Judges’ Commentary on “A Narrative of the Life of Mary Jemison: A Cultural Baggage Tug-of-War” by Stephanie Leung

“A Cultural Baggage Tug-of-War” received an Honorable Mention in the University of Pittsburgh’s 2006/07 Composition Program Writing Contest

In “A Narrative of the Life of Mary Jemison: A Cultural Baggage Tug-of-War,” Stephanie Leung tells the story of a reading experience early in the semester that dislodges her understanding of North American frontier history. Using the extended metaphor of a tug of war, she shapes her response to an assignment asking students to consider how the “cultural baggage” acquired through formal education and other life experiences affects their reading of an 1824 account of a white settler’s complex relationship with her Native American captors. The image of opposing pulls not only enables Leung to craft a concisely detailed description of first encountering a representation of Native Americans that she finds startling, and at times deeply disturbing, but also helps her begin to reflect on the implications of this reading experience.

Her essay opens with telling summary of the sympathetic but sentimentally superficial view of Native Americans she encountered throughout elementary school:

Immediately after reading A Narrative of the Life of Mary Jemison, in an almost predictable manner, a sudden urge to listen to “Colors of the Wind” befell me, and I promptly obeyed. As I sat there quietly enjoying the song, it reminded of my love for the classic Disney movie from which the song came, Pocahontas, as well as the period in my life that surrounded it. I distinctly remember my elementary school social studies classes and how we often heard about the tales and customs of Native Americans. However, the Indians (although we were not allowed to call them that) abruptly
vanished after the fifth grade, and I have hardly given thought to them hereafter until today. By tucking a parenthetical reference to not being allowed to use “Indians” into a sentence telling readers that all study of Native Americans “abruptly vanished after the fifth grade,” she deftly suggests the limitations of her social studies education, without resorting to heavy-handed commentary.

The opening paragraph also effectively prepares for the essay’s depiction of well-intentioned yet decidedly oversimplified annual school field trips that nearly reduced regional history to themepark:

Just a few miles from my family’s house in Northbrook, Illinois lies one of the only tokens of history in my town, The Grove. Without fail, we could expect an autumn field trip to this interactive educational park every year. It appeared as though the curator created it solely for the purpose of accompanying our textbook, because everything we learned on paper, we could relive at The Grove. As our history lessons came to life there, the people of long ago became real and relevant. In a convincing setting, we role-played as schoolchildren of the prairies, hand-churned our own butter, and explored an Iroquois long house. By reading first and then experiencing for ourselves, we learned well the customs, lifestyle, and difficulties of each time period.

As we studied the unique lifestyles and rituals of Native Americans throughout American history, we only learned of injustices dealt to this minority group. Our textbooks relayed stories of how the whites tricked the natives by stealing all their land, and how the traditions of this “primitive” and unfortunate people group hardly exist anymore. Everything we learned invoked either pity for their miserable circumstances or respect for their unique lifestyles. Likewise, by watching Pocahontas, I developed sympathy for the protectors of nature, the pure in heart, the seemingly obvious
victims. The song *Colors of the Wind* shows the innocence of her people and the cruelty of their invaders.

Against this backdrop of childhood experiences, Leung’s account of her initial response to the *Narrative’s* sharply different image of Native Americans seems fitting:

Certainly, then, it should be of no surprise that the story of Mary Jemison came as a shock to me and opened my naïve eyes. As the *Narrative* introduced me to the horrific methods by which Indians punished their enemies, I felt at a lost as how to digest it. The settlers instigated it all by oppressing the indigenous people; consequently, the victims needed to defend themselves and retaliate. No; conversely, the barbaric exploits of the natives provide the rationalization for the pioneers’ endeavor to forcefully civilize and subdue them. . . .

While reading the *Narrative*, I could sense the tension between my presumptions and the new knowledge, where evidence strongly existed for both perspectives. The well-placed semicolons in this passage also help to convey the increasing tension of its author’s tug-of-war turns of mind.

To Leung’s credit, even when her essay’s focus shifts from descriptions of personal experience to close work with the *Narrative’s* language, the energy of her writing does not dwindle. Rather than drifting into the dutiful and increasingly arid analysis that all too often characterizes assigned work with text, she maintains momentum by steadily advancing her tug-of-war argument. Particulars of the *Narrative’s* diction and tone become basis for considering and reconsidering her conflicted feelings about its representations:

The phrase, “A number of scalps,” invokes an image I thought I could only find in horror movies, and the mental picture of many scalps piled together like someone bagging groceries immediately wipes away any pleasant thoughts of a peaceful Native American planting corn with the pilgrims. Also, the way she systematically retells the events as if she
were reading off a list makes it seem as though she wants to tell the story in a detached way, in fear of reliving the account.

. . . In Pocahontas, John Smith called the Native Americans “savages,” but the term took on a new meaning: from “uncivilized” to “sadistic.” As I continued to read these stories of the Indians’ horrific acts, it seemed only reasonable for me to conclude that no justification could forgive their deeds.

However, the tension insisted on arising. I have always been told the cliché phrase, “Don’t judge another man until you’ve walked a mile in his shoes.” Therefore, it is necessary to take into consideration the cultural context.

In the end, Leung’s interpretation of Mary Jemison’s attitude inspires her own efforts to come to terms with conflicting information:

As [Jemison’s] narrative matures, her understanding and ability to relate also develops. She neither forgets her crude history nor refuses to assimilate to the new culture. She both relishes the memory of her birth family and still genuinely loves and shows affection for her adopted people. By experiencing both worlds and witnessing the amoral measures of both groups, Jemison finds an equilibrium. The captive’s ability to find a balance throughout the story allows the reader to apply the same balance to the tension between past learning experiences and the current cultural shock. Because Mary Jemison can live with and make sense of it all, so can I.

“A Cultural Baggage Tug-of-War” received an Honorable Mention in recognition of Stephanie Leung’s well-proportioned and concisely detailed efforts to explore through apt extended metaphor the conflicting aspects of a complex reading experience.