

2017

## Native American Women: A Silent Presence in History

Jackie Krogmeier

*University of Purdue, West Lafayette, jkrogme@purdue.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/puhistorian>



Part of the [Cultural History Commons](#), and the [Women's History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Krogmeier, Jackie. "Native American Women: A Silent Presence in History." *The Purdue Historian* 8, 1 (2017).  
<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/puhistorian/vol8/iss1/9>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.

NATIVE AMERICAN WOMEN: A SILENT PRESENCE IN HISTORY

Jackie Krogmeier, sophomore

[jkrogme@purdue.edu](mailto:jkrogme@purdue.edu)

(765) 404-8111

“Women’s words are the not the stuff of history.”<sup>1</sup> So says Clara Sue Kidwell in her essay, “Indian Women as Cultural Mediators,” in which she compares fact and fiction of lauded Indian women such as Pocahontas and Sacagawea, and bemoans the lack of written testimony. “They did not write their own accounts to analyze their own actions.”<sup>2</sup> So she might be right— the words of native women are lost from history. But their actions are largely present. The actions of native women guided the European men whose words *can* be found today. Native women, often through marriage and child-bearing, wove permanent ties between native and European cultures. And in many cases, the actions of native women led their own people through the most tumultuous moments in their history.

To understand how Native American women interacted with European men, it is important to first understand their role within their own societies. Though this varied from nation to nation as each had, and continue to have, their own unique culture, women in native societies were largely involved in the daily workings of their communities. They were the agriculturists: they planted, harvested, and distributed food.<sup>3</sup> Among Algonquian-speaking societies in particular, women grew and harvested crops as well as produced bedding, baskets, fashioned animal skin into clothing, and made other domestic tools critical to life in their community. With their duties balanced through child-rearing and mourning the dead, it is easy to see that women were strongly united with the earth in spirit, their roles anchored in life-giving.<sup>4</sup> In her essay on the Anglo-Algonquian gender frontier, Kathleen M. Brown writes, “Lineage wealth and political power passed through the female line, perhaps because of women’s crucial role in producing and maintaining property.”<sup>5</sup>

Native women and men operated in ways that complemented each other, rather than existing in total equality; a misconception that historian Dawn Marsh says leads many to

describe native societies as “egalitarian.” But equality did exist within native societies: men and women worked equally as hard and were equally as valued, only for different reasons. Men were responsible for hunting, defending their community and engaging others in warfare. They produced weapons and held political roles at greater rates than native women, although women often held political positions tied to decisions for the welfare of the community and were highly respected for their wisdom. Many societies practiced matrilineal descent, where clan membership and possessions descended through women instead of men. Among Plains Indians, women often decided where to camp on bison hunts, could trade their surplus crops, had the right to divorce, and because they owned the contents of their lodge, could remain in their dwelling while the dismissed husband had to look elsewhere for a place to sleep.<sup>6</sup>

Because men’s duties drew them away from their community, sometimes hundreds of miles away for long periods of time, they were often its public face. They interacted with other native communities and with traveling Europeans. When they returned, they were often “off duty.” While they would assist women with harvest and home construction, Europeans passing through often found them smoking, gambling, or making minor repairs during the time between hunts which grew increasingly demanding with the rise of the fur trade. For this reason, many Europeans concluded that men held all the power and did none of the work.<sup>7</sup> In 1644 a Dutch Reverend wrote that native women were “obliged to prepare the Land, to mow, to plant, and do every Thing; the Men do nothing except hunting, fishing, and going to War against their Enemies...”<sup>8</sup> John Smith said, “The land is not populous, for the men be fewe; their far greater number is of women and children.”<sup>9</sup>

The belief that native women were slaves to their lazy menfolk bridled many Europeans, as European women lived within strictly regulated social norms that “protected” their honor and

civility. Misconceptions about the complementary roles of native men and women and the native ways of life all came to bear in Indigenous-European relations, especially those that occurred exclusively or specifically between Europeans and native women. First impressions of native women recorded by Europeans are almost entirely based on surface-level glances, coming from places of deep misunderstanding. Europeans saw Indian women as promiscuous “drudges” who labored tirelessly to please their idle men.<sup>10</sup> Amerigo Vespucci, an Italian explorer for whom the American continents are named, perpetuated many of these Indigenous stereotypes in his lengthy correspondence *Mundus Novus*, translated from Latin:

All of both sexes go about naked... They (women) have another custom, very shameful and beyond all human belief. For their women, being very lustful, cause the private parts of their husbands to swell up to such a huge size that they appear deformed... They (men) marry as many wives as they please; and son cohabits with mother, male cousin with female, and any man with the first woman he meets. They dissolve their marriages as often as they please... The women as I have said go about naked and are very libidinous, yet they have tolerably beautiful bodies and cleanly... When they had the opportunity of copulating with Christians, urged by excessive lust, they defiled and prostituted themselves.<sup>11</sup>

Immediately we can see the portrayal of native women as uncontrollably lustful, solely responsible for the desires of the men who viewed them as objects. The emphasis on the woman’s sin in fornicating with Christians, and the lack of emphasis on the part of Christians, is a theme that would play out over the course of centuries.

There are several native women “stand-outs” in history, though why they have made the impression on American culture that they have is another topic—Denise K. Lajimodiere, a native women and author, proposes that in order for a native woman to stand out in history, she must have aided or had sexual relations with white men.<sup>12</sup> The Indigenous woman given to Hernando Cortez, known as La Malinche or Doña Marina, certainly fits these requirements and played a critical part in the conquest of the Aztec empire.<sup>13</sup>

La Malinche, previously sold as a slave by her own people, was gifted to Cortez by the Tabascan people as part of their tribute, and quickly proved valuable in her ability to speak Nahuatl and a Mayan dialect, and could be assumed to have learned Spanish throughout her exposure to the language. With her knowledge of the regional languages, culture, and geography, La Malinche was able to advise Cortez in such an influential way that she doubtless deserves a portion of the credit for the fall of the Aztec empire. Not only that, but by nature of her sexual relationship with Cortez and other Spanish men, Doña Marina also mothered a mestizo race in Mexico.<sup>14</sup> Whether or not this was within her control, the incredible power of bringing to life a new race of people certainly makes an impact in history.

Nancy Ward, a Cherokee councilor honored for fighting in her husband's place after he was killed in battle, was another influential native women whose actions can be considered controversial. Like La Malinche may represent betrayal to Indigenous Mexicans, Nancy Ward carries a fraction of the same accusation for informing British military officers that some Cherokee men were planning to take hostile action against them. However, Nancy Ward was also morally and duty-bound to preserving the peace, as was the tradition of her Cherokee society. She acted out of concern for the lives of American settlers, British military, and of course, her own beloved people. More than the warning she gave the British in the 1780s, Ward is known for passionately advocating on behalf of the Cherokee and by bringing valuable resources and connections to the community through her marriage and even more through the intermarriages of her daughters. Unfortunately, though Ward is honored in Cherokee and native culture as a "beloved woman", the peace she so compassionately campaigned for was never achieved.<sup>15</sup>

Sacagawea, the Shoshone who, in inaccurate combination with the Disney rendering of Pocahontas, may be the best-known native woman in the history classrooms of American children, is another example of a woman whose actions spoke where her words never will. Sacagawea and her husband, French trader Toussaint Charbonneau, joined explorers Lewis and Clark on their famous expedition in Montana, 1805. Sacagawea, who was surely capable of communication in more than one language, never-the-less is mute to history. However, she could not have been more valuable to the expedition. More important than her geographical knowledge was her power as a woman: her presence meant peace to the native communities Lewis and Clark encountered. Though it is speculated that Charbonneau was an abusive husband, implying the marriage was more one of captivity than enchantment, Sacagawea by virtue of her womanhood represented good intentions to the natives who assisted the expedition on its way. Had she been visibly mistreated, or perhaps had she allowed her mistreatment to be visible, the expedition would likely not have traveled as smoothly.<sup>16</sup>

But it is not only the native women who married and bore children, interracially or otherwise, that shaped history—Lozen, an Apache warrior, remained unmarried throughout her unusual life. Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, she and another Apache woman named Dehtaste, who had followed her husband into battle, negotiated peace for their resistant band of Apache men, women, and children. After being pursued by American soldiers to the mountains of northern Mexico, the Apache were tired of running and ready to return to the reservation. But the reputation of the U.S. Army in native encounters, even when non-violent, preceded them. Lozen and Dehtaste likely volunteered to approach the soldiers, knowing that even women as well-armed and trained as they would not register as a threat. Indeed, it is only in native tradition

that the presence of Lozen and Dehtaste is even documented; American soldiers only recorded the names of Apache men during military campaigns.<sup>17</sup>

Lozen, who began to acquire a traditionally male role in her society at an early age, was valued as a warrior not only for her physical skill but also for her supernatural prowess. She was able to request supernatural aid in order to locate the Apache's enemies; after singing a prayer, her palms would turn purple if an enemy was close by.<sup>18</sup> This in combination with her natural gift for warfare was able to transcend the traditional fear associated with native women and men interacting in battle: the menstrual blood that was believed to weaken a man's ability to fight. But Lozen was recognized by the Apache for her unique talents, and her place within their society was respected rather than ridiculed or feared. She was instrumental in assisting her people when the Apaches fled the reservation in bands like the one she and Dehtaste represented in their negotiations with the American soldiers, and was able to use her dual role as woman and warrior to both lead her people into battle and deliver a woman's baby on the trail, a task that would have been supernaturally treacherous for a man.<sup>19</sup>

More recent in history, there is a notable example of a rare moment when the words of a native woman were not only written, but published. Christine Quintasket, a Southern Okanogan woman known by her pen name Mourning Dove, was born on a reservation to a mixed-race family in 1888. In a time where racism towards Native Americans was still extremely prevalent, Mourning Dove reached out to the white public with her novel *Cogewea the Half-Blood: A Depiction of the Great Montana Cattle Range*. Not only was it a work written by a native and about native life, it was also one of the first novels to feature a mixed-race woman as the protagonist. While doubtless Mourning Dove wrote with fellow native women in mind, historians consider her "a cultural mediator who tried to improve white understanding of Native

Americans.”<sup>20</sup> Her writing meant progress and representation for a greatly over-looked and stereotyped minority, but its execution has been criticized. Mourning Dove was heavily influenced by her editor and close friend, Lucullus McWhorter, a white advocate for native tribes whose political views are more present in *Cogewea the Half-Blood* at times than Mourning Dove’s honest cross-cultural commentary. In a letter to McWhorter before the novel’s publication Mourning Dove wrote, “I have just got through going over the book *Cogewea* and am surprised at the changes you made...I felt like it was someone else’s book, and not mine at all.”<sup>21</sup> Despite whatever misgivings she may have had, Mourning Dove trusted McWhorter’s judgment and the novel was published with his white words interlaid over hers. As frustrating as this might be, it is good to remember that Mourning Dove still broke barriers with her writing, and remains a native woman who expressed herself through brave initiative.

Today, educators like Jane Katz work to present the words of native women to the world. In her 1996 collection of interviews, native women recount personal experiences of living out their culture through artistic expression, activism, and spirituality. Ingrid Washinawatok, a Menominee woman, recounted a lifetime of experiencing racism and said, “I found that people expect the Indian woman either to be a backwoods person or a wise woman who knows the secrets of the earth.”<sup>22</sup> Her words show the dichotomy of prejudices against native women today: they must be all-knowing, or they must know nothing. Many white people, especially those who have never known native women, are unused to considering them as real human beings with both failings and strengths. Emmi Whitehorse, a Navajo artist, spoke in amusement about common reactions to her work, “My work isn’t something mystical that has to be pondered...when I first showed the painting (of a bird), everybody thought it was an illusion to some Native American

ritual. I said, ‘Well, if that’s what you want to believe, fine. But I just saw it on a beer label, and I’m painting it.’”<sup>23</sup>

Native women throughout history are unfairly stereotyped, abused, and misrepresented. Where they do appear, they are often the silent guardians of the European men who spoke for them. However, their silence is not cause to forget them. They were here; they are still here. As Faith Smith, a Chicago Indian caseworker and Purdue graduate, said, “I see an incredible force that exists within tribal peoples across the world, and within Native peoples here in this country, which allows us to flourish in our tribalness, in the face of tremendous adversity.”<sup>24</sup>

## Notes

1. Clara Sue Kidwell, "Indian Women as Cultural Mediators." *Ethnohistory* 39.2 (Duke University Press, 1992), 98.
2. Ibid.
3. Ellen Holmes, "American Indian Women." *National History Education Clearinghouse*. <http://teachinghistory.org/history-content/ask-a-historian/23931>
4. Kathleen M. Brown, "The Anglo-Algonquian Gender Frontier." In *Negotiators of Change: Historical Perspectives on Native American Women*, edited by Nancy Shoemaker, (New York, NY: Routledge, Inc., 1995), 29-30.
5. Ibid.
6. David J. Wishart, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, "Native American Gender Roles." *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains*. <http://plainshumanities.unl.edu/encyclopedia/doc/egp.gen.026>
7. Ibid.
8. Ellen Holmes, "American Indian Women."
9. Kathleen M. Brown, "The Anglo-Algonquian Gender Frontier," 32.
10. Nancy Shoemaker. Introduction to *Negotiators of Change: Historical Perspectives on Native American Women*, 3.
11. Amerigo Vespucci's *Mundus Novus*, in *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present*, by Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr. (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).
12. Denise K. Lajimodiere, "American Indian Females and Stereotypes: Warriors, Leaders, Feminists; Not Drudges, Princesses, Prostitutes." *Multicultural Perspectives* 15, no. 2. (National Association for Multicultural Education, 2013), 105.
13. Clara Sue Kidwell, "Indian Women as Cultural Mediators," 98.
14. Ibid., 99.
15. Ibid., 103.
16. Ibid., 101-102.
17. Laura Jane Moore, "Lozen: An Apache Women Warrior." In *Sifters*, edited by Theda Perdue, (Oxford University Press, 2001), 92.

18. Ibid., 96.

19. Ibid., 97-102.

20. Dee Garceau, "Mourning Dove: Gender and Cultural Mediation." In *Sifters*, edited by Theda Perdue, 110.

21. Dee Garceau, "Morning Dove: Gender and Cultural Mediation," 112. Mourning Dove to McWhorter, 4 June 1928.

22. Jane Katz. Interview with Ingrid Washinawatok. *Messengers of the Wind: Native American Women Tell Their Life Stories*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996), 93.

23. Jane Katz. Interview with Emmi Whitehorse, 55.

24. Jane Katz. Interview with Faith Smith, 129.

## Bibliography

- Brown, Kathleen M. "The Anglo-Algonquian Gender Frontier." In *Negotiators of Change: Historical Perspectives on Native American Women*, edited by Nancy Shoemaker, 29-32. New York, NY: Routledge, Inc., 1995.
- Garceau, Dee. "Mourning Dove: Gender and Cultural Mediation." In *Sifters*, edited by Theda Perdue, 110-112. Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Holmes, Ellen. "American Indian Women." *National History Education Clearinghouse*. <http://teachinghistory.org/history-content/ask-a-historian/23931>
- Katz, Jane. Interviews with Ingrid Washinawatok, Emmi Whitehorse, and Faith Smith. *Messengers of the Wind: Native American Women Tell Their Life Stories*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1996.
- Kidwell, Clara Sue. "Indian Women as Cultural Mediators." *Ethnohistory* 39.2 (Duke University Press, 1992): 98-103.
- Lajimodiere, Denise K. "American Indian Females and Stereotypes: Warriors, Leaders, Feminists; Not Drudges, Princesses, Prostitutes." *Multicultural Perspectives* 15.2. (National Association for Multicultural Education, 2013): 105.
- Moore, Laura Jane. "Lozen: An Apache Women Warrior." In *Sifters*, edited by Theda Perdue, 92-102. Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Shoemaker, Nancy. Introduction to *Negotiators of Change: Historical Perspectives on Native American Women*, edited by Nancy Shoemaker, 3. New York, NY: Routledge, Inc., 1995.
- Vespucci, Amerigo. *Mundus Novus*. In *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present*, by Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr. New York: Vintage Books, 1978.
- Wishart, David J. "Native American Gender Roles." *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains*. University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2011. <http://plainshumanities.unl.edu/encyclopedia/doc/egp.gen.026>