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“The Old Lady Trill, the Victory Yell”

The Power of Women in Native American Literature

Patrice E.M.Hollrah
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“Sherman Alexie’s Challenge to the Academy’s Teaching of Native American Literature, Non-Native Writers, and Critics,” Studies in American Indian Literatures 13.3 (Summer/Fall 2001): 23–35.
To
Eva Virginius Falk,
My Grandmother,
and
Joseph Avery Falk,
My Uncle
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: “Writing Is Different from Tribe to Tribe”

Historical and Cultural Contexts

The political ramifications of gender complementarity for women in Native American literature result in strong female characters in the works of Zitkala-Ša (Yankton Sioux), Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo), Louise Erdrich (Ojibwe), and Sherman Alexie (Spokane/Coeur d’Alene). These authors create powerful females who live autonomous lives. Considering the tribal constructs of gender relations when examining the female characters helps explain why these women are politically empowered, whereas using a Western theoretical framework, for example, white feminism, will not produce the same kind of reading or explain as well why these female figures are so impressive.

The scholar/author Michael Dorris (Modoc) relates the story about his mailman, who was a Scout leader. The troop wanted to be as authentic Iroquois as possible during a week-long stay in the woods, so the mailman asked Dorris to recommend items to take along. Dorris told him they should take their mothers along because “Iroquois were matrilineal, and these little fourteen-year-old kids wouldn’t know what to do without their mothers telling them what to do” (Moyers 145). Unfortunately, the mailman was not interested in this information because he was focused on the popular stereotyped image of the Native American male, which included “hatchets or something” (145). In addition to not understanding the importance of the Native woman in the life of the Iroquois, perhaps the mailman also had a popular stereotyped image of the Native woman based on erroneous images of figures like Princess Pocahontas and Sacajawea. Because Native women have not always received the critical attention that they deserve, these misrepresentations have not been rectified in popular culture.

Looking at popular and scholarly writings about Native American women, American Indian studies scholar Rayna Green (Cherokee) reviews “work done since the seventeenth century in the United States and Canada which […] spans several academic and professional fields—anthropology, history, psychology, literature, medicine, law, and journalism” (248–49). Her comments on the increase of anthropologists’ contributions in the seventies to the study of Native American women are relevant to the works of the authors discussed in this book:
Discarding views of powerless slaves to warriors, children, and subsistence life, these authors portray the pervasiveness of powerful roles for women, ones complementary to those of men. Challenging feminist scholars’ insistence on the pervasiveness of male dominance in Native American cultures, these writers insist on tribal rather than Western definitions of role and status. (260)

Within the writings of Zitkala-Ša, Silko, Erdrich, and Alexie, evidence of gender complementarity in both traditional tribal communities and contemporary urban settings can be seen at work in the roles of powerful female characters. Gender complementarity within tribal constructs arose out of the gendered division of labor. Because women were responsible for the bearing of and usually the caring for children, their work involved tasks that could be done close to the home. The men were responsible for protection of the community and also were able to travel farther away from the home to secure food and other necessities. Men and women had their assigned roles in tribal life, and women could be involved in numerous areas, such as decision making and landownership. The important aspects of men and women’s roles is that they complemented each other, and they were equally valued for the contributions they made to the community; one role did not have more importance than another. This general description of gender complementarity allows for many variations, as gender roles are social constructs, more importantly tribal constructs. Often, females could also perform tasks that normally would be considered male behaviors within the tribe, and because of special circumstances, such as widowhood or merely living as a single person, they would not seem unusual. Additionally, because people could act with autonomy, making decisions about their own conduct, women could choose to engage in male-gendered behaviors, for example, as warrior women, and not seem atypical. Although contemporary Native female women have survived the impact of colonization and the changes it has brought, gender complementarity continues to the present day, and examples can be found in the construction of literary female characters. In the works of Zitkala-Ša, Silko, Erdrich, and Alexie, gender complementarity is seen in the political, religious, economic, educational, and social areas of Native life.

In the political arena, Zitkala-Ša works for the Indian cause—tribal sovereignty and self-determination—through her writing, lectures, and political activism. For example, she establishes a new Pan-Indian organization in 1926, the National Council of American Indians (NCAI), and is the self-appointed president, and her husband, Raymond T.Bonnin (Yankton Sioux), is the secretary-treasurer. Zitkala-Ša sees men and women working together, sharing positions of power that complement each other, and knows that she is as capable as any Native man working in an organization of improving the lives of American Indians. As she states in her personal correspondence of May 2, 1901, to Carlos Montezuma (Yavapai), “Am I not an Indian woman as capable to think...
in serious matters and as thoroughly interested in the race as any one or two of you men put together?” Clearly, Zitkala-Ša sees her work and contribution as equally valuable and as complementary to that of any male. The same is true of the contemporary figure Marie Polatkin in Alexie’s mystery novel Indian Killer, a college student who pursues political activism for Indian rights as a way of survival.

Similar to the gender complementarity in the political arena, Native spirituality also represents both men and women. Unlike the monotheism of Christianity, Native spirituality incorporates male and female deities that complement one another, as in the case of Mother Earth and Father Sky. In Silko’s short story “Lullaby,” there is the unspoken presence of an important Navajo female deity, Changing Woman, who symbolizes nature and the mystery of birth. She is significant in determining the high standing that Navajo women have in their community. Despite colonization’s legacy of missionaries’ putting an end to Native ceremonies and converting Natives to Christianity, many tribes embrace both their Native practices and Christianity. In Erdrich’s novel The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse, she imagines what could have been a more positive outcome for the work of missionaries when a woman disguised as a Catholic priest begins to accept some of the Ojibwe spiritual beliefs, as the Ojibwe have Catholicism. In like fashion, Alexie shows in his novel Reservation Blues how Big Mom handles the traditional Spokane part of the funeral for Junior Polatkin while Father Arnold attends to the Catholic ritual. Big Mom tells Father Arnold, “[Y]ou cover all the Christian stuff; I’ll do the traditional Indian stuff. We’ll make a great team” (280). Native female figures participate in and complement other aspects of the religious life of Native communities.

In the same way that gender complementarity plays a key role in Native spirituality, in the area of economics, women and men contribute equally to the production and distribution of goods and services. In Silko’s “Lullaby,” the female protagonist, Ayah, is from a matriarchal and matrilineal tribe, so although she is married, she owns her hogan (Navajo home) and livestock. In Erdrich’s fiction, the women engage in numerous occupations: In The Birchbark House, for example, Old Tallow hunts, fishes, dresses the animals, and shares her catch with Omakayas’s family, and in The Bingo Palace, Shawnee Ray Toose designs clothing to sell that is steeped in the style of her Chippewa heritage. In the same novel, Albertine Johnson studies to become a doctor, and in Love Medicine Margaret Kashpaw and Fleur are traditional Ojibwe midwives, performing services that pregnant women would have to pay for in a mainstream hospital. Most importantly, Fleur manages her resources in such a way that she is able to buy back Pillager land, one of the most significant and empowering economic acts in The Bingo Palace and The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse. These female characters complement the labor performed by the male characters, who work as tribal chairmen (Nanapush), as businessmen in bingo halls and casinos (Lyman Lamartine), and as healers (Lipsha Morrisey). The women’s
economic activities are as necessary to and valued by the community as the work done by the men.

Native men and women are both portrayed in the area of education. In Alexie’s fiction, characters such as Roman Gabriel Fury and his wife, Grace Atwater, are college graduates who manage to finish their education by relying on their intellectual sovereignty and each other. When the couple returns to the Spokane Reservation, Grace teaches at the elementary school. Alexie also uses the female character Marie Polatkin to critique higher education and the content of Native American literature courses. As a powerful Spokane female, Marie challenges her white male professor and by extension the patriarchal academic institution. In a critical discourse, Marie provides an important Native viewpoint, one that balances the dominant academic culture’s male voice.

In the social realm of Native life, gender complementarity plays out in the husband-wife relationships seen in Ayah and Chato of Silko’s “Lullaby,” Roman Gabriel Fury and Grace Atwater in Alexie’s “Saint Junior,” James and Norma Many Horses in Alexie’s “The Approximate Size of My Favorite Tumor,” and Sid and Estelle Polatkin of Alexie’s “Indian Country,” to name just a few of the intimate male-female relationships, which are dealt with in later chapters of this book. Erdrich and Alexie go further and explore same-sex relationships in their writing; however, the concept of each partner’s making a valued and equally regarded contribution to the relationship remains the same. In “Saint Junior,” Alexie accurately assesses the work required by both partners in marriage: “Damn, marriage was hard work, was manual labor, and unpaid manual labor at that. Yet, year after year, Grace and Roman had pressed their shoulders against the stone and rolled it up the hill together” (emphasis added, Toughest 177–78). In comparing the effort and energy necessary in a good marriage to the unending labor of Sisyphus, repeatedly rolling the stone up the hill, Alexie correctly captures the teamwork involved in the marriage relationship, an example of gender complementarity at work.

Native women who use “their power to become agents of change for their communities” are described in the preceding examples of gender complementarity (Green 259). Female characters who make autonomous decisions based on their intellectual sovereignty affect the welfare of their community and are politically empowered by their acts. For example, Zitkala-Ša manages to mediate between Native cultures and the dominant mainstream society, a maneuver that groups of marginalized peoples often adopt. Being able to function in both worlds does not mean that the Native woman is any less Indian when in the mainstream culture; nor does it mean that she gives up her sense of gender complementarity. She knows that Indian women might be treated differently by mainstream culture because of their race and gender, but knowing the cultural codes of both worlds only adds to her intellectual sovereignty and the ways she chooses to use that information. In contemporary Native American literary theory, James Ruppert defines mediation:
By mediation, I mean an artistic and conceptual standpoint, constantly flexible, which uses the epistemological frameworks of Native American and Western cultural traditions to illuminate and enrich each other. In working toward an understanding of Native American writers’ texts, it is more useful to see them not as between two cultures (a romantic and victimist perspective) but as participants in two rich cultural traditions. While some may say these writers are apologists for one side or the other, or that their texts inhabit a no-man’s-land, a mediational approach explores how their texts create a dynamic that brings differing cultural codes into confluence to reinforce and re-create the structures of human life: the self, community, spirit, and the world we perceive. (*Mediation* 3)

Ruppert’s definition of mediation stops short of pointing out how it is a necessary and pragmatic survival tool for Native Americans, not just a tool for literary analysis. His concept of mediation, however, helps illuminate how a Native woman like Zitkala-Ša functions as a participant in “two rich cultural traditions.” She can embrace the values of white women in a patriarchal culture if they will help attain her objectives for American Indians and at the same time maintain her Native worldview of gender complementarity. Exercising this kind of intellectual sovereignty empowers Native women such as Zitkala-Ša. According to Joseph Bruchac (Abenaki), Bonnin knew the expectations of her predominantly white audiences better than they knew themselves: “Bonnin, in fact, knew how to communicate to the white world so well that she would abandon literature after only two books and quite effectively devote her life to working as an activist and lobbyist for Indian rights” (xliii).

The idea of gender complementarity in this discussion is inherently linked to the ideas of autonomy, intellectual sovereignty, and political empowerment. In view of a history of conquest, war, disease, sterilization, and cultural genocide, author and literary critic Gloria Bird (Spokane) observes the obvious political implications of Native survival on the North American continent: “That we are still here as native women in itself is a political statement” (Harjo 30). Survival for Native peoples in the face of continued racism, oppression, marginalization, and challenges to tribal sovereignty is a political issue that touches all aspects of Native life. The construct of these connected ideas might be represented best as points on a circle that lead to and from one another: Because women are able to make autonomous choices about their lives based on their own intellectual sovereignty within the context of gender complementarity, they are politically empowered.

Critics also must take into account the history and culture of specific Native American tribes in question when discussing literatures. Often, current literary theories alone do not account for these factors that must be considered. Feminist theory, for example, does not always provide a broad enough lens through which critics can view Native American literature because it often focuses on political inequality between genders. Ignoring the broader cultural context of specific
tribes frequently renders the feminist view of the literature incomplete and, therefore, inaccurate. In this book, I explore how a tribal construct of gender relations—gender complementarity—functions in the works of Zitkala-Ša, Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich, and Sherman Alexie. Gender complementarity, or balanced reciprocity, acknowledges that the worlds of men and women are “distinctly different but not generally perceived as hierarchical” (Klein and Ackerman 14). If gender roles are not seen as unequal but as simply “different,” the resulting political relationships do not necessarily result in power struggles for equality. Examining the political ramifications of gender complementarity for women in Native American literature is approached through the historical and cultural contexts of each specific tribe. The research focuses primarily on evidence that proves how the female characters are empowered by the very nature of their tribal social structure of gender complementarity. In addition, focusing on gender complementarity without accounting for the holistic nature of tribal worldviews could result in the same error as using feminist criticism. In other words, gender complementarity alone cannot account for a specific political result; the structure of gender roles is part of a connected whole. By examining the concept of gender complementarity within the tribal context, the critical readings should more fully illuminate the role of Native American women as politically empowered.

As anthropologists and historians have begun to rethink the images of Native American women promoted by popular culture and to search for an understanding that involves new concepts of gender, so too do literary scholars need to evaluate Native American literary female characters in a cultural paradigm that is less European-American and more closely situated in a specific tribal context. In Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Ngati Awa/Ngati Porou) writes about the assumptions that non-Natives impose on research about indigenous peoples:

Research ‘through imperial eyes’ describes an approach which assumes that Western ideas about the most fundamental things are the only ideas possible to hold, certainly the only rational ideas, and the only ideas which can make sense of the world, of reality, of social life and of human beings. It is an approach to indigenous peoples which still conveys a sense of innate superiority and an overabundance of desire to bring progress into the lives of indigenous peoples—spiritually, intellectually, socially and economically. It is research which from indigenous perspectives ‘steals’ knowledge from others and then uses it to benefit the people who ‘stole’ it. Some indigenous and minority group researchers would call this approach simply racist. It is research which is imbued with an ‘attitude’ and a ‘spirit’ which assumes a certain ownership of the entire world, and which has established systems and forms of governance which embed that attitude in institutional practices. These practices determine what counts as legitimate research and who count as legitimate researchers. (56)
Tuhiwai Smith rightly acknowledges the concern that Native scholars have when people from outside the indigenous peoples’ cultures carry on research and then dictate what the “real” history and culture are of those people.

Similarly, when non-Native critics write about Native American literature, they can be met with resistance to them as cultural outsiders who claim authority about material of which they have no personal knowledge. Admittedly, white people can rarely speak as cultural insiders about Native American literature; however, to compensate for this lack of personal experience, they can acknowledge their limited perspective and focus on the sovereignty, history, and culture of the specific tribe in question, whether that of the author and/or of the text. Beginning with this caveat should help create a context that allows for a less European-American focus by the critic and one closer to that of a Native American worldview. Tuhiwai Smith recommends that nonindigenous researchers become more culturally sensitive and address the issues that will make a difference for indigenous peoples’ lives (176–77). Writing about Native American literature in a way that promotes the understanding that the literature is about the people’s lives—not a fiction in the usual sense—works toward that end.

For example, in *Tribal Secrets: Recovering American Indian Intellectual Traditions*, American Indian studies theorist Robert Allen Warrior (Osage) discusses the importance of American Indians’ establishing a criticism based on a framework of intellectual sovereignty to examine their own culture. Intellectual sovereignty is an individual manifestation of the worldview of tribal sovereignty, the inherent right of a nation to rule itself, “conduct its own affairs, in its own place, in its own way,” without any outside interference (Lyons 450). In the same way that Scott Richard Lyons (Ojibwe/Mdewakanton Dakota) defines rhetorical sovereignty as “the inherent right and ability of peoples to determine their own communicative needs,” intellectual sovereignty implies the inherent right and ability of peoples to determine that their own knowledge systems are valid, useful, and applicable to their lives and their survival (449). Warrior argues that a criticism based in intellectual sovereignty must be open-ended with connections to the land and community, and capable of flexibility, much like an ongoing process, in order to accommodate the many different kinds of American Indian writing being produced today (44). Warrior calls for a criticism that arises within the tribal community rather than one from without, which often results in a layering of non-Native ideology onto the Native American discourse, a skewed perspective at best. By examining the perspectives of American Indian intellectuals John Joseph Matthews (Osage) and Vine Deloria, Jr. (Standing Rock Sioux), Warrior moves “toward a cultural criticism that is grounded in American Indian experiences but which can draw on the insights and experiences of others who have faced similar struggles” (xxiii).

Correspondingly, author Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo) has the same opinion that readers need a better understanding of place, or of the land. When asked during a 1977 interview what she thought people needed to know about context before reading her stories, she responded:
I would wish that people would have a little better understanding of place, that in geography classes they would teach how people live in Bethel, Alaska, and Laguna, New Mexico, or Iowa City, etc…. What I would ideally wish for is that people had just a general familiarity, a sense of the history, when the Spaniards came in, just American history, for Christ’s sake, but they don’t…. Included in geography should be the way people live, some of their attitudes, their point of view, so if you have even just a smattering of Pueblo point of view, that helps. It’s not much. (Fisher 21)

Although possibly not as emphatically as Warrior, Silko still calls for close attention to the land and the community when discussing Native American literature. However, in order to understand the relevance of the land and the community to a Native American tribe, one must begin with its history and culture.

In his essay “Native American Literature in an Ethnohistorical Context,” Dorris supports this approach when he writes that knowledge of any national literature is improved with recognition of the larger cultural context: “Without some knowledge of language, of history, of inflection, of the position of the storyteller within the group, without a hint of the social roles played by males and females in the culture, without a sense of the society’s humor or priorities— without such knowledge, how can we, as reader or listener, penetrate to the core of meaning in an expression of art? (237).” Dorris notes that because there are several hundred Native cultures, there is no true concept of “American Indian literature,” and therefore, readers must have an awareness of the nature of the specific tribe in question. Author Louise Erdrich (Ojibwe) agrees: “Writing is different from tribe to tribe, the images are different from tribe to tribe” (Coltelli 48). Thus, the critic needs to look at the specific history and culture of the tribe in question.

In Studies in Native American Literature, Gunn Allen concurs with this premise when she states, “Simply put, the teachers and critics of American Indian literature must place the document within a context that allows readers and students to understand it in terms that do not distort it” (x). Her assumption presupposes that history and culture are the context for that understanding. Gunn Allen goes on to say,

[The critic in American Indian literature becomes important—not as a scholarly adjunct to the creating and re-creating that are always the component parts of the synergy between teller and listener, but as a mediator who allows teller and listener to share a particular understanding even though they come from widely divergent traditions, (xi–xii)]

In other words, Gunn Allen calls for the non-Native critic to be familiar with different Native cultures in order to help readers move beyond their ethnocentric positions and to have a better understanding of the Native literatures, to move
between them, much as Native Americans have had to do for the last five hundred years in mediating between their cultures and the dominant one. In fact, the trend in Native literary theories continues to emphasize history and culture, while moving closer to theories growing out of tribal literatures themselves.

Most recently, in Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism, Craig Womack (Muskogee Creek/Cherokee) argues for self-determination in discussing Native American literature, a Native perspective that allows Indian people to speak for themselves:

[S]uch a viewpoint exists and has been silenced throughout U.S. history to the degree that it finally needs to be heard. [...] there is the legal reality of tribal sovereignty, recognized by the U.S. Constitution and defined over the last 160 years by the Supreme Court, that affects the everyday lives of individuals and tribal nations and, therefore, has something to do with tribal literatures. (6)

Womack notes the legal relationship that tribal nations have with the U.S. government, a fact of life that cannot be ignored when reading Native American literature. He sees tribal literatures not only as “the oldest literatures in the Americas, the most American of American literatures,” but also as separate from the academic American canon, not as a branch of American literature (6–7). In other words, Womack views Native American literature as its own canon; therefore, it deserves no less than its own criticism. He believes that this criticism should grow out of the intellectual history of the tribes’ literature, and he focuses on

the idea that Native literary aesthetics must be politicized and that autonomy, self-determination, and sovereignty serve as useful literary concepts. [...] a literary criticism that emphasizes Native resistance movements against colonialism, confronts racism, discusses sovereignty and Native nationalism, seeks connections between literature and liberation struggles, and, finally, roots literature in land and culture. (11)

Clearly, Womack privileges the Native voice in Native American literary criticism, illustrating that any other Western theoretical approach is simply another act of colonization. Womack’s position presents one more reason for non-Native scholars to rely on the critical works of Native scholars. As he says, “Native literature, and Native literary criticism, written by Native authors, is part of sovereignty: Indian people exercising the right to present images of themselves and to discuss those images” (14).

Non-Native scholars of Native American literature join ranks with Native scholars in choosing to focus on history and culture for their critical approach. In discussing the problems associated with interpreting Native American literature,
Gregory Salyer argues that readers must pay particular attention, so they do not fall into the trap of their own ethnocentric viewpoint:

Crossing cultural boundaries, even literary ones, is a difficult and sometimes painful process, and without a willingness to adjust our expectations, reading across cultures can trivialize or exaggerate the distinctiveness of the other culture and simply reinforce our own beliefs about the world. It is crucial that we allow Native American literature to teach us and that we read in order to learn how to read. Otherwise, we will end up simply projecting our own cultural assumptions onto a body of work by people who do not share these assumptions, and in the end we will not have learned anything but how to drive our assumptions deeper into the background while a whole other world passes before our eyes. (12)

Although Salyer highlights the importance of critical self-reflection when reading Native American literature, he does so in a context of cultural assumptions. To offset the limitations of being trapped in one’s own cultural circle, the critic needs to examine the historical and cultural contexts of the Native American author and/or tribe in the text.

The importance of the historical and cultural contexts in this book might signal to the reader a new historicist approach. However, the desires to “relate literature to history, to treat texts as indivisible from contexts, and to do so from a politically charged perspective forged in the present” are not new concepts to the Native American worldview (Ryan x–xi). Gunn Allen distinguishes between Native and non-Native cultures in their perception of time and space:

Another difference between these two ways of perceiving reality lies in the tendency of the American Indian to view space as spherical and time as cyclical, whereas the non-Indian tends to view space as linear and time as sequential. The circular concept requires all “points” that make up the sphere of being to have a significant identity and function, while the linear model assumes that some “points” are more significant than others. In the one, significance is a necessary factor of being in itself, whereas in the other, significance is a function of placement on an absolute scale that is fixed in time and space. (Sacred 59)

Because all events carry equal importance in the Native worldview, when they happen does not diminish nor increase their importance. In fact, mythic time conflates the past, present, and future, reinforcing the notion of a fluid cyclical time in which all events are of equal significance. In other words, the past always carries meaning for the present that distance and time cannot attenuate.

Much of the current historical criticism deals with English Renaissance literature in two camps: in Britain, cultural materialism, and in the United States, new historicism. Jonathan Culler succinctly summarizes a major preoccupation of