

Revolutionary Creators of the Modern World: Sacagawea

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Taking the study of history as the linking of the past with the present, and indeed the future, this essay will explore why Sacagawea – a Lemhi Shoshone woman – deserves to be viewed as a revolutionary creator of the modern world. Commemorated for the role she played in the Lewis and Clark expedition of 1804, an enterprise tasked with exploring and recording the newly acquired land comprising of the Louisiana territory stretching to the west as far as the Pacific, Sacagawea has been the subject of extensive mythologising and probable historic inaccuracies. However, despite how little we know of her factually – even the date and place of her death remain ambiguous – Sacagawea, or at least her image as a pioneering female explorer, has had an undeniable influence on the US; past and present and, as this essay will suggest, its future. The extent of Sacagawea's impact, through time and across cultures and movements, will be key to the reasoning of the essay, which will offer the view that Sacagawea occupies a unique space in the formation of a US national identity in constant evolution.

Although Sacagawea's exact contribution to the 1804 expedition remains a source of historical speculation, she clearly played a role in what was a seminal voyage for the nascent republic and an important moment in the founding of modern-day America. The expedition, which travelled almost 8,000 miles traversing the country East-West,

improved US geographic and scientific knowledge of the continent and was a celebrated feat of planning and human endurance. Whatever her contribution – whether it be as an interpreter, guide or in a domestic capacity as forager and camp mother – the fact Sacagawea, a nursing mother at the time, was part of this pioneering party is not insignificant and captured the imagination of generations to come. Although she is referenced only infrequently in journals kept by Lewis and Clark and was never recognised or even mentioned on either the official roster or pay-roll for the expedition, it seems Sacagawea played an important role particularly as an interpreter – it was for her linguistic skills that she was recruited – between the expedition party and Native tribes. Her presence as a nursing mother also ensured that the explorers' presence was not misconstrued as hostile to local peoples, so she was important in communicating the non-military status of the explorers. Furthermore, there are known examples of moments where her presence directly benefited the expedition, for example her connection with her brother resulted in securing local help in the party's traverse of the Rocky Mountains. She also helped to recover important documents following the capsizing of one of the boats, with Lewis referring to her as, "the Indian woman to whom I ascribe equal fortitude and resolution, with any person on board at the time of the accident" in a diary entry.¹ Sacagawea's knowledge of flora and

¹ Lewis, M. (May 16th 1805). Journal entry, [online]

Available at: <https://lewisandclarkjournals.unl.edu/item/lc.jrn.1805-05-16#lc.jrn.1805-05-16.01>

fauna directly benefited the exploring party, supplementing the diets of the otherwise male team, with Clark describing how “the squaw collected a parcel of roots” in a diary entry.² Upon their return in 1806, the exploring party were welcomed back as heroes, evidence of the prestige and importance ascribed to the journey they had undertaken of which Sacagawea was clearly an active member.

The expedition was a resounding success for the US government in terms of the information it gathered, which, alongside its controversial legacy as a precursor to acts of violence committed against indigenous peoples to facilitate the expansionist ideology of the growing republic, has secured its place in history as an important event in the transition from fledgling republic to the world superpower we know the US as today. While our knowledge of Sacagawea’s responsibilities on the expedition is limited, she has become mythologised to represent a symbolic independence and endurance. Her iconic status has transcended the immediate significance of the 1804 to 1806 expedition, reaching through generations, with her character even featuring in the popular modern-day *Night at the Museum* film franchise. The character of Sacagawea is a powerful revolutionary whose posthumous revolution was initiated by those who found either inspiration or justification in the idea of her.

The character of Sacagawea was adopted as “a useful icon” – in the words of historian Wanda Pillow – by suffragists working to enfranchise white women.³ The movement regenerated, and to some extent rebranded, the character of Sacagawea to further their own agenda. Pillow’s essay *Whitened Reproductions and Endarkened Representations* explores and exposes this appropriation of Sacagawea which, as she argues, involved the whitening and commodification of her. By encouraging a view of Sacagawea as, “ours to consume and celebrate without question”, it continues colonial oppression. The

legacy of this white feminist discourse, which tries to mould and redress the character of Sacagawea to fit a prescribed stereotype, has actually undermined feminism. By distancing, even removing, Sacagawea from her indigenous origins, the exclusion of Native American women from mainstream feminist objectives was secured and the legacy of this disregard continues in the marginalisation of native feminist theory to this day. In their essay *Decolonising Feminism: Challenging Connections between Settler Colonialism and Heteropatriarchy*, Arvin, Tuck and Morrill advocate a radical change to the reading of and engagement with native feminist theory which in turn asserts the importance of a united approach to dismantling patriarchy reflected in the focus on the intersectionality of fourth wave feminism.⁴ Sacagawea is an interesting individual to consider in relation to this, as an outstanding female figure whose story is inextricably linked with the colonial project. As historian Jan C. Dawson puts it, “Sacagawea’s role has implications for the history of race, gender and even the environment”. Challenging those who dismiss the platforming of Sacagawea and discredit the so-called ‘bosom school’ of novelists and suffragists, Dawson insists that despite the challenges the historian faces in documenting Sacagawea’s life, “historians today who dismiss the Shoshone woman as merely a mythic figure may be overlooking the significance of that myth in both women’s and western history”.⁵ Given the role and status that history has assigned her, Sacagawea’s status as a creator of the modern world is thus also established in the historiography of feminism, with great potential for her to appear as an interesting example in future discourse around fourth wave feminism given the unique space she occupies in US history.

Not only has Sacagawea influenced the evolution of US feminism (and necessarily global feminism given the nature of the movement),

² Lewis, M. (June 26th 1806). Journal entry, [online]

Available at: <https://lewisandclarkjournals.unl.edu/item/lc.jrn.1806-06-25#lc.jrn.1806-06-25.01>

³ Pillow, W. (2007). Searching for Sacajawea: Whitened Reproductions and Endarkened Representations, *Hypatia*, vol. 22, no. 2, pp. 1-19.

⁴ Arvin, M. and Tuck, E. and Morrill, A. (2013). Decolonizing Feminism: Challenging Connections between Settler Colonialism and Heteropatriarchy, Project Muse, *Feminist Formations*, vol. 25, iss. 1.

⁵ Dawson, J. (1992). Sacagawea: Pilot or Pioneer Mother?, *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, vol. 83, no. 1, pp. 22-28.

her character also offers an interesting insight into the historiography of, and attitude towards, race relations and the legacy of colonialism in the US – which clearly remains an issue of immense importance in modern America. Given the centrality of Native American history to the foundation of the USA, it is both hugely interesting and revealing to see how Americans relate to their own past, and how this has changed over time. In a speech made in Selma in 2015 President Obama declared, “We are Lewis and Clark and Sacagawea”.⁶ This attempt to generate a sense of shared and united history is in stark contrast to the current Trump administration who have shown a distinct disregard for indigenous populations through a series of policies that prejudice and disrespect indigenous rights to land through an ideology of racism and division. This is a continuation of the painful violence with which indigenous peoples were treated in the colonial era following the Lewis and Clark expedition. As with the suffragist movement, Sacagawea has also been impersonated by a racialised philosophical discourse which has used the interlocking logics of white supremacy to continue this legacy of oppression.⁷ Historian Eloise A. Brière explores this in her essay *Ventriloquising the Native: Whose Voice is it?*, in which she investigates the effect of work which has appropriated the Native voice both directly on Native populations as well as the reader’s understanding of colonialism. In relation to Sacagawea, two interesting examples of this ventriloquising are Eva Emery Dye’s novel *The conquest: the true story of the adventures of the Lewis and Clark expedition* (1902) and Paula Gunn Allen’s poem *The one who skins cats*. These give Sacagawea two very different voices and highlight the multiplicity of her identity in the canon of world literature; Dye’s representation raises Sacagawea to an almost divine

status while Allen attempts to re-humanise her, as an independent and self-assertive woman who cannot be put in a box whether in relation to her race or gender. As a big name in US history – there are more statues of her than any other American woman – Sacagawea, as has already been said, holds a unique prestige in US national consciousness and identity, and given the current climate of discrimination and the deterioration in race relations domestically, perhaps the myth of this iconic pioneer defying the supposed limitations and undeniable discrimination of both her race and her gender, has never been so symbolic.

Another interesting and important aspect of the history of Sacagawea is how she relates to the lesser-known slave trade in Native American women and children. Captured by raiding Hidatsas before being purchased by the French-Canadian trader Toussaint Charbonneau (who became her husband), Sacagawea’s presence on the Lewis and Clark expedition as Charbonneau’s wife was directly connected to the widespread European-Indian trade in Native tribeswomen across the sixteenth century. Although there is, as always, variation between experiences – in particular between how Native slaves were treated by French versus Spanish colonists – the trade in Indian women and children was central to diplomatic negotiations between the colonial powers and individual tribes. Here, yet again, Sacagawea’s story again demonstrates the gaping voids in the history of American colonialism, with historian Juliana Barr summarising how “the violence and coercion that reduced her to the status of a slave among Euro-Americans has been lost as popular preference casts her as Charbonneau’s «wife» and a celebrated mediator of Indian-European diplomacy”. If historically more attention had been given to this fundamental early chapter in

⁶ Obama, B. (2015). From transcript of speech made in Selma, Alabama on the 50th anniversary of ‘Bloody Sunday’, *HuffPost*, [online]

Available at: https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/obama-selma-bloody-sunday-transcript_n_6823642?ri18n=true&-guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly9jb25zZW50LnlnhaG9vLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAMtWw035Ap5emay-dUBunK-cPCaoXFcNsPGISpD5oVLHw39E1qPaHFzvZegPO4fBS-JO2CnvtuL1b7IUS6yM_PyK2EUvPdVojriZU_TStdJcZqstPd-6vpvxUBIuhhjuKPUW04NxWBjWjewYcyhUwyyL6dQmFj0wxt9hxu-SH_M7

⁷ Bailey, A. and Zita, J. (2007). *The Reproduction of Whiteness: Race and Regulation of the Gendered Body*.

Sacagawea's life then perhaps our understanding of slavery would not have been wrongly "cast as a monolithic, chattel-orientated system of coerced labour".⁸ There are so many layers to the story of Sacagawea, layers which reveal both the subjectivity and shortcomings of traditional academic process. The history of colonialism and thus slavery are lasting and deeply personal histories – particularly given intermarriage, which was often part-and-parcel of the European-Indian slave trade. Fundamentally, the history of Native American colonialism, within which Sacagawea is clearly a fascinating figure, is not the tragic history of an extinct peoples but instead the many-and-varied stories of different groups of people who continue to thrive to this day – in 2020 there remain 574 federally recognised tribes in the United States.⁹ The relationship between the US and these tribes is inevitably linked with the misrepresentations, inaccuracies and gaps in white academic discourse, and thus the revaluation of this history – including that of Sacagawea – is central to US democracy, justice and the future of this relationship.

In conclusion, it is clear Sacagawea is a figure who has been pulled in many different directions in the centuries following the Lewis and Clark expedition for which she is famed, evidence of her iconic appeal and unanimous relevance as a figure of interest and opportunity. She is a fascinating example of how figures of the past are given voices, improvised and often inauthentic, in the future and as such offer a great opportunity to examine both the process and the role of history. Indeed, studying Sacagawea requires a self-conscious avowal of the subjectivity of history as the inconsistencies in documenting this figure are immediately evident. As a young female history student who has felt starved of female historical figures throughout my history education, discovering Sacagawea has been of immense personal interest and importance, as I am sure she will

continue to be for generations to come. I hope this essay has demonstrated that Sacagawea, in all the multiplicity of her identities, should undoubtedly be viewed as a revolutionary creator of the modern world both in her capacity as a pioneering explorer on the influential Lewis and Clark expedition and as an iconic embodiment of metahistorical discourse which helps to shed light on the development – past, present and future – of our society.

⁸ Barr, Juliana. (2005). From Captives to Slaves: Commodifying Indian Women in the Borderlands, *The Journal of American History*, vol. 92, no. 1, pp. 19-46.

⁹ National Conference of State Legislatures, updated March 2020.

Available at: <https://www.ncsl.org/research/state-tribal-institute/list-of-federal-and-state-recognized-tribes.aspx>