Nineteenth Century Sioux and the Empowering Institution of Motherhood

The mission of the Women’s National Indian Association (WNIA) was to “secure all laws needed by the Indians of the United States and to send and support suitable missionaries and instructors to reside among Indians, to labor for their help industrially, politically, educationally, morally and religiously” (Indian’s Friend, 1881). However, this was not the only responsibility for which the WNIA felt accountable; in the January 1889 edition of The Indian’s Friend, WNIA President, Amelia Stone Quinton, stated “…the Indian question must become more and more of a woman question. When all legal rights are assured, all fair educational facilities provided, the women and children of the tribes will still be a sacred responsibility laid upon the white women of the land. The true civilization that begins with the child and in the home must come through women’s work” (Mathes 49). Nineteenth century Indigenous American societies functioned around diverse gender roles, in which indigenous women held powerful political influence, through matriarchal authority, over land and culture. The emergence of Euro-American culture, controlled dominantly by white male political leaders and complete with oppressive female gender norms, was overpowering indigenous societies. Despite the assimilation of the Euro-American disparity of gender norms, how, then, were indigenous societies able to maintain a strong matriarchal influence within their tribes?

The emergence of anti-removal theory has brought with it critical assertions concerning the broader repercussions of Euro-American influence on the autonomy of indigenous women. Post-nineteenth century, indigenous women have found themselves in a state of abjection—outcasts amongst women of higher social order. Class disparity has sparked scholarly arguments that disturb Euro-American conventional gender roles and incentivize a push for female independence. In a patriarchal Euro-American society, that values masculinity over femininity,
and often claims motherhood inferior, the bringing to light of the past indigenous matrilineal influence has become popular amongst critics today. Tiya Miles asserts that native women must ground themselves as both mothers, and stewards of the land.

“An indigenous motherhood that was inherently nationalist clearly trumped a Euro-American republican motherhood. Cherokee women did not gain access to public life by proxy, through the moral and civic education of their sons. Rather, in their role as mothers, they had preexisting political authority, grounded in their stewardship of Cherokee land and their sustainment of the Cherokee population...republican motherhood “integrated political values into . . . domestic life,” indigenous motherhood as evinced by these women did the opposite: it integrated domestic values into political life” (227).

Despite the excitement of indigenous feminine autonomy among critics, namely the political authority they were able to maintain as stewards of the land and the sustaining of the population, critics have neglected to show how the indigenous feminine influence operated hand in hand with indigenous chiefs, or male political leaders. Rather than focus on indigenous feminine autonomy, this analysis explores the appeals made by male Sioux chiefs to the Government of the United States, and how the female Sioux had an intricate role in those appeals. A close reading of an ongoing publication from the April-June 1891 editions of the Indian’s Friend, entitled, “The Wrongs and Wants of the Sioux—as told by themselves at the Great Council with Commissioner Morgan,” will be used as the medium through which the collaboration of Sioux men and women is explored.

“The Wrongs and Wants of the Sioux” provides a space in which indigenous women discreetly insert domestic values into political agendas through the voices of Sioux chiefs. Despite the assimilation of Euro-American gender norms into indigenous communities, native
women unsilenced their voices through the assertion of their own political authority. The women influenced the chiefs’ ideas, who then used those ideas to appeal to the U.S. government for change, in this case, independent land. While Sioux women did not use their own voices to speak out against the injustices of the Euro-American influence on their agencies, matriarchal influence was given voice through the rhetoric of male Sioux political leaders. Sioux men and women alike, both oppressed by the white man, did not receive equal opportunity to present tribal ideas to U.S. government officials; however, the two genders did collaborate equitably. The chiefs’ appeals to the U.S. government were motivated by matriarchal authority in the women’s stewardship of the land. Each gender played a different but vital role, that, together, created a powerful tool against the oppressive Euro-American culture.

The first publication of “The Wrongs and Wants of the Sioux,” compiled by Marie E. Ives, Superintendent of the Young People’s Department for the WNIA (1891), introduces the piece as a series of publications from a stenographic report, including an interview between forty Sioux chiefs in conference with government officials at the Great Council. The report includes the words of Sioux chiefs from five Native American agencies of South Dakota: Pine Ridge, Rosebud, Crow Creek, Standing Rock, and Lower Brule. The forty chiefs were split in half, the first section labeled as “hostiles,” and the other, “friendlies”—who were sent with Commissioner Morgan, dressed in “citizens clothes,” and labeled representatives of the progressive party. The following analysis is based on their words.

White Horse of Crow Creek, conveys the first attribute of Sioux motherhood; he petitions for “protected land” by using imagery and metaphor to gain sympathy from Commissioner Morgan.
“We have not protection over our land; the whites encroach on it. We want to be assured of a very strong protection so that my people within well defined lines may live in peace, and we may urge our children in the way of progress. White people in large numbers have come into our midst, and I have been so anxious that my body is weary and my flesh is watery” (Indian’s Friend, Apr. 1891).

Speaking of education for native Cherokee children, critic Katy Simpson Smith states that “Women were not merely mothers of children, but also mothers of communities, and though they sought individual success for their children...they also hoped that education in white ways would provide the strongest defense of Cherokee land” (424). Motherly concern and responsibility for community lands manifests itself in the imagery that White Horse’s metaphor creates. The comparison of “flesh” with “watery” connotes a feeling of pruny skin, aged and worn out. The portrayed anxieties felt by the Sioux, for their land, function as motivators for future appeals to the U.S. government for the protection of tribal lands. The metaphorical imagery makes the anxiety tangible.

The perspective that indigenous mothers had on education functioned as a source of hope during times of anxiety. Sioux women viewed their children’s education as a means to bring about positive change that would enable the children’s success in preserving native lands. This history implies that the appeal for the education of native children, made by Big Mane of Lower Brule, to Commissioner Morgan, stemmed from the motherly desires of the Sioux. Big Mane uses symbolism to rhetorically appeal for educational help through the illustration of native pains from assimilation to Euro-American culture. Critic Katy Smith explains, “native women did not merely succumb to or resist change, but also fought for survival by manipulating it [change]” (404). Big Mane stated, “I am an Indian; look at me; I have cut my hair, and wear citizen’s
clothes. I am a Christian man; I believe in God, and therefore I have cut my hair” (*Indian’s Friend*, Apr. 1891). Indigenous matriarchal authority promoted the desire to educate their children in “white ways”—a mode of assimilation that would appear weakening and deconstructive to indigenous culture; however, despite its derogatory appearance, Sioux women were able to survive through manipulating the change to “white ways,” which was forced upon them. They continuously took advantage of the benefit of education for their children, which European-American influence offered. The changes described by Big Mane above symbolize a will to assimilate in order to survive. The acceptance of white education would implement the further loss of Big Mane’s indigenous culture and allow an increase of Euro-American ideologies into the lives of his children; however, his willingness to sacrifice was rooted in the matriarchal hope that his children would learn better methods of defending Sioux land.

The climax in the series of publications from the “The Wrongs and Wants of the Sioux,” is a recount of December 1890, the Wounded Knee Massacre on the Pine Ridge reservation, South Dakota. The recount was given by a Sioux Episcopal preacher, Turning Hawk, and his translator, Reverend Mr. Cook (also a Sioux). In the context of Native literature, critic Wolfgang Klooss asserts, “the oral tradition of many Native cultures, the understanding of the text, as a whole, is based on ritual repetitions tying the stories together” (84). Turning Hawk utilizes his Native ritual tradition, storytelling, to tie these stories together and reinforce the pleas of previous chiefs. He reuses the prior literary elements metaphor, imagery, and symbolism as part of his storytelling rhetoric. These devices function as precursors to the way in which Turning Hawk uses powerful language to unveil the gap between Commissioner Morgan’s logical and evidence-based questions, in contrast to the emotional appeals to the white man for sympathy and the preservation of land and culture by the Sioux. The retelling of the Wounded Knee
Massacre recreates the tragedies forced upon the Sioux through the use of unnerving language such as “strewn,” “under,” “almost touching,” “not knowing,” and “butchered.” These words and phrases paint a picture of the disheartening trauma experienced by tribal members, men and women alike.

“Gen. Morgan- ‘Do you mean to say there was a white flag over the women when they were fired upon?’

American Horse- ‘Yes, sir, and there was a woman with a babe in her arms killed almost touching the flag of truce, and the women and children were strewn all along. Right under the flag of truce a mother was shot down with a very young child, and the child, not knowing the mother was dead, was still nursing, and that was a very sad night. The women as they were fleeing were killed together, and women who were heavy with child were also killed. A cry was made that all who were not killed should come out and they would be saved, and a number of boys came out of hiding and were immediately butchered by the soldiers’’” (Indian’s Friend, May 1891).

The white flag, a literal war sign of surrender, negotiation, and a willingness to communicate, from the helpless Sioux women, is redefined to signify the embodiment of the female, nursing mother. Rather than an “Indian question” of war, the white flag becomes a “woman question.” The image of the woman and child killed, “almost touching the flag of truce,” becomes symbolic of the child that must come through women’s work, as asserted by Quinton. Although there are no female voices physically present in the recount of Wounded Knee, the voices of Sioux chiefs act as conduits as they use the grotesque fatalities of female bodies to illustrate a point. The motherly ghosts of violated women reemerge as they are unsilenced through the oral language of
the men. Male and female Sioux voices collaborate to combat the Euro-American oppression forced upon them.

As Ives concludes her report, she returns to the responsibility that the WNIA felt they owed to Native Americans at this time. In her concluding remarks, Ives takes the liberty to call for “comfort in their trouble” for Natives, by reiterating the words of Turning Hawk. She calls for the comfort of “heroic men who so valiantly stood by the government against their own friends and kindred” (Indian’s Friend, May 1891). Though these words appear to agree with Turning Hawk’s appeal, Ives is quick to condone the assimilation of native norms to Euro-American culture. Contrary to Turning Hawk’s desire for the comfort of all Natives, Ives changes the appeal to apply only to the Natives who had stood loyal to the United States Government—the “friendlies,” and disregards those labeled as “hostiles.” Her final words are ones that call for an assimilated transformation of the Sioux—the changing of “dependent savages into brave, trusted man and women, and in training up the Indian boys and girls to become loyal to the government, useful to their people, and honest, self-supporting Americans”—as if they had never been useful in their own communities (Indian’s Friend, May 1891). The disparity between the context of Turning Hawk’s words and Ives’ words, unmistakably mirror the gap between republican motherhood—political values integrated into domestic life—and indigenous motherhood—domestic values planted into political life.

Literary theorists have indeed neglected to demonstrate specific methods in which nineteenth century indigenous female voices were heard through collaboration with the male chiefs. Because theorists have concerned themselves mainly with the empowering factors of indigenous female autonomy, they have disregarded the actuality that the feminine influence operated hand in hand with the masculine voices of indigenous chiefs. The “call for comfort”
made by Ives is an embodiment of the wrongs and wants of the American government. Her call for Natives to be assimilated into loyal, useful, honest, and self-supporting Americans not only includes indigenous boys and men, but also girls and women. If Native women are to reclaim political matriarchal authority and identity today, they must reinsert that authority back into their culture, in the same way that their domestic authority was originally asserted into nineteenth century Indigenous-American political life. Domestic power and influence was not asserted by the autonomy of indigenous women, but rather in alliance with the voices of indigenous men. Autonomy, through the lens of male and female indigenous authority, must not be viewed as separate but equal, but separate and collaborative. The analysis of “The Wrongs and Wants of the Sioux” offers a nuanced perspective; political appeals for change, made by male Sioux chiefs, were the original ideas and motivations of Sioux motherhood. Euro-American society must cease the push for equal gender roles and the deemphasis of motherhood, and instead mirror the male and female collaborations of the Sioux into political functions. It is in the Euro-American woman’s best interest to adopt the original operations of indigenous motherhood if she desires stronger political influence. She must reinsert the importance of domestic values into political life, not to right the wrongs forced on the Sioux, but to respect the wisdom and rights of this powerful and united indigenous people.
Works Cited


