

The Selling of the Indian

When non-Native people think of Indians, they think of the Hollywood version of an Indian. They perceive the men as these noble warriors, or “features of a noble Indian elder gazing toward a setting sun” (Meyer & Royer, 62). Their perceptions of Indian women are glorified, in that they are the voluptuous Indian princess, which is often played out in Hollywood. You see that when Hollywood tries to make a movie about Indians, the first example of this that I came across was that of Pocahontas. Both these glorifications of Indian men and women are forever seen in Hollywood depictions because “American Indians have become potent cultural symbols, and more specifically, Indian men and Indian women have come to fill separate and different places in the popular white iconography” (Meyer & Royer, 62).

We as Indian people somewhat allow this glorification to happen by playing the roles of these characters Hollywood presents. I feel that it happened more in previous years, even dating back to picture films because of their economic need. Also seen in *Mending Skins* in Tommy Jacks father Fred, and how he wanted to be a Hollywood actor. Also we see this stereotype of Native actors in film of them having the lesser roles, like being a sidekick to the white man, or not speaking at all. That is exactly what Tommy Jack did when he went to be a Hollywood actor, he got roles but he never spoke, or like Graham Greene in *Thunderheart*. Or like the silent film we watched in class, *The Silent Enemy*, the Chief starts by saying that this is a true story, and the depictions made are factual. Well while watching it as a Native person I could see that it was basically just

made up because of the way they acted. As an example, when the hunter Baluk killed the bear he just left the meat there. For one, the bears were sacred to the Ojibway people and they wouldn't just leave it there and waste it. They would have first performed a ceremony, and another thing they wouldn't have taken the cubs as pets.

The Silent film also gives a good example of how they sexualized the portrayal of the Indian princess by having an Indian woman wear a seductive outfit at the beginning, in which shows the stereotypical image of the romanticized Indian princess. However now the willingness to play those roles has somewhat declined with some Indian peoples resources and reliance to other economic factors, such as the casino. When you do see these depictions it is probably that of those less fortunate because some don't have the casinos or their not as successful. People need the money to survive, and they know that this nation has a fantasy with romanticizing Indian peoples, so they help them in this glorification.

The whites fascination with the stereotypical images of the Indian princess had been seen long before that of Pocahontas, the Indian Queen image which had been widely used to represent the exoticism of America, evolved into the dusky Princess who "continued to stand for the New World and for rude native nobility" (Meyer & Royer, 78). However as Robert Tilton describes it, the Pocahontas/Princess myth became a crucial part in the creation of a national identity: The Indian Princess became an important, nonthreatening symbol of white Americas' right to be here, because she was always willing to sacrifice her happiness, cultural identity, and even her life for the good of the new nation" (Meyer & Royer, 79). He goes on to say that "the Pocahontas/Princess story enabled the white United States, but especially the South, to

justify its dominance, providing a kind of origin myth that explained how and why Indians had welcomed the destiny brought to them by whites” (Royer & Meyer, 79).

So can we say that if Pocahontas didn’t act the way she did in the Columbus era, would we now as Indian people not have this obsession of depicting our people and culture by the whites? Why don’t they try and depict other cultural groups like the Hispanics, African Americans, or Asian people? Why do they have a fascination with the Indian people? Why, because they wouldn’t already have the glorifications brought about earlier of the noble warrior/chiefs, the wise elder, or the voluptuous Indian princess in their so called observations. They taunt our culture with their so called depictions. You also see in films that in order for an Indian woman to be with a white man, she either has to be an Indian princess or like in *Thunderheart* educated in order to be up to standards.

However one of the most common themes of the depictions of other races of men, especially Indian men, is by labeling others as sexual savages, while whites “reassured themselves that their own race was indeed the civilized one it aspired to be. When in reality they have just as many “sexual savages” as any other race. “They characterize other races as, at best, remote sexual pagans and, at worst, sexual monsters in pursuit of white women, whites could manipulate the sexual fears of their own culture in order to justify the conquest of Indians, Mexicans, and blacks” (Meyer & Royer, 90). You cannot make those kind of distinctions because we are all human beings, and we all have the capacity of making the same mistakes not just one race or the non-white race is uncivilized by this.

You still see the stereotypical image/depiction of the Indian man in the colonial period, when Indians were seen as wild, passionate, alluring, and blessed with a dark

beauty in films and especially romantic books today. They have a deep obsession at the physical appeal of the imagined Indian body with their fine physical development and muscular handsomeness.

“In addition to the young, romantic hero, there is another male Indian type. Indian men, more than women, were the focus of the wave of fascination with things Indian that first crested in the 1960’s and 1970’s when the counter-culture embraced Indians as purveyors of ancient wisdom and spiritual knowledge” (Meyer & Royer, 75). Most of the people who depicted the “wise elder” were in fact not Indian, and most of them just lived out a fantasy of being Indian. Why, I wish to understand why the white culture chooses to be deeply “captivated” with the Indian people and culture, and why is that we are always made the object of white consumption, as it has been for centuries? I never thought of it before this class, and will probably continue to wonder. It just amazes me! We see the appropriation of the “wise elder” in his representation on greeting cards and popular art, clad in buffalo robes and feathers. However unlike his younger counterpart, he is rarely scantily clad, and he is definitely not a sex object. “Unlike the young Brave, the Wise Elder has power; he communes with the spirits and passes on his wisdom, usually to white people”. He also represents the way the wisdom of the lost race can be incorporated peacefully into the modern world (Meyer & Royer, 77). I feel that it can be said that the white’s fascination comes from their want of more power, since the wise elder possesses this.

Now I can proudly say that we are starting to resist this cultural appropriation and stereotypical images in film and books by making our own films by Native directors and authors. We have taken one step in the resistance of the white’s glorification of our

people.

In the essay by Sarah Hill, *Marketing Traditions* we see the Cherokee's both Western of Oklahoma and Eastern of North Carolina's effort to survive in earlier times with selling their weaved baskets. We see how they first started to sell the baskets by how they used them for their everyday utensils, etc. "The baskets' commercial appeal points to consumer values of non-Native buyers" (Meyer & Royer, 212). "The basket market that linked Field, a collector, with Eastern and Western Cherokee weavers attests to the commercialization of Indian basketry by buyers, governments, and reformers with a hint of the whole pattern of life of weavers, and of the early era of Indian tourism" (Meyer & Royer, 212).

By the early twentieth century, however, Cherokee women were also producing nonutilitarian vessels to appeal buyers. "Only ten of the thirty-four Western baskets were identified by function, suggesting that more than two-thirds were decorative and were probably created for sale" (Meyer & Royer, 213). "The pristine condition and decorative appearance of the majority of Cherokee baskets indicate that weavers were diversifying from utilitarian wares and creating basket types they personally did not use to engage a non-Native market" and we still do this today. There are many Native people who can make a living off selling arts and crafts to the non-Native market, but the Native market as well. It was something we made a living on and something we have continued to rely upon.

"They believed handicrafts enhanced social and recreational life in rural communities, while reconnecting industrialized America with its lost past and the natural world". There has also been tremendous commercialization and tourism which promised

economic relief which was heavily needed in order to sell their baskets in order to survive in this new found economical world. Today still plenty of Indian people rely on tourism and pow-wows to sell their crafts in order to make a living. I tell you it one thing that has stuck around in order to make reasonable profitable gains.