

Feminist Criticism: The Importance Of Sharing The Native Female
Journey

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Feminist Criticism: The Importance of Sharing the Native Female Journey

The female Native American perspective is grossly neglected in mainstream media. Sadly, stereotypical images romanticize Native American women in a light that disallows them to be taken seriously in a modernized world. The fact is that the majority of women with American Indian ancestry do not live on reservations; they make up a considerable part of the general population. There is an unfortunate “invisibility of Native women in comparison to men,” and “Native women are often represented by popular culture within the Plains Indian context, the generic Indian. Omnipresent is the ‘squaw’ who is portrayed as servant, concubine, beast of burden, drudge, ‘sinful,’ and ‘sultry’” (Tohe xviii).

The Native American female authors who contribute to this diverse collection of poetry and prose in the book *Sister Nations* are writing to directly challenge popularly accepted unflattering stereotypes and images of themselves and their peers. These damaging stereotypical images steal Native women’s distinct and modern identities (Tohe xviii). They strive to change the readers’ perceptions by using specific rhetoric in their native stories and poetry. As Native women attempt to voice their own true identities through the words they write and stories they tell, we can get a better understanding of what life is like for them, in their roles as the spiritual provider, family and community backbone, nurturer, caregiver, cook, and much more. When we think of an American Indian woman, what comes to mind? How do we summarize her? “The Cherokee Princess possesses Asian or white features to make her palatable to western

tastes, thus the Barbie doll look found in tourist shops, magazines, toy stores, and grocery shelves. Her image sells.” (Tohe xviii). The painfully oversimplified version of the native woman has been created after centuries of “Colonizer’s guilt,” explains LeAnne Howe, one of the authors in the book. Instead of portraying native females in a light that is honest, fair and free from the distortion of stereotypical ideas “ the dumb-down image that is now accepted is overtly sexual, incorrect and fails to emphasize the driven, hard-working female that is truly the crux of the native woman” (Howe xviii).

The pieces included in *Sister Nations* represent Native women’s experience and wisdom. This knowledge is rooted in what prominent Native American female authors, professors, and notable indigenous women’s rights activists Heid E. Erdrich and Laura Tohe define as “indigenous knowledge,” which are beliefs ingrained by cultural experience (Tohe & Erdrich xvi). The stories show that women of different tribes share similar experiences connected by a common tradition of sharing oral histories. The Native women who write about their unique experiences show that being female unites all women, regardless of nationality. Together, these authors address the way this group of women is currently regarded by the popular media, and discuss how they wish to be thought of. The authors show Native women as “vibrant and present in the world we share,” and not a group that deserves to be forgotten or one that ceases to exist in our modern world (Erdrich 109). Through the use of humor, diction, nature symbols, and juxtaposing negative stereotypes regarding Native people with positive images of these women, these Native authors construct an intricate tapestry that allows us to understand the complexities and beauty of the female Native American perspective.

Communication scholars will be able to view *Sister Nations* as a literary artifact that exemplifies Women's Liberation rhetoric in the style that Karlyn Kohrs Campbell had suggested to be most effective. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, well known for her immense contributions to the field of Feminist rhetorical study during the 1970s, defines Women's Liberation Rhetoric in her 1973 essay entitled, "The Rhetoric of Women's Liberation: An Oxymoron." *Sister Nations* gives the intended audience of females from various cultural backgrounds the opportunity to make connections with the Native American woman's perspective. We will be able to see how the Feminist movement is perceived differently by some Native women, compared to how it is understood by Anglo-American communities. By studying the indigenous female's voice through the stories in *Sister Nations*, we will start to understand the complicated history that dictates the success of Feminist ideals for these women through the rhetoric presented by Native female authors.

Understanding Sister Nations from a Feminist Perspective

The book is separated into four distinct chapters. The first section is entitled 'Changing Women,' which discusses women's transition from young girl to adult, and the spiritual ceremonies that focus on the participation of the female and the community to celebrate womanhood. The 'Strong Hearts' section includes politically-charged poetry, showcases the emotional strength it takes to survive in times of war and persecution, and defines the strong resiliency of the indigenous female spirit. The 'New Age Pocahontas' chapter addresses the stereotypical images of Native Americans that are portrayed by the

media, and the ways indigenous women are working to create positive role models for future generations. In 'The Arms of Skies' section, the topic of female sexuality is explored and represented through the traditional indigenous style of using metaphor, and allusions to the natural world.

Each section includes ten to fifteen pieces that represent different topics. Female authors from many different tribes reveal their unique stories and points of view, and show examples signifying how each tribe is distinctly different from one another. Released in 2002, *Sister Nations* gives us the chance to study the enigmatic perspective of the Native woman, hear her voice for possibly the first time and begin to understand her tenacity to learn, write and thrive. This book helps to illustrate the Native female psyche one word at a time.

This essay will present a Women's Liberation method of critique on the connections between the works of literature in *Sister Nations*, and the traditional Native American female roles in a changing modern society. Analysis of this work of literature using Feminist rhetorical criticism will help to unearth reasoning behind the rhetorical devices and styles used by authors to construct the Native American female image.

In *Sister Nations*, stories explain that women act as the backbone of the family's spirituality, as well as the nurturer and caregiver. It is believed that a "nation is not lost until its women's hearts are on the ground. [Women] are the hearts held above the ground, and nations [are] held up by strong women" (Erdrich 66). The complex responsibility women have in Native American communities gives us an idea of how important it is to listen to the female experience first hand. Native women's writings

reveal “women’s traditions of healing and making art,” and help develop the younger generation’s belief system, and promote a successful future for their tribe (Tohe xvi).

Campbell explains that in order to successfully “raise the consciousness” of women about the importance of gaining equal rights to men, women must talk about the important issues together. Because every woman is considered an expert on the female experience, it is important to hear all points of view regardless of background, belief, ethnicity, age or other distinguishing factors. Many women share similar experiences and struggles regardless of cultural background. “‘Conscious raising,’ or spreading the ideas of the Feminist movement involves meetings of small leaderless groups in which each person is encouraged to express her personal feelings and experiences” (Campbell 513). In this setting, there would be no single “leader, rhetor, or expert,” to dictate the discussion, “and the goal is to make the personal political: to create awareness (through shared experiences) that what were thought to be personal deficiencies and individual problems are common and shared, a result of their position as women” (Campbell 513). Campbell explains that it should not be considered shameful discussing women’s experiences, and it should not be kept private. Many females may share similar points of view, and can learn from one another. The act of women participating in these discussions, and hearing other women speak of relevant topics to their lives, in turn, empowers women.

The Female Native American Role and the Importance of Storytelling

Common, 'every-day' aspects of female communication, interaction with their communities and life experiences make up the main themes in the work included in *Sister Nations*. This aligns with Campbell's teachings about the nature of Women's Liberation rhetoric. This group of women has been expected to play certain roles in the home and community throughout history. Without a widely-accepted public platform to vocalize thoughts and opinions, we can learn about their experiences through traditional oral and written story telling. "At the heart of the American Indian oral tradition is a deep and unconditional belief in the efficacy of language," remarks N. Scott Momaday (Lincoln 45). Many Native people believe that there is great power in spoken word, and it is the best way to learn about yourself, your family and other people who came before you. "Tribal literacy survives as an interactive organism, going on interconnectedly. Story is the human container of a historical building from the ground up." (Lincoln 44) Ultimately, passing down stories throughout generations allows one to make connections to his or her life, according to many traditional beliefs. It is empowering to hear that you share similar life experiences and challenges to those of previous generations.

Gender roles and responsibilities are some of the primary building blocks of a community, "and women often set the key to tribal harmonies" (Lincoln 43). Women act as the promoters of spiritual education for families by "storytelling, singing, dancing, playing, talking, and praying. Paying daily attention is critical, as magic and miracle pervade ongoing origins" (Lincoln 43). Women teach their children that everyone "and everything has a voice — humans, animals, stones, sun, moon, the earth and sky" (Lincoln 43). Stories are used to explain almost every stage and significant occurrence in life. In order to make sense of the complexities in life, American Indian cultures rely on

traditional teachings from elder members of the community to explain what should be expected in the future. Word of mouth and tribal knowledge are fundamental, traditionally-valued ways of passing on important teachings, explains LeAnne Howe, herself of Choctaw ancestry. “Surviving winter and drought and famine and predator triggers cautionary parables, why-so tales, where-from myths, and how-to stories” (Lincoln 43). In early civilizations, the oral tradition to pass on stories about events gave people a way to relate, understand and respect their natural surroundings, and this crucial survival information was passed on to posterity.

Feminist Criticism Used to Decode Female Native Rhetoric

Campbell explains in her essay that Feminist rhetorical criticism is composed of two main steps: assessing substance and style in rhetoric. She asserts that if the substance of the piece of literary work being critiqued is to be considered supportive of Feminist ideals, it should align with the main arguments of the Feminist Movement, or the pursuit of equal rights for females. The substance, wording and rhetoric of the piece being analyzed defines the context. Stylistic choices made by the rhetor, or creator of the artifact, are greatly influenced by context and subject matter. In Feminist criticism, substance and style in the work being critiqued are greatly interdependent (Campbell 510).

By studying substance and stylistic elements, readers will be able to analyze the construction of gender in the literature we read. It will help us to explain the recurring ideas that perpetuate the traditional perception of male and female roles that place women

in societal positions with limited upward mobility. The sooner we address these issues, the better equipped our society will be able to begin creating and popularizing images and rhetoric that align with Feminist ideals; the main goal, giving a renewed strength to women to achieve the same in life that a man could.

Stylistic elements can include the use of “symbolic reversals,” which transform negative terms used against women into words of empowerment when used by women. Ultimately, this “violat[es] the reality structure,” or ideas and norms society has already accepted to be true, and is comfortable believing, and attempts to alter the word’s meaning (Campbell 516). “Attack metaphors,” reveal the underlying sexist language and accepted ideas of male and female roles by suggesting new perspectives about traditionally masculine ideas, for example: “Trust in God: She will provide” is a statement that gives a controversial alternative way of thinking about the traditional Biblical images of the masculine figure of God (Campbell 513). It attacks the previously accepted masculine view and offers the female perspective as if to pose the question, ‘Why not?’ These stylistic elements can be used in Feminist criticism to “raise the consciousness” of women about the goals of Feminism, in order to convince all women that change in the perception of women’s roles need to be addressed and discussed publically (Campbell 515).

Native American Authors Bring the Struggle “Back Home” to Life

Many Native American female authors show that their primary struggle is with being part of a group that feels over-looked by the United States government. They have

been kicked off their land, and driven out of their homes. “The primary driving force of Native Americans is not to gain what the majority culture has,” but rather to “not lose any more than they've already lost” (Curry 12). Many have felt that they are “under assault” because they continually have lost land and power over the past decades (Curry 12).

Indigenous Native cultures have been the victims of centuries of injustice, oppression and economic debilitation in America. On reservation lands, Native Americans can live by locally enforced laws, and are free to practice their native spirituality without the Federal Government’s intrusion. However, they have been segregated by the Federal Government’s land treaties, virtually “separating them from the rest of American society” (Warrior 30). Today, many indigenous people face racial discrimination and feel the effects of social and governmental isolation. As a minority group in the United States, the struggle to gain equal rights continues.

The second issue that this group of women struggles with is the vague, half-truths that construct the negative and degrading images of the Native American woman that the American public accepts. Native authors strive to conjure a positive and current image that truthfully represents the modern Native woman. Contemporary females of indigenous nations, especially, are a group without great representation “politically, or heavily covered in American media, and at times can be over-looked as a group in need of a strong voice to present their population positively” (Lincoln 47).

Today, women still play the traditional roles of “housekeeper, childbearer, and nurturer, but no longer enjoy the unquestioned positions of power, respect, and decision making” locally and internationally, that females experienced during previous years in tribal societies (Fossum 15). Also, it appears that Native American males have adopted

the pattern of “colonial violence,” which is manifested through “domestic and sexual violence, child abuse, and homophobia” (Mayer 17). Equality will not be attained if historical oppressive behaviors are not addressed, discussed and changed.

Women in Native American communities face being defined and limited to certain roles, like women of many other ethnicities may experience. For example, in the United States, “the sex role requirements for women contradict the dominant values of American culture—self-reliance, achievement, and independence” (Campbell 510). Women are born into a society where pre-determined expectations exist for them, due to centuries of ingrained societal rules. This creates friction between the woman’s free will and the risk of public disapproval for defying social norms. “The girl who maintains qualities of independence and active striving (achievement-orientation) necessary for intellectual mastery defies the conventions of sex appropriate behavior and must pay a price, a price in anxiety” (Campbell 512). There is pressure to conform to the social norms that define what women should do. The price that a woman may pay for not following these set rules of her culture is the fear that she may not be considered desirable or feminine.

Traditionally, Native American women have lived in mainly patriarchal societies. Women are tasked with the mundane chores of raising a family, and also the unspoken, but assumed responsibility of promoting historical cultural practices to younger generations. Campbell defines this societal assumption of duty for females as “a woman’s place” (Campbell 514). “Success for men is defined as instrumental, productive labor in the outside world whereas ‘wives’ are confined to “woman’s place”—child care and domestic labor in the home” (Campbell 514). These concepts of “masculinity” and

“femininity,” are deeply rooted economic issues that define male and female roles in America. “The woman who strives for the kind of success defined as the exclusive domain of the male is inhibited by norms prescribing her “role” and must pay a heavy price for her deviance” (Campbell 512).

Debra Haaland, a Laguna Pueblo Indian remembers from her childhood that her “mother never just cooked. The food [eaten] while growing up was nourishing for my body and my spirit” (Erdrich 68). Dinners, for this family, were times to reflect on how they had been fortunate enough to have the food, and to celebrate the work that went into preparing the meal. This community did not believe in taking from the earth without giving thanks. “As we ate, my mother would give us advice about listening to our teachers and how to treat the people we shared this world with. They would tell us how we came by food—someone had grown it, an animal had given its life to us so we could live, my dad had worked hard to buy us the food we needed” (Erdrich 68). This example shows the mother preparing the nourishment and connecting the meal to important life lessons she wanted to instill in her children early on. Not only is this mother acting as the spiritual and moral agent in her children’s lives, but also is playing the traditional “housewife” role some might equate with the expectations of a typical North American Caucasian female of the 1950s. The idea that a woman should follow these stereotypical woman’s roles is heavily attacked in Campbell’s work. The act of talking about the experience, women’s feelings regarding the expectations, and acknowledging the reality of many females’ situations is productive and necessary to the promotion of female equality.

The Use of Tragic Native Humor to Address Cultural Tensions

“Insider” joking, also known as ethnic-based humor, is frequently used by members of minority cultural groups “as a means to develop and reflect group pride” (Curry 12). Much of this type of humor focuses on revealing the differences between the minority group and the majority population. Many modern authors have created ways to express their pain through the use of tragic humor; an attempt to talk about the past issues and stereotypes, make fun of the situation, stop ignoring the past, and respond to the outrage their families have experienced, but were not able to express publicly for decades. These kinds of “jokes” may not elicit a laugh-out-loud response that most may consider appropriate for most comedies. Instead, many examples of this humor reveal the struggle of oppression and discrimination many Native American people have endured.

This type of humor has become increasingly popular by the frequent use of prominent Native Americans “in both their personal and political lives” and for entertainment and educational purposes (Curry 12). It can be viewed as a release of frustration due to social and cultural tension, and a way to address the difficult issues that surround everyday struggles that many people in minority groups can relate to. Though humor differs greatly from tribe to tribe, self (and tribe) deprecation, clever cultural observation, references to historical injustice, and commonly held prejudices and stereotypes are found in Native humor across many tribes.

Some examples of this style of humor may not be easily interpreted or understood by other cultures, but they are important artifacts when studying Native American culture. From an outsider’s perspective, one may feel offended or unable to fully

understand the ‘joke’ since many of the references confront brutal truths regarding American history or other culturally sensitive topics.

I know what you’re looking for and I know I’m not it. You’re looking for that other Indian woman, you want a for real gen-yew-whine oshki-traditional princess and you’ll know her when you see her glibly glinting silver and turquoise carrying around her own little magic shop or real gen-yew-whine rattling beads and jangling charms...as she sells you a ticket to her sweat lodge. She’s a spiritual concession stand (Tohe 134).

This excerpt is from a poem entitled “To the Woman Who Just Bought a Set of Native American Spirituality Dream Interpretation Cards” in *Sister Nations*, and is an example of how an author directly addresses stereotype of the ‘typical’ idea of a Native woman. She uses this piece to vent her anger about the unjust treatment of her people, and as a way to show how she would have liked to respond to the comments made by the woman.

Through a scathing account of an awkward exchange that took place in her gift shop, the author uses a form of antithesis to illustrate many people’s expectations of how Native American women should look and behave, and counters it with common reactions of indigenous females to these perceptions. She explains how disappointed many “outsiders” have been when they realize she differs from many preconceived notions of the “typical” indigenous woman.

She repeats the word “gen-yew-whine,” a terse tongue-in-cheek imitation of how Southern Anglo-Americans speak, and emphasizes the ignorance and insensitivity some people practice when communicating with other cultures. This repetition is also a type of malapropism, or “the usually unintentionally humorous misuse or distortion of a word or

phrase” (Merriam-Webster). By emphasizing a common and unsophisticated pattern of speech, she attempts to create a negative reflection on some white Americans. We can clearly picture the scene and understand how hurtful the ignorance about her tribal background can be.

Poet Marcie Rendon poses the question: “What is an Indian woman to do when the white girls act more Indian than the Indian women do?” in her poem, “What’s an Indian Woman to do?” (Rendon 138). Rendon is of the White Earth Anishinaabe tribe, and sets up this paradoxical question by giving examples of how she has not ‘lived up’ to the typical Native woman one might automatically think of, and how she observes other ‘less genetically Native American females’ trying to blend in to Native American culture. People who claim they have Native American ancestral roots, though they have lived the majority of their lives off reservation lands and take part in Anglo-American culture, can sometimes be labeled as “wanna-bes,” and are not taken seriously by the Native American community (Rendon 138). It is believed that the “wanna-bes” have not had to survive the same struggles regarding oppression, and cannot truly understand Native American culture by attempting to take part later in life.

I remember Kathy She Who Sees the Spirit Lights when she was still Katrina Olson from Mankato, Minnesota. And Raven Woman? Damn, I swear I knew her when she was a Jewish girl over in St. Paul (Rendon 138).

Rendon contrasts her life experience with other Native women: “To my ex husband’s dismay, I never learned to be humble, spiritual, Native woman stance, legs tight, arms close, head bowed three paces behind” (Rendon 138). Though Rendon says she feels like she does not fit the mold of the standard Native female, she does illustrate to us that she

knows when someone is impersonating it, and does not hesitate to point it out. By making fun of an “outsider” group, it may serve to relieve some cultural tension. Rendon’s excerpt directs attention to the inadequacies or inappropriate behavior of other cultural groups besides her own, perhaps in an effort to persuade audiences to think about how their actions and words might affect people of different ethnic backgrounds.

Heather Harris, of Cree descent, writes in her satirical poem regarding husbands, ties to one’s close female family should be cherished and celebrated above all. “Husbands come and go but mothers, sisters and daughters last forever. A certain logic to matrilineality” (Harris 178). She uses examples from her life and of close relatives’ to illustrate her point that men cannot be completely trusted, and that women must stick together.

Harris’ arguments align with those of the American feminist movement: that it is important for women to unite in the pursuit of equal rights, and close the gap between people of different backgrounds. Women are divided from one another “by almost all the usual sources of identification—age, education, income, ethnic origin, even geography” (Campbell 513). In order for women to feel connected to one another, they must first eliminate the negative feelings one might have towards women of different social standings or backgrounds. “If a persuasive campaign [such as the Feminist perspective] directed to this audience is to be effective, it must transcend alienation to create ‘sisterhood,’ modify self-concepts to create a sense of autonomy, and speak to women in terms of private, concrete, individual experience,” because the female population has a limited number of shared public experience (Campbell 513).

Sister Nations Reveals Stereotypes and Distortion of the Female Image

Through the journey of life, women strive to become educated, liberated, accepted people in a complex world that has its own set of rules beyond what is acceptable on the reservation. They give birth to children, to whom they hope to pass on traditions and a sense of pride in their ethnicity. They are selfless in the way that they must live up to certain roles, and provide support for their community.

When it is an accepted American birthright that citizens live ‘in the land of the free,’ and should exercise their right to ‘the pursuit of happiness’ by capitalistic means, it is apparent that women have a few more hurdles to overcome before attaining complete equality. One main feminist concept is that “unlike most other groups, the social status of women is defined primarily by birth, and their social position is at odds with fundamental democratic values” (Campbell 510). On top of that, Native American women tend to feel increasingly alienated from mainstream American society, considering modern capitalistic goals. “The argument for economic equality follows a similar pattern. Based on median income, it is a greater economic disadvantage to be female than to be black or poorly educated (of course, any combination of these spells economic disaster)” (Campbell 510).

As young Native American girls grow up, they are exposed to stereotypical ideas portrayed by the media about their ancestors and nationality. In “Her Pocahontas” by Susan Deer Cloud of Ojibway descent, she describes the differences in the baby dolls young girls play with. Their toys help mold their young minds on the topic of race, and expectations placed on those who are White and American Indian. Young girls are keen

observers of differences, and are shaped from early social experiences. Young girls in formative years, in search of their identities and truths about their nationalities may find it difficult to find healthy role models to look up to.

Her Pocahontas was an [Indian] doll given to her by her mother. The other girls played house with dolls that had skin like refined sugar. They expected their dolls to grow up, to be like the actresses they worshipped on vast movie screens—blonde, pug-nosed Doris Day always ‘holding out,’ golden, pout-lipped Marilyn hinting with winks she’ll ‘put out’ (Tohe 111).

This excerpt gives us a sense that it is “fierceness, cutting humor, and the tough love that is the heart of ‘Indian Country,’ that is the Native American woman in her world” (Tohe xiii). In a world where the modern American Indian woman does not have many spokespeople, characters, or leadership roles promoted heavily in the media to contribute to a positive overall image, it is important for the women of native cultures to learn from local heroines and rely on their community for support and strength.

The controversial image of the ‘perfect woman,’ is heavily commercialized and has been redefined throughout the decades. However, the ‘supermodel standard’ is still elusive and seemingly unattainable for the majority of females. Today, living in North America, we see “crest-white teeth, Jane-Fonda-implant breasts, contact-lens-throwaway-blue eyes, collagen smiles, sucked-thin thighs” in movies and television every day (Tohe 111). What celebrity figure can Native American girls relate to? Some might feel insecure when they do not look like the majority of media publicized women, and wonder “who would want to make love to decades of daydreams, longing, sorrow, ecstasy, delicate wisdom—want to kiss flesh like hills warmed by many suns, gullied by stinging

rains, hypnotic snows” (Tohe 111). Today, the “pressures Natives and non-Natives put on Native women as to what they should look like, how they must behave, and who they should associate with cause emotional distress and identity confusion,” which helps us to understand the growing identity crisis many Native Americans are dealing with currently.

Stereotypes and Prejudice

Most groups hold some ethnocentric beliefs that people like them are, in some ways superior to other groups. They may boast that they are the most civilized, modern, or spiritual compared to the rest of the world. Many American Indian tribes have greatly divergent beliefs, traditions, and histories, but “there is a deep sense of kinship, [that is] so important to indigenous communities, that crosses boundaries of culture, even political boundaries imposed on land” (Tohe xv). Similar to the global community, American Indian tribes have pride in their separate and unique cultures, but share the common bond of being American people whose ancestors lived off the land for centuries.

In the literature presented in *Sister Nations*, Native Americans present the voice of the indigenous female, and Campbell confirms that talking about women’s issues is a relevant and necessary practice. However, feminism in Native American culture is a controversial topic. Some women align with the concept, while others completely reject it. Many native women activists, except those who are ‘assimilated,’ do not consider themselves feminists. “Feminism is believed to be an imperial project that assumes the givenness of U.S. colonial stranglehold and oppression on indigenous nations. Thus, to

support sovereignty Native women activists reject feminist politics” (Fossum 4).

Rejecting the feminist movement may be a hindering step backwards.

Feminist affiliation has long been suspect among Native American women whose memories survive the dishonor of colonialism. The idea of common struggles is simultaneously repugnant and alluring. Sadly, this has led to much confusion and rejection between indigenous women (Mayer 20).

It is believed by Native American women that while indigenous academics are starting to become increasingly prominent, “non-indigenous whites, whether male or female, still control it” (Fossum 10). White women still “have the power to set the feminist agenda, [and in so doing] contribute to and participate in the oppression of women of color” by not considering or realizing their experiences and needs (Mayer 25).

Living in a modern society that values knowledge, education and capitalism, it can be a difficult dilemma for an American Indian woman to see her child lose sight of traditional values. “A [mother] choosing to send one son to school while keeping the other at home illustrates... not the line between ignorance and knowledge or between degradation and uplift,” but the existence of a changing mindset for native peoples, and the importance of participating in a modern society, while still holding traditional values dear (Fossum 13). It is as if one must take the best elements of the two worlds they live in, and learn what they can from each, in order to improve themselves. Those who have lived on both reservations and urban communities “have come to value the past and the stories of [their] relatives’ survival. Yet, the cycle of life continues. People die, but new life is born from old” and new expectations from life are created with new generations (Lincoln 22).

“The movement in the history of ideas that occurred in the encounter between Europeans and the indigenous people of the Americas has most often been considered a one-way process.” Where ideas, and bloodlines have come into contact, Europeans have made their indelible mark on native peoples (Mayer 30). Though native cultures had some influence on the European settlers, it is apparent that Europeans had the mindset to ‘conquer’ and take over the ‘New World’ in order to make it theirs. They came from their lands to make a new home for themselves and escape from tyrannical rule, and in turn, fought to control and dictate the use of land that was already being lived on and used by indigenous tribes. Some “ideas and goods made their way from the Americas to Europe, but the routes of most [scholarly and popular] interest have been those from Europe to the Americas” (Warrior 182).

The American Indian women who share their thoughts and stories combine to create a vivid image of what it is like to be female in an indigenous community. With similar expectations that women all over the world have encountered, American Indian women authors explain their unique ways of dealing with social pressures, of community expectations, family needs, the maturation process, and the search for a true identity. The selfless roles many women fit into seem to mirror traditional values, which helps to ground many tribes and remind them of ancestral ways of life. American Indian lifestyles may not be completely understood by other cultures, but these women have shared their perspectives to give us an invaluable look into their ancient cultures, and what they hope to see for future generations. According to author Laura Tohe, “the voices expressed here reveal the transformative and re-creative abilities of being female, of being changing

women,” and give women the chance to relate to one another, by supporting each other and celebrating the female experience together (Tohe 4).

Conclusion

American Indian women are the cynosures to the prosperity of many native cultures’ traditional practices. *Sister Nations* is a poignant work that explores the dilemma that Native American women face as they attempt to integrate into modern society while maintaining traditional values. It also explains the huge responsibilities many women take on in indigenous communities. The more frequently Feminist ideas are talked about, the greater success the movement will have, and ultimately, accelerate the momentum to promote equality between the sexes. *Sister Nations* brings the modern native female voice to a public light, and allows for a large audience to hear the perspective of the Native indigenous woman.

From Campbell’s point of view, this book aligns with true Feminist ideas by celebrating the everyday-female perspective and giving a platform for women to share their stories. The authors represented in the book would be considered credible and expert on the topic of womanhood, according to Campbell’s reasoning that all women should have a stronger voice in society. They share their works of literature so a large number of women from various backgrounds can relate with their diverse experiences.

Feminism is perceived by Native American women in different ways. While some accept the concept, others may reject it because it is a concept that stems from white American culture. However, many realize that females have progressively gained more

rights since the beginning of the Women's Liberation movement and each day brings more possibilities to attain equality. Native women are the beneficiaries of the strides that white and other minority group Feminists have already taken, because all women benefit. In order to improve their situation, it is important for Native American authors to analyze past struggles.

In recent decades Native American authors have been working to repair the image of the indigenous female through strategic rhetorical creativity, such as the use of storytelling, tragic humor, anecdotal evidence of cultural insensitivity, and using examples of United States media stereotypes of native women. By studying the examples provided in *Sister Nations*, audiences can appreciate the strides many prominent Native American scholars have forged in fighting to create positive images of their people. Hopefully, people from many different cultures can better understand the background behind emotional wounds and inner conflict many indigenous women may feel due to past historical injustice. We can clearly see that the hurt does not simply disappear, it has manifested itself deep into the psyche of this group of people. Talking about the issues will help improve social conditions for the future of Native American women. And, similar to the goal of *Sister Nations*, by exposing audiences of different cultural backgrounds to the Native American struggle, people will become increasingly culturally aware, accepting of others and allow for continued progress and support.

Within the last forty years, Native American culture has begun to gain more strength and make its own mark on American society. This has allowed for increased opportunities to voice opinions on important issues, such as Feminism. Beginning in the

1960s and 1970s, indigenous tribes gained more economic independence through the success of many entrepreneurial endeavors and businesses formed on tribal lands. The Civil Rights movement of the 1960s has helped reduce some of the preconceived notions that perpetuate all types of racial stereotyping in society. Similarly, the Women's Liberation movement has functioned to raise the consciousness of men and women alike, about sexist attitudes in order to reduce the economic and social conditions that repress females. In order for great strides to be made, women had to start believing in themselves, first. The Native American struggle parallels that of the African American struggle during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Viewing the female Native American plight in this light contributes to a shift in the rhetoric produced by their society. Viewing this group of females' specific situation through the context of the larger society, where many oppressed groups have struggled to gain equality and rise above controlling forces of the majority, can unite minority groups and provide a hopeful and positive outlook for the future.

Women of all racial backgrounds will be able to benefit by understanding that the work people have done previously fighting for equal rights will make their journey comparatively easier, and there will be fewer 'hoops' to jump through in order to win the prize of equal rights. If Native American women reject feminism because they believe it is a white American movement, their progress could be hindered. The goal of attaining rights and success in American culture for a minority group can only be achieved without alienating the rest of mainstream society. Otherwise, they will remain a disenfranchised group.

Sister Nations displays Native American women's literature for society to consume, read and consider. Publicizing the message of Native women is a step in the right direction to emphasize the need to reduce oppression. Hiding women's issues will not promote women's rights, it will do just the opposite. Speaking out can help women to prove themselves as capable, educated and deserving of respect in society. The authors provide the ways that they wish to be regarded with their unique style of rhetoric. Through the use of humor, style, social commentary and analysis, they give us an in-depth look into the Native American female psyche.

It is believed by Native cultures that a 'culture will not die until the hearts of the women are on the ground,' meaning that women are the strength and backbone of their cultures. In order to prevent the destruction of their culture, Native American women should join women of all backgrounds and come together on women's issues, in order to create their own empowerment and movement towards an egalitarian society. If women cannot come together, "the fracturing that began with European ideology" will continue to erode and destroy the identity of Native cultures (Mayer 30).

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