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Malinche, Pocahontas, and Sacagawea: Indian Women as Cultural Intermediaries and National Symbols

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Résumé de l'article

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Malinche, Pocahontas, and Sacagawea: Indian Women as Cultural Intermediaries and National Symbols by Rebecca K. Jager. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015.

In her book, Rebecca K. Jager compares and contrasts the lives and legends of three Indigenous North American women: Malinche, Pocahontas, and Sacagawea. Jager's research answers an earlier call by Native-American historian and feminist scholar Clara Sue Kidwell in her 1992 *Ethnohistory* article, "Indian Women as Cultural Intermediaries," to revisit these stories from a non-Eurocentric perspective. Jager also builds on the theoretical framework developed in Richard White's landmark 1991 work *The Middle Ground*. Building on his model of native-newcomer relations in the context of frontier conquest and Western expansion, she re-examines the role of these three key individuals as cultural brokers through a gender lens, ultimately posing the question: why is each woman remembered so differently today?

In Part 1, Jager examines the lives of Malinche, Pocahontas, and Sacagawea in their pre-contact roles. She carefully considers and reconstructs their day-to-day roles and responsibilities and contextualizes their struggles after their paths crossed with Hernan Cortés, John Smith, and Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, respectively. In all cases, the women had extensive experience as mediators prior to contact with European men. They earned their place and cemented their reputations as skilled, talented women in their own right. Malinche was a multilingual and highly-skilled, intelligent interpreter with years of experience. Despite her youth, Pocahontas carried certain diplomatic responsibilities as Chief Powhatan's daughter. Sacagawea was a skilled guide and expert in the lands Lewis and Clark were charged with "discovering."

European records did not reflect the complexity of their positions because they failed to recognize "unfamiliar female responsibilities" (p. 47). Explorers did not comprehend the value and respect accorded to these women as generators of intercultural dialogue in Indigenous communities, whether in the context of Nahua Mexico, the Powhatan Confederacy, or Shoshone society. By contrast, their own communities viewed women's sexuality in an entirely different light, seeing it as a "powerful transformative force" (p. 48) that was advantageous in relationship-building. Little did colonists know that these women were "part of a diplomatic strategy to calm tensions, facilitate interactions and build strategic alliances during a time of uncertainty" (p. 105).

In the period preceding contact, their merits brought Malinche, Pocahontas, and Sacagawea to the foreground in the "foreign relations" scene of their own communities, long before any outsider recognized their value in this sphere. Jager also notes the damaging effects of Eurocentric accounts that imposed European gender norms, portrayed Indigenous women as overworked and oppressed, and gradually served to "justify the cultural genocide that occurred during the colonial era" (p. 119). By grounding their experiences in their own worldviews, she re-assigns them a sense of agency that is all-too-often missed in popular accounts of their lives. This essential step acknowledges that each woman *chose* to take part in building relationships with Europeans in some capacity. As such, she dispels the shroud of inevitability that surrounds the telling of Indigenous women's stories in the native-newcomer narratives.

In Part 2, Jager turns from reality to perception, from historical accounts to the myths

and legends that have arisen in the decades and centuries after the lived experiences of these three key women. Combining analysis of a variety of mediums, from novels and poetry to ethnohistory, from art to film and theatre, she traces the changing portrayal of these women. Why is Malinche, especially, remembered so differently from Pocahontas and Sacagawea? Mexican history in the Independence era and Revolution years largely determined the trajectory of Malinche in memory. As the first mother of a mixed-race child, she was remembered positively at first while Mexico sought to establish itself as a mestizo nation and consolidate its identity as a mixed Indigenous-Spanish population. But with the spread of Christianity and the rise of a uniquely Mexican Catholicism, Malinche gradually fell from grace to be replaced with a superior figure, the Virgin of Guadalupe. She was the Mexican Eve, instigator of the original sin of miscegenation and a traitor, not to mention an unvirtuous "whore" in the virgin-princess/whore-squaw binary that dominates portrayals of Indigenous women. More recently, Malinche has been reclaimed in Chicana narratives that emphasize, with modern sensibilities, her efforts as an advocate, evangelist, conflict mediator, and proto-feminist figure.

Meanwhile, Jager argues that Pocahontas and Sacagawea are remembered in a more positive light due to the differing nature of conquest in the United States. They aided the project of "Manifest Destiny." Pocahontas aided in the establishment of a European foothold in the present-day U.S. Sacagawea's involvement in the expedition with Lewis and Clark transferred knowledge about western territories, essential to colonial expansion. Although Pocahontas and Sacagawea are generally portrayed more positively in comparison to Malinche, their stories were manipulated and modified according the prevailing wisdom of the times. For instance, Sacagawea was recast as an icon in the suffragette movement. Upper-middle-class Euro-American women found in her a heroine, a proxy that could be used to illustrate a woman with feminine, domestic qualities who simultaneously served her "country." Jager summarizes the common denominator in these stories – the tendency to portray Malinche, Pocahontas, and Sacagawea in the Judeo-Christian trope of women as helpers to men. By giving them a part to play in the grand narrative of the colonial enterprise, the portrayals functioned to ease the colonial conscience.

Jager's work is a contribution to Indigenous history, gender studies, historiography, and myth-making. It exemplifies scholarship that departs from conventional historical accounts, from reliance on European primary sources and Eurocentric modes of thinking, writing, and story-telling. So much has been said and written about Malinche, Pocahontas and Sacagawea, but this work is the first to study all three of them collectively while also contextualizing and humanizing their struggles. Jager reminds readers again and again to be wary of perceptions that cast these popular Indigenous women in ways that deny their agency and the power they exercised to choose and shape their fates. *Malinche, Pocahontas, and Sacagawea: Indian Women as Cultural Intermediaries and National Symbols* is the product of a scholar telling the stories of Indigenous women while earnestly imagining herself in their shoes.

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