

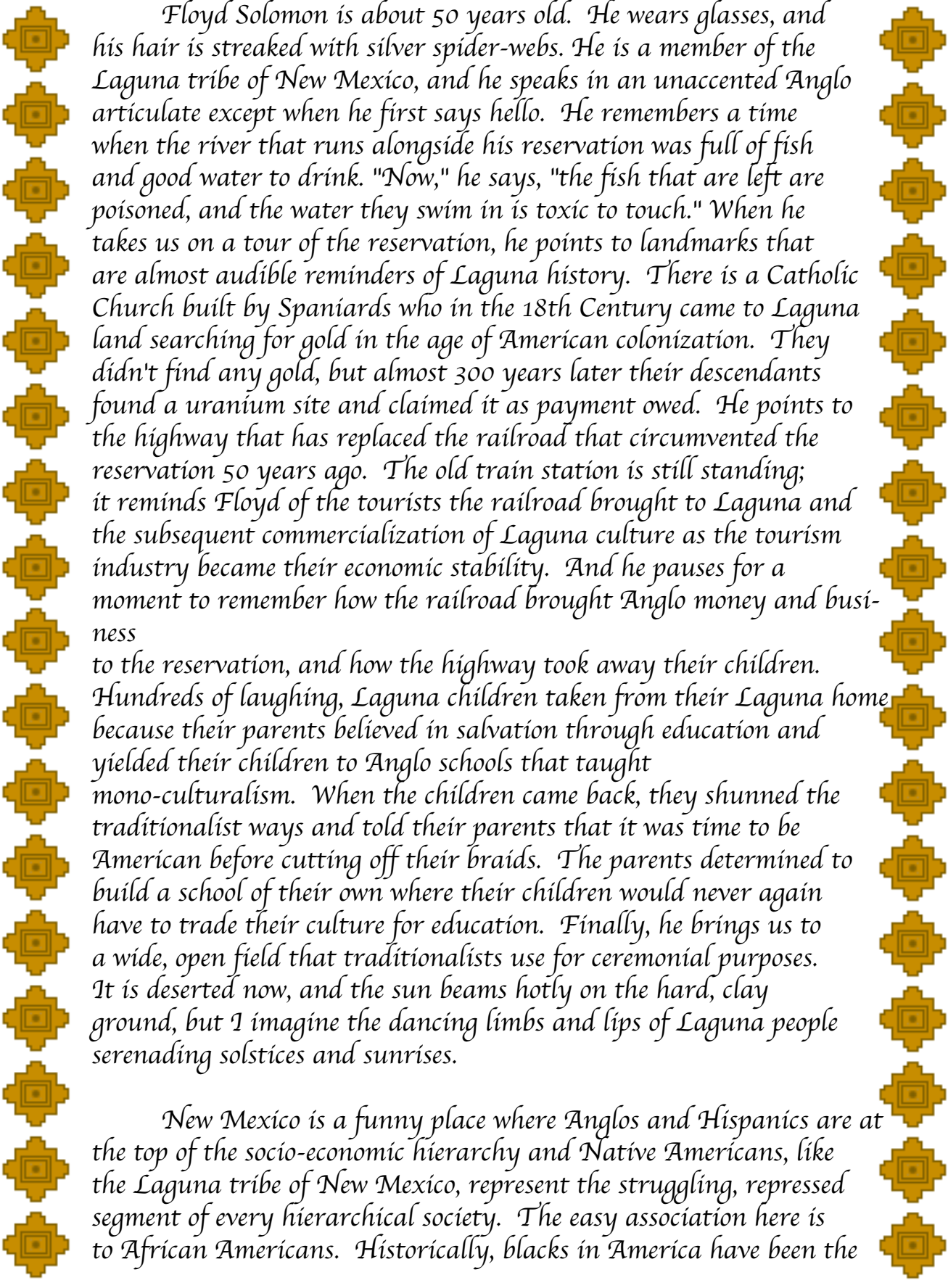
The Spiritual Economy of Tourism

by
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The purpose of our trip to New Mexico was to participate in a cultural exchange. The phrase, "cultural exchange" seems a little bourgeois and distant to me. How audacious of me to use such a phony, materialistic phrase to describe what I hesitate to define even now. I say materialistic because the word "exchange" depreciates the universality of the word "culture" to a level of socio-economic, rather than spiritual consideration. The phrase, "cultural exchange," then, is conspicuously inadequate to describe the spiritual gift giving and receiving I experienced in New Mexico.



New Mexico is a place of adobe palaces that squat on the sides of mountain ranges that are little more than hills along the massive skyline. As our group struggled down the rocky mountainside of Bear Canyon like the amateur hikers we were, I was reminded of lazy ants who have lost their carriages somewhere between the boulder and the stream. Every other glance or so the skyline changed, as did the complexions of the empty-handed travelers. I watched the roasting Anglos, their pale, pink skin barbecuing beneath the sun as their light eyes burned beneath the brim of straw hats. And I saw the horizon darken as the people took on a dusk-colored hue that is the same as New Mexico's autumns and adobes. The dusk-colored people who are native to the area wear their hair in long, thin braids that are beginning to silver; they look at the sun before they falter "good morning" pleasantries.

One of these dusk-colored men wraps his braid around itself at the nape of his neck and offers his salutations in a Laguna language that tickles my ears. Laguna is the name of his people; they are a Native American tribe of about eight thousand, living quietly beside the New Mexican landscape. They built a school a few years ago with the money they received for allowing their land to be poisoned by uranium mines. "Ten million dollars was a lot of money back then," he says. He speaks quietly, and it doesn't matter if I forgive him for driving a truck full of uranium and mother's earth when he was supposed to love nature more than financial security. He doesn't need my sympathy, because I know that the short little school full of bronzed, braided children is healing his soul-scars.

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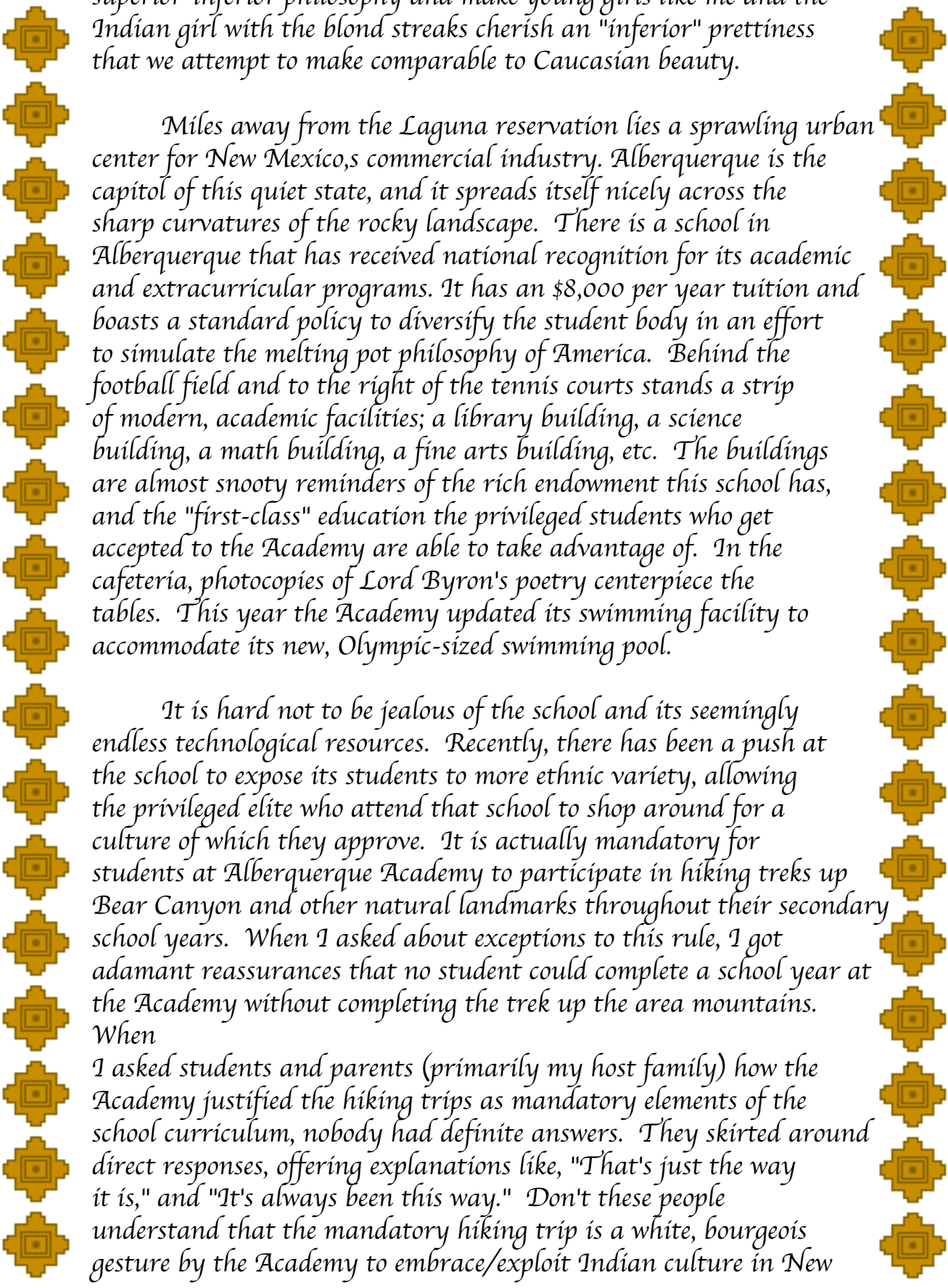
Floyd Solomon is about 50 years old. He wears glasses, and his hair is streaked with silver spider-webs. He is a member of the Laguna tribe of New Mexico, and he speaks in an unaccented Anglo articulate except when he first says hello. He remembers a time when the river that runs alongside his reservation was full of fish and good water to drink. "Now," he says, "the fish that are left are poisoned, and the water they swim in is toxic to touch." When he takes us on a tour of the reservation, he points to landmarks that are almost audible reminders of Laguna history. There is a Catholic Church built by Spaniards who in the 18th Century came to Laguna land searching for gold in the age of American colonization. They didn't find any gold, but almost 300 years later their descendants found a uranium site and claimed it as payment owed. He points to the highway that has replaced the railroad that circumvented the reservation 50 years ago. The old train station is still standing; it reminds Floyd of the tourists the railroad brought to Laguna and the subsequent commercialization of Laguna culture as the tourism industry became their economic stability. And he pauses for a moment to remember how the railroad brought Anglo money and business to the reservation, and how the highway took away their children. Hundreds of laughing, Laguna children taken from their Laguna home because their parents believed in salvation through education and yielded their children to Anglo schools that taught mono-culturalism. When the children came back, they shunned the traditionalist ways and told their parents that it was time to be American before cutting off their braids. The parents determined to build a school of their own where their children would never again have to trade their culture for education. Finally, he brings us to a wide, open field that traditionalists use for ceremonial purposes. It is deserted now, and the sun beams hotly on the hard, clay ground, but I imagine the dancing limbs and lips of Laguna people serenading solstices and sunrises.

New Mexico is a funny place where Anglos and Hispanics are at the top of the socio-economic hierarchy and Native Americans, like the Laguna tribe of New Mexico, represent the struggling, repressed segment of every hierarchical society. The easy association here is to African Americans. Historically, blacks in America have been the



scapegoat victims of this country's racist attitudes, prompted by the ethnic insecurities of its "majority" culture. Unfortunately, the American ideal of "liberty, justice and equality for all" is only applicable to the white American generic. All other cultures that strive to preserve their traditionalism are labeled primitive, anti-American, and socially inferior. During the 1920s until the 1940s revolutionary blacks who advocated equality and justice were labeled Communists and insurrectionists, isolating them from the "pro-democratic patriotism" of the World War periods. It didn't matter that blacks fought in the world wars, hoping to win the approval of white America and show their support for an equality that was never intended for them. After the wars, when they returned to their shantytown communities, they were still poor and patronized, as were the Native Americans. As a result, a self-segregated society developed where the ethnic groups isolated themselves in order to preserve their culture and protect themselves against depreciation. In New Mexico, Native Americans assign themselves to reservation communities because they don't want to be seduced by the melting pot myth of American diplomatic: neutral, diluted, and uni-cultural. So instead, they prostitute the land they live on and allow outside companies to mine their earth for money. They use the money to build schools for their children and pray that the new schools will prevent the selling-out of their culture for a pro-assimilation Anglo education.

On the Laguna reservation I caught a glimpse of two Native American teenage girls out of the corner of my eye. Both girls were dressed in very urban, American clothes, and one girl had colored her heavy, dark hair with honey blond streaks. As they giggled back and forth in a silly conversation peppered with a Laguna accent, I thought how even here the perception of female beauty has been assaulted by the white ideal. The Native Americans are a striking people, with their copper-colored skin and dark hair, but aren't we all 'Blacks, Hispanics, Asians' different variations of the same linguistic cop-out: ethnic, striking, unusual? How racist are compliments qualified by adjectives that note ethnicity? I am pretty, for a black girl, but my processed hair and manufactured makeup imitate the pale, blonde girls who are supposed to be prettier than me simply because they are white. Here categorizations 'ethnic beauty versus American beauty' intimate a




superior-inferior philosophy and make young girls like me and the Indian girl with the blond streaks cherish an "inferior" prettiness that we attempt to make comparable to Caucasian beauty.

Miles away from the Laguna reservation lies a sprawling urban center for New Mexico, its commercial industry. Albuquerque is the capitol of this quiet state, and it spreads itself nicely across the sharp curvatures of the rocky landscape. There is a school in Albuquerque that has received national recognition for its academic and extracurricular programs. It has an \$8,000 per year tuition and boasts a standard policy to diversify the student body in an effort to simulate the melting pot philosophy of America. Behind the football field and to the right of the tennis courts stands a strip of modern, academic facilities; a library building, a science building, a math building, a fine arts building, etc. The buildings are almost snooty reminders of the rich endowment this school has, and the "first-class" education the privileged students who get accepted to the Academy are able to take advantage of. In the cafeteria, photocopies of Lord Byron's poetry centerpiece the tables. This year the Academy updated its swimming facility to accommodate its new, Olympic-sized swimming pool.

It is hard not to be jealous of the school and its seemingly endless technological resources. Recently, there has been a push at the school to expose its students to more ethnic variety, allowing the privileged elite who attend that school to shop around for a culture of which they approve. It is actually mandatory for students at Albuquerque Academy to participate in hiking treks up Bear Canyon and other natural landmarks throughout their secondary school years. When I asked about exceptions to this rule, I got adamant reassurances that no student could complete a school year at the Academy without completing the trek up the area mountains. When

I asked students and parents (primarily my host family) how the Academy justified the hiking trips as mandatory elements of the school curriculum, nobody had definite answers. They skirted around direct responses, offering explanations like, "That's just the way it is," and "It's always been this way." Don't these people understand that the mandatory hiking trip is a white, bourgeois gesture by the Academy to embrace/exploit Indian culture in New




Mexico? It is amazing to note the paradoxes here. Native Americans universally revere nature; Albuquerque Academy mandates that its students experience their natural environment on a two-week hiking trip in the mountains. Isn't it just like rich, white institutions like Albuquerque Academy to dabble in difference just because they can? The hiking trek in itself is a fine idea, but I wonder if students learn about the religious significance to Native Americans as their feet pound the sacred sleeping places of spirits and chiefs?

As I hiked along the paths of Bear Canyon, I gained a small understanding of Native Americans, spiritual affinity to nature. I felt like an outsider, browsing a culture I deemed worthy of my attention. I imagine that this is how the students at the Academy feel when they take their yearly hiking treks up area mountains. It is hard not to resent the privileged opportunity Academy students have to intimately insert themselves in Native American culture. But at the same time, I understand that without this interaction true racial equality is an impossible dream.

As I talked to our tour guide, a freshman at Albuquerque Academy, about his school, he admitted that the school mostly consists of rich, white kids. He added that the Academy had recently made efforts to recruit a core population of Coloreds, which he later clarified as Blacks, Asians, and Hispanics. Jason's easy use of the word, coloreds shocked me. The word itself is not offensive, but its historical context is. "Colored" is part of a long list of ethnic labels black people in America have adapted to, adopted, and discarded. Colored, for me, is a bourgeois word for nigger, because it replaced blatant derogatories like pick-a-ninny, buck, negroes, etc. during the supposed racial awareness of the civil rights era. The word retains a sense of repression for me because it is obviously a verbal effort to mask or de-villify white, supremacist mentalities.

I don't think Jason is a racist. But he is white and that means that he doesn't have to think about himself, or his world, in terms of race. There are some advantages to being an acknowledged majority. For Jason, the rainbow-colored people who infiltrate his classrooms are ornamental. He, therefore, without any sense of his racial insensitivity, is able to lump all ethnic groups outside the great white majority under the term, colored.



In a corner of the southwest there is a place decorated by dust and adobe. It snows in the summer here, and the landscape flits between iced-over mountain peaks and rocky summits. Every Native American tribe here is a different minority, and they lounge along the avenues of the Santa Fe plaza, lending their culture to the eager vendors willing to bargain for pottery and rugs. The tour guide at the Multicultural Museum in Santa Fe said that the Indian women don't weave anymore. It's easy to see why. Who wants to sit on a Santa Fe patio and offer ancient, magical secrets to the Anglos passing by? The songs here are sad, and Floyd Solomon sings them with his eyes. How difficult it must be to wear an Anglo-assimilation mask, even if it means the construction of a Laguna-Acoma Middle School.

