



*Gioia Woods*

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## **Cowboys, Indians, and Iraq: Jessica Lynch, Lori Piestewa, and the Great American Makeover**

If we can understand where and how in history the rules of the game originated, what real human concerns and social relationship the rules conceal or distort, and what the historical consequences of playing the game have been, we may be able to respond more intelligently the next time an infantry captain or a senator or a president evokes it.

Richard Slotkin<sup>1</sup>

False history gets made all day, any day.

Adrienne Rich, from "Turning the Wheel"<sup>2</sup>

Television has, from its earliest days, differentiated itself from other media by its ability to represent reality. During the early 1950s, live programming helped establish the audience expectation that television, unlike cinema, portrayed the "real." Today, live television represents a miniscule portion of what goes on the air, but nonetheless, its capacity for imitating or representing "real life" continues to shape television into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Television's unique identity as an institution, writes James Friedman, is "ideologically, technologically, and programmatically linked to the presentation of reality."<sup>3</sup> But to read the televised text, especially those texts

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that pretend to give viewers an unmediated view of the “real,” we must be mindful of the ideological desires that exist in that “murky space between reality and representation, between event and history.”<sup>4</sup> In the American televisual world, this murky space undulates with audience expectations for the content and drama that affirm deeply held values about American identity. Much of what Americans hold true about national identity can be found in that most enduring of myths, the Myth of the Frontier.

That myth has made cameo appearances in political rhetoric during the Bush administration’s war in Iraq, and has a starring role in a wildly popular and deeply moving episode of *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*. In this essay I examine how one episode of *Extreme Makeover* opens a representational space in which a Native American family is remade by participating first in savage war and then in bonanza economics, two key narratives of the Myth of the Frontier. The episode itself recapitulates the American desire for makeover through consumerism and patriotism. As in any use of the Myth of the Frontier, meaning is largely based on a familiarity of certain stereotypes. Stereotypes work by making a set of values appear “natural” or “normal.” In this historical moment, culture brokers are working hard to make war normal and consumerism an American right. Consumerism becomes a patriotic gesture. Reality television like *Extreme Makeover* is particularly effective at normalizing cultural values and manufacturing consent, because ideas are represented to the viewer through a seeming multiplicity of viewpoints as family members, designers, local residents, and even politicians editorialize on the events unfolding on the show. But in truth, the viewer is getting a unitary narrative, scripted and controlled by the editor.

That the narrative evokes the ideology of the frontier is not surprising. During times when American identity is physically and ideologically threatened, American television turns to the myth for reassurance. The Western as televised and cinematic genre enjoyed its heyday during the Cold War; in 1959 thirty-two adult westerns aired on prime-time television per week.<sup>5</sup> Our earliest televisual heroes—recall Davy Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier—were taken directly from the myth. During the

Vietnam War, the Western again made a resurgence in popularity. Cultural critics have demonstrated how the Western genre morphed into the cop show or science-fiction fantasy—the clothing and setting changed, but the familiar theme of go-it-alone frontier justice remained.

The television western (and its many iterations) reflects the deep cultural resonance of the Myth of the Frontier; its themes, images, and narratives effectively communicate a founding image of American identity. “The American West was born out of a desire to imagine, enforce, enact new nationalisms,” explains Krista Comer. She continues: “It continues to serve this role in American cultural and countercultural life. The claim that western mythology provides the nation’s founding myth, that the West circulates in American culture as America, is a fairly broadly accepted claim in western studies.”<sup>6</sup>

The meaning of the myth is described by American studies scholar Richard Slotkin as the “political rhetoric of pioneering progress, world mission, and eternal strife with the forces of darkness and barbarism.”<sup>7</sup> Progress, manifest destiny, and savage war characterize the project of American nationhood, past and present. The Myth of the Frontier has been endlessly reiterated to serve political agendas and communicate a complex bundle of meaning that conceals, commodifies, and fabricates history.

Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan both capitalized on the image of the cowboy. In his 1960 nomination speech, John F. Kennedy evoked a “New Frontier” that would shape the life, politics, and imagination of the nation. President Bush has made liberal use of the cowboy image, too. Clearing brush on his Crawford ranch or standing on the flight deck of the USS Lincoln, Bush conflates the cowboy image with American might. Despite contrary rhetoric that the United States is part of a coalition, President Bush has evoked the frontier hero by deciding to virtually “go it alone” in the war in Iraq, telling Saddam and sons to “get out of Dodge,” and threatening to “ride herd” on a variety of mid-east leaders.



In reality television, more so than in other programming, it is the editor who shapes the narrative. Investigating the meaning of reality television, as I indicated earlier, involves looking into that narrative space between reality and representation. The narrative is both “what happens” and “how the story is told.” In *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, which premiered on December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2003 on ABC, “what happens” is the weekly recapitulation of the deeply-held American desire for makeover. “How the story is told” is by relying on American notions of property, class, and race. The story and its discourse are neatly wrapped in the narrative of progress, straight from the Myth of the Frontier. Each episode builds suspense by featuring a race against time. The challenge to the *Extreme Makeover* design team is to totally rebuild a house, including exterior and landscaping, in seven days. The characters include the quirky and ever-resourceful permanent cast of designers and builders along with a changing cast of people whom *Extreme Makeover* chooses as its “lucky” and “deserving” families. The narrative is built, as is by now a convention of reality television, in the editing room, where shots and scenes are carefully selected to heighten tension, develop characters, and produce the emotional resolution.

The desire for an extreme makeover is not new to Americans. Reality television shows like *Extreme Makeover* reiterate a popular 19<sup>th</sup> century dime-novel theme of “rags-to-riches.” Horatio Alger, the most famous author of these novels, relied on a stock formula: a down-and-out boy performs a single act of bravery and wins the favor of a wealthy patron. The patron rewards the boy with wealth and success. Alger has been called the “inventor” of the American Dream—the notion that through hard work and determination, or “luck, pluck, and virtue”—anyone can entertain the hope of a dramatic makeover. We buy lottery tickets in the hope of striking it rich, and we read fairy tales about wand-wielding godmothers who fulfill our deepest desires for wealth, beauty, love, and life everlasting. The makeover, as it’s played out on reality television, allows the viewer to enter the possibility of being made new without the inconvenience of risk. No hard work is necessary, no honesty or act of bravery.



We do not even have to reach into our pockets to pay the cost of this week's PowerBall. By seemingly shrinking the space between event and representation, the reality television makeover places the audience squarely in the event, so the new Weber Grill, the new princess bed, and the stunning cathedral ceilings suddenly become ours.

*Extreme Makeover*, which has aired during the coveted Sunday, 8:00 pm time period in each of its three seasons on the air, has gained millions of viewers (adding 4.7 million between seasons one and two), garnered an Emmy nomination for Outstanding Reality Program, and won a People's Choice award for Favorite Reality Show. *Extreme Makeover* ended its 2005 season with an episode on the building of a home for Lori Piestewa's family outside of Flagstaff, Arizona. In March of 2003, shortly after the US invasion of Iraq, Spc. First Class Lori Piestewa became the first female casualty of the war and the first Native American woman believed killed on foreign soil. Piestewa was driving a Humvee as part of a supply convoy that came under attack on the road near Nasiriyah. Ten other soldiers were killed during the ambush; 19-year old supply clerk Jessica Lynch was injured and captured by Iraqi forces. Lynch becomes the narrator of the story that shapes the emotional impact of this episode of *Extreme Makeover*. (Lynch's own story, as I discuss later, is itself a fascinating example of "reality television," scripted to bolster support for the Iraq War.) After Lynch's rescue by US Special forces, called one of the war's "great patriotic moments," Lynch returned home and nominated the Piestewa family for *Extreme Makeover*. According to Lynch, she and Lori, a 23 year-old single mother of two young children, had entered into a pact: if one of them didn't make it, the other would help take care of the family left behind. For Lori Piestewa, this included her parents, Terry and Percy, and her two young children, Brandon and Karla.

The opening scenes of *Extreme Makeover* effectively establish the mythical terms in which the audience should make meaning about the events that will unfold over the next two hours. First, the setting: the *Extreme Makeover* bus rolls through vast expanses of unmistakably western landscape along an empty highway. We see deep colorful canyons and vast



open space covered with pinion pine, juniper, and western scrub brush. A lone eagle soars against the endless blue sky. Without a doubt, this is the West, birthplace of cowboy ethics and the mytho-cultural space on which the narrative of our nation is inscribed. The West means patriotism: frontier values like self-determination, freedom from inhibition, and a “fresh start” were tested here. As we zoom into the bus, we see the regular cast assembled, along with a guest: Jessica Lynch is introduced, and news clips of her dramatic rescue from captivity in Iraq are what we see while design team leader Ty Pennington tells her story. Jessica, he says, survived the war, and now she can participate in the makeover of the Piestewa home. Ty—characterized on the show’s website as the “lovable, off-the-wall, hunk-of-a-carpenter and home design guru”—assures Jessica, the cast, and the television audience that he brings a “platoon full of designers” to make Lori’s dream come true.<sup>8</sup>

It takes no stretch of the imagination to link western landscape with patriotism, as the opening of *Extreme Makeover* does. It is not unusual for image-makers to conflate the language of the West with the language of savage war. Neither is it strange for the West to be imagined as a nexus of progress. Richard Slotkin notes that the dominant themes of the Myth of the Frontier “center on the conception of American history as a heroic-scale Indian War” and have been used as justification for “the process of capitalist development in America.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Republican senator from Arizona Rick Renzi, who makes a cameo appearance on *Extreme Makeover*’s follow up program, *How’d They Do That?* applauds the builders and “recognize[s] *Extreme Makeover* as true patriots.” The viewer can become a patriot, too, by participating vicariously in the sort of extreme consumerism represented on the program; the show models how consumer expression can replace political expression. The war becomes “real” to its consumers through the enabling ideology of the myth.

## The Myth of the Frontier

For more than three centuries, the American West has been the ultimate site of the American makeover. As a physical topos, it was the direction of American colonial expansion, a place to realize the dream of an agrarian democracy, a place of untapped resources to fire the engine of the nation. As a mythical topos, it was the New Eden, where an independent-minded Adam could escape the legacy of New England and the Old World. The Myth of the Frontier gave the nation a desire for Eden, which has contributed to an insatiable appetite for ever-new land. The myth gave us the desire for larger-than-life heroes who draw easy dichotomies between good and evil; it gave us the belief in endless opportunity, and it justified the building of empire. In his three-volume study of the historical development of the Myth of the Frontier, Richard Slotkin traces the myth from its origins in the 17<sup>th</sup> century through the Reagan administration. Slotkin does more than describe the master narrative of western American mythology; he pinpoints the texts that made the mythology such a powerful force in the American national imagination.

In *Regeneration through Violence* (1973), Slotkin shows how the experience of warfare on the frontier from 1600-1820 became transformed into a myth by historians, writers, and preachers. The central narrative of this early experience was the captivity narrative, the most widely read genre of literature from 1680-1716. The narrative follows a predictable pattern: a woman (usually) is kidnapped by Native Americans, withstands physical and mental anguish, and through the experience is transformed. The first published captivity narrative, *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* (1682), symbolizes the Puritan hope for chastened suffering and eventual freedom from devilish savages. It entered the American imagination as a powerful story of regeneration through violence, retribution toward one's enemies, and reward for the victim-turned-hero. Ideology is expressed through myth, and myth carries its meaning through narrative. The captivity narrative, Slotkin explains, justified the establishment of American colonies, and as Anglo-

European settlers moved west, new, related narratives justified Manifest Destiny.

Slotkin continues his examination of myth and text in *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* (1985). The argument in this volume demonstrates how the myth was adapted to fit the needs of a nation moving westward and changing from an agrarian to an industrial economy. Here Slotkin examines how the frontier captive hero becomes the frontier hunter hero through fictional representation such as James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking stories. During industrialization and increased westward migration, the Myth of the Frontier justified capitalism's growth in the name of national progress. The West was sold to emigrants as a New World paradise, ideal for personal and national makeover. In fiction, promotional literatures, and newspaper accounts, "the restorative and regenerative power of the land was emphasized. . . Frontier Land had the capacity to work grand transformations on the character, fortunes, and institutions of the inhabitants."<sup>10</sup> It is during this phase of the myth's development that the West becomes linked, in American popular imagination, with Horatio Alger's promise of rags-to-riches. *Extreme Makeover* capitalizes on this narrative. As if to dramatize the family's rapid, seven-day rise from "rags" to riches, Terry Piestewa explains early in the show to Ty Pennington, "We don't have the money to do anything. We live payday to payday."

Finally, in *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (1992), Slotkin turns his formidable interpretive powers to political rhetoric, film, television, and war. In 1893, historian Frederick Jackson Turner famously declares the frontier "closed," and with this pronouncement, nostalgia for the Old West becomes a stock theme in popular culture. Although nostalgia for the frontier remains strong, the mythical hero changes from captive to hunter, from cowboy to soldier. It is not unexpected, then, that a self-described "country girl from West Virginia," and a young Hopi woman from Arizona become heroes.

Since at least the 1980s, the myth of the American West has been challenged by a new metaphor which replaces "frontier" with "contact

zone.” New Western historians have debunked the notion of the westward-moving frontier as the single source of settlement and have exposed the history of savage war against indigenous peoples and severe resource extraction that denuded western landscapes. New Western writers have revised the garden in light of the machine, and linked cowboy to community and family. But in many cultural spaces, the trappings of the New West give way to the Old, like a fresh paint job that fades to reveal patches of the stubborn, out-of-date color you wish to hide. That the Piestewa episode of *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* so fully relies upon the myth testifies to the endurance of the ideology about “national character” it communicates.

Central to the ideology is the makeover narrative. The West-as-garden is linked historically and symbolically with the doctrine of progress, and progress is linked with bonanza economics: huge financial gain acquired with little labor and investment. Think of the 1849 California Gold Rush, when many did “strike it rich,” and of the mythical narrative prompted by that moment in history: you, too, can strike it rich with nothing but a mule and a pan.

It is not just the rags-to-riches narrative, however, that influences audience interpretation here. Alger’s famous formula colludes with the mythical meaning of the West and with the “imperialist gaze” of the explorer. The Piestewa home site is repeatedly referred to as “the middle of nowhere,” encouraging us to imagine it, and the West itself, as raw and unfinished. As scholars of American culture Henry Nash Smith, Annette Kolodny, and others have so persuasively argued, imagining the land as empty, “virgin,” made possible its colonization. “The success of settlement,” Kolodny writes, “depended on the ability to master the land, transforming the virgin territories into something else—a farm, a village, a road, a canal, a railway, a mine, a factory, a city, and finally, an urban nation.”<sup>11</sup> Of course, those western territories were not unstoried, virgin landscapes existing in the middle of nowhere. The West was home, migration route, and trading center for thousands of indigenous people. But like early survey teams sent west to find the Passage to India and thus increase the



empire's power, the trope of progress rests on extreme makeover: the remaking of "nowhere" into somewhere, natural resource into capital. In order to enact this transformation there needs to be a locus of control. That control is metaphorically asserted by what we see, through what Mary Louise Pratt and others have identified as the "imperialist gaze." Like colonial explorers who "discovered" and mapped territory, Ty and design team control the land through the view: we see repeated shots of Ty in a helicopter surveying the land. As the camera sweeps over site of the Piestewa's future home, we hear designer Paul DiMeo (Carpenter/Attitude) guiding the viewer's eye to the "snow capped mountains in front of us, the valley below us, [the] absolutely stunning, stunning, land." The gaze of the camera and hence the viewing audience frames the land within a specific power dynamic; through the camera's eye, we become the central point of perception and thus become "monarchs" of all we survey. Through the gaze, we commodify, control, and consume space.

As Ty descends from the helicopter, he tells the cast that "we're gonna need a pretty incredible builder to build us a house from scratch out here in the middle of nowhere." To emphasize the extent of the makeover, designer Constance Ramos (Building/Planning) tells the viewer that none other than Shea Homes, the "guys who built the Hoover Dam and the Golden Gate Bridge" have agreed to build the Piestewa home. The comparison between a home and two of the most enduring symbols of American industrial progress underscores the extent of transformation about to occur. The very engineers of progress, represented here by Shea Homes, will usher the family into the trajectory of history and the narrative of progress.

The five-acre parcel of land donated to the Piestewa family is located just outside of Flagstaff, Arizona, and as if to further locate the physical and mythical terms by which the narrative proceeds, the bus pulls off the lonely highway to greet two men standing in a seemingly empty wilderness. The two men who orchestrated the land donation greet Ty and the design team as they tumble off the bus. Tex Hall, representative of the National Congress of American Indians, and San Manuel Tribal Chair-



man Deron Marquez shake hands all around and point into the distance, where a group of Native American dancers has assembled to bless the land. The scene feels so spontaneous that it reinforces a stereotype of native spirituality. As designer Ed Sanders (Construction) says about the meeting, “you have to bless the land. We look over, and there’s people singing to bless the land.”

Reality television works, remember, because it diminishes the space between event and representation. In contrast to the feeling of spontaneity was the crowd of spectators on the site, drawn there in hopes of catching a glimpse of Ty Pennington or Jessica Lynch. They witnessed the repeated takes of Ty and Jessica getting off the bus to meet with the tribal representatives and talk casually about the property. In an unscripted reminder of the narrative of progress and bonanza economics, a local home owner told a news reporter that he was ecstatic about the building of the home: “The Piestewas are going to own the nicest home in the area with an unobstructed view of the Peaks, and it’s going to lift the property values for all the rest of us.”<sup>12</sup>

Flagstaff, population approximately 55,000, is an international hub for tourism and the regional center for health care and education. It is hardly the middle of nowhere, but in fact a center for many people, including Navajo and Hopi people, many of whom live nearby. The Piestewas were one such Hopi family, living in a 30-year-old trailer in Tuba City on the western edge of the Navajo Reservation. After Ty Pennington, with his signature bullhorn in hand, yells, “Good morning Piestewa Family!” the cast of *Extreme Makeover* enters the family’s crowded trailer. The scene in and about the trailer reinforces the narrative of progress, this time through the trope of ownership. The design team is shocked to learn that the Piestewas do not own the land on which they live.

### Reading semiotically, reading discursively

In cultural studies, it is important to consider the ways in which a cultural product—like *Extreme Makeover*—makes meaning or creates

knowledge. If we look through the semiotic interpretive lens, we can ask “how.” How does language (words, images, etc.) produce meaning? How does it work in representation? Another interpretive lens in cultural studies is the discursive, and it can show us the effects and consequences of representation. What are the political repercussions of the knowledge created? How does this knowledge connect with power, regulate conduct, and construct identity? When Ty Pennington asks the Piestewas, “do you own the land [the trailer’s] on?” he participates in an abstraction made possible by the Myth of the Frontier. The historical reality of contested terrain, the socio-political struggles for sovereignty among tribes and between tribes and the federal government, are, as Richard Slotkin says in the first epigraph of this essay, “concealed and distorted.” All that is left in Ty’s statement is the appeal to that overarching entity called the “national character.” It’s a reference to a complex bundle of meaning: property is an American right and ownership is progress.

Before the trailer door is opened, the viewer is warned that it is falling apart. The camera pans across a room straining to hold the family’s things. Because Ty’s words are phrased as a question—do you own the land?—the responsibility for the answer, and the “responsibility” for not participating in the ownership of property, falls to the Piestewas. The television audience surely wouldn’t sit still for a long lecture from Percy or Terry about the history of shrinking Hopi territory, the Navajo-Hopi Land Dispute, and the practiced nonchalance of the federal government toward Hopi (and other tribal) attempts to protect ancestral territory. So the Piestewas simply reply, “No.” The knowledge produced by all the languages in this scene, including the visual images and the verbal question, relies on a succinct stereotype of Native Americans: they are poor, and what’s more, their poverty is somehow their fault. Indeed, a glance at the history of the Bureau of Indian Affairs corroborates this stereotype. The BIA’s mission at its inception in the 1830s was to “civilize” the “savage” by means of religious, educational, and other cultural assimilation. One of its earliest commissioners, William Medill, believed that Indians lived “independent of industry and exertion, in idleness and profligacy, until the

indisposition to labor or the habit of intemperance becomes so strong that [the Indian] degenerates into a wretched outcast.”<sup>13</sup>

The Myth of the Frontier operates in part by concealing or fabricating history in order to serve a specific construction of meaning. In this case, the discursive meaning of the opening scene in the Piestewa’s trailer conceals the long history of indigenous occupation and land disputes in northeastern Arizona. To say that the history over tribal land rights in northeastern Arizona is contentious is an understatement.<sup>14</sup>

This history is concealed on *Extreme Makeover*. But reading discursively, Stuart Hall reminds us, can reveal things, too What does this scene in the Piestewa’s old, falling-apart trailer reveal about power, expected conduct, and identity construction? As the agents responsible for making over the Piestewa’s home, the *Extreme Makeover*’s design team exercises the power. There is no BIA civilizing the savages here; instead, only the benign control of Sears who remake the Piestewas into extreme consumers. The trailer scene demonstrates how conduct between the cast and the family is to be regulated: the cast is the agent of charity, and the family is continually grateful. Even when historical trauma is acknowledged, as it is in a scene where designers Preston Sharp (Exteriors/Big Ideas) and Ed Sanders are assigned the job of constructing a Veterans Center for Native Americans, the meaning made of the event rests upon the notion of stewardship. As Ed says about Navajo code talkers, soldiers who made an unbreakable code during WWII, “they got a bum deal out of it, they got a real bum deal. And things could have been a lot different if we never had them. It’s our job to take care of those people.” Finally, identity on the show is largely constructed by foregrounding class and race. The Piestewa’s distance from wealth and property ownership is often mentioned, and vague references to their “Indianness” dominate references to cultural origins. These references, as I explain below, rely upon the easy stereotype of native spirituality.

As they enter the trailer, designers Paul DiMeo and Preston Sharp have the following exchange:

Paul: Look at all the stuff inside, man!



Preston: O my!

Paul: Wow, it's like a museum. It's like a museum.

By now a standard of reality television genre, *Extreme Makeover* intersperses “realtime” segments like walking into the family trailer, with “editorial” segments, where members of the cast give an invisible interviewer (the audience?) their intimate opinion. After Paul and Preston invite the viewers to consider the trailer as a museum, designer Ed Sanders, in his pronounced British accent, tells the audience, “you walk into the house and you got all these Native American things on the wall looking at you. It just feels very spiritual in there.”

Ed—and more to the point, the editors who actually shape the show's narrative—evokes centuries of Euroamerican desire to be made-over in the image of the philosophical primitive. As writer Leslie Silko quips: “Most Americans, while they may not know much about Indian cultures or Indian treaty rights, tend to harbor a special sentiment for American Indians. . . . Whether this is a dim recognition of the fact that Indians were here first or whether it is merely a romantic American notion is difficult to determine.”<sup>15</sup> Native spirituality has always held a fascination for Americans, and the stereotype of the noble savage, living in harmony with the land, has not lost its appeal. Part of this glamorization of native life, however, is promoted by the way some museums produce knowledge about indigenous people. They are a “lost or vanishing human species . . . deemed worthy of sustained nostalgia. . . .frozen in history as an artifact.”<sup>16</sup>

As Terry Piestewa shows the *Extreme Makeover* team around the trailer, he gives a partial inventory of what's hanging on the crowded walls, sitting on the furniture, and located in boxes: “Native American cultural stuff,” he says, “kachinas, dream catchers, musical instruments, bows and rattles, artwork.” Included in the “cultural stuff” are mementos of Lori Piestewa's military service, including letters, photographs, drawings, and pictures of her life as a daughter and a single mother of two. Designer Paige Hemmis (Carpentry/Nuts and Bolts) says, “You can tell this family cherishes everything. Everything has some sort of meaning to them.” The editors do not expound on just what that meaning is, but designer

Constance Ramos takes on the job of creating the new home's memorial room. We see Constance as curator, labeling and boxing hundreds of items that will soon become part of this museum room, and it is Constance (through the editors) who lands on the meaning of Lori Piestewa's now-iconic life when she chooses the centerpiece for the exhibit. "I've found the centerpiece to our room!" she exclaims: a framed portrait of Lori Piestewa, smiling in full military uniform, superimposed against the image of a waving American flag. Although the design team refers to Lori as daughter and mother, it is Lori as warrior that emerges most powerfully. On the show's website, Lori is called a "true warrior spirit," reminding the audience that it is through savage war that the frontier hero (and the nation) is regenerated.

### Cowboys, Indians, and Other Heroes

The savage war described by Richard Slotkin is the long series of Indian Wars in which Euroamericans domesticated the wild west by clearing the land of its native inhabitants. These wars have become a powerful mythical symbol of Americans vs. Other and good vs. evil in fulfillment of imperialist destiny. The rhetoric of the Indian Wars is similar to the rhetoric surrounding the war in Iraq. Descriptions of Indians by early American colonists rendered the Indian into a godless Other. The frontier hero—real and imagined—furthered American imperialist goals by fighting the Indian and claiming America as moral territory. The cowboy code divides the world into good and evil; by adopting this code, the Bush administration extends the idea of moral control to a global frontier.

The savage war that symbolically remakes the nation gives us our "warrior spirits" and our heroes. Reality television, including programming like *Extreme Makeover* and scripted, documentary-style news footage, packages and sells revised frontier heroes to the public. Lori Piestewa was not an Indian fighter; she was an Indian. But she participated in a new "Indian War," a war against new savages. Through it she (and we as a nation) become regenerated. In cultural studies, we must acknowledge



how we consume and appropriate images to make meaning. When designer Constance Ramos chooses artifacts to exhibit in the memorial room of the Piestewa's home, she exercises her power as representative of a museum-like institution. A museum does not simply represent reality; like reality television, a museum places images within specific contexts. In a museum the meaning of an object is neither natural nor fixed; it is constructed through the poetics and politics of exhibiting. Museums, writes Henrietta Lidchi, "appropriate and display objects for certain ends."<sup>17</sup> Through reality television, the viewer can enter the intimate space of the memorial room to grieve, to participate in a patriotic moment, and to witness the making of a new hero. By participating on this level, the viewer is fooled into thinking that he or she is constructing the meaning, not consuming the meaning. This same trick of obscuring power, obscuring the authorship of meaning, can be observed in the making of another Iraq War hero: Jessica Lynch.

As I discussed earlier, the foundational text of the Myth of the Frontier is the captivity narrative. The story of captivity, suffering, and redemption laid the foundation for the development of the regeneration through violence theme so prevalent in the myth and its deployment. In March 2003, news from the Iraq war was not positive. Lynch's dramatic rescue from a hospital in Nasiriyah, later exposed for its trumped-up drama, provided just the redemptive story the country needed. With cameras rolling, US Special Forces broke down the doors of the hospital to get to Lynch. *The Guardian's* John Kampfner observed, "[Lynch's] rescue will go down as one of the most stunning pieces of news management yet conceived."<sup>18</sup> Popular consent for the war is manufactured by recalling two deep American narratives, captivity and action-adventure. Kampfner furthers his interpretation by quoting a witness to the rescue, Saddam Hussein General Hospital's Dr. Anmar Uday: "It was like a Hollywood film. They cried, 'Go, go, go', with guns and blanks and the sound of explosions. They made a show—an action movie like Sylvester Stallone or Jackie Chan, with jumping and shouting, breaking down doors."<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Lynch later challenged the way her ordeal was represented by

calling it a “patriotic fable.” In an interview with ABC news anchor Diane Sawyer, Lynch said she felt misrepresented by the military and by media managers who used her story to “symbolize all this stuff.”<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, *Extreme Makeover* relies on the well-known images of Lynch’s rescue to establish the patriotic meaning of the show. That Lynch’s captivity narrative was scripted to recall early colonial captivity narratives—the heroine is held captive by savages, and eventually redeemed through suffering—underscores how potent the Myth of the Frontier remains in reinforcing the theme of regeneration through violence.<sup>21</sup>

In mythic narratives of war and violence, the hero’s task is pivotal: he (or she) confronts evil in the wilderness in order to prepare the territory for the civil pursuit of economic gain. The American West’s makeover was accomplished through savage war and bonanza economics. *Extreme Makeover* makes use of this established pattern by juxtaposing images of the Iraq war with extreme consumerism. However, no television show, reality or otherwise, can directly confront the inevitable loss inherent in this pattern. Percy Piestewa, Lori’s mother, tells the makeover team that she hopes no other family has to experience what she does: the death of a child. “We lost our daughter,” she says through tears, “and we only hope our family and friends don’t have to deal with what we did.” But by August of 2006, the Department of Defense listed the American death toll in Iraq at 2,607; Iraqi deaths due to the war are estimated to exceed 10,000. Thousands of families are grieving for lost children. *Extreme Makeover* offers the nation not an end to the casualties, but a displacement of them through consumer fetishism.

### Consumer fetishism

Fetishism is a representational practice—a natural object represents the supernatural, a mundane object stands for a taboo, commodities on the market replace social relations. As Clive Hamilton argued in his best selling book *Growth Fetish* (2004), the pursuit of wealth has become a stand-in for the pursuit of happiness; growth has become a fetish, a magi-



cal cure for personal and societal dissatisfaction. The *Extreme Makeover* design team has seven days to build a house, and progress on the job site is marked by lush shots of housing materials prominently bearing product names and logos. The sheer volume of products increases as the house nears completion—the construction materials, flooring, lighting, landscaping, appliances, and furnishings all arrive on site with an aura of magical transcendence. The extreme consumerism on the show is a strategy of disavowal and displacement. We see the Piestewa family at Disneyworld, surrounded by Cinderella and Prince Charming. We see 5-year old Karla’s closet full of princess dress-up clothes, and designer Paige Hemmis telling the camera, “I want Karla to have a mystical bed. A coach bed. A fairy tale feel, like she’s being ridden off to her castle in a horse-drawn carriage.” We see Jessica Lynch shopping at Sears with abandon, piling bathroom towels into the hands of designer Michael Maloney (Interior/Glamour). We see a Sears semi-truck full of appliances and clothing pull into Tuba City—enough clothing, the driver says, “to outfit every family on the reservation.” And we see Ty referring to, yet concealing, the history of colonial trauma when he explains, “These are people still struggling because they live on the reservation; they’re living on the reservation, and I think we kinda owe it, to do something.” In each case, the fetish of consumer goods stands in for a deeper loss, one that cannot be fully represented—loss of a daughter, loss of a mother, loss of land, loss of history.

False history, as poet Adrienne Rich writes, is made every day. This sort of history, the poet imagines, constructs an America that makes meaning through appropriation. What is conquered in the name of Manifest Destiny becomes the object of consumption:

The imitation of a ghost mining town,  
 the movie-set façade of a false Spanish  
 arcade, the faceless pueblo  
 with the usual faceless old woman grinding corn?  
 It’s all been done. Acre on acre  
 of film locations disguised as Sears  
 .....



False history gets made all day, any day,  
the truth of the new is never on the news.<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps the “truth of the new” is too traumatic to examine or too difficult to represent. Perhaps it defies understanding unless we force it into the grooves of older myths. Perhaps “Islamic extremists” become the Indians in a new savage war on the global frontier. The nation’s founding myth helps us to reimagine not just our past, but our present. It gives us comfort, tricking us into believing that we are replaying a challenge we have played, and surmounted, before. The physical and mythical West provides a place where we can “go back to our values” and articulate a better nation. Normally, the hard work of good deeds or self-sacrifice may get the better of us. But reality television appears to shrink the space between event and representation, and so by watching makeover, we participate in makeover and become made over ourselves. The Piestewa episode of *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* remakes us all into westerners, citizens of, as Wallace Stegner famously quipped, “the native home of hope.”<sup>23</sup>

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Richard Slotkin, *Fatal Environment: The Mythology of the American Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1600-1860* (Norman: U of Oklahoma Press, 1985), 20.

<sup>2</sup> Adrienne Rich, “Turning the Wheel” in *Fact of a Doorframe: Poems Selected and New, 1950-1984* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984), 306.

<sup>3</sup> James Friedman, “Introduction,” in *Reality Squared: Televisual Discourse on the Real*, ed. James Friedman (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 4.

<sup>4</sup> Friedman, 5.

<sup>5</sup> Alan Nadel, "Johnny Yuma Was a Rebel; He Roamed through the West"—Television, Race, and the 'Real' West," in *Reality Squared: Televisual Discourse on the Real*, ed. James Friedman (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 65.

<sup>6</sup> Krista Comer, *Landscapes of the New West: Gender and Geography in Contemporary Women's Writing* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina Press, 1999), 200.

<sup>7</sup> Slotkin, 12.

<sup>8</sup> ABC, *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, <http://abc.go.com/primetime/xtremehome/bios/> (accessed October 2, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Slotkin, 31, 34.

<sup>10</sup> Slotkin, 40.

<sup>11</sup> Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters*, (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina Press, 1975), 7.

<sup>12</sup> Mark Shaffer and Betty Reid, *The Arizona Republic*, "Makeover' Heads to Piestewa Home," sec A3, April 13, 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Scott B. Vickers, *Native American Identities: From Stereotype to Archetype in Art and Literature* (Albuquerque, NM: U of New Mexico Press, 1998), 17.

<sup>14</sup> Hopi teaching holds that the land the tribe now occupies has been theirs since they emerged as a people and culture into this world. Archaeological evidence documents Hopi presence of the area since 500 CE, giving Hopi people the longest history of occupation of a single area by any Native American tribe in the United States. The land is the place where katsina spirits dwell and where their religious obligations must be carried out. Navajo people began moving onto Hopi land in the 1600s, and by the early 1800s, what many Hopi call the Navajo "invasion" caused Hopi to withdraw to the tops of mesas for security. Between 1850 and 1863 the Hopi made repeated requests to the US Government for protection of their land, economy, and culture. In 1882, President Chester Arthur called for the creation of the Hopi Reservation. The Hopi Reservation today is surrounded by Navajo land, and many refer to the ongoing

battle for territory as the Navajo-Hopi Land Dispute. In 1958 the Hopi tribe, seeing little protection for their shrinking lands at the hands of the federal government, sued the Navajo Nation for the rights to their 1882 reservation. In 1962 the Hopi were given exclusive rights to a 650,000 acre unit within the area; the decision, however, allowed for squatters' rights and gave the Navajo claim to a 50% interest on the land, called the Joint Use Area. That area was further divided in 1974 among the Hopi and Navajo—the Hopi Partitioned Land and the Navajo Partitioned Land. Most families complied with the new ruling and moved to their own territory. Land disputes continued, and in 1996, Congress passed the Navajo-Hopi Land Dispute Settlement Act that established a 75-year lease opportunity for Navajo families remaining on Hopi Land.

<sup>15</sup> Leslie Silko, *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 78.

<sup>16</sup> Vickers, 4.

<sup>17</sup> Henrietta Lidchi, "The Poetics and Politics of Exhibiting Other Cultures," in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 198.

<sup>18</sup> John Kampfner, "The Truth about Jessica," *The Guardian*, May 15, 2003, <http://www.guardian.co.uk>

<sup>19</sup> Kampfner, "The Truth about Jessica."

<sup>20</sup> David D. Kirkpatrick, "Jessica Lynch Criticizes U.S. Accounts of Her Ordeal," *The New York Times*, November 7, 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com>.

<sup>21</sup> Several critics have contributed to the development of this argument, first made by Melani McAlistar in her article, "Saving Private Lynch: A Classic American Tale," April 9, 2003, *International Herald Tribune*, <http://www.iht.com/articles/92615.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Rich, 305-310.

<sup>23</sup> Wallace Stegner, *The Sound of Mountain Water* (New York: Penguin, 1969), 38.

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