “the coming of the whites.”

Both talks by Eastman and Pokagon operated within an imagined nostalgia promoted by the Fair's organizers, who sought to recall an America long gone, but both men also had an eye to the future. For these Indian intellectuals, the past they mourned was neither that of Frederick Jackson Turner's closed frontier nor a Puritan New England. In addition, their future was concerned neither with the extension of American influence abroad nor a conquest of territories, but rather focused on overcoming and overturning a history of fraught interactions between whites and Indians that had resulted in so many losses, in people, in faith, and in land.

For Eastman, the Fair marked the beginning of a career as a public speaker, a writer, and an educator. In a similar fashion to Carlos Montezuma, Gertrude Bonnin, and Luther Standing Bear, he moved from the specific site of the Folklore Congress to other cultural spaces to push beyond the limits of Indianness defined by types, such as “noble savage,” “wild Indian,” and “warrior.” Instead, Eastman and other Native intellectuals found ways to represent a range of ideas about the roles Indian people could play as political and cultural citizens of the United States, and as members of Native communities. Their intellectual work did not capitulate to the ideology of the Fair, but rather sought to remember and create an American nation that acknowledged the conquest of Native lands *and* the necessary presence of

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Indian people in its future. These were the stakes and claims Eastman's generation of Native intellectuals set forth.

Why Collective Cultural Biography?

This history begins with Charles Eastman, the Native physician well known for tending to survivors of the Wounded Knee massacre in 1890, just three years before his presentation at the Chicago Fair, before he became active as a writer of autobiographies, political tracts, and young adult books. The next chapter turns to another member of this cohort, Carlos Montezuma (Yavapai), who, like Eastman, trained as a doctor. Unlike Eastman, however, Montezuma did not move around different reservations in search of work or rely on white progressive allies in the Northeast, but succeeded in his medical career based out of Chicago. Perhaps Montezuma was among the fairgoers in 1893 who witnessed Pokagon's speech or came to hear Eastman talk. Living in Chicago for most of his life, Montezuma was an active member of local professional groups, and able to self-publish a Native newsletter circulated throughout the United States to Indian and non-Indian readers alike. Montezuma no doubt drew on similar sorts of networks that had supported Pokagon's writing and speaking career through the patronage of white men and women among Chicago's Gold Coast "high society" and the Chautauqua literary circuit and "Friends of Indians" groups nationwide.³⁵ The third chapter of this book moves to a friend of Eastman and the former fiancée of Montezuma, Gertrude Bonnin (Yankton Sioux). Often known as Zitkala-Sa, after she began publishing short stories, Bonnin also became active as a lobbyist in Washington, DC. Bonnin's story also brings us to the West Coast, specifically Utah, where she and her husband, Raymond, lived and worked among the Ute. There she collaborated with William Hanson, a professor of music at Brigham Young University, to produce an opera titled *The Sun Dance* in 1910, before she relocated to Washington, DC, to found and become president of the National Council of American Indians, a position in which she served until her death. The fourth and final chapter of this book is largely centered on activities of performance on the West Coast, in California, and on the acting and activist career of Luther Standing Bear (Oglala Sioux). Beginning with his education at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School (where Bonnin had taught, Eastman had worked as a recruiter, and Montezuma had been the resident physician for the well-known football team), Standing Bear first became acquainted with Carlisle's headmaster, Richard Pratt, who would help shape the young man's future. The fourth chapter continues by examining the ways Standing Bear maneuvered Pine Ridge as a teacher before being hired as a translator and performer by William "Buffalo Bill" Cody, which set the stage for his work in the emergent film industry of Hollywood.³⁶ Examining all four of these

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individuals in detail, while also attending to their points of intersection and disjuncture, reveals the different strategies Native intellectuals used as public figures during the early twentieth century.

All four of them were active as writers. Therefore, I turn to the work of American Indian literary critics, such as Robert Warrior, Philip Round, and Penelope Kelsey, who have focused on the subversive potential of the writing Native people produced.³⁷ I focus on these four writers in particular because some of their political works have been understudied and they have also been criticized for advocating assimilation, despite the fact that they invariably had tribal-centered agendas, which contradicted arguments in favor of acculturation. My choice to examine them together contributes to this scholarship as much as it also reflects the work of historians of the Progressive Era. This book builds on the work of Frederick Hoxie, who has highlighted the importance of these individuals, and the recent work of Cathleen Cahill, whose social history of the Indian Service examines Native and non-Native employees and broader issues related to governance, colonialism, and gender (*Federal Fathers & Mothers* [2011]). In addition, Jean O'Brien's *Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians out of Existence in New England* (2010), which looks to an earlier time period and focuses on the ways that local histories written by European Americans operated to assert their own modernity while simultaneously denying it to Indian people, has influenced how I analyze these Native intellectuals and their engagement with modernity. This book, like these other histories, aims to push back against dominant trends in American historical writing that have suggested the period between the 1880s and the 1930s be understood as a decline in Native activities because of either population decreases or the so-called success of assimilation practices. The collective nature of this history aims to showcase quite the contrary, that there were a diversity of ways Native intellectuals participated in American society with regards to politics and culture during the early twentieth century.³⁸

My examination of the cohort of Indian cultural producers in the pages that follow links their work to political changes, like the Dawes Act (1887), the Indian Citizenship Act (1924), and the Indian Reorganization Act (1934) to add to the scholarship of Robert Berkhofer, Brian Dippie, Philip J. Deloria, and others.³⁹ These scholars have successfully traced the origins and movements of white attitudes and representations of concepts like “vanishing Indian” or “playing Indian” that appeared in science, literature, art, and popular culture, while also influencing federal Indian policy. Inspired by these earlier studies, but with attention more focused on Native responses to white perceptions and utilizing Deloria's theorization of dominant American cultural “expectations,” I consider the ways that American cultural ideologies helped shape policy formation to point out how this intersection contributed to the emergence of pan-tribal⁴⁰ networks, which affected changes in federal policy. Indians perceived this early, as Lisa