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LATS 232

Professor Rosario

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Writing Assignment #2: Archival Lessons from the French Revolution



This photo was taken by Edward Curtis, an American photographer and ethnographer who sought to capture the life of Native Americans in the first decades of the 20th century. By trying to engage the American gaze, Curtis tried his best to fully manifest Native American culture and lifestyle through his photography--but fails. Instead, he incorrectly displays Plain Indians by giving them props and traditional clothing to fit his standard for what makes a Native American. Furthermore, he romanticizes Native American life through the erasure of European influences--in other words, he removed modern objects and European-American furniture from the scenes in which the pictures were captured. His photographs would soon have a cultural impact ushering in the generic representation of Native Americans as being Plain Indians on horseback. However, with this image depicted, we see small evidence of cultural diffusion in that the woman is wearing a necklace with a cross on it. With this demonstration of European

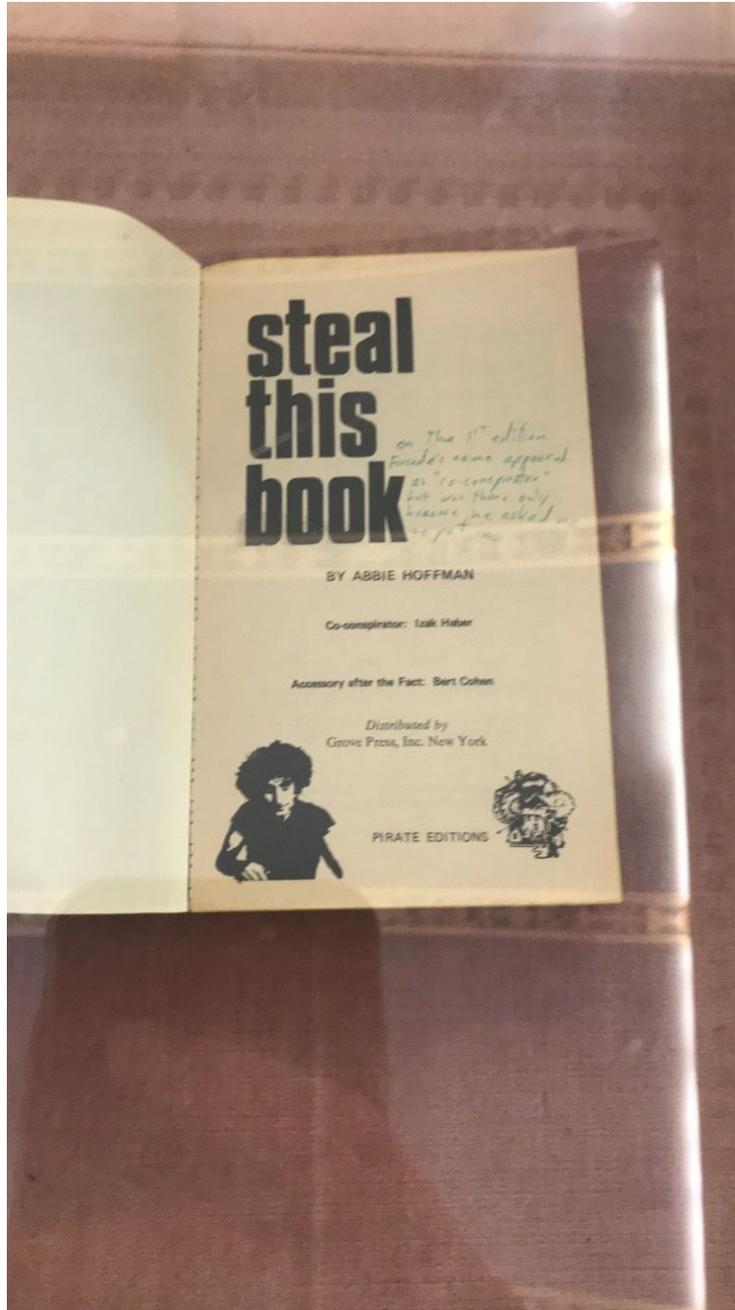
influence on Native American culture, to what extent is this photograph authentic? Thus, inevitably, this also brings up the question as to whether such elements exist of authority still relevant and authentic?

In analyzing the relevancy of the photograph to history and to the present, it is not hard to come by times where history was erased in order to satisfy one's needs. For Curtis it was to enable Americans to gain knowledge about the Native Americans that existed in the United States as they were beginning to make contact with these inhabitants. This erasure of history also coincides with the conservation of history, which can be seen in this photograph with the lack of European influence in the scenery, but having the woman with the necklace of the cross. Panitch makes light of these two opposing tendencies (preservation and destruction) in her argument as she discusses its impact on cultural and historical institutions and artifacts of the day.<sup>1</sup> As Curtis removes these items from the scenery, we are being introduced to the purposeful elimination of European history (as they made contact far before the 20th century), and in doing so eliminating the past that go along with the conquest of the Americas. This is also brings up another point that Panitch makes in her argument: the malleability of archival development.<sup>2</sup> This, in turn, brings into question our ongoing relationship to our documentary heritage. Due to its fragile states, documentary of our past thus affects how we see these Native Americans, especially in reference to what was going on during this time in history (World War I and first contacts with existing Native American tribes). When looking at the European influences and the lack thereof we see the extent to which this "old regime" is destroyed, but still implemented in the lives of the Native Americans. This also stresses the importance of the cultural impact that these photographs had on American conventional knowledge. Because this was the beginning of documented knowledge of Native Americans, many Americans were only provided with so little to thus draw conclusions about how these Native Americans lived--hence their generic stereotypes. Its accessibility only contributed to the knowledge that many Americans to this day still take to heart (inclusive of effects on history classes in the educational system in the United States.

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<sup>1</sup> Judith M. Panitch, "Liberty, Equality, Posterity?: Some Archival Lessons from the Case of the French Revolution," *The American Archivist*, Vol.59, No.1 (1996) pg 32.

<sup>2</sup> Panitch, "Liberty, Equality, Posterity?: Some Archival Lessons from the Case of the French Revolution,"pg 34.



*Steal this Book* by Abbie Hoffman is simply a counterculture classic--a how-to survival guide that goes against archetypal capitalist institutions. In regards to Panitch's essay, this book presents one of her arguments: "The creation of new repositories helped the Revolution to affirm its own identity..."<sup>3</sup> In tying them both together, the creation of this book leads to the formulation of an identity that is anti-capitalist, and is one of the things that ushers into similarly held beliefs that would soon be shared by succeeding generations. However, the question that arises from this is where or not this form of authority is authentic? This question comes to mind primarily because of the authors determination to find a mainstream publisher that would make

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<sup>3</sup> Panitch, "Liberty, Equality, Posterity?: Some Archival Lessons from the Case of the French Revolution,"pg 47.

her book public where it can be sold in a variety of bookstores. With this in mind, how would that contribute to the anti capitalist propaganda that Abbie is trying to promote to the wider audience? Does accessibility of any document come with a cost? I would answer it as such: that there is a dichotomy between accessibility and beliefs held by Hoffman. Its reliability also comes into mind, because many contributed to this book, yet people mainly associate the curation of the book to Hoffman. The archive also provided annotated versions of the book that are said to be done by Hoffman, which thus contributes to not only the malleability of documents and archives, as Panitch mentions, but also a “more thorough understanding of archival development during that defining period.”<sup>4</sup> The reliability of the text made by Hoffman and company are further questioned in the eyes of the audience--but they make to stand that to survive by undermining capitalist institutions one must follow what is said in the book. So to an extent, this text does deliver in its authoritativeness, but its message lacks reliability due to the contradiction contributed to its accessibility and the overall message.

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<sup>4</sup> Panitch, “Liberty, Equality, Posterity?: Some Archival Lessons from the Case of the French Revolution,”pg 47.