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Book Review

We Are Dancing For You: Native Feminisms & The Revitalization of Women's Coming-of-Age Ceremonies

by Cutcha Risling Baldy (Hupa, Yurok, Karuk)

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The paradigm of settler colonialism is built on heteropatriarchy and heteropaternalism and seeks to sever the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the lands they have traditionally stewarded for millennia. In *We Are Dancing For You: Native Feminisms & The Revitalization of Women's Coming-of-Age Ceremonies*, Risling Baldy (Hupa) argues that women's coming-of-age ceremonies and the larger role of women in tribal structures were targeted post-invasion as they challenged

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“settler colonial claims to universality and legitimacy” and therefore to much-sought after land (Baldy, 2018, p. 9).

Settler colonialism is pervasive and appears many times over in anthropological records. Scholars like A.L. Kroeber are heralded for their contributions to the discipline, yet he and anthropologists like him studied California Indian peoples through a lens of “salvage ethnography.” In this way, tribal peoples are painted as static in time, and their pre-invasion culture is idealized, with academics more concerned with describing a “pristine” state rather than accurately depicting a living, breathing culture that changes over time and varies internally across adherents. As the discipline of Anthropology grew, it privileged the opinions of “experts” external to the culture they were studying over those of their Indigenous informants. Even in present day, as tribes work to reclaim their narratives, these external voices are still evaluated as more accurate sources on a given tribe’s culture.

According to Risling Baldy, menstruation and the coming-of-age ceremonies associated with these stages of life for young women provide a concentrated example through which to study Anthropology’s bias as academic considerations of the subject skew to the heteropatriarchal. A large portion of such literature characterizes menstruation and its accompanying cultural beliefs and practices as taboo and denigrated by tribal cultures, leaving little room for variation or even possible positive connotations for this biological process. In addition, in privileging the male gaze, Victorian ideals of femininity, and modern society’s emphasis on “sanitation” and efficiency, menstruation has been relegated to the periphery of anthropological considerations even for tribes that placed a highly positive value on it, such as the Hupa. By extension, Risling Baldy argues that this omission also denigrates the feminine contribution to the community, both historically and in the present day. In doing so, “Native feminisms” (Ramirez 2007; Goeman & Nez Denetdale 2009) are removed from the historical record. Native feminisms speak to the process by which tribal nations and individuals therein can uplift the feminine contribution to the community and restore the balance between genders that was prioritized pre-invasion.

Risling Baldy builds on the critique of fellow Native feminist scholars who assert “how ‘tradition’ can be used to justify continued heteropatriarchal policing of women in contemporary Native societies” (p. 17). She offers a decolonizing praxis to push back on these settler colonial expectations and to explain how “these spaces, these bodies, and this land were never as ‘settled’ as once believed” (p. 17). To do so, Risling Baldy employs methods outlined in Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (1999) to “re-imagine” research as an activity carried out by tribal peoples, for tribal peoples. This line of inquiry holds up Indigenous knowledges to stand alongside Western conceptions that have historically been projected *on* to these communities, rather than built *with* them. In addition, Risling Baldy adopts the use of (re) in parentheses in the same vein as Seneca scholar Mishuana Goeman (2008) to indicate a reconceptualization of traditional practices in present day, rather than a return to some idealized past culture. In doing so, she demonstrates how Indigenous peoples are “participating in a (re)vivification that builds a future with the past, showing how these epistemological foundations speak to a lasting legacy that is both ancient and modern” (p. 8).

In structuring her argument, Risling Baldy centers her evidence, including oral narratives, historical texts, anthropological records, and a discussion of Indigenous menstrual practices around the revitalization of the Flower Dance in the 21st century. With her analysis, she asserts that the *Ch’ilwa:l* and the processes of (re)writing, (re)righting, and (re)riting the dance are “tools that we will use as contemporary Hupa people to build a decolonizing praxis that shows how ceremony is theory and knowledge embodied through song, dance, and movement” (p. 126). Such praxis is particularly compelling within the context of the near annihilation that California Indian tribes experienced—90% of the state’s Indigenous population were killed in the years immediately following contact, a time more accurately referred to as “the invasion” by the author and other California Indian scholars (Norton, 1979; Lindsay, 2012).

The genocide of California Indians has been virtually left out of textbooks, formal schooling curricula, and from the public conscience. Such

omission does not mean that the genocide did not happen, and if anything, its denial re-victimizes the descendants of genocide survivors, such as Risling Baldy and me, a member of the Yurok Tribe neighboring the Hupa. In Hoopa Valley in particular, women, their bodies, and their coming-of-age ceremonies were specifically targeted for violence by settlers because the existence and practices of Native feminisms challenged settler colonial claims to land and legitimacy. In an effort to protect their female community members, these ceremonies were forced underground, but in doing so, so too were hidden the significant roles that Hupa women had traditionally served in pre-invasion society. This imbalance in gender roles has led to the rise in heteropatriarchy and heteropaternalism that exists in present-day Hoopa.

As a Hupa woman, such imbalance was of particular concern to Risling Baldy. She is a Hoopa Valley tribal member and is invested in the community through family and through her own participation in their cultural practices, including traditional dances. Growing up the daughter of a trained medicine woman and educator, she had known of the Flower Dance but came of age before its revitalization. The dance and its teachings would return to her in later years in times of duress, and as the dance was revitalized, Risling Baldy was motivated to use its revival as a lens to interpret the resurgence of Native feminisms within tribal cultures in modern era. In addition, she saw the dance as a direct response to the colonial, heteropatriarchal gaze that colors the problematic “salvage ethnography” on the ceremony and on the Hupa people more generally.

The book is a critical analysis of settler colonialism and heteropatriarchy from end-to-end, but several specific contributions are outstanding. In Chapter 3, *Wung-xowidilik/ Concerning It—What Has Been Told: Anthropology and Salvage Ethnography*, Risling Baldy uses a “critical historiography of salvage ethnography in California to intervene in the anthropological discourse and demonstrate how Native peoples negotiate ‘ethnographic refusal’” (p. 77). Ethnographic refusal is the process by which tribal peoples have managed the information made available to anthropologists from the beginning. Despite beliefs otherwise, they are and have always been active participants in the research process, both in the

sharing of information just as much as in their withholding of information from the outside researcher. Risling Baldy delves into the field notes of anthropologists like Kroeber (1925) and Goddard (1903) to critically engage their published works with their direct observations, this time interrogating the latter with a Hupa feminist analytic. In doing so, she makes a powerful case for her assertion that,

what at one time had been a community celebration, bringing young women to the forefront as important foundations of their communities, was now associated with shame. This disruption affected not only of young women but the entire community, which was taught to devalue women and their contributions to culture, ceremony and spirituality. (p. 71)

In Chapter 4, *Tim-na'me/ At the Lucky Spot She Bathes: Indigenous Menstrual Beliefs and the Politics of Taboo*, Risling Baldy argues that Western disdain for coming-of-age ceremonies is ironic given the prevalence of such descriptions written by Western male anthropologists. She sees their inclusion as an act of negotiating ethnographic refusal on the part of Indigenous informants to leave an additional record of the dance for future generations during a time when the ceremony had gone dormant for the sake of safety. Risling Baldy asks the question:

Why tell these stories? For me, it is because Native peoples are always thinking about future generations. They must have known there would be people who could remember these stories without Kroeber or Goddard or Sapir writing them down, but they also wanted to make sure somebody wrote them down. Maybe they wanted to show these white male ethnographers that they were not ashamed of their culture or beliefs. Maybe they hoped to leave a record that we could find one day. (p. 98)

By illuminating the different ways that the Flower Dance persisted through anthropological records and in oral narratives, Risling Baldy makes a powerful case for how the dance may have been set aside by previous generations, but was never lost nor denigrated as portrayed by anthropologists.

Through a piercing discussion of purported menstrual taboos, Risling Baldy further contends,

Native feminisms need to critically engage how patriarchy has been inscribed into Indigenous cultural practices. Native people must be diligent in their revitalization efforts and understand that heteropatriarchy is not traditional. Part of that can be achieved through the (re)writing, (re)righting, and (re)riting of Indigenous menstrual practices. (p. 122)

The final empirical chapter focuses on present day examples of the Flower Dance, using interviews with participants or *kinahldung*, to show the importance of the dance to the young women and to their larger social networks. Risling Baldy writes,

all of the *kinahldung* interviewed reflected on how watching Kayla [the first public *kinahldung* in generations] run made them excited about running, watching her sing made them excited about singing, seeing her smile after she finished her dance made them want to know what that feeling was like. (p. 132)

And with that “first” *kinahldung* and each *kinahldung* since, the ceremony is reborn for use in the 21st century. Risling Baldy points out that “this ceremonial revitalization was not treated as a static re-creation or an attempt to recapture a ‘traditional’ ceremony from the ‘old days.’ Instead the ceremony was being reclaimed as a dynamic and inventive building block of our culture” (p. 132). Overall, through her work, Risling Baldy presents a compelling argument for how the revitalization of Indigenous women’s coming-of-age ceremonies and their larger framework of Native feminisms serve as a vehicle through which these communities can reclaim their identities as “nations and sacred spaces.” In doing so, Risling Baldy upholds Native feminisms as a tool for understanding contemporary gender relations in Indian Country and for rejecting the patriarchy that now envelops far too many of our communities. As we make our way through this process, Risling Baldy reminds the reader that *Ch’ilwa:l* and its teachings are expansive, so much so that the “stories stretch into our future and [are] always reaching forward” (p. 152).

One potential area of improvement would be the addition of a map of the Hoopa Valley and adjacent areas, to orient the reader to the location of the Valley in respect to county and state landmarks, as well as in relation to nearby tribal nations. Beyond this, *We Are Dancing For You* serves as a stunning example of decolonizing praxis that elevates Indigenous knowledge to rectify the errors that exist in anthropological records to date. As Risling Baldy explains, such work is far from over, but in the meantime, *we are still dancing*.

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