The effects of culture Images

Stereotypes have been commonly integrated in the everyday life. They are used without thinking of the consequences. **But how do stereotypes affect a person?** “What Kind of Asian Are You” is a spoken word poem written by Alex Dang. Dang is a poet from Portland, Oregon. He has Vietnamese and Chinese roots, and growing up in America being Asian has been difficult for him. He often faces racism, and is still the subject of stereotypes. His performance is expressing what being Asian in America is like. “Knock Off Native” is a spoken word poem written by Winona Linn, a poet, visual artist, performer, teacher and spoken word artist. She is from Kingston, Ontario. Linn has a Native heritage, and the First Nations is a common theme in her work. She has a white skin and red hair, making her not fit in the other’s perception of Native. Her poem is an open letter to a racist man insulting her heritage. **Although Alex Dang and Winona Linn are from different cultures, both “Asian” and “Knock off” express how the poets are expected to be some cliché of the Asian and First Nations cultures based on movies. Dang is expected to be some Asian cinema character while Linn a Pocahontas. Unfortunately, Dang feels ashamed of his heritage, and Linn needs to prove hers. By synthetizing the two sources, one can see the diversity of those two cultures.**

Although they are both expected to be some cinema clichés, Dang and Linn are from different cultures. Dang is a part Vietnamese part Chinese man living in America. Most people see his face and directly think of him as an Asian nerd, knowing everything about the Asian culture, as if Asia was one big country. They do not see him as Vietnamese or Chinese, but only as an Asian person, with all the stereotypes that come with it. He is “still pretty much whatever [they] want to see,” (Dang). He is seen as an “awkward math genius, / cold and calculated Kung-Fu expert, / assistant to ‘Dr. Jones, you crazy!’” (Dang). Those allusions are given by the cinema industry, grossly exaggerating Asian features. Indeed, most Americans have a limited knowledge of the Asian culture and use their little resource to refer to Asian people. They are given an image of the culture by the medias, cinema or video games, and do not look further. On the other hand, Linn is a Native woman who is “a white skinned, green eyed and red-blooded Meskwaki […] dotted with freckles and red hair,” (Linn). However, when most people think of Indian, they think of the biggest stereotypes: red skin, long black hair, feathers, or hair dresses. Pocahontas, the protagonist of the famous Disney movie of the same name is a well-known Native figure, creating an unreal image of the culture. The Disney princess is what some people think Indians look like, and most importantly what they want to see. The poet uses recurrently the name of Pocahontas in her spoken word. Linn has been the subject of mean comments regarding her appearance: “He could only call me out because of the color of my skin, but the color of my skin doesn’t match his perception of Indian,” (Linn). Therefore, by not looking like an Indian princess, Linn disappoints Non-Native people.

Stereotypes have affected Dang to the point of feeling ashamed of being Asian; meanwhile, Linn must prove that she is Native, since she is white. Asian people are referred with terms such as “chink”, “zipperhead” and “gook”. Those words are coming from times when Asian where slaves and brutalized. Asians living in America are marginalized, projected as the secondary role in the society. In his poem, Dang remembers, “When those kids thought I’d make them sick,” (Dang). He grew up in a society discriminating people like him, a society telling him that he is weird, a bit off, because of his origins. Growing up in such an environment influences one’s perception of their culture. Dang “still feels the shame of being Asian,” (Dang). He ingests those stereotypes to the point of not feeling proud of his roots. Unlike Dang, Linn is proud of her culture but must prove her origins. As said before, she does not look like the general perception of Indian, and has been called a “Knock Off Pocahontas” (Linn). Her outside does not represent her inside; consequently, she is not seen as a true Native. This remark is the source of her poem “Knock Off”. This kind of comment makes him angry because she knows what she is worth; thus, she knows where she comes from and what her people have been through. Linn is very confident, and uses her confidence to tell people who she is.

Similarly, both poets want to show how diverse their culture is. Dang is included in a box containing all Asian people; indeed, he is referred as terms that are not even from his culture. In his poem, Dang says, “I can give you/ Tokyo Drift,/ Jeremy Lin/ Mario Kart,/ Tiger Woods,” (Dang). Most of those allusions are from other countries than China or Vietnam. Most people do not make the effort of differentiating Asian people. Dang is Vietnamese and Chinese but is assimilated with the others 47 Asian countries. Being often mistaken for another culture is not easy for Dang: “Every time you confuse me with some other nationality that I might share feature to is stripping away my individuality,” (Dang). Most people see an Asian feature on Dang - such as slanting eyes or black hair, and automatically see him as an Asian, not an individual identity with more precise origins. By expressing this idea in his spoken word, he shows the diversity of the Asian culture, hoping that people will understand the variety of Asia. Likewise, there are 634 First Nations in Canada, but most Canadians do not realize that by putting them all in one category: Native people. Indians are thought to be red-skinned and black-haired people living in tepees, spending their time carving totem poles, yet they are a very diverse population. Indeed, not all bands carve totem poles or live in tepees. The medias take the most cliché activities and features of the First Nations to create an image, destroying all individuality. Linn insists on the fact that she is Meskwaki, to let people understand that there are various tribes: “Pocahontas was Pohatan and I am Meskwaki/ But I knew he would not know the difference,” (Linn). She is Meskwaki, but is assimilated with one of the only Native figure people know, yet Pocahontas is not even from the same Nation.

In conclusion, despite their different culture, both poets are expected to be some movie character. Those expectations make Dang ashamed and Linn in the need to prove her heritage. In fact, both the Asian and the First Nations cultures are diverse, as “Asian” and “Knock Off” are illustrating it. People feeling ashamed of their culture or needing to prove who they are should not be something accepted in the society. Especially if those feelings come from stereotypes. A lot of the different cultures are misrepresented in the Western world. Considering that, the next question would be: should not the medias represent cultures in a more accurate way?

# Works Cited

Dang, Alex. "What Kind of Asian Are You." 2013. *YouTube.* Web. 19 December 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VoP0ox\_Jw\_w>.

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