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Cover Page Footnote

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SILENT VOICES, STOLEN IMAGERY, AND SUBJECTED VIOLENCE: PLAINS NATIVE AMERICAN WOMEN IN HISTORIOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT:

This paper delves into the historiography of Indigenous women's history and how experiences on the Great Plains have been recorded. The main question when approaching this subject was, "what does a review of the historiography reveal about how historians have addressed Indigenous women's history in the Great Plains?" The overwhelming consensus was that Indigenous women's history of the Great Plains was minimal in regard to articles, however, there was a growth of autobiographies and other historiographical works throughout the same time period. This would lead to a directed look at how individual women in Indigenous Plains history had a larger impact in American history.

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 were 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 of primary sources; they could have been destroyed or lost, or, sadly, never written. Sometimes the sources lack the authenticity of the subject—anthropological studies or narratives written by outside authors might miss the subtle nuances of a social group. Unfortunately, there was a dismissive attitude within the field of historiography that limited or ignored oral histories from participants in the early days of ethnohistory.¹

Within the realm of women's history, the trend continues; certain groups are given precedence over others. The disparity between Eurocentric women's history and that of 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. A review of historiography reveals that historians have not addressed Indigenous women's history in the Great Plains adequately. From a small sampling of articles, there is quite a bit of movement on Indigenous women's history but there are elements lacking. Regional histories are somewhat hit or miss in reference to Native American women. In the case of the Great Plains there is a dearth of material about Indigenous women's experiences but a plethora of pioneer women articles.

From a small sampling of ten articles from 1988 to 2017 dealing with women on the Great Plains, three talked about aspects of rural life and the impacts of white women solely. Only one

¹ *Oxford Bibliographies in Anthropology*, s.v. "Ethnohistory and Historical Ethnography," by Bronwen Douglas and Dario Di Rosa, accessed December 13, 2021, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199766567/obo-9780199766567-0240>

focused on Native women in a localized setting on the Great Plains. Six articles were more universal to Native American women's history and included details about the Great Plains Native women's experience. One of these six was not from a historical journal. Only one article included white women as well as minority groups and Native American women 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 searching for Native women on the Plains, there was not much to view. Looking into articles from *Great Plains Quarterly*, *Journal of American Studies*, and the *Journal of American History*, many focused on Native Americans as a whole or solely on men—or focused on white women's interactions on the Plains. Again, this could have been due to user error in searching but Great Plains women's history seemed to skew towards white pioneer women with little intersectionality with Native American sources. Of several articles relating to women in rural spaces and agricultural settings, only one mentioned “native” women, but 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.

While Native American women have had a large role in American history, they are often glamourized and colonized for historical consumption.⁴ Iconic figures Sacagawea and Matoaka (Pocahontas) serve as bridges between two cultures, but their actual personal lives are minimized. Even their experiences are distorted through the lens of Eurocentric masculinity. Their statements, words, and actions are relayed through the news clippings and journals of white Europeans.⁵ Additionally, both Matoaka and Sacagawea assisted in connecting diverse cultures 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 the journals of Lewis and Clark. She was captured at a young age by a different tribe and eventually 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, there is imagery of the “newfound” America being a Native woman and the explorer being a Eurocentric male “conquering” her sexually.⁷ In contrast, Native cultures viewed the land or earth as “Mother” and placed more nurturing roles on how they viewed the land. Matoaka and Sacagawea symbolically play this more sexual role in the mainstream narrative of American History. They were “tamed” by their white husbands whereas contemporary Natives would have seen it as an extension of the family, perhaps a kinship bonded in marriage. The European view

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

³ Cary W. De Wit, "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>.

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

⁵ Shoemaker, 11.

⁶ Shoemaker, 11.

⁷ Shoemaker, 10 and Renya Ramirez, "Healing, Violence, and Native American Women," *Social Justice* 31, no. 4 (2004): 103, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/29768279>. 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.

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, accounts relating to Indian boarding schools highlighted the experiences of Native American women. 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 in missionary education 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 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's article also reveals a wellspring of information about early life and ascending through to adulthood for women. Devens's work focuses on Dakota and Ojibwa women and their experiences with education from both their mothers and grandmothers and the boarding schools. Devens heavily uses Zitkala-Sa's *American Indian Stories* in her article, which demonstrates 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 utilized white writers to express their words.¹³ In the latter case, there still was an element that the primary writer or anthropologist was 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 their traditional ties to landscapes also changed the view that many people had of Indigenous women. Instead of the western Hollywood stereotypes of Native women as

⁸ Shoemaker, 11.

⁹ Carol Devens, "'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, 225.

¹¹ Walsh, 252.

¹² Devens, 232-233.

¹³ Shoemaker, 11.

¹⁴ Shoemaker, 12.

“Indian Princesses” or heavysset matrons, we see a growing diversity of representations in publications that 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 than individual nations but does utilize Plains Indian mythology, which ties in with Devens’s article about women experiencing coming of age rituals based on Lakota and Dakota cosmology.¹⁶ Bales also delves into elements mentioned by Shoemaker and Walsh about women being traditionally associated with agriculture 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 Native women’s sense of 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 Plains women would lead to disastrous effects. In 2004, Ramirez’s points out how the allusions to wild sexuality led to violence towards Native women. The use of the American Indian Holocaust exhibit to point out the intersectionality of history, art, and writing in order 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 “invaders” the right to claim sovereignty—this builds on the colonial idea that land was associated with women’s bodies and therefore colonists could “claim” its bounty.¹⁹ It is interesting how the use of photography and artwork influenced white American’s perceptions of Native Americans, particularly 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 two 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 has a lasting effect. It is something 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 emphasis on domestic and womanly attributes to counter these stereotypes also fed falsehoods. While Native women traditionally had more autonomy and made

¹⁵ Rebecca Bales, “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, 231, 236-237.

¹⁸ Devens, 227-228.

¹⁹ Ramirez, 107.

²⁰ Ramirez, 107.

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 at that intersectionality. Many groups took on vestiges of Native American culture to reaffirm their ties to stolen land and to better reinforce 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 had ties to Native Americans.²³ One such broker, Eastman, challenged the negative stereotypes surrounding 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 to Native Americans while at the same time translating a more authentic, positive image of Native Americans to whites.

Finally, in the evolution of the historiography of Great Plains Indigenous women 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” showcase the roles of women on the Great Plains in a non-traditional setting, warfare and battle.²⁶ It places the focus on the women, but it does include white men’s accounts and how people at the time viewed the women’s actions.²⁷

It 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 as well as the emergence of the “water is life” movement.

Overall, scholarship by and about Native American women is expanding to include more voices and allow for the previously marginalized voices of women, 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, including gathering oral histories from smaller or non-recognized nations and delving more into experiences of Native womanhood on the Plains. It

²¹ Jennifer Helgren, “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, 334.

²³ Helgren, 341.

²⁴ Helgren, 342.

²⁵ Leila Monaghan, “Cheyenne and Lakota Women at the Battle of the Little Bighorn,” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 67, no. 3 (Autumn 2017): 3-21, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26322888>.

²⁶ Monaghan, 3.

²⁷ Monaghan, 17; DeRudio and Herendeen, American survivors, were horrified by the women’s actions, which were heavily reported. Many biased accounts of women “savages” stemmed from these types of encounters.

²⁸ Monaghan, 15-16.

would also be interesting to see a representation of early pioneer woman life that included an intersectional analysis with contemporary Native American women. In modern scholarship, more social activism and environmental movements are taking precedence in Native American circles. Kinship to the land, both in traditional cultural roles and in roles forced upon them, has informed women's leadership in activism for quite some time. It would be interesting to see the impact they have had on Native women on the Great Plains.

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