

Silent Voices, Stolen Imagery, and Subjected Violence

Plains Native American Women in Historiography

In the realm of historical events people, genders, groups, or ethnicities often were minimized or dismissed to the footnotes. If they were lucky. A rare few would be included in the narrative. Often their roles heavily distorted to supply a message aligning with the values presented. These inequities are normally due to a lack of written sources of the minorities involved. There are many reasons for the lack in primary sources; they could have been destroyed or lost, or sadly unwritten. Sometimes the sources lack the authenticity of the subject—anthropological or narratives written by an outside author that might miss the subtle nuances of a social group. Unfortunately, there was a dismissive attitude within the field of historiography to limit or ignore oral histories from participant in the early days of ethnohistory¹.

Within the realm of women's history, the trend continues; certain groups are given more precedence over others. The disparity between Eurocentric women's history to other minorities is particularly important to address. Luckily, within the field of American historiography since the Civil Rights Movement, we are seeing more comprehensive approaches to women's history. Minorities are given more voice and acknowledgement.

In the case of Native American Women's history, it has been somewhat rocky. From a small sampling of articles, there is quite a bit of movement on Indigenous women's history but

¹ Douglas, Bronwen, and Dario Di Rosa. "Ethnohistory and Historical Ethnography." Obo. Accessed December 13, 2021. <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199766567/obo-9780199766567-0240.xml>.

there are elements lacking. Regional histories are somewhat hit or miss in reference to Native American women. In case of the Great Plains there is a dearth of material about Indigenous women's experiences but a plethora of pioneer women articles.

From 1988 to 2017, again from a small sampling of ten articles dealing with women on the Great Plains, three talked about the aspects of rural life and the impacts of white women solely. Only one focused on Native women in a localized setting on the Great Plains. Six articles that were more universal to Native American women's history, that included details about the Great Plains Native women's experience. Technically, one of these six was not from a historical journal. Only one article overlapped white women and included minority groups and Native American women at length in relation to women's inclusion in historiography.²

There were several articles written in the mid-1990s about Native American Women and their histories. Prior to 1992, when researching for Native women on the Plains there wasn't much to view. Again, this could have been due to user error in researching but Great Plains women's history seemed to dovetail towards white pioneer women with little intersectionality with Native American sources. Upon, finding several articles relating to women in rural spaces and agricultural settings. Only one mentioned "native" woman, upon further examination this was referring to white women born on the American continent.³ In contrast, several historical books and autobiographies about Native women on the Great Plains were published during this time.

² Walsh, Margaret. "Women's Place on the American Frontier." *Journal of American Studies* 29, no. 2 (August 1995): 241-55. doi:10.1017/s0021875800020855.

³ De Wit, Cary W. "Women's Sense of Place on the American High Plains." *Great Plains Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 29-44. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23533129>.

While Native American women have had a larger sampling in American history, they are often glamourized and colonialized for historical consumption.⁴ Iconic figures Sacagawea and Pocahontas serve as the bridge between two cultures, but their actual personal lives are minimalized. Even their experiences are distorted through the lens of Eurocentric maleness. Their statements, words, and actions are related through the news clippings and journals of interactions with white Europeans.⁵ This also holds true to some of conceptions to both Pocahontas and Sacagawea, both assisted in connecting two diverse cultures together through kinship of marriage.

In Sacagawea's case, her experiences outside of the discovery of the Northwest Passage are more intriguing, even if they were related to us from journals of Lewis and Clark. She was captured at a young age by a different tribe and finally married a French trapper. Her personal motivations are unknown, but she did play a major role in creating successful connections in the fur trade—like many other Native women in the Great Plains.⁶

It is interesting to note that in two separate articles, Shoemaker's in 1995 and Ramirez in 2004, that there is associated imagery of the "newfound" America being a Native woman and the explorer being a Eurocentric male "conquering" her sexually.⁷ In contrast, in Native cultures viewed the land or earth as "Mother" and placed more nurturing roles on how they viewed the land. Pocahontas and Sacagawea symbolically play this more sexual role in the mainstream narrative of American History. They were "tamed" by their white husbands whereas

⁴ Shoemaker, Nancy. "Native-American Women in History." *OAH Magazine of History*, Native Americans, 9, no. 4 (Summer 1995): 10-14. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25163037>. Pg. 10.

⁵ Shoemaker, pg. 11.

⁶ Shoemaker, pg. 11.

⁷ Shoemaker, pg. 10 and Ramirez, Renya. "Healing, Violence, and Native American Women." *Social Justice* 31, no. 4 (2004): 103-16. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/29768279>. Page 103. It is important to note that *Social Justice* is a peer-reviewed academic journal that focuses on crime and social justice. It was established in 1974, in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement and the American Indian Movement.

contemporary Natives would have seen it as an extension of the family, perhaps a kinship bonded in marriage. The European view would shape dealings with Native American women for centuries.

Shoemaker's article published in 1995 highlights an important component in Native American Women's history, "much of what historians know about Indian women's lives in the past comes from the stories of individual women."⁸ In the 1980s and early 1990's the experiences of Native American women stemmed from accounts relating to Indian Boarding Schools. Several books and articles were published about the experiences of Indian Boarding Schools in general but some really delved into the impacts on young women and girls. Carol Devens put forth an excellent article in 1992 about the focus of missionary education and the focus on gaining more female students.⁹

The subtle shift from focusing on boys to girls set a predatory tone not only in racial relations but in breaking Native families. Isaac Baird, member of the Presbyterian BFM Odanah Mission in Wisconsin remarked, "...[girls] will wield greater influence in the future. If we get the girls, we will get the race."¹⁰ It's also an interesting deviation from how white Americans viewed Native Americans, historically women were either seen as "beasts of burden" or holding too much authority over their male counterparts.¹¹

By 1995, both Walsh and Shoemaker point out that Native women held power and prestige in a different way in their own communities. There was a lack of understanding between Native communities and white Americans. This can be seen from the experiences of the early

⁸ Shoemaker, pg. 11.

⁹ Devens, Carol. "'If We Get the Girls, We Get the Race': Missionary Education of Native American Girls." *Journal of World History* 3, no. 2 (Fall 1992): 219-37. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20078530>.

¹⁰ Devens, pg. 225.

¹¹ Walsh, pg.252.

missionary work both in how they viewed the children, “ragged, dirty, lousy, and disgusting,” and the recollections of Zitkala-Sa, from the Dakota Nation, who stated the differences in how her mother treated her like a “smaller” individual versus the treatment she received from her teachers and the confusion stemming from those interactions.¹²

Devens article also reveals a wellspring of information about early life and ascending through to adulthood for women. Devens work focuses on Dakota and Ojibwa women and their experiences with educational methods from both their mothers and grandmothers and the boarding schools. Devens heavily used Zitkala-Sa, *American Indian Stories* in her article which leads to another emerging field in historiography during the same time frame— the use of autobiographies.

Once autobiographies became popular many Native American women wrote about their experiences firsthand or once again utilized white writers to express their words.¹³ In the latter case, there still was an element that the primary writer or anthropologist were writing with a white audience in mind and not to adhere to Native voices. Luckily, modern day historians and anthropologists are looking critically at the biases and possible exclusions that previous recorders of history described.¹⁴

A further shift to look more critically at Native American women and their relationships with their nations and traditional ties to landscape also changed the view that many people had of Indigenous women. Instead, of the western Hollywood version of Native women as “Indian Princesses” or heavyset matrons stereotypes we see a growing representation in publications that

¹² Devens, pg. 232-233.

¹³ Shoemaker, 11.

¹⁴ Shoemaker, 12.

show the importance of Native women in both traditional and modern life. Bales touches on the prominence that women played in native societies, their ties to landscapes and their respective nations cosmology.¹⁵ In a brief article, Bales touches on geographic regions more so than individual nations but does utilize Plains Indian mythology which ties in with Devens article about women experiencing coming of age rituals based off of Lakota and Dakota cosmology.¹⁶ It also delves into elements mentioned by Shoemaker and Walsh about women being traditionally associated with agricultural and why they were the farmers in contrast with white society.

This bridging of Native American cosmology assists with redefining Indigenous women's sense of place. However, it is a long time in coming and a lot of damage was done that weakened a sense of Native women's power. Devens highlights that many Native American girls attempted or committed suicide or that they felt uprooted or broken from their traditional relationships.¹⁷ There was also the dismissal of Native children's bodily autonomy. Aside from Zitkala-Sa's experiences with teachers using corporal punishment. The shearing of children's hair had an adverse effect on their mores and culture.¹⁸

This dismissal of bodily autonomy and the more earthy nature that was ascribed to Native women and in particular Plain's women would lead to some disastrous affects. In 2004, Ramirez's article points out the allusions to wild sexuality and how that mentality led to violence towards Native women. The use of the American Indian Holocaust Exhibit to point out how the intersectionality of history, art, and writing to show the stages of violence, healing, and the effect on Native American women is poignant. The idea that "virgin" land was empty gave European

¹⁵ Bales, Rebecca. "Native American Women: Living With Landscape." *OAH Magazine of History* 12, no. 1 (Fall 1997): 13. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25163186>.

¹⁶ Bales, 14.

¹⁷ Devens, pg. 231, 236-237

¹⁸ Devens, pg. 227-228.

“invaders” the right to claim sovereignty—this builds on the colonial idea that land was associated with women’s bodies and therefore they could “claim” it’s bounty.¹⁹ It’s interesting how the use of photography and artwork was used to influence white American’s perceptions of Native Americans and especially the women.

“Historically, photography was used to weaken and gain control of Indian people and their land by stereotyping us and placing white people in the foreground. We are surrounded by images of mascots, Indian warriors, Indian maidens, and squaw drudges. They tell dominant stories. One is the Indian as victim, stuck, between tow worlds, in charge of none. Another is the seductive Indian woman, a sexual fantasy who is often bare-breasted and positioned next to a white man (Hill, 1996).”²⁰

This call to sexuality and the stereotype that sexual promiscuity is common among Native women does have a lasting effect. It is something to consider relevant even today with the number of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls and the growing movement to better report and serve this underserved community. The rigid approach to domestic and womanly attributes to tamp down these stereotypes also fed the falsehood. While Native women, traditionality, had more autonomy and made decisions differently than white women that would shift as more Eurocentric ideals took hold.

Furthermore, while Native Americans were expected to strip away their Indianness, white people began to take on Indian mannerisms. Once the “Indian problem” was alleviated once again the idea of the “Noble Savage” became the norm. Books and articles by Philip Deloria such as *Playing Indian* entered the mainstream and women historians began to look that

¹⁹ Ramirez, pg. 107.

²⁰ Ramirez, pg. 107

intersectionality. Many groups took on vestiges of Native American culture to reaffirm their ties to stolen land and to better cultivate gender norms.²¹ The Camp Fire Girls was used to instill “timeless” women’s role and “reaffirm female differences.”²²

In an effort to be authentic camp leaders did seek out information from nonnative experts and from “cultural brokers” who did have ties to Native Americans.²³ One such broker, Eastman challenged the negative stereotypes surround Native American women, especially those from his home nation, the Dakota Sioux, “Contrary to the popular opinion,” he wrote, “our Indian girls and women are not mere drudges, but true feminine athletes.”²⁴ Though living a hybrid life Eastman was able to broker the ideas of white romanticization and at the same translate a positive image of Native Americans in a more authentic way.

Finally, in the continual change of Great Plains Indigenous women historiography a detailed article about Cheyenne and Lakota Women at the Battle of the Little Bighorn was presented.²⁵ In the overarching Native American women’s history this is a confirmation of what Shoemaker and others said that individual women’s histories make up the foundation. The accounts, or “testimonies of Antelope, Pretty White Buffalo, Moving Robe, Julia Face, and others” showcases the roles of women on the Great Plains in a non-traditional setting, warfare

²¹ Helgren, Jennifer. "Native American and White Camp Fire Girls Enact Modern Girlhood, 1910-39." *American Quarterly* 66, no. 2 (June 2014): 333-60. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43823443>.

²² Helgren, pg. 334

²³ Helgren, pg. 341

²⁴ Helgren, pg. 342

²⁵ Monaghan, Leila. "Cheyenne and Lakota Women at the Battle of the Little Bighorn." *Montana The Magazine of Western History* 67, no. 3 (Autumn 2017). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26322888>.

and battle.²⁶ It's also not biased and places the importance on the women, but it does include white men's accounts and how people at the time viewed their actions.²⁷

It also shows the respect women had in the ability to wrangle mounts, collect coup, and even fight in the battle; there was also the recognition of their womanhood.²⁸ Overall, the article shows an excellent cross section of Cheyenne and Lakota women in context of their social and cultural hegemony. It also highlights a history of Indigenous women rising into prominent roles of activism. Something that continues today with historiography and the modern American Indian Movement and the emergence or rather emergence of the "water is life" movement.

Overall, Native American women scholarship is expanding to include more voices and allowing for other marginalized voices in womanhood, girls, trans, and non-binary. It is moving forward quite successfully. However, in the case of Great Plains Indigenous women scholarship there is still work to do. Gathering oral histories from smaller or non-recognized nations and delving more into experiences of Native womanhood on the Plains. It would also be interesting to see a better representation of early pioneer woman life with an intersectional component to contemporary Native American women that is longer than two paragraphs. In modern scholarship, more social activism and environmental movements are taken precedence in Native American circles. While a kinship to the land, both in traditional cultural roles and the roles subjugated upon them, women have been at the forefront of activism for quite some time. It would be interesting to see the impact they have had on Native women on the Great Plains.

²⁶ Monaghan, pg. 3.

²⁷ Monaghan, pg. 17, DeRudio and Herendeen, American survivors, were horrified by the women's actions. Which was heavily reported and many biased accounts of women "savages" stemmed from these types of encounters.

²⁸ Monaghan, pg. 15-16.

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