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Native American Women in Academia

Edward Miamee Salce

Native American women in academia, and even those working to become academics, have had to endure a history of neglect, limited opportunities, difficulties in finding stability and support, and struggles discovering their identities and ultimately their role in this space (Strong, 1998, p. 3). Some issues relate to the time in their lives, when the average student in higher education questions how to address the new realm of time management. However, Native women also need to address the weight of a unique issue: being a member of the most historically persecuted group in the country and one that comprises the smallest ethnic group. They must also spar with gender discrimination, which serves to impede their academic growth on a myriad of levels. American Indian women (this essay will include references to indigenous North American women as Native, Indian, Native American, and American Indian) greatly desire their dilemmas to be addressed and solved for the benefit of their ethnicity. Additionally, their background of academic impediments must be met to open the gates to another wave of Native women scholars.

Some Native women have carved out their mark in the collegiate environment. A thorough examination of the experiences of Native women and what they have brooked has been my goal since visiting the Warm Springs Indian Reservation in Oregon, where I hoped to delve into issues concerning the well-being of education on reservations and understand those who bear psychological or emotional ties to it as well. Therefore, here I provide a glimpse of Native women and formal education during the 1800s in the dreaded Indian schools, the subsequent forced relocation to reservations, effects of the racist media that perpetuated stereotypes, and what effect these occurrences have had on Native women. Successful Native women have risen up from this backdrop and newer genera-

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tions have defended their right to gain an education, using this as a method of empowerment.

Furthermore, this essay is meant as a guide to help Indian women understand aspects of the race- and gender-based educational and social problems created by the American system to subdue their ascension. I present real-life examples of women who have flourished, despite the intentional obstacles laid before them. I hope to do justice for the women of my ethnicity who have contributed to my life in ways they may not have known affected me, including as matriarchs of the family, scholastic mentors, inspirational figures, and supporters of my past attempts to understand gender differences while retaining the fact that they were my equal. I came upon this idea during research of Native views of men and women and how they have had roles conferred upon them—some the same, others not—by the Great Spirit and must work in unison, relying on one another to achieve aspirations; only when the European colonizer disrupted this time-honored cycle did Native people refrain from the natural ways of humane treatment.

Indians and Westernized Education

The history of formal education for Indians was engendered by Anglo-Saxons in missionary schools that functioned until the time that the United States acquired land from another country, filching land from Indians, in Mexico, and eventually pillaged the grasslands, forest-covered mountains, and deserts of what later became U.S. western states. It was at this time that a system of boarding schools was actuated to assimilate American Indians and “civilize” them according to the canons instigated by the American government. The Bureau of Indian Affairs was a main player in this cowardly scheme to “Kill the Indian, Save the man” (Almeida, 1997), as efforts were executed to destroy the most pivotal aspects of the Indian community and their survival—the children. Indian families were destroyed by the strategy of removal and enforcement in adopting the ways of the White man. It was at these same locations of Anglo learning that they would face the racism, sexual and physical abuse, and psychologi-

cal colonization that marred their first schooling experience in the outside world. This would lead to students returning home to their tribes disenchanting, grappling, for their life's duration, rendering them unable to adjust to the domestic landscape because they had been thoroughly brainwashed, suffering from a radically altered view of tribal life (Wright, 1996, p. 93).

These Indian schools, which were imputable for the tragedies inflicted on Red people, included Carlisle and Stewart, with the grim slogan of power: "To civilize the Indian, get him into civilization. To keep him civilized, let him stay" (Pratt, 1983). This saturation of the human mind was a period when Indian children were kidnapped from their family's protective control. They became malnourished, underserved, and positioned in close contact with pedophiles (who held powerful positions in the Christian religion) and physical diseases, perpetrated by these European "hosts" (DeJong & Holder, 2007, p. 256).

With this background, students attempted to run away from this living hell and struggled to cope with this climate of horrifying tactics implemented by administrators to restrain children, paling the cultural differences between Whites and Indians in comparison. Though more details are emerging from scholars embarking on ways to unearth this chapter of American history now that the most visible of Indians schools have shut down, it is not common knowledge that Indian boarding schools still exist:

Possibly too few people are aware that assimilation of American Indians continues in our country today in multitudinous forms, including Indians boarding schools [and] school residential environments. ... Currently there are 22 Indian boarding schools funded by the Bureau of Indians Affairs, Serving over 10, 000 students ... many Indian boarding schools have and do engage in assimilating students into mainstream culture. (Robbins et al., 2006, p. 70)

Indian Women on the Reservation and the Results of Historical Injustices

Just prior to the years of forced removal from their tribes, American Indian women would join men in the land set aside by the U.S. government. for purpose of reservation. These plots of barren land were designated to quell the “Indian problem” (and the first “Red Scare” the Americans faced years before the U.S.S.R. became a superpower) and to monitor unruly Indians; the last of the Indian wars was fought at this time. With this changing of the guard, Americans could freely initiate attempts to expand into the desert states of the West, and construct metropolitan and railroad projects: major ingredients in the Manifest Destiny concept preached by politicians with trite rhetoric justifying their efforts to massacre whole populations.

Thereafter, Indians began new lives in sequestered land after their dismay in boarding schools. Some were relegated to totally different states such as the Kickapoo, Cherokee, and Oneida people. It was at these locations of terror where a shell of a human “existed” in a community rife with hysteria and hopelessness:

Native children, young adults, and, in some cases, entire families were transported from their communities to boarding schools. ... This formal education system contributed enormously to the breakdown of Native families, including women’s traditional roles, and led to the development of many of the social ills that still affect Native nations, such as dysfunctional families and substance abuse (Almeida, 1997, p. 262).

Indian women on reservations underwent cultural challenges, attempting to see eye to eye with their reservation kin, and bore the harsh reality of comporting themselves in a non-Native fashion; an incapacitating past had affected their everyday living. This destructive ideology of following what the White man considered Native women to be has been further buttressed through the generations with a chain of Native women feeling disempowered, unmotivated

toward educational achievement, and involved in the same vices that have entrapped former generations of their gender. Native women have historically battled in the realm of procuring an education on a reservation and continue to do so:

Considering nearly three times as many American Indian females begin childbearing during adolescence, and bear twice as many children while teenagers as the general U.S. population, increasing use of meth among American Indian adolescents pose significant lifetime risks for American Indian mothers and thus children, families and communities. (Barlow, 2009, p. 2)

The reservation, even with its splendid beauty of natural landscapes, unadulterated in some cases, contains a familial network among all members in place, and a sovereign nation that has separated itself from the United States, yet still faces visible problems, impinging on the means by which women seek an education; for example, in patriarchal society, men are favored over women specifically in education, whereas women are relied on to fill archaic roles of domesticity. Women do not gain the proper emotional support from those closest to them, and must deal with issues related to isolation and finding their niche in college, if they are fortunate enough to receive the rare opportunity to attend a university. Moreover, Native women fall victim every day to the same inurements following all Natives on a reservation—battling with the remnants of colonization such as alcoholism, drug abuse, sparse numbers of role models, poverty, a dwindling local economy, poor health, and viewing themselves as inferior to the members of the pasty-colored knaves who desecrated *Turtle Island*.

Racism Circulated With Media Images of American Indians

The malicious White man was not satisfied with his collusive methods to annihilate the Indian women's chances of gaining an education after hundreds of years of rape, usurping Indian land, murder, disbanding communities, and imposing diabolical doctrines of

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patriarchy on this land, which was his signature segue to more recent hardships for Native women. He then formally infringed on the Native way of learning by (a) hauling children off to boarding schools; (b) constructing parameters of enclosure for them to reside (usually to die) in, so as not to interfere with his takeover of the world, to spread these thoughts of ill will on future populations; and (c) completing the trifecta by moving into the latter part of the 20th century with the media's distortions of Native women (Krumm, 2006, p. 213). This is where Hollywood ornately displayed American Indian women as damsels in distress awaiting some uncoordinated, dull White man to rescue them in Western films, or interpreting the language of her tribe so that he could lead his cohort to the promised land. Women were also portrayed as loyal "squaws" who would risk life and limb for the men she served in *Pocahontas* (1995) or, worst of all, in *Dances with Wolves* (1990), where a White woman adopted into the Lakota tribe played the hackneyed role whose every decision in life hung on the very whim of the male figures in her life—a milksop White man and an indolent and passive medicine man—although, ironically, she is named "Stands with a Fist" (Berkhofer, 1979).

The media has had a marked impact since World War II on societal expectations and misconceptions, especially toward the original "people of color" in America—Blacks and Indians. In particular, in cinema studies, Natives were portrayed in blockbusters as a *cause celebre* of Native women. Popular TV shows such as the Lone Ranger have been cited for how people, Native and non-Native alike, view Indian women. However, this is not the dourest of consequences; it is that Native women are victimized based on how they see their racial group exhibited. They have become ashamed of their cultural and racial identity and in turn have lost their sense of identity; key facets accompanying academic achievement among women (Moon Bird Woman interview, 2011).

Native women feel the need to fulfill a precise definition of themselves: devalued by men who they invest their time in pleasing, feeling unequal to those of the male gender, developing a consciousness

that only White people and those that follow their ways can survive in the academy. Native women suffer from thoughts of alienation and presumably make the haphazard attempt to allay this through substance abuse. In addition, Native women and their depictions in Hollywood work to make Indian women feel exoticized as “the other,” with physical characteristics that are unlike the norm in America. This setup acts to mentally conquer women by the ploy set forth and administered by the White man and his lackeys. Therefore, the Native girl finds herself entrenched in an acutely orchestrated scheme to make her believe, upon entering adulthood, no opportunities for scholastic contentment exist. Her only role, then, is to wallow in the same emotional slough to which many of her maternal influences have been sadly relegated. This is a picture I have witnessed all too often.

In the final section of this essay, I will rupture this concept by pointing out the successful testimonials of Native women that can inspire even a timid generation to believe they can achieve. They must begin to realize they are as competent, capable, and intelligent as their male counterparts. They should understand that the race of people that has persecuted them will one day pay the ultimate price of being reunited with their wicked ancestors in an unearthly dimension reserved for their ilk.

Successful Native Women Deserve Merit

Even as the White race represses the success of Native women, there have been numerous instances whereby women have excelled in academia and are prime models of inspiration for a new era. Many Native women have been involved in political activism, primarily during the height of a Native movement in the 1970s: “Minority racial forces were gaining strength across the country, and their voices were heard loud and clear in California. They were on a quest for a better housing, more jobs, and an end to discrimination” (Mankiller & Wallis, 1999, p. 187).

There have been Native women who have been moved to change the conditions in which Indians quailed and have fostered a political voice and inner strength from grassroots organizations geared toward

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Native women and their concerns; but, undeniably the first major flurry of activity that spurred their political consciousness was the American Indian Movement (AIM).

The American Indian Movement hit the reservation like a tornado, like a new wind blowing out of nowhere, a drum beat from afar getting louder and louder. It was almost like the Ghost Dance Movement that hit the tribes in 1890. (Crow Dog, 2011, p. 73)

“After I joined AIM I stopped drinking. Other put away roach clips and airplane glue bottles ... What was important was getting it on. We kids became AIM’s spearheads and the Sioux set the style” (Crow Dog, 2011, p. 76).

American Indian women belonging to this movement were then endowed with a political voice and mental stability that helped usher in their educational prowess as they began to comprehend the value of knowledge and that eloquent leaders in this group, composed of firebrands, were just as ruddy-complexioned as them:

A new era of Indian militancy had begun in 1968 with the inception of the American Indian movement. ... Other chapters soon appeared on reservations and in cities across the country. AIM members staged demonstrations and sit-ins to protest the loss of tribal property and resources. (Mankiller & Wallis, 1999, p. 162).

“We did freak out the hankies. We were feared throughout the Dakotas. We made Mr. White Man realize that there were other Indians besides the poor human wrecks who posed for them on a quarter” (Brave Bird, 1997, para. 21).

Native women have emerged in all disciplines from college professors and writers to politicians and even the unthinkable position: Wilma Mankiller becoming the first woman to head the long-established Cherokee Nation. What began with a Chippewa Indian

in Minnesota, frustrated with the American government disregarding his tribe, evolved to Native women locating an outlet for their years of aggression and realizing the advantages to attaining an education, first by being inspired through political involvement by other Natives, then succeeding in the White man's world of institutions of higher learning. This was a newfound fortitude that helped them come full circle. In the same vein, their giving nature showcased itself through contributions made to the reservations when they returned with the skills learned on the outside in the White man's land to help others in need on the inside in the Red man's/woman's land.

Native Women Experience Quandaries as College Professors

Though female Native American professors have faced challenges on campus, due to being women and Indian, they have been able to overcome these barriers by concentrating on the benefits of informing a wholly new generation of what it is to be Indian: "Non-Indian people sometimes do not recognize me as Indian. I do not exhibit the stereotypical physical attributes associated with the Western idea of what Indians look like. ... I do not look like the guy on the nickel" (Black-Connor Clearly, 2002, p. 183). Native women have had to withstand the scorn, rancor, and mitigation by not only colleagues but White students, yet they recognize the privilege they carry as representatives of their communities by revealing to the classroom the correct idea of Indians who have advanced in this constituency of teachers: "In a state where Native people represent the largest minority group, and where relations between Native and white are strained, my appearance was—for one—already a problem" (Chavez, 2002, p. 75).

Many Native women have gone into teaching at all levels with the intention to be an inspirational figure for other Native students and non-Whites, to demonstrate that there is someone teaching that empathizes with them and is genuinely supportive of their endeavors and academic potential (Moon Bird Woman interview, 2011). This is commendable on their part, making a point to recognize the internal issues in a child; this foresight can be traced to their own burden of lacking a substantial support network. Impressionable students look

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for guidance and approval to those viewed as dignified elders with the much-revered gift of knowledge to bestow upon them. Thus, it is all the more macabre when the teacher does not deliver on this cultural assumption.

Concentrated in high economic needs schools, I observed that many American Indian students experienced instruction by indifferent teachers in schools led by disengaged administrators. The educational needs of these students were enormous, yet the opportunities afforded to them were few. . . . I began to explore graduate schools which would fulfill my need to find meaning behind and explanations for decisions and actions that limited life chances for students. (Cockrell, 2006, p. 123)

Conclusion

It is because of the sacrifices made by previous Native women enrolled in Indian schools, where they faced a life of turmoil, that the successes of Native women were permitted to come into fruition. The famous Native American women included in the supplementary film to this essay and the anonymous, common women who teach at universities across the nation, have benefited from the women that have shouldered their exposure to early Anglo education. However, these same women returned to their hometowns or reservations, and although carrying the burdens of emotional anguish of their past, membership in a reviled ethnic group, and rampant destitution, they are the mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers of the women in academia who have proliferated or are on the verge of academic accomplishment.

The new class of young Native women has realized that it is their responsibility to seize the opportunity to get an education. At no time before has there been this relative easing into academia, considering the past difficulties of Native women reaching this point. The multitude of role models of their ethnicity and gender having already

received an education and are presently in the sphere of professor or mentor to them.

I basically made myself believe that I was fully capable in getting straight As in my classes, to do that, to put all my energy and confidence into my classes and the projects I had to do, and in my student teaching. (Moon Bird Woman interview, 2011)

The *nouveau arrivés* can move forward with their academic undertakings and no longer lack the confidence to attend universities. Now they can develop a nexus of their own ethnicity and express themselves:

They discovered that it is possible to be Indian in the heart of the non-Indian world. ... The confidence, self-worth, and sense of purpose displayed by the transaculturated students were not in spite of being American Indian; it was because they were American Indian. (Huffman, 2001, p. 27)

Young Native women are in command of their own destiny but have now appropriated the necessary package for success: pride in their identity, self-assurance, awareness of the many advantages of education, and the conviction of the Red woman to view herself as equal to men.

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