Muskogee as the Canon Sees It

In relatively recent history, there has been a shift in the American literary canon to include marginalized and forgotten voices. One group that has suffered from this subjugation is the countless tribes of Native Americans. Among these rising voices of Native writers, there appears to be some debate in regards to the level of assimilation groups of “Indians” were forced into. Many prevalent speakers, such as Chief Black Hawk and Red Jacket, take center stage in this debate. Such famous orators pen memorable speeches decrying the imposition of the white men on their tribes, and rightfully so. But there are many that chose to assimilate to American culture, and that is often over looked by this burgeoning literary canon. This has become apparent through the study of various Native American newspapers, such as *The Mental Elevator* and *The Daily Indian Journal*. One piece that originated from *The Daily Indian Journal*, “Muskogee as a Stranger Sees It,” highlights that many Native American communities became “traditionally American.” In criticism, there appears to be no exploration of works such as these—the focus lies solely on pieces that spoke against the oppression forced on native tribes, and on groups that were forced to conform against their will. There are many misconceptions about the Native American experience—particularly in regards to the types of assimilation they were subjugated to; however, by comparing the ways in which they were forced to assimilate with those that chose to embrace the traditional American lifestyle, it becomes clear that while there were many atrocities perpetuated against Native groups, those that assimilated ought to be
just as a valid part of the canon. By omitting any voice from the time period, the conversation cannot be considered a complete one—and the cycle simply continues to perpetuate.

It is true that countless Native Americans were made to conform to American culture, and this was done in various ways—ranging from forcing children to go to boarding school, being told they had to convert to Christianity, to being made to look like they reflected traditional American values even when they do not. Perhaps the harshest way Native Americans were made to adapt was by the forced removal of their children to government schools. At these schools, children were taught that their culture was vulgar and barbaric, and were instructed on how to be “civilized” young children. The Dawes Act of 1887 instituted this as a law (this same law broke up large reservations in favor of more nuclear, American styles of family living), and the children who attended these schools were forced to forget their Native American heritage. Teachers would give their pupils western names, and any student who spoke their native tongue was harshly punished (Bickford-Duane). This form of mission schooling was coined as “de-Indianization,” and American ideals were “instilled into the young charges through a military-like regime” (Welch 342).

These schools were often a topic of display at trading fairs, a place where Native Americans were often on show but seldom accurately represented. Even when efforts were made to depict Native Americans, “in their natural habitat,” their lives were altered to reflect American values. For example, Omaha natives lived in a more matrilineal society where polygamy was the standard (Welch 340). However, when photographer Alice C. Fletcher presented images at the New Orleans Exposition, she portrayed the Omahas as nuclear families, with one father and one mother standing by their tent with their children. While this was an unfair projection of American values onto the Omaha tribe, this critic fails to explore the other side of the subject
matter. One scholar, Andrew Denson, discusses these fairs further in depth. His paper begins by explaining that many Americans would come to the fair, expecting to see Native Americans on display. However he states, “the truly remarkable aspect of the fair was the extent to which those in attendance did not match the popular images of western tribes. The man who goes to the Indian Territory to find the dime-novel Indian will be badly fooled” (Denson 326). In other words, what white people were expecting to see is not what they were actually confronted with. But Denson goes on to claim that, “These expositions displayed Indians in ways that reinforced white ethnocentrism and justified American conquest. Indians appeared as colorful primitives and relics of the past” (Denson 326). While this is most likely true, most white people probably viewed Native Americans this way, it is clear that the Natives themselves did not adhere to this view. As this paper will go on to explicate, many Natives lived content in their communities that followed traditional American values, such as converting to Christianity.

It is true that many Native Americans were coerced into converting to Christianity—or at least were heavily pressured to. The dominant voices of the Native American canon, Chief Seattle and Red Jacket, reflect this sentiment. They give two orations that comment on the white man’s affect on the different Native American tribes, with varying levels of accusation in their rhetoric. Chief Seattle, on the one hand, uses strong pathos to draw attention to the sad injustices carried out against his people. Chief Seattle says, “The Red Man has ever fled the approach of the White Man, as the morning mist flees before the morning sun” (Chief Seattle 1642), and that the “yonder sky has wept tears of compassion upon my people” (Chief Seattle 1640). Literary criticism praises the rhetoric employed here. For example, one critic, Jason Edward Black, states, “Seattle’s nineteenth century rhetoric reveals the ways that American Indian pasts, presents, and futures are symbolically controlled by Western interests that tend to overlook the importance of
the Native voice” (Black 636). Many others echo this commentary—the idea that everything Native Americans ever did was carefully controlled by the United States. Although it is true that Native Americans were imposed upon and abused, there is a gap present in this conversation. Critics like these allow no room for a different Native experience to be considered, let alone considered valid.

This can also be seen through Red Jacket’s famous speech, “The Religion of the White Man and the Red,” where he uses carefully curated logos to give credence to his argument against converting to Christianity. Instead of simply attacking and accusing the white men, he implies their wrong doings by commenting that the Native Americans were peaceful until the settlers came in and brought violence into their lives. He calls his audience “friend and brother” (Red Jacket 1578). He presents his arguments against Christianity very reasonably, even going so far as to comment that he and his people will wait and see if those recently preached to will become “good…honest, and less disposed to cheat Indians” (Red Jacket 1580). This suggests that Christianity never did anyone any good, especially not the Native Americans themselves, because thus far Christians have only plagued and mistreated his people. However Red Jacket does not distinguish between the wrongful actions of the white man and their religion. Critics play into this rhetoric by praising the way that Red Jacket attacks religion. Diane Meili says that “Red Jackets response…was one of the best ever given to Christianity’s claims” (Meili 19). Her arguments stands on rocking ground when put next to Native American texts written by strong Christians.

And there were ample number of communities and people that willingly decided to follow this new religion. This does not mean that they were brainwashed or convinced they were heathens. Although that may be the case for some, in the communities of the Seneca tribe and in
the town of Muskogee, more devout groups could not be found anywhere else at the time. The Mental Elevator is a Native American newspaper published by and for the Seneca tribe; this newspaper was published primarily in the Seneca language, however, the lifestyle of this community can be gleaned from the interspersed English texts. They frequently published chapters of the Bible in their native language—showing an appreciation for these newly blended cultures. They also had community rules regarding alcohol consumption and compulsory prayer group attendance. Similarly, the Daily Indian Journal boasts of having both a thriving Baptist and Methodist congregations (Muskogee 61). One article, “Missionary Work,” speaks of a congregation in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. The article depicts a church adorned with beautiful foliage and a large cross. There, a Miss Whitaker teaches the local youth during the week. Several young Native American boys are mentioned, all in promising terms—all converts and all very eager to be educated. One boy who struggled with English. “turned triumphantly to the class and cried out” a Bible verse he had been struggling to remember. The pride with which the boy touted his success, and the pride with which the teacher reported it, proves that the conversion here was not a forced one. Nevertheless, it should be noted that even though these Native groups fully converted and dedicated themselves to Christianity, they were still excluded from the rising American religious pluralism of the time (Welch 340)—to say nothing of those that held firmly to the indigenous religions.

Femininity is one of the ways Native Americans adapted (or were forced to adapt) to contemporary American expectations. The Daily Indian Journal offers another article, titled “The Power of Feminine Beauty,” which illustrates how such expectations were conferred onto native women. In “Making Home Work,” Jane E. Simonsen claims that domesticity was presented as the only solution to “the Indian problem” (Simonsen 282). That is not to say that
This was not true, but this ignores the women that accepted the American role of female. In this news article, the author writes, “The sensible will however, not be content merely to look pretty…to a rosy cheek and sparkling eye she can add a cultured brain” (Feminine Beauty). Although in all likelihood a man wrote this article, the paper was published by Native Americans—showing that this was the standard. Other artifacts in the paper, such as an advertisement for a face cream for ladies, demonstrates that by the mid 1880s, the women of this town held themselves to the same standards of beauty women across the United States were held to.

The gap in this conversation surrounding Native Americans, especially in regards to women, can be further explored through the story of Mary Jemison. Jemison was abducted from her home in 1755 by a group of irate Native Americans. She was eventually adopted by a Seneca family and became fully assimilated into their culture. Later in life when she has the opportunity to rejoin the society into which she was born, she chooses to stay with the Seneca tribe. Literary critics such as Elena Ortells Montón praise Jemison for resisting “hegemonic cultural models” (Montón 82). This narrative is seen as a defense for Native Americans, although Jemison was taken by force, she became apart of their community—showing that they were not as barbaric and uncivilized as so many thought. But no such defense seems to exist for those natives that, like Mary Jemison, “switched sides” as it were. By embracing American culture the canon seems to disregard these voices as moot.

The Daily Indian Journal offers a bounty of insights into the lifestyle of some of the somewhat forgotten Native American voices. Without observing the paper’s title, it is almost impossible to identify this periodical as one of indigenous people. Almost all of the texts are about national or communal news, which reflects the lifestyle of a typical American community.
of the time. Articles range from interesting anecdotes, such as a funny story about a cat that magnetized (tricked) a mouse, to lifestyle advice (particularly for women). This paper also is predominantly seems to be a means for stimulating the local economy through the advertisement and sale of cattle. This newspaper highlights this underlying gap in the conversation surround Native American works.

One piece in particular stands out however, is titled “Muskogee as a Stranger Sees It.” The article begins by setting the scene—Muskogee is described as being situated next to a railroad about “seven or eight miles south of the Arkansas River, on a high rolling prairie” (Muskogee As a Stranger Sees It 2-4). The article goes on to give further description of the land surrounding the town, as well as the water tank “built by enterprising citizens and the railroad company for the use of citizens and the railroad (9-11). Also present are the International Fair Grounds, where people from all around may gather “to show their stock and other products” (15-16). This town appears as any other up and coming community of the late nineteenth century—a bustling economy is supported by industrious citizens. What stands out about this piece however, is that this is a community of Native Americans. The fair grounds are annually occupied by “the five tribes” (14), and the author of this article states that “the white man might profit by being present, and take advantage of the example set by the Indian” (16-19).

This thriving town is one often overlooked by modern day critics—scholars focus solely on the aforementioned injustices carried out against Native American groups. Although it would be an injustice claim to state that the people of Muskogee never faced persecution because they were Native Americans, because that is simply untrue, this was a community that took great pride in their lifestyle. They embraced contemporary, “Euro-American” life as critic Jane Simonsen calls it. In 1881, anthropologist and activist, in a somewhat well meant gesture, told
Omahas “that conforming to Euro-American habits of industry and domesticity was their only hope of survival” (Simonsen 79). Muskogee has done exactly what has been asked of them, they have assimilated to this new way of life. This does not, however, mean that the Native Americans completely forgot or overlooked the ways in which the white men abused them. The Daily Indian Journal offers one article titled “The Allotment Question,” which is a letter to the editor about the abuses suffered by the Native Americans. The writer calls white people “pests” and “intruders” (The Allotment Question). The author suggests that if Native Americans and citizens of the United States were to be allotted an appropriate amount of land, they could live and govern their people separately and as they chose.

By ignoring Native Americans that adapted to what was expected of them at the time, a complete understanding of the native experience cannot be had. By omitting the stories of these peoples’ lives and the pieces of literature that they produced, the literary criticism community is akin to those that did not included Native Americans in the canon in the first place. It is clear that Native Americans, especially those discussed in this paper, took pride in their heritage, but embraced new ways of life that brought them western education and new ways of living. That is not to say that groups that chose to adhere to their traditional ways of life were any less, or somehow uncultured—simply that some Native Americans had the opportunity to chose their own way of living, and they chose a different way. “Muskogee as a Stranger Sees It” elucidates this point quite clearly through the proud but clear way in which the community is described. The author boasts of the successful Indian community with a thriving economy and healthy Christian atmosphere. This is a society that proclaims its heritage boldly, while looking forward to new, diverse ways of life.
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