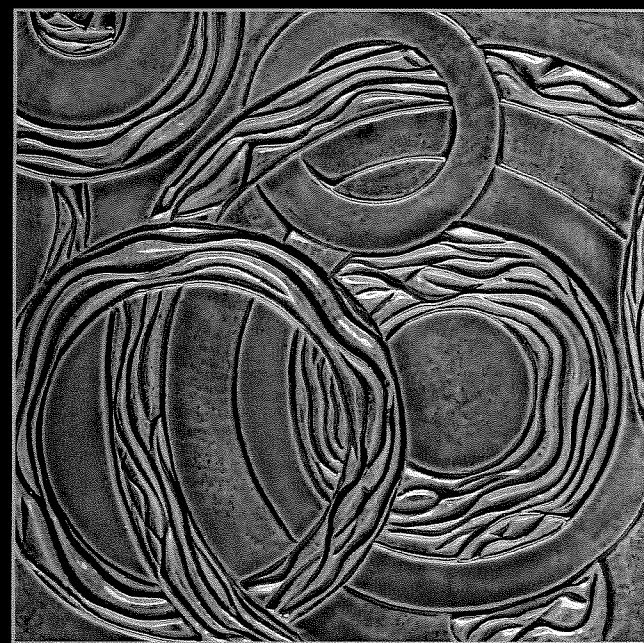




CONTESTED IMAGES

Women of Color in
Popular Culture



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Chapter Fifteen

The Burden of History

Representations of American Indian Women in Popular Media

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In summer 1995, U.S. toy stores were flooded with dolls, books, play-sets, costumes, and games carrying the name of Pocahontas, the Indian princess. The Walt Disney marketing juggernaut was selling images of American Indians as never before, and the face and body of an Indian woman in particular.¹

The animated feature, *Pocahontas*, was the first mainstream movie in history to have an Indian woman as its leading character. It seemed ironically appropriate that this role was a cartoon—the ultimate in unreality. For although women from other ethnic groups have had varied but definite success in transforming stereotypical media representations, American Indian women have continued to appear in a limited range of roles and imagery. More than a decade after Disney's *Pocahontas*, there has been little significant change in that situation. Indeed, it is striking that the most pervasive representations of Indian women in contemporary U.S. culture are stereotypical images in such places as comic books, advertising, toys, "collectables," and greeting cards.

The mainstream media visibility of American Indians in general has declined since the 1990s, a decade that saw a rise in "Indian" movies and a few TV shows, following the unexpected success of *Dances With Wolves* in 1990. Even in that decade, Indian women were conspicuous by their absence, appearing (with some exceptions) in small, supporting roles, as loyal wives or pretty "maidens," while the plot lines belonged to the men. To understand why this happened, and to interpret the current state of representation, we must understand one basic point: Mass images of American Indians are im-

ages created by White culture, for White culture, and the representation of Indian women carries the double burden of stereotyping by both ethnicity and gender. American Indians have only recently (although quite successfully) begun to influence the production of images of themselves, and the range of available imagery of Indians is remarkably small.

This was demonstrated eloquently in the classic work by Berkhofer (1979):

the essence of the White image of the Indian has been the definition of Native Americans in fact and fancy as a separate and single Other. Whether evaluated as noble or ignoble, whether seen as exotic or downgraded, the Indian as an image was always alien to the White. (p. xv)

As Berkhofer noted, interest in American Indians has ebbed and flowed over time. Depending on the era, the Indian male has usually been either the “noble savage” or his alter ego, the “ignoble savage.” As White cultural images of themselves change, so does the image of the Indian change—now becoming everything Whites fear, in the person of the marauding, hellish savage, then becoming everything they envy, in the person of the peaceful, mystical, spiritual guardian of the land who was in vogue in the 1990s. However they are pictured, Indians are the quintessential Other, whose role in mass culture is to be the object of the White, colonialist gaze. And a central element in that gaze has been a construction of the Indian as locked in the past.

WOMAN AS PRINCESS OR SQUAW

Although this limited view of Indians has affected the representation of both men and women, it has curtailed the presentation of women more. Again, to understand that, we need to go back in time to see how the current imagery developed. Just as male imagery alternates between nobility and savagery, so female Indian imagery is bifurcated. From early times, a dominant image was the Indian Princess, represented most thoroughly by Pocahontas, the seventeenth-century sachem's daughter who, according to legend, threw herself in front of her tribe's executioners to save the life of colonist Capt. John Smith. Even before this, the Indian Queen image had been used widely to represent the exoticism of America, evolving into the dusky princess who “continued to stand for the New World and for rude native nobility” (R. Green, 1975, p. 703).

As Tilton (1994) described it, the Pocahontas/princess myth became a crucial part in the creation of a national identity: “On a national level . . . it had become clear by the second decade of the nineteenth century that Poca-

hontas had rescued Smith, and by implication all Anglo-Americans, so that they might carry on the destined work of becoming a great nation” (p. 55). The Indian princess became an important, nonthreatening symbol of White Americans' 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. Endless plays, novels, and poems were written about Pocahontas, extolling her beauty and nobility, and illustrating the prevailing view of the princess—gentle, noble, nonthreateningly erotic, virtually a White Christian, and yet different because tied to the native soils of America. As Tilton explained, the Princess Pocahontas 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.

The “Indian princess” as a stereotype thrived in the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. For example, Francis (1992), in his study of the “Imaginary Indian” in Canadian culture, described the late nineteenth-century success of author and poet Pauline Johnson, the daughter of a Mohawk chief. Dressed in a “polyglot” costume of ermine tails, knives and beads, the “Mohawk princess” declaimed melodramatic tales of doomed love between Indian women and White men. Audiences “saw in her the personification of Pocahontas. . . . The original Miss America, Pocahontas came to represent the beautiful, exotic New World itself. Her story provided a model for the ideal merger of Native and newcomer” (pp. 120–21). Similarly, Deloria (2004) described the fascinating career of early twentieth-century Creek singer Tsianina Redfeather, who, as a classic buckskin-clad princess, entranced audiences with her mixture of musical refinement and Native identity.

But just as popular imagery defined White women as either good or bad, virgin or whore, so it forced images of Indian women into a similar bipolar split. According to R. Green (1975), the Indian “princess” is defined as one who helps or saves a White man. But if she actually has a sexual relationship with a White or Indian man, she becomes a “squaw,” who is lower even than a “bad” White woman. The squaw is the other side of the Indian woman—a drudge who is at the beck and call of her savage Indian husband, who produces baby after baby, who has sex endlessly and indiscriminately with Whites and Indians alike. R. Green documented the sad history of this image in popular songs and tales of the nineteenth century, and King (2003) offered a thorough analysis of the multiple derogatory connotations of the word, arguing that “it is best understood as a key-word of conquest” (p. 3). The perception of Indian women as sexual conveniences is demonstrated with graphic horror in the eyewitness accounts of the 1865 Sand Creek massacre

of Cheyenne, after which soldiers were seen to move the bodies of Indian women into obscene poses, and to cut off their genitals for display on their saddle horns (Jones, 1994).

The inescapable fact about this dual imagery of Indian woman is that the imagery is entirely defined by Whites. From early contact, White observers brought their own categories and preconceptions to indigenous American cultures, and “authoritative” sources defined the role of the Indian woman in ways that bore little relationship to reality. Thus, James Hall and Thomas McKenney (who was the chief U.S. administrator of Indian affairs from 1816 to 1830) wrote in 1844: “The life of the Indian woman, under the most favourable circumstances, is one of continual labour and unmitigated hardship. Trained to servitude from infancy, and condemned to the performance of the most menial offices, they are the servants rather than the companions of man” (McKenney & Hall, 1844/1933, p. 199). No actual Indian culture saw women in these limited terms; in fact the range of Indian cultures offered a variety of roles for women, many of them holding a great deal of honor and prestige.² As Denetdale (2001) pointed out, for example, “In contrast to popular stereotypes about Native American women that have cast them into the dichotomies of princess and squaw drudge, the few Navajo women in the historical record are noted as autonomous and self-assured” (p. 1). The complexity of these roles has been elided from both mainstream history and popular culture because they were not comprehensible to White culture. Thus, as R. Green (1975) argued, stereotypes of male and female American Indians “are both tied to definition by relationships with white men, but she (woman) is especially burdened by the narrowness of that definition” (p. 713).

THE WESTERN AS DEFINING GENRE

As popular media evolved, the definitions of Indian women remained oppressively narrow. As I have noted, representations of Indians have stayed locked in the past, and the popular genre that has ensured that is the Western (Leuthold, 1995). Western film and television simply took over where dime novels and Wild West shows left off, endlessly reliving the myth of the late nineteenth-century frontier. The Western genre was hard on American Indians, imprisoning them in their roles as marauding savages, and later as noble, doomed braves. Although we think of Westerns as “cowboys and Indians,” during the great era of Western film from the 1930s to the 1950s, actual Indian characters were surprisingly rare. Rather, they appear as yelling hordes, scenery, or in occasional bit parts. And, as Tompkins (1992) pointed out, the Western is overwhelmingly male, dealing with male quests and

challenges. Women may be there as an incentive or a reward, but they are not subjective participants in the story. Indian women, above all, disappear. If they surface occasionally, they are minor plot devices, like the character from the famous 1956 western *The Searchers*: “Her name was ‘Look.’ This woman is treated so abominably by the characters—ridiculed, humiliated, and then killed off casually by the plot—that I couldn’t believe my eyes. The movie treated her as a joke, not as a person” (p. 8).

Thus, in the “golden age” of the cinema Western, the “squaw” was the most common image of Indian women. At the same time, the sacrificing princess stereotype was still salient, as it had been at the birth of cinema. Marsden and Nachbar (1988) described the princess image in such early films as the 1903 *Kit Carson*, in which an Indian woman helps Kit escape and is killed by her own chief. “For the next 10 years this romantic figure, young, beautiful and self-sacrificing, would come to the aid of Whites almost as often as the savage Reactionary would murder or capture them” (pp. 609–10). Although Pocahontas herself is portrayed in many movies, the theme is replayed in other guises—*The Squaw’s Sacrifice* (1909), *The Heart of the Sioux* (1910), *The Indian Maid’s Sacrifice* (1911), *The Heart of an Indian* (1913). As Deloria (2004) put it, in these films, Indian women offered White men “access through marriage to their primitive authenticity and their land. Having transformed their White partners, the Native spouses then voluntarily eliminate themselves so that reproductive futures might follow White-in-White marriages” (p. 84).

From the 1920s to 1940s, the portrayal of the princess declined. She returned with the “sensitive” Westerns of the 1950s and beyond, led especially by director Delmer Daves’ *Broken Arrow*, released in 1950. This told the story of a White man (played by James Stewart), who in the course of setting up a peace accord with Apache chief Cochise, falls in love with and marries Sonseeahray, or “Morning Star” (played by Debra Paget), an Apache woman who is, naturally, a princess. Sonseeahray dies, after being shot by a White man who is breaking the peace, but, as always, her death is not in vain. As the Stewart character speaks over the final scenes in the film, “The death of Sonseeahray put a seal on the peace.” The Princess figure again went into decline in the 1960s, seeming outdated and of less importance to White culture. Although the graphically obscene dimension of the “squaw” did not translate into the movie era, the remnants of it remained in the few, tiny roles for Indian women in Westerns from the 1950s onwards. Without the princess stereotype, White culture had only the squaw, and she was by definition unimportant and uninteresting.³ Like her princess predecessor, the newer squaw was devoted to a White man, but she had even less importance to the plot, and was easily sacrificed if necessary. As Marsden and Nachbar (1988) pointed out, none of the famous “Indian” movies of the early 1970s had substantial roles for women: “*A Man Called Horse* (1970); *Little Big Man*

(1971); *Jeremiah Johnson* (1972); and *The Man who Loved Cat Dancing* (1973)—all have Indian women married to Whites who die either during the film or in the background of the film's story" (p. 614).

Thus, the most obvious and overwhelming aspect of portrayals of American Indians (male and female) is that these portrayals reflect a White gaze. Ironically, this has become even more pronounced in recent years, even as portrayals of Indians have become more "authentic," in terms of accurate detail, language, and above all, the use of Indian actors. When non-Indian Hollywood stars played Indians, there were occasional films that purportedly saw events from the point of view of an Indian character. Thus, in Robert Aldrich's 1954 *Apache*, Burt Lancaster is cast as Massai, an Apache warrior who first defies White authority, but eventually learns to farm, and sets the stage for peace. His wife, a classic Indian princess, also played by a White actress, Jean Peters, is a woman who sacrifices everything, and almost dies for love of Massai. ("If I lost you, I would be nothing," she mourns at one point in the film.) Like the casting of Debra Paget and Jeff Chandler in *Broken Arrow*, these many ludicrous casting choices are insulting, consigning actual Indian actors to minor roles.

However, contemporary filmmakers, aware that it is no longer acceptable to cast Whites as Indians, seem to have simply abandoned central roles for Indian characters. Clearly, this is an economic as well as a cultural decision—no Indian actor apparently has the drawing power that Burt Lancaster or Jeff Chandler had in their era. Inevitably, the lead roles go to White characters playing White roles. Even the television movie, *The Legend of Walks Far Woman* (1982), would probably not have been made without a star like Raquel Welch in the (Indian) title role. Thus, ironically, although Hollywood now realizes that Indian roles must be played by Indian actors, those actors often find themselves playing only side-kick roles. The films look more "authentic" now, but as Leuthold (1995) wrote, issues of representation go far beyond accurate detail into "questions of whether (Indian) women are depicted with a full sense of humanity" (p. 178). One device producers have used is to create a central role for a White actor to play a mixed-blood Indian—Tom Berenger in *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* or Val Kilmer (who does have Indian heritage) in *Thunderheart* (1992). But, once again, there have been none of these roles for women; the female role in *Thunderheart*, played with conviction by Sheila Tousey, is small and, predictably, ends in death.

CONTEMPORARY MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF INDIAN GENDER

Meanwhile, Indian men have fared somewhat better in media depictions. It is not insignificant that the most recent collection of essays on the Hollywood Indian (Rollins & O'Connor, 2003) rarely mentions women. Indian men also have been consigned to the past, defined by the Western genre. But Westerns are about men, and Indian men since the 1950s have had roles as side-kicks to the hero. Most significant, however, Indian men were the focus of the wave of fascination with things Indian that first crested in the 1960s and 1970s when the counter-culture embraced Indians (Brand, 1988). Although mainstream media interest subsided somewhat in the 1980s, the Indian "wannabee" phenomenon was gaining momentum in New-Age-tinged popular culture (R. Green, 1988b), and rose again in the 1990s, this time in a more mainstream, ecologically minded form. The Indian elder who is wise beyond White understanding first began to appear in films like *Little Big Man* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975), and returned in force after *Dances With Wolves*. In the 1990s, as never before, Indians were chic—mystical, wise, earth-loving, and tragic. New Age culture appropriated Indian religious practices, clothing, music, and myths, whereas Indian-inspired art and design became all the rage.⁴ In this trend, Indian culture is yet again commodified and made the object of White consumption, as it has been for centuries (Castile, 1996).

This fascination is consistently associated in popular imagery with Indian men—artists, warriors, shamans. Indeed, in a study of male Indian imagery in film, romance novels, and other popular media, Van Lent (1996) convincingly shows that the image of the Indian male became an important cultural icon in the 1990s. Perhaps in response to cultural uncertainties about "correct" male roles, the Indian man, usually placed in a "dead" historical context, bifurcated in a slightly new way. Young men are handsome and virile, with the potential for decisive action when pressed, yet tender, loving, and vulnerable. Thus, Indian or mixed-blood men prove incredible lovers for White women in romance novels, whereas Indian women are invisible. Handsome young Indian men fight alongside White heroes in 1990s movies like *Dances With Wolves*, *Last of the Mohicans*, and *Squanto*. Meanwhile, older men act as wise sages in the same period pieces, and they provide a similar spiritual dimension in more contemporary films like *Free Willy*, *Legends of the Fall*, and even *Natural Born Killers*. They were stereotypical roles, they were usually subordinate to White storylines, and they served White cultural needs—but at least they were there (Bird, 2001).

In contrast, roles for Indian women in mainstream film and television have been meager at best. It is instructive to look, for example, at the Indian woman who became most familiar on both the large and small screen in the 1990s. Tantoo Cardinal, a Metis (mixed-blood) woman from Canada, had roles in several movies, including *Black Robe*, *Dances With Wolves*, and *Legends of the Fall*. She also played a recurring role in the television series *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*, to which I return later; first, I consider Cardinal's movie roles.

In *Dances With Wolves*, Cardinal plays Black Shawl, the wife of Kicking Bird, the medicine man who befriends Lt. John Dunbar, the lead character played by director Kevin Costner. Black Shawl is a definite advance on the sacrificial princesses of the past—she admonishes her husband when he is too curt with his ward, Stands with a Fist, and nudges him into authorizing the marriage of Dunbar and Stands with a Fist. Kicking Bird and Black Shawl are permitted an enjoyable sex life, and their marriage is seen as warm and loving. Nevertheless, it is clearly a minor, supporting role. The lead female role is Stands with a Fist, a White woman who has been adopted into the tribe. This fact does make it plausible that she can speak English, and thus can interpret for Dunbar and Kicking Bird. However, one wonders why some other device did not occur to Michael Blake, the author of the book and screenplay, that would have made a Lakota woman a central character.

In *Black Robe* (1992), Cardinal again plays the wife of a more prominent character, although with less humor and light relief. Her character is killed midway through the film. The one other role for an Indian woman in the film is that of the chief's daughter Annuka, with whom a young subsidiary character falls in love—an unrewarding role played by Sandrine Holt, who is Eurasian, not Native American. The film, although praised by critics for its accuracy, misrepresented the important role of Iroquois women in political decision making (Churchill, 1994). Worse, perhaps, it resurrected the squaw in Annuka. Churchill commented on "Annuka's proclivity, fair and unmarried maiden though she is, to copulate voraciously with whatever male she happens to find convenient when the urge strikes. More shocking, she obviously prefers to do it in the dirt, on all fours" (p. 128). Only when she falls in love with Daniel, a young Frenchman, does she learn how to enjoy love and the civilized "missionary position." Once again, the message is that sexuality among Indians is casual and animal-like, although an Indian can be uplifted by a real love relationship with a White.

Legends of the Fall (1994) is a classic example of Indian identity being appropriated to add mystery and resonance to White characters' life problems. The film is narrated by Gordon Tootoosis as a Cree elder who frames the life of hero Tristan Ludlow (played by Brad Pitt). Cardinal plays Pet, an Indian woman married to a hired hand on the Ludlow ranch. She is clearly

loved and respected, but speaks hardly at all. Eventually, her daughter (played by Katrina Lombard) marries Tristan, but is killed in a random act of violence, setting in motion a new twist in the main, White characters' lives.

Cardinal has spoken about her supporting roles and the frustrations that go with them: "If you've got those small roles, you're there on the (production) set but you're barely ever used" (cited in Greer, 1994b, p. 152). She describes building the characters in her mind, giving them histories and trying to make the experience more fulfilling this way: "You have to give yourself a reason for being there, a whole history where you live, what the whole place looks like, what your everyday life is like" (p. 152). One can only think how frustrating it must be for other Indian women, having to do their best with tiny, underwritten, and stereotypical roles. For example, Kimberley Norris, an Indian woman who had a small role in the 1980s TV miniseries *Son of the Morning Star*, reports how she was told to redo a scene in which she wept for the slain leader Crazy Horse. Instead of her tears, she was told, "Let's do it again and just take it with that dignified stoicism of the Indians" (cited in Greer, 1994a, p. 144). As Norris commented, "That was a real quick lesson in their perception of how we don't have those natural human emotions" (p. 144).

THE DUAL BURDEN OF GENDER AND RACE: DR. QUINN, MEDICINE WOMAN

Even in the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, American Indians are still rare on popular television, largely because of the demise of the Western as a major TV genre. They did appear occasionally, frequently as stereotypical "mystical wise men," in action adventures such as CBS's *Walker, Texas Ranger*, where the supposedly part-Native hero (Chuck Norris) was advised and inspired by his Indian uncle and mentor on a semi-regular basis. *Northern Exposure*, which ran on CBS from 1990 to 1995, did succeed in challenging some stereotypes, and I shall return to that show later.

Aside from *Northern Exposure*, the only other show that included Indians as regular characters over a sustained time period was CBS's *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*, a frontier drama set in the late 1860s. Generally despised by critics for its formulaic and sentimental predictability, and dismissed by Jojola (2003) as "an awful, awful, apologist's series" (p. 19), *Dr. Quinn* nevertheless proved very successful, lasting several seasons in the 1990s. The show featured a crusading woman doctor, Michaela Quinn (played by Jane Seymour), who fought the bigotry and sexism of the people of Colorado Springs on a weekly basis. The show was especially popular with women, and one reason for this was its essentially feminist point of view (Bird, 2003;

Dow, 1996). Created and produced by Beth Sullivan, the show was populated by a cast of strong women, surrounded by a group of rather weak and bigoted men. As Dow suggested, the show took many of the standard Western formulas, such as the hero battling for justice, and transformed the hero into a woman. And unlike traditional TV Westerns, American Indians were included in the form of a Cheyenne village. However, these Cheyenne were largely anonymous, functioning as plot devices to showcase the central White characters. Indeed, *Dr. Quinn* illustrated perfectly the point that the Indian of popular culture is a White creation (Bird, 1996).

Perhaps most striking of all, the show had not one strong female Cheyenne character. In fact, *Dr. Quinn* threw into sharp focus the double burden of race and gender stereotyping that erased Indian women from popular imagery. It demonstrated that in popular media, the traditional, restricted images of White women have often been challenged and transformed; virtually all the strong characters were women, with men generally presented as ignorant buffoons (with the exception of the glamorous Indian “Wannabe,” Sully, Michaela’s love interest). Yet even within this context, there was no space for a significant Indian woman. The Cheyenne, although presented “authentically,” and generally favorably, were not well-drawn characters with their own stories. Rather they were beautiful, serene, and spiritual, reflecting the 1990s fascination with New Age-tinged mysticism.

The one Cheyenne who had a significant presence was medicine man Cloud Dancing, the epitome of the stoic, strong, noble male Indian, who suffered horrendous personal losses with dignity and forgiveness, fitting right into a permitted role for Indian men—the noble wise man. There was no such role allowed for his wife, Snowbird, played until the character’s death by the long-suffering Tantoo Cardinal. Her main role was to look wise and wifely, offering smiling advice to Cloud Dancing, just as she did as Kicking Bird’s wife in *Dances With Wolves*. Mostly, however, she appeared briefly to allow Dr. Quinn to make a point—she suffered a miscarriage so that Michaela could become indignant about the Indians’ lack of food; she looked on as Michaela vaccinated Indian children, uttering lines like, “You bring us strong medicine.”

Cardinal must have had shows like *Dr. Quinn* in mind when she commented, “Native people are not brought into the foreground, or even accepted as an everyday part of life, not anywhere in the American media. It is rare, rare, rare that you see anything about Native people as human beings” (Greer, 1994b, p. 153). Other Cheyenne women drifted around the village, smiling and carrying babies. In one memorable episode, the show displaced Indian women completely, while trying to use their cultural experience to make a 1990s moral point. It focused on a woman who is the sole survivor of an Army raid on her Cheyenne village. She is brought to town, where she faces the ignorance and racism of the local people, and meanwhile proves to

be a temporary rival for Sully’s affections. This story offered a chance to develop a Cheyenne female character more fully, and yet this was avoided—the woman is White, and was merely raised Cheyenne. She fits perfectly into the pattern of White female Indian adoptees or abductees that we have seen in movies from *Soldier Blue* to *Dances With Wolves*, drawing on the long popular tradition of the captivity narrative (Bird, 2001). In this context, the White woman essentially stands in for the Indian woman, apparently making the character more interesting for White viewers, who can vicariously enjoy “going Indian,” without having to engage with a real Indian woman. Toward the end of the 1994–1995 season, the producers of *Dr. Quinn* apparently found the strain of incorporating Indian characters too much, bringing to the screen the real historical massacre of Cheyenne at the 1868 “battle” of Wapishita. Snowbird and most of the villagers died, and Snowbird’s dying words to Michaela were typically designed to assuage White guilt: “One day, perhaps many seasons from now, my people and your people will come to understand each other and no longer be afraid.” After that episode, audiences saw Indian land being sold off, and the Cheyenne largely disappeared from the program. The notion that viewers might have been interested in following the fate of the survivors apparently did not occur to the producers.

RETURN TO POCAHONTAS

So it seems that by the mid-1990s, living, breathing Indian women had become so invisible and irrelevant that the only way mainstream White culture could insert an Indian woman back into the cultural picture was to return to Pocahontas—and make her a cartoon. And despite being touted as a feminist rendering of the tale, with Pocahontas as a free-spirited, courageous, and strong-willed young woman, the story clearly echoed the old imagery. Pocahontas persuades her father to make peace, although it is not clear why this is in her best interests. Even though she loses her lover, she learns to recognize the inevitability of “progress,” a crucial and guilt-reducing element in the White image of Indians. In the cartoon, Disney tells us also that Pocahontas taught John Smith respect for nature, implying that she had a profound impact on how the nation developed—representing a kind of collective fantasy that is strikingly close to the sentimental image of Pocahontas embraced in the nineteenth century. Disney’s version harks back to Victorian imagery in other ways—the cartoon character is notably voluptuous and scantily clad, as were the earlier images. As R. Green (1988a) pointed out, “the society permitted portrayals to include sexual references (bare and prominent bosoms) for females even when tribal dress and ethnography denied the reality of the reference” (p. 593). Combining “superwoman” imagery of women as both

strong-willed and eminently desirable to men, alongside the current image of Indians as guardians of the Earth, “Disney has created a marketable New Age Pocahontas to embody our millennial dreams for wholeness and harmony” (Strong, 1996, p. 416).

“Our dreams,” of course, refers to White dreams, for Pocahontas was still a White fantasy. Indeed, as Tilton (1994) wrote, “We might argue that if one were to formulate the narrative from an Indian perspective, Pocahontas would have to be presented as an extremely problematic character” (p. 90). Yet Disney’s *Pocahontas* breathed new life into an Indian Princess stereotype that never really disappeared. We still see it, on Pocahontas-inspired merchandise in gifts shops and flea markets—“collector plates,” dolls and figurines, greeting cards, and gaudy artwork. The image lives on in local legends about Indian maidens/princesses who leaped to their deaths for love of a handsome brave or a White man (DeCaro, 1986). But it has nothing whatever to do with the lived experience of American Indian women in the late twentieth/early twenty-first centuries. As R. Green (1975) argued, “Delightful and interesting as Pocahontas’ story may be, she offers an intolerable metaphor for the Indian-White experience. She and the Squaw offer unendurable metaphors for the lives of Indian women” (p. 714).

Not surprisingly, then, *Pocahontas* did not break ground for innovative representations of American Indian women. Indeed, in many ways, the film marked the high point of mainstream media’s interest in exotic female Indian identity. Into the 1990s, interest waned; *Dr. Quinn* and *Northern Exposure* ended, and the miniboom in Westerns spawned by *Dances With Wolves* fizzled out. Richard Attenborough’s *Grey Owl* (1999) told the story of Englishman Archie Belaney, who masqueraded as an Indian in Canada in the 1930s and became an international sensation as an environmentalist speaker and writer. Starring Pierce Brosnan, it was conceived as a major movie, but was not well received. The film is worth noting because it did have a significant role for an Indian woman. Annie Galipeau portrayed Anahareo, Grey Owl’s common-law wife, who in reality encouraged him to write and market the books that made him famous, and clearly was a major force in his life. Unfortunately, in the movie she is presented as a young woman who, although strong-willed, will go to almost any lengths to win over and keep her Indian wannabe partner.

By 2006, the mainstream media interest in American Indian themes had all but disappeared, as evidenced in the lukewarm reaction to critically acclaimed director Terrence Malick’s 2005 film *The New World*. The movie, which experienced serious production delays, was billed as “an epic adventure set amid the encounter of European and Native American cultures during the founding of the Jamestown Settlement in 1607,” in which we witness “the dawn of a new America” (www.thenewworldmovie.com). The movie starred Colin Farrell as John Smith, Christian Bale as John Rolfe, and 14-

year-old newcomer Q’Orianka Kilcher as Pocahontas, in yet another retelling of the classic legend. Despite its highly bankable cast and esteemed director, *The New World* made little impact. Many critics praised its stunning and evocative cinematography, but it lacked dramatic punch. The film perpetuated the fiction of a physical love affair between Smith and the “princess,” and in an odd way it seemed to echo the style of the Disney cartoon, as much of the film involves Pocahontas educating Smith on the beauty of nature and her perfect, harmonious culture. The filmmakers were constrained by the discomfort of showing the 14-year-old Kilcher and 27-year-old Farrell as lovers, so the love story depends on endless scenes in which the two exchange lingering looks, platonic embraces, and rather chaste-looking kisses, while frolicking in the pristine Virginia scenery. Kilcher, whose heritage is part indigenous Peruvian, presents Pocahontas as strong, striking, and independent-minded, although totally consumed by love. The film cannot escape the problematic nature of the story, in that she asserts her independence by effectively renouncing her family and tribe, and throwing in her lot with the English, resulting in her banishment. And despite numerous decorative roles for Indian extras, there are few Indian roles of any consequence, and none for other women, most of whom float mutely around the camp. Only one matters—the woman who helps create the “new America” that will largely exclude her own people. Malick’s relatively unsuccessful Pocahontas version seems to mark the end (for the time being) of the small wave of “Indian” movies and television.

BREAKING THE STEREOTYPE

Although mainstream popular culture still offers little subjectivity to the Indian, male or female, the impetus for change grew steadily in the 1990s and into the twenty-first century. The day of the blockbuster Indian movie seems over, but that was never the venue for innovation anyway; in mainstream movies Indians continue to be trapped in the past, or in a conception of Indians as “traditional.” Instead, we may look for change in smaller, independent films, and nonmainstream television. More honest portrayals of Indian life have developed in such “small” movies as *Powwow Highway* (1989), which became a very popular video rental among American Indians, and “came closest to revealing the ‘modern’ Indian-self” (Jojola, 2003, p. 15). Writing in 1998, Jojola (2003), predicted that the cycle of blockbuster “Indian sympathy” films would have to wane before space could open up for innovation in Indian representation. “Such invention will only come when a bona fide Native director or producer breaks into the ranks of Hollywood” (p. 21). That moment came with the 1998 release of the critically acclaimed

Smoke Signals, directed by Chris Eyre from stories by noted Spokane/Coeur d'Alene writer Sherman Alexie. As Cobb (2003) wrote, *Smoke Signals* breaks new ground in that it is ultimately about Indian people telling their own stories without any reference to White/Indian relationships: "*Smoke Signals* was not merely a part of the continuum of Native Americans and film; it was a pivot point" (Cobb, 2003, p. 226). Eyre went on to direct the more somber *Skins* (2001), while Alexie himself made *The Business of Fancy Dancing* (2002), which addressed the issues faced by a gay central character.

These productions, rooted in the reality of contemporary reservation life, have shattered the stereotypes of American Indian screen roles. At the same time, women have not had major roles in these films. Both *Powwow Highway* and *Smoke Signals* focus on road trips that tell the story of two male buddies. Female roles are by no means stereotypical, but are limited. *Skins* also concentrates on the relationship between two brothers, Mogy and Rudy, played by Graham Greene and Eric Schweig. There are three tiny female roles, two played by well-known actors, Lois Red Elk and *Northern Exposure*'s Elaine Miles. Michelle Thrush plays Stella, ostensibly Rudy's love interest, but the relationship (and Stella's character generally) is barely explored, with Thrush getting only a few minutes of screen time.

Women fared a little better in *Dance Me Outside* (1995), set on a contemporary Canadian reserve. Although the film's central characters are young men (Indian actors Ryan Black, Adam Beach, and Michael Greyeyes), there are several interesting and nonstereotypical female roles, notably girlfriend-turned-activist Sadie (played by Jennifer Podemski) and the hero's sister, Ilianna (played by Lisa LaCroix), who is torn between her old flame and a new, White husband. Finally, one other 1990s independent film deserves a mention—*Where the Rivers Flow North*. Jay Craven, the non-Indian director, coproducer, and cowriter, adapted it from a novella by Vermont author Howard Frank Mosher. Although not "about Indians" at all, it finally provided a major, costarring role for an Indian woman—Tantoo Cardinal. This film tells the story of a couple, an aging White logger (Rip Torn) and his Indian housekeeper/common-law wife Bangor (Cardinal), as they fight against the acquisition of their land in the 1920s. Bangor is written as an Indian woman, and there are moments in the film where that is clear, such as when the developers' strong-man refers to her as a squaw. But her ethnicity is not the issue—her complicated, bickering relationship with Tom's character is. In a reversal of the usual pattern, the male character dies in his quest for independence, leaving Bangor alone, not victorious but at least surviving. The film, by its nature and subject matter, could never be a "big" movie, but at least it may point to the possibility of roles for Indian women that acknowledge their ethnicity while being "about" larger human issues.

Conventional wisdom also is challenged in other nonmainstream media. Independent documentary Indian filmmakers are telling their stories (Prins 1989; Weatherford, 1992), and Indian women such as Loretta Todd, Sandra Osawa, and Jolene Rickard have emerged as among the strongest of them (Ginsburg, 2003). Noncommercial television has also led the way to change; for instance the National Film Board of Canada produced many films, beginning with a series of four 1-hour television movies in 1986, called "Daughters of the Country," which told four different stories of Indian or Metis women from the eighteenth century to the present. Although still set in the past, these were extraordinary in that they told their stories from the point of view of the women. Suddenly, instead of a movie that gazes at Indians through the eyes of White settlers, soldiers, or trappers, we saw those Whites as interlopers, whose ways are strange and alien. So accustomed are we to the standard way of seeing things, that it takes time to adjust. I found myself expecting to have the story of Ikwe told through the eyes of the White man she is forced to marry. Instead, he remains peripheral and, ultimately, dispensable. Life in the Ojibwa village is simple and mundane, concentrating more on survival and everyday tasks than on mystical ceremonies. The women who play the lead roles, such as Hazel King as Ikwe, or Mireille Deyglun as Mistress Madeleine, are neither voluptuous princesses nor dumpy squaws, but ordinary women who face human dilemmas not defined by their ethnicity.

Canada has also led the way in producing TV series and movies that represent contemporary Native experience, something that has not happened at all in the United States. Canadian Broadcasting Corporation series such as *The Rez* and *North of 60* have had a national impact that has transcended their identity as First Nation or "Indian" productions and made their stars nationally known. Native musicians have also had an impact, with singers such as Inuit Susan Aglukark and the Innu band Kashtin, who have also gone beyond an indigenous market.

U.S. network television went some way in expanding the imagery of Indian women in the CBS series *Northern Exposure*, which ran from 1990 to 1995. As Taylor (1996) wrote, *Northern Exposure*, which was set in contemporary Alaska, "casts its native population as alive, well, and flourishing, part of the dominant White society and modernity, yet still practicing traditional ways" (p. 229). As part of an ensemble cast, the show included two native Alaskan characters, Ed Chigliak (played by Darren E. Burrows) and Marilyn Whirlwind (played by Elaine Miles). Like all the characters on the show, neither was simple and one-dimensional, but rather displayed idiosyncratic, quirky characteristics. Marilyn was large, and yet was allowed to be sexual without being portrayed as "loose" or "squaw-like." At the same time, Taylor pointed out that the program was vague and inconsistent about Marilyn's cultural heritage; she seemed to move between the distinctly different

Haida, Tlingit, and Athabascan cultures, whereas White characters are consistently rooted in specific ethnicities. "Television would never consider giving cajuns Russian accents, (or) putting Islamic women in bikinis," (p. 241), yet *Northern Exposure*'s producers moved Marilyn and Ed's tribal affiliation with abandon.

In the long term, it's doubtful if *Northern Exposure* had any major impact on mainstream portrayals of Indians. The show was so distinctive, dreamlike and "unrealistic" that it may be remembered as a unique and nonrepresentative moment in television. Yet when I asked Indian viewers to compare *Northern Exposure* and *Dr. Quinn*, which is ostensibly presented as more "realistic," they all agreed that *Northern Exposure* was more "real," reflecting a sense of identification with the Native Alaskans as human beings, rather than cardboard characters (Bird, 1996). In that respect, *Northern Exposure* was in a different class from any U.S. television show, before or since.

We also saw a hopeful sign in the 1994 Turner Broadcasting series on "The Native Americans," which attempted to dramatize historic moments in Indian history in a series of feature-length TV movies. Although Geronimo and *The Broken Chain* were dismissed by at least one Indian critic as "feeble" (Merritt, 1994), the same writer had more encouraging words for *Lakota Woman: Siege at Wounded Knee*, a dramatization of the autobiography of Mary Crow Dog, who took part in the 1973 American Indian Movement (AIM) siege at Wounded Knee. The movie was made with a 90 percent Indian cast, and 40 percent of the crew were Indians, offering unprecedented opportunities for Indian people to gain experience in film-making techniques. Executive producer Lois Bonfiglio described the filming as "an extraordinary spiritual and emotional experience" for everyone involved. Indeed, the movie proved exceptional in that, like the smaller budget Canadian films, it told the story from the point of view of Mary Crow Dog, played by Irene Bedard (the voice of Disney's Pocahontas). The film does not glamorize Indian women—Mary is seen to sink into a life of alcoholism and promiscuity before being transformed by the message of AIM. Neither does it stereotype her as a degraded squaw; she is simply a human being, dealing with a set of problems and issues, many of which confront her because of her ethnic heritage. Although some may be cynical that Ted Turner and Jane Fonda were merely jumping on the Indian bandwagon (Merritt, 1994), *Lakota Woman* did offer an encouraging step in the right direction.

In 1996, HBO offered a groundbreaking mini-series *Grand Avenue*, based on the novel by Greg Sarris, which follows five generations of Pomo Indians as they leave the reservation to deal with life in Santa Rosa, California. Again, this production offers much more well-drawn roles for women than most feature films, giving rich opportunities to Irene Bedard, Sheila Tousey, and the inevitable Tantoo Cardinal. And perhaps the most high-profile effort of all has been the PBS *Mystery* productions of the very popular Tony Hiller-

man Navajo novels, starring Adam Beach and Wes Studi as Navajo police officers Jim Chee and Joe Leaphom. An earlier film attempt to make one of the novels, *Dark Wind* (1993), which cast non-Native actors in the central roles, was widely derided. However, PBS signed Chris Eyre to direct *Skinwalkers* (2002) and *Thief of Time* (2004), which were much more successful. Although the main roles again were male, Alex Rice as lawyer/love interest Janet Peete and Sheila Tousey as Emma Leaphom gave fine performances in rich, nuanced and nonstereotypical roles.

Meanwhile, American Indian women novelists and poets have worked hard to cast off the old imagery. Leslie Silko, Paula Gunn Allen, Joy Harjo, and others "have established a 'voice' and an 'identity' for the Indian woman which are grounded in the realities of the present, rather than the stereotypes of the past" (Tsosie, 1988). An interesting intervention in the world of comic book production, a notoriously stereotypical industry, is Bluecom Comics, which produces *Peace Party*, a "multicultural comic book featuring Native Americans" and also maintains a comprehensive Web site with pages on stereotypes and how to combat them (www.bluecomcomics.com). Even so, the *Peace Party* series centers around two leading male characters, with women generally taking subordinate roles. Nevertheless, it can be hoped that eventually, just as White and African-American women now have at least some voice in creating mass imagery, American Indian women will break into the consciousness of the mass culture industry. As Tantoo Cardinal said, "We have to get to a place where our Native women have a sexuality, a sensuality, an intelligence" (cited in Greer, 1994b, p. 153). But the stereotypes of Indians, male and female, will be hard to shatter—their role as the exotic, fascinating "other" is so entrenched and so naturalized.

DOES IT MATTER?

Over the last twenty years or so, feminist media criticism has moved past earlier, simplistic studies of media imagery—the kind of study that described media portrayals and discussed whether they reflected reality or perpetuated stereotypes. Classic studies offered a rich discussion of female "resistant" and "subversive" readings, suggesting that women can find pleasure in a range of unexpected texts (see, e.g., Ang, 1985; Bird, 1992; Brown, 1990; Press, 1991; Radway, 1984). Additionally, as more women take part in the production of media—as scriptwriters, directors, producers, and actors—we see the opportunity to celebrate some of the huge advances that have been gained in the representation of women. As Cook (1993) wrote, these female

media makers “speak for themselves and not necessarily for all women: but they insist on their right to speak differently, and for that difference to be recognised” (p. xxiii).

Yet overwhelmingly, these gains have been made by White and African-American women, with American Indian women still almost invisible in mass culture in other than stereotypical representations. Ironically, “Indian-ness” is pervasive in U.S. culture, as a style that has embraced particular icons, such as the ubiquitous dream-catcher, or Kokopelli, the South West’s hump-back flute player, both of which now appear on everything from T-shirts to earrings. A contemporary restless quest for spirituality continues to fuel demand for sweat lodges, sand-paintings, and carved fetishes—all disconnected from specific tribal identity and context. Indians seem to be the last ethnic group that still can be freely stereotyped in the most grotesque ways. As recently as 2004, American Indians were outraged by a CBS Grammy Award broadcast featuring the hip-hop duo OutKast, who performed their hit “Hey Ya” against a backdrop of smoke, teepees, and other Indian pop culture symbols. Singer Andre “3000” Benjamin, in a lime-green “Indian” costume and wig, was backed by scantily clad, gyrating dancers in feathers and green “princess” outfits. An introductory voice-over intoned that “the Natives are getting restless.” A staff writer for the newspaper *Indian Country Today* commented, “These may have been costumes to OutKast and the producers . . . but to American Indians they were the latest in a long line of insults, caricatures drawn from history” (<http://www.indiancountry.com>). The performance drew protests from many Indian nations, individuals, and well-known Indian voices, such as writer and columnist Suzan Shown Harjo. AIM member Vernon Bellecourt commented that the performance was analogous to portraying African Americans “with a grass skirt, a bone through their nose, a war lance in hand and balancing a watermelon and pork chop in the other” (www.bluecomcomics.com).

But does the limited picture of Indian women (and men) actually matter? After all, most people are surrounded by real men and women; they know that media imagery is not everything, and their understandings of gender are formed not only by media but also by day-to-day interactions. In many parts of the country, however, non-Indians never see or encounter a real, living Indian person (McGuire, 1992). Media representations take on an added power in this situation, filling a knowledge vacuum with outmoded and limited stereotypes, as several studies suggest (see Riverwind, n.d.). In my study of *Dr. Quinn*, for example, White viewers found the portrayal of the Cheyenne “authentic” and believable, especially when the Cheyenne behaved in ways that are, indeed, stereotypical—stoic, silent, and spiritual. It was these very aspects of behavior that Indian viewers found most problematic. Furthermore, one of the most striking findings in my later study (Bird, 2003), which offered participants the chance to create a hypothetical televi-

sion show with an Indian character, was that White participants had a particularly hard time developing a nonstereotypical female role—even in a region of the country that has one of the largest populations of Native people. Perhaps the reality is trumped by the endless parade of buckskin-clad “princesses” on comic books, greeting cards, “collectables,” and gift shop paraphernalia.

In 1993, Williams introduced an anthology that in many ways was a celebration of the transformations women have brought about in popular filmmaking. She presented the collection as the beginning of an answer to her own question: “So what happens when marginalised or repressed stories come to the fore? What happens when fantasies of power or tales of difference . . . become the conscious, overt, marketable stuff of mainstream cinema?” (p. xxv). When it comes to representations of American Indian women, the answer to this question is sadly clear. We don’t know what happens, although the examples of independent film and television offer an encouraging way forward. More than a decade after Williams’ question, American Indian men and women in the United States have little public identity as everyday Americans. Only when we find room for their tales will our mediated realities be finally able to break the lock of a mythic past.

NOTES

1. Although some prefer to use the term *Native Americans*, I have generally chosen to use *American Indians*, since this is the more commonly used self-description in Minnesota where I resided when first writing this.
2. Tsosie (1988) discusses the range of traditional roles for women in several indigenous cultures. For a discussion of accepted alternative female roles in specific cultures, see Lewis (1941) and Medicine (1983). Many Native American cultures also offered alternative social roles for men (see Callender and Kodrens, 1983). Foster (1995) describes how strong female roles have been erased from the historical literature on the Iroquois.
3. Indian actress Lois Red Elk commented in 1980 that of the many small roles she has played in her career, almost none of her characters was given a name (Leuthold, 1995).
4. For a discussion of appropriations of Native culture, see Whitt (1995) and Meyer and Royer (2001). A. Green (1991) took issue especially with white feminists who appropriate Indian spirituality.

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