Educational Genocide

A unique and astonishing characteristic of Shan Goshorn’s work is the use of photographs that she weaves into traditional Cherokee baskets. When I asked her if anyone else has done this before, she said, “I’ve never seen any work like that.” What first drew Goshorn to my attention was seeing the panoramic photograph of the Carlisle Indian School student body (1912), woven around the deep rim of the lid of Educational Genocide; The Legacy of the Carlisle Indian Boarding School (fig. 1), just shortly after this basket won the 2011 Red Earth Festival’s Grand Award for Best in Show. I was in the process of researching the Carlisle Indian School’s extensive photographic archive and exploring how Native artists are reclaiming and reframing some of these disturbing, colonial images. I was flabbergasted to discover that in Educational Genocide Goshorn had fused this nineteenth-century technology—photography—with the centuries-old tradition of Cherokee double-weave basket design.

Educational Genocide measures almost two feet in length, and when looking at the image around the lid one can clearly make out the features of individual faces, the insignia and buttons of dark uniforms, and neat collars topping white blouses. The Olympic athlete Jim Thorpe was at the school in 1912, as was Goshorn’s grandmother. Goshorn came across the photograph hanging in her cousin’s restaurant in Cherokee, North Carolina. At this point, she had not yet woven any photographs, but she thought to herself, “That would wrap around a basket very nicely.” She borrowed the photograph and took it to Kinkos to make a scan, which she then used for her basket (fig. 2). Goshorn had only very recently started weaving seriously and had completed just one single-weave and one double-weave basket; Educational Genocide was only her third basket. When she told her Mom, “I’ve got this idea. . . . I think I’m going to try to weave a photograph into a basket,” her Mom just said, “Hah!”

Goshorn explains that a double-weave basket is one basket sitting inside another, joined around the rim (fig. 3). Construction starts on the interior bottom, and weaving continues up the sides to the desired height and then back down the sides to be finished on the bottom. When I asked her if the double-weave design has any particular function in telling this history, she reflected and replied, “I like the fact that this is a Cherokee basket. I also like the sturdiness; it has more presence, more weight, more sense of self.” The exterior of Educational Genocide is woven from beige paper splints printed with the words of the infamous “Kill the Indian, and save the man” speech made by Carlisle’s founder and first superintendent, Lieutenant Richard Henry Pratt (fig. 4). Goshorn has sliced up the text to create the splints. Individual words are...
still legible, but when integrated into this basket they contribute to a very different narrative (fig. 5). The interiors of basket and lid are bright red—the color of anger, blood, passion, and danger but also love (fig. 6). And these interiors are woven out of thousands of paper splints, each one of which carries a strong message about the terrible cultural devastation that Carlisle and other boarding schools inflicted on Native peoples and the continuing legacies of these programs in Native communities today.

The Carlisle Indian Industrial School and Photography

The founding of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School (1879–1918), the first US government boarding school, marked the beginning of the coordinated, state-run campaign of educational genocide that would be directed at all indigenous youth. Carlisle was an audacious experiment in cultural transformation, and it was here that the blueprint for the federal system of Indian schools was developed and would be copied in Canada. Carlisle’s founder and first superintendent, Richard Henry Pratt, was a man with a mission; it is appropriate that his words and ideas are remembered by being incorporated into Goshorn’s baskets. After fighting Native nations who were defending their lands and lifeways on the Plains, Pratt was appointed by the US Army to be the jailor of captured warriors, imprisoned for three years (1875–78) at Fort Marion in Saint Augustine, Florida (fig. 9). Pratt opened a fortress school for the prisoners and became convinced that he had found the answer to the nation’s “Indian problem.” He insisted that if Native children were treated in the same way as the Florida prisoners and transported to schools far from their reservation communities, they could be stripped of all vestiges of their traditional cultures and readily reeducated in the religion, language, values, and behavior of mainstream settler society. Pratt projected that at schools like Carlisle this transformation of the “Indian” from “savagery” to “civilization” could be accomplished in a single generation. His objective at Carlisle was twofold: first, to “civilize” Native children from across the United States in preparation for their assimilation; second, to demonstrate to skeptical Americans that this transformation was possible.

From the first days of the Carlisle Indian School, Pratt recruited the new medium of photography to provide visual “proof” that the dramatic transformation he promised could indeed be rapidly achieved. A convincing public visual record was vital to his purpose. With the willing cooperation of local commercial photographer John Nicholas Choate, he carefully choreo-

in the student roster. We had always known they had gone, but to see them listed . . . made it so real (figs. 7, 8).”

Just as her ancestors would spend weeks locating and gathering the rivercane, white oak, and honeysuckle they needed to make their baskets, so too Goshorn needs time and expertise to acquire her materials. But instead of riverbanks and copse, Goshorn’s search grounds are archives and libraries, where she becomes a hunter-gatherer, harvesting written and visual documents as well as listening to conversations: “I gather information from everything that happens around me,” she explains, “That’s my preparation.” As a result of her research, Educational Genocide is multivocal. It incorporates a historical document outlining the genocidal mission of Carlisle, along with the bureaucratic record meticulously kept by the school on each and every one of the students, together with the human side of the story—visible in the photograph that shows the faces of the students.

The basket draws in the viewer to marvel at the rendering of a photograph in warp and weft. It then delivers the realization that on this basket the students are not posed to demonstrate the success of the school, but instead to expose the pain and horror of a campaign that obliterated tribal names, reduced hundreds of traditional regalia to a single uniform, and forced children from disparate nations into an individual but regularized “Indian.” Combining the aptitude of the evidential historian with her weaving skills and artistic talent, Educational Genocide carries a strong message about the terrible cultural devastation that Carlisle and other boarding schools inflicted on Native peoples and the continuing legacies of these programs in Native communities today.
Despite the hundreds of photographs that Choate made of Carlisle’s students and activities, it was the before-and-after pairs that were most popular with White viewers and that became the photographic signature of the school, as well as an instrument of its propaganda. Mass-produced as albumen boudoir and cabinet prints, Pratt sent them out to the US president, congressmen, government officials, and prospective donors, and also offered them as “rewards” to any reader of the school’s Indian Helper who signed up ten new subscribers. At Choate’s downtown studio and on campus, the photographs were sold to members of the public. Intended to provide indisputable proof of the success of this federally sponsored campaign of cultural genocide, the before-and-after photographs carried a forthright message of a seemingly straightforward and easy transition from “savagery” to “civilization,” in binary pairs that elided all reference to the processes of change demanded by the school, and that totally disregarded the disruption, loss, and pain inflicted on the students, as well as subsequent generations.

Despite their apparent simplicity, these photographs are highly complex visual constructions that carry covert narratives. Embedded in these photographic dyads is a new rendering of the “vanishing Indian.” Here, under the eyes of the viewer, instead of being subject to physically disappear—‘the traditional solution”—individual tribes are rendered culturally extinct, a process described by Ted Jojola (Isleta Pueblo), in an essay about boarding school images entitled “Photographs from Hell,” as “a magic act called ‘The Vanishing American.’” Reflecting on photography and how it has “abused” Native Americans, Arshinabeh writer Gerald Vizenor demands, “Photographers abused the native sense of privacy to capture an image and then either sold or distributed the pictures to various agencies. How should we now respond to photographs that have violated the privacy of the natives?”

Before and After Photographic Baskets
Shan Goshorn’s response to this question is to weave the Carlisle photographs into traditional Cherokee baskets. Goshorn is herself a distinguished photographer who has directly used the power of her camera to expose and combat visual racist stereotypes (figs. 12, 13). But she finds that her baskets have been much more effective in conveying the difficult messages she wants to communicate. “Up until I started making baskets,” she notes, “my work was very confrontational and people would wrap their arms around themselves and practically back out of a room, because they didn’t want to deal with that confrontation.” Reflecting on how that response has now changed, she reflects:

But there’s something about baskets… maybe it’s the familiarity of the shape—it’s a domestic vessel, they’re not threatening, they’re very nurturing—so I think people are intrigued. People literally lean into these baskets. Instead of backing up and separating and distancing themselves, they actually want to engage in this conversation.

The conversation she hopes to open up through her Carlisle baskets directly engages Native peoples, but Goshorn also wants “the general public to be educated about this history and about the terrible impact it has had on tribal cultures… I’m stunned by how many people in America are still just so surprised that there are Indians left… so unaware. Our history is not taught in schools.”

Like Educational Genocide, the exteriors of the “before” and “after” baskets that make up her most ambitious series of baskets—Resisting the Mission: Filling the Silence—are woven from the words of Pratt’s “kill the Indian” address, and their red interiors are made from splinters carrying the students’ names (fig. 14). While creating this series, Goshorn engaged directly with members of the communities who have been affected by the historical trauma instigated
by Carlisle’s program and who have experienced firsthand the enduring legacies of cultural destruction. Sending the before-and-after images out to communities and carrying them with her on her travels, she invited descendants to inscribe their own thoughts and feelings directly onto the photographs (figs. 15, 16). Then she cut the images into splints and wove them into seven pairs of Cherokee single-weave baskets, each standing nearly two feet high. The photographic pairs Goshorn selected for these baskets cover the wide range of Native nations enrolled at Carlisle—Inuit, Lakota, Pueblo, Apache, Navajo. The school included representatives from almost every single Native nation whose lands were incorporated into the United States; few were left untouched by its genocidal mission. 

Navajo/Diné student Hastiin To’Haali, known at Carlisle as Tom Torlino, arrived at Carlisle in 1882. He is one of twelve Navajo posed for a photograph on the school bandstand with Pratt (see fig. 10). There is also a solo portrait of him; the only before-and-after pair that Choate made of an individual student (figs. 17, 18). When members of the public have been made aware of the history of Indian boarding schools including Carlisle, it is often after seeing Torlino’s before-and-after photographs. These iconic Carlisle images were used to demonstrate the “marked contrast between a Navajo as he arrived in native dress, and as he now looks, and worth 20 cents a piece.” Created by carefully cropping a three-quarter length portrait so that it closely matched the image made of Torlino three years earlier, Choate succeeded in displaying striking changes in Torlino’s dress, hair, ornamentation, gaze, and even skin color, all of which served to make his supposed transformation appear particularly dramatic. As with all such duos, the visual narrative embedded in this pair of photographs powerfully suggested that a dramatic change had taken place and deftly implied that the exhibited exterior changes had been matched by analogous interior changes.

Responding to Torlino’s persistent exploitation through the misuse of his teamed photographic images, in Two Views Shan Goshorn refutes Carlisle’s binary message by weaving a portrait that unites and merges these two photographs (fig. 19). “I wanted to show the division in this one person,” Goshorn explains. The portrait nestled in this basket is mesmeric; the extraordinary resilience demanded of Torlino is suggested by the serene power that seems to radiate from his face. Torlino’s bureaucratic Carlisle record is reproduced in the tan splints that encircle this basket (fig. 20). But Goshorn does not allow his story to end with Carlisle. After his four years at the school, Torlino returned to Coyote Canyon, New Mexico, to resume his traditional studies and to serve as medicine man to his people until he died. So, unlike the original before-and-after photographs, Goshorn’s basket embodies his whole life, with the later period being described by his great-great-granddaughter, Nonabah Sam. Her handwritten account is written on the basket’s rust colored splints, which speak of the continuing impact of Torlino’s years at Carlisle on his Diné family, who respect education but remain true to Diné teachings, as was his wish. (Interestingly, Choate had made his long hair a striking feature of Torlino’s “before” photograph, but Goshorn discovered from his relatives that Torlino kept his hair short for the rest of his life.) The basket’s white, black, blue, and yellow splints carry a Navajo prayer.
for well-being in the four sacred colors, but the irregular blackbird-eye pattern of the basket references the discomfort and divisions internalized by many students.

All the photographs woven into these baskets were made by Choate in Carlisle. Either the students visited his studio at 21 Main Street (now High Street), 500 yards from the Trout Gallery, or photographs on the Carlisle Indian School campus (now the US Army War College), just two miles up the road. In an era when hundreds of Carlisle images are now available online,

Shan Goshorn is intensely aware of the importance of the photographic encounter and the saliency of the physical photograph. “It’s very different when you hold the image…because that photo is literally the link between the photographer’s eye and the subject…” She invites us to position Choate’s photographic duos as the “before,” with her Cherokee baskets being the “after.” Now integrated and carried in a traditional craft form, the photographs are no longer instruments of propaganda. They can offer a means for Native and non-Native audiences alike to view, ponder, and begin to understand the history of Carlisle and its legacies.

Shan Goshorn, interview by the author, November 12, 2016, Frankfurt, Germany. All Goshorn quotations are from this interview.

1. The photographs of these students have now returned to the place where they were made. In this exhibition, Resisting the Mission, Shan Goshorn entirely transmutes the meaning of “before” and “after.” She invites us to position Choate’s photographic duos as the “before,” with her Cherokee baskets being the “after.” Now integrated and carried in a traditional craft form, the photographs are no longer instruments of propaganda. They can offer a means for Native and non-Native audiences alike to view, ponder, and begin to understand the history of Carlisle and its legacies.

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