

Sacagawea: The Name That Says It All

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Sacagawea. The name itself brings to mind reverence and mystery, grace and strength, and humility and courage. Throughout history, people have viewed the young woman, known to guide Lewis and Clark in their expedition to scope out the west, as one of America's most prominent and inspirational Native American female role models, maybe stepping above one of America's more popular Native American princess, Pocahontas. Many people have portrayed Sacagawea not only as the guide for the Corps of Discovery, but the mother of a nation about to be born (Heenan 125). She symbolizes Manifest Destiny and the expansion west. She represents the ideal American, feminine icon while suffragists and abolitionists don't hesitate to use her as a motivating tool in their movements. Throughout all of this, many don't consider the true person of Sacagawea, nor her real contribution to the Corps of Discovery. Although many have represented Sacagawea in a positive and romanticized light, the Lewis and Clark journals and a thorough analysis of Sacagawea's life have portrayed an honest, reserved, and even thoughtful Native American woman. But with so many dominating voices disregarding the true picture of Sacagawea, movements, ideas, and representations have linked Sacagawea's name with the American dream, expansionism, and progress not only into the west, but into the future and the American society.

In the Lewis and Clark journals, kept by Meriwether Lewis, William Clark, and several other men in the Corps of Discovery, the men refer to Sacagawea as nothing more than a commodity. They don't even bother to decide on a spelling for her name. 'Sacajawea,' 'Sakakawea,' or 'Sahcahgarweah' list just a few of the various ways the men attempted to spell her name. At some point, most of the journalists gave up and actually referred to her mostly as *squaw*, *Indian woman*, or *Indian girl* (Cutright 207). Sacagawea joined the expedition when Lewis and Clark eagerly signed on her husband, a French fur trader by the name of Toussaint Charbonneau. About forty years of age, Charbonneau owned young wives from different tribes. Sacagawea, captured from the Shoshone tribes by the Hidatsas at a very young age, had been bought and married to Charbonneau around the age of eleven or twelve. At approximately fifteen and a half years old and six months pregnant, Sacagawea joined the Corps and acted as the interpreter.

Although Sacagawea played an important role in translating the Native American languages to French, some of the Corps expressed their dissatisfaction with the long process. Charles MacKenzie, a British trader who joined the Corps shortly before Charbonneau and Sacagawea, said, of Sacagawea, that "she had to converse

with her husband, who was a Canadian and did not understand English. A mulatto [Jessaume], who spoke bad French and worse English, served as interpreter to the Captains..." (Ambrose 187). Besides Sacagawea and Charbonneau, Rene Jessaume, a British trader from a Mandan village into which he'd integrated, joined the group of interpreters. Translating for the Indian chiefs to the captains easily compared to a game of telephone for the people involved: from Sacagawea to Charbonneau, Charbonneau to Jessaume, and Jessaume to Captain Clark. When Sacagawea got sick, Clark, who referenced her the most in his journal entries, would be worried. The only particular instance where Lewis shared the most care actually occurred when Sacagawea gave birth to her son, Jean Baptiste, also known as Pomp. Pomp became, as Lewis said, "the first child which this woman had boarn and as is common in such cases her labour was tedious and the pain violent" (Ambrose 197). Lewis only hoped they wouldn't lose her because they needed her to secure horses from the Shoshone, her native tribe.

The journalists continually portrayed Sacagawea as void of any emotions. Clark, for example, cared about Sacagawea's health when she had a burning fever, because she had been their "only dependence for a friendly negotiation with the Snake Indians on whom we depend for horses..." (Ambrose 241). Clark also called her their "token of peace" (Heenan 137). In another instance, Sacagawea shared her childhood story of getting kidnapped by the Hidatsas. In recognizing the Shoshone land, she'd boosted the men's morale. But as she told her story, Clark described her as not showing "any immotion of sorrow in recollecting this event [the kidnap] or of joy in being again restored to her native country; if she has enough to eat and a few trinkets to wear I believe she would be perfectly content anywhere" (Ambrose 260).

Though they treated Sacagawea as a commodity and remained misogynistic throughout their journey through Shoshone lands, the Corps expressed shocked when, upon meeting the Shoshone tribe, Sacagawea wept and reunited with her brother, Chief Cameahwait. "The meeting of those people was really affecting," said Lewis (Lauter 1135). There might have been several reasons Sacagawea didn't display emotions, but if any of the journalists knew, they didn't note it. Clark, at one point, mentioned he "checked our interpreter [Charbonneau] for striking his woman at their dinner" (Slaughter 104). With an abusive husband and seemingly no support from the other Corp members, Sacagawea does have reason to remain quiet or at least to show little to no emotion.

However, we get another hint of who she might have been, as the Corps of Discovery finally reached the Pacific Ocean and spotted a beached whale. When told that she couldn't go, Sacagawea rebelled. She "observed that she had traveled a long way... and that now that monstrous fish was also to be seen, she thought it very hard she could not be permitted to see either" (Lauter

1138). This notes the only instance we hear Sacagawea speak. The entry shows great significance as it reveals a quick shift in the journalists' writing. They spare a few lines to attribute Sacagawea's wish, which also displays curiosity and even courage on her part to speak up for herself even for a line or two in the journals. At the end of the expedition, Charbonneau and Sacagawea moved into a Mandan village. Charbonneau received \$500.33 1/2 while Sacagawea received nothing. However, in other records, Clark offered to take John Baptiste and raise the child as his own son. Sacagawea said she would consider, but wanted to keep the baby until it finished weaning (Abbott 54). Clark also offered Charbonneau a job in the city, but Charbonneau turned it down, saying "he would be out of his element" (Salisbury 209).

With the small amount of information offered by the journals, many historians, anthropologists, and historical-fiction writers have portrayed Sacagawea as the woman who guided the expedition. In Paul Cutright's *A History of the Lewis and Clark Journals*, he states that Sacagawea "was a girl of rare courage and spirit. But... it is unfortunate that so many writers have overemphasized her role as a guide, which was negligible, and have done her an actual disservice by failing to stress her aid as an interpreter, which was considerable" (220). At some parts in the expedition, as seen in the journals, Sacagawea pointed the way, such as the experience on the Shoshone grounds. But other than those few instances, Lewis or Clark made all the decisions.

Other representations further emphasize the happy image of Sacagawea leading the way. In David Heenan's book, *Bright Triumphs from Dark Hours*, Heenan shares stories from all eras of America's history to emphasize that no matter how hard challenges seem, they can always be overcome. Although Heenan attempts to send a positive message, his portrayal of Sacagawea becomes one of the most misleading portrayals of her contribution to the Corps. Heenan labels her as the "Madonna of her race" (Heenan 125). The experiences that merely mentioned Sacagawea's help, such as saving belongings from the overturned boats, recognizing the Shoshone landscape, or preparing meals when food became scarce, became a few of the stories Heenan exaggerates. Not only does Heenan romanticize her, he implies the idealism behind Sacagawea's purpose on the expedition. "Against all odds, Sacagawea—along with Lewis and Clark—had been there [West] first. And the West would never again be the same" (Heenan 125). Although Sacagawea had a tough childhood, getting kidnapped and sold into marriage, she ultimately triumphed by leading America to its success: expansionism to the west. She became the manifest destiny, the reason why America exists as it does today. This representation, though convincing, shows such an inaccuracy that many reactions took place, in which scholars and historians re-thought these master narratives, taking a fresh look at Sacagawea from new angles.

In *Sifters: Native American Women's Lives*, Donna

Barbie dispels the myths surrounding Sacagawea. From visual representations to fiction writings, Barbie shows that "at the end of the twentieth century, this Native woman's story continues to endure in the society that first endowed it with significance" (Barbie 60). Barbie doesn't seek to discredit Sacagawea, but she wants people to see the "making of a myth." Barbie focuses on two reasons Sacagawea has been made into a myth. First, Sacagawea "consecrated the wilderness to national purpose" and secondly, she "has enabled those who retell it [her story] to confront diverse social and political issues in several historical periods" (Barbie 62). In the 1920's, Sacagawea became the icon for suffrage, and even so far as an icon for abolitionists. If she could guide Lewis and Clark, as the misguided history records, surely others could follow in those brave footsteps.

The fiftieth anniversary of Lewis and Clark's return from the West prompted a revival in the Lewis and Clark, and, in consequence, literature about Sacagawea. Another of the misleading master narratives placed on Sacagawea came from Eva Emery Dye. Dye wrote a fantasized version of the expedition, even going so far as hinting a romance between Sacagawea and William Clark. Plays and musicals swiftly followed, emphasizing the love affair between Sacagawea and Clark. Scott O' Dell, writer of the Newberry Award winner, *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, even followed this trend. *Streams to the River, River to the Sea* follows the story of Sacagawea, from her humble beginnings, kidnapping, and marriage. Although critics revere O'Dell for *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, the inaccuracy of his Sacagawea story goes to show how Sacagawea's master narratives misguide even the most prominent of literary authors. Although O'Dell's romanticization seems minuscule, it has shaped readers and viewers' of Sacagawea to believe that she ultimately guided not only through the journey west, but through the journey of the heart and overcoming challenges.

Even more recently, pop culture represented Sacagawea, such as in the movie *Night at the Museum*. The movie portrays Sacagawea, played by Mizuo Peck, as a wax doll in a display along with Lewis and Clark. The museum night guard, played by Ben Stiller, breaks her casing and uses her expertise to track down the enemy. Though amusing, and somewhat satisfying, the Sacagawea portrayal from the movie perpetuates Native American stereotypes, such as the long black braids, a quiet nature, and the connection to the land. The actual Smithsonian museum today contains no display of Sacagawea or the Lewis and Clark expedition. As a part of the movie and the museum, Sacagawea falls into the myth that she "will be remembered as long as Americans love their country, for in its history no other woman ever served it better" (Barbie 68). In other words, the movie glorifies Manifest Destiny through using a simplified character, Sacagawea.

To further complicate Sacagawea's legend, controversies concerning Sacagawea's death still remain debatable. Where Clark explicitly stated Sacagawea died

in 1812 from a fever, other accounts tell of a woman living in Wyoming who said she traveled with white men and saw a whale. A whole chapter dedicates itself to "Porivo's Story" in Thomas Slaughter's *Exploring Lewis and Clark*. Slaughter argues that the story of her death in 1812 "prevents her from challenging Lewis's and Clark's status as cultural leaders" (Slaughter 87). But in making her live longer, the 1884 death gives Americans something to hold onto. The journalists "leave her underdescribed and thus a nearly empty vessel into which the makers of our national myths can pour what we need to cast the Lewis and Clark Expedition as a multicultural, multiracial, gender-integrated success" (Slaughter 101).

With the wide gap open for interpretation, an interview with Randy L Teton, the youngest living female model for one of America's coins, helped solidify, or at least clarify, some of the issues surrounding Sacagawea's history, death, and physical traits. Teton said that Sacagawea's history has "been good and bad." Although some tribes view Sacagawea as a traitor for leading the white men west, Sacagawea had only been "doing what her husband told her to do." When enemy tribes stole family members or friends, those people "died" because the tribes thought they would never see the stolen loved ones again. This explains the emotional reunion between Sacagawea and the Shoshone people. It also says a lot on the part of the journalists. Although they kept her void of emotion, the slip of this show of emotion helped solidify Sacagawea as a real person, not as the master narratives surrounding her.

According to the tribal stories, Sacagawea didn't die shortly after the expedition but instead lived a long life outside Fort Washakie, Wyoming. Priests from the reservation recorded, in church journals, that an old lady lived on the outskirts of the fort. She spoke of traveling with white men and seeing a large whale. "She was shy," said Teton. "A lot of our elders believe that because of the hard life she had, she didn't trust a lot of people and did her own thing. She kept to herself." While Sacagawea's name lives on in *Porivo*, the bird woman who lived outside Fort Washakie, one last question remains concerning the myths and names surrounding Sacagawea: What did she look like?

Because no photographs or descriptions of Sacagawea remain, the U.S. Mint opened Sacagawea's face for interpretation. Professional artists from all over the United States attempted to capture Sacagawea, just as sculptures have created images of Sacagawea throughout the United States. In the Sacagawea sculptures, the "most prominent part of Native Americans was inanimate" (Abbott 88). Similarly, the coin, as an inanimate object, would symbolize something great and long-lasting for many generations to see. When choosing the face for the coin, some artists chose Caucasian, African American, and Mexican women and tried to capture a female face from these different races. They then placed braids on the face to make it look like a stereotypical Native American woman. This interpretation shows that Sacagawea's face

has come so far as representing the combination of races that make up America. It completely takes Sacagawea away from her own ethnicity, Native American. Despite the other artists' interpretations, the U.S. Mint chose Glenna Goodacre's design, which used Teton's face. The coin "paved a new path of history for the U.S. mint," said Teton. "For the Natives to have their own coin, with a true Native American woman on it, it symbolized such a great feat of United States history" (Teton). Sacagawea's face on the coin didn't just portray a mix of America's different faces, it showed a real Native American woman. So when comparing the two, Teton noted, "it was clear who the winner was."

Although Sacagawea never had a voice, many people have tried to make one for her. Through these master narratives, Sacagawea becomes nothing more than a myth to satisfy the American dream to move out, to explore the world, and to conquer. Her name becomes an automatic buzz word for female writers and feminist movements, while the carrying of her baby triggers the birth of a nation whose expansion west will change everything. Sacagawea seems to portray the ideal American woman, yet by looking at the primary source, the Lewis and Clark journals, and analyzing the master narratives given to Sacagawea, we can now more fully appreciate Sacagawea as a person, not as the master narratives surrounding her. The whole irony surrounding Sacagawea remains in her main purpose as a voice. She worked as an interpreter and that required her to physically speak with others. But in the end, like her ambiguous death, she becomes a name, an idea that Americans of the past, present, and the future, will have a difficult time letting go.

Works Cited

- Abbott, Carl and Lang, William. *Two Centuries of Lewis and Clark: Reflections on the Voyage of Discovery*. Portland: Oregon Historical Societal Press, 2004. 29.
- Ambrose, Stephen E. *Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson, and the Opening of the American West*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.
Ambrose attempts to present an unbiased account of the Lewis and Clark expedition. Relying on historical and geological facts to summarize the journey, Ambrose couldn't stress enough Sacagawea's role as an interpreter, not as a guide. By pulling direct quotes from the Lewis and Clark journals, Ambrose supports his claims well. Because he did this, I found it easy to use him as a credible resource. He not only goes into details of the tools, food, and route the Corps took, but he emphasizes the weather conditions, the lack of technology, and the minute details of the Corps' daily routines. He shares Sacagawea's power as a tool of not only a sign of peace, but a provider of food, and when in the Shoshone lands, a guide through the rough terrain. Teton's interview supported this research, emphasizing the fact that although Sacagawea guided through her native Shoshone lands in Idaho, it didn't mean she guided the whole expedition.
- Barbie, Donna. *Sacagawea: The Making of a Myth*. Perdue, Theda. *Sifters: Native American Women's Lives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. 61-76.
The essay explains why people view Sacagawea as the guide for the Lewis and Clark expedition. In attempts to create a female role model and Native American icon, Sacagawea became a voiceless, though, romanticized figure in history. Barbie acknowledges the different images of Sacagawea but analyzes various texts, including Eva Emery Dye's *The Conquest: The True Story of Lewis and Clark*, written in 1904, through a historical perspective. The analysis heavily influenced my paper, especially looking at Sacagawea through historical lenses, as opposed to a literary perspective. Barbie presented a lot of research that I followed and used as building blocks for my paper, such as Sacagawea's image as a guide, icon for suffrage, the stereotypical image of a Native American, and the encouragement of American expansionism to the west.
- Cutright, Paul Russell. *A History of the Lewis and Clark Journals*. Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1976. 198, 220.
- Heenan, David. *Bright Triumphs from Dark Hours*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010. 123-138.
David Heenan's article on Sacagawea presents her as a "Madonna of her race." He emphasizes the fact that Sacagawea, despite the obstacles of child-bearing, an abusive husband, and pure discouragement against the forces of nature, overcomes all odds and guides the Corps of Discovery to the Pacific Ocean. Although Heenan intended to provide encouragement for people in dark circumstances, his portrayal of Sacagawea is not backed up, as Donna Barbie's essay is, by credible resources and he exaggerates Sacagawea's real purpose on the mission. Heenan encourages Eva Emery Dye's portrayal of Sacagawea by emphasizing Sacagawea as a guide on the expedition. He gives voice to the men in the Corps of Discovery by stating that they found courage in Sacagawea. If she could make the journey with a baby on her back, they could too. I used this article in my paper to emphasize some of Sacagawea's exaggerated portrayals as a guide and vocal supporter to the Corps of Discovery. I used the Lewis and Clark journals and Barbie's essay to dispel Heenan's exaggerations of Sacagawea.
- Lauter, Paul, and Bruce-Novoa. "The Lewis and Clark Journals." *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath, 1990. Print.
- Salisbury, Albert and Jane. *Two Captains West: A Historical Tour of the Lewis and Clark Trail*. New York: Bramhall House. 209.
- Slaughter, Thomas P. *Exploring Lewis and Clark: Reflections on Men and Wilderness*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003. 86-113.
The chapter, entitled *Porivo's Story*, asks why some people believe Sacagawea died in 1812, as opposed to 1884, where an old woman, believed to be Sacagawea, lived and died at Fort Washakie, Wyoming. The chapter questions the credibility of the Lewis and Clark Journals, which explicitly state that Sacagawea died shortly after the expedition in giving birth to a daughter. In making Sacagawea live a short life, the journalists discredit and disallow Sacagawea to live on as a legend. Slaughter argues that Sacagawea should be given full credit for her contributions to the expedition and that she, as Porivo, or bird woman, should be hailed and remembered as a legend that lived long after Lewis, Clark, and many of the other members in the Corps of Discovery. In analyzing this chapter, I reverted to my interview with Teton, in which she said her tribe, the Shoshone-Bannock tribe, believes Sacagawea did live a long and quiet life after the expedition. Teton said Sacagawea bore no descendants, but from those who associated with her, Porivo kept to herself near the Fort Washakie reservation, and shared little to no information. Luckily, a priest recorded Porivo's stories, which told of her traveling with white men, seeing a large whale, and trading coffee grinds with other tribes. This article, combined with Teton's interview, emphasized my point that Sacagawea's legend presents another American myth, or something to hold onto for years to come.

Teton, Randy'L. Telephone interview. 3 Dec. 2012.

Although the interview was intended to focus on the Shoshone-Bannock tribe's view of their ancestor Sacagawea, Randy'L Teton, the youngest and only living female model for a U.S. currency, wanted to make sure Sacagawea's history was accurate to how her tribe learned about Sacagawea. After the overview, Teton explained that Sacagawea's contribution to the Corps of Discovery was an accomplishment. Sacagawea gave birth without the aid of other females and she was "only doing what she was supposed to do as a young lady." Sacagawea had no other options but to follow her husband. Teton said her personal view of Sacagawea differs from some of the other tribes. Some tribes view Sacagawea as a traitor for helping the Corps, but her own tribe views Sacagawea as a hero. Being six months pregnant, Teton said she "can't imagine for her [Sacagawea] to give birth while traveling." I used my interview with Teton to portray the contemporary look of Sacagawea. It fit into my argument of Sacagawea as not only the interpreter, but the sign of peace when Native American armies approached. Teton's insight into the making of the U.S. dollar coin allowed me to emphasize Sacagawea's image as the American female icon and confirmed the stereotypes people assign to Native Americans, though even these stereotypes are dispelled through Teton's face on the Sacagawea coin.