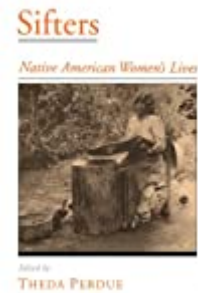




Theda Perdue, ed. *Sifters: Native American Women's Lives*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. x + 260 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-513081-2.



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Published on H-AmIndian (March, 2002)

In *Sifters: Native American Women's Lives*, editor Theda Perdue has brought together the work of fourteen scholars in the field to tease out the stories of people whom history has long forgotten. As she states in her introduction, because “European men largely controlled the historical record, and they were interested in trade, war, and land acquisitions rather than in women’s roles” (p. 4), “sifting” through the available records for examining Native women’s lives is no easy task. Thus, while Perdue acknowledges that most of the women whose lives are detailed in *Sifters* appears in historical records because “they behaved in exceptional ways” (p. 5), each of these women presents a window into a world which might be otherwise unseen. The biographies in this volume move both chronologically and spatially, unveiling the variety of Native women’s experiences across cultures and across historical contingencies. Thus, this volume helps to illuminate the broad diversity, as well as the shared patterns, of Native women’s lives.

The first biography in *Sifters* is that of perhaps the best-known Native woman, Pocahontas. But in proclaiming that her name strikes a familiar chord in the memories of most Americans does not imply that her real story is even vaguely understood or appreciated. Rather, it is the mythical Pocahontas–Indian “princess” saving the life of presumably virile Englishman John Smith–

that has become the distorted legend meant to convey the attractiveness of Native princesses, especially when saving English men. Helen Rountree, noted historian of Powhatan peoples, explores the actual life of Pocahontas, a story that is every bit as rich and important as the mythical woman. Rountree analyzes Pocahontas’ early childhood, as the daughter of one of Powhatan’s “temporary” wives who grew up with her mother and only later became one of perhaps thirty children in her father’s household. Blessed with both her father’s attention and clear ability to cross cultural boundaries, Pocahontas was kidnaped and “re-educated” by the English. Eventually, she converted to Christianity and fell in love with John Rolfe, becoming both Matoaka–her Indian name–and Rebecca–her Christian name. After a brief marriage and one child, Rebecca Rolfe died in England in 1617. The multiple layers of her experience, from upbringing to captivity to her death at age twenty-one, provide a powerful glimpse into the impact of European contact on one woman.

While most Native women did not face the dramatic trajectory that the woman who is known as Pocahontas did, many did face a range of experiences that forced them to confront and adapt traditional upbringing with the reality of European contact and conquest. Indeed, many of the women whose biographies appear in *Sifters* faced similar though varied choices. As each author ex-

plores his or her subject, the complex interplay of Native and European cultures is highlighted by the details of each woman's experience. The anthology also highlights the experiences of Native women who have worked to maintain and promote Native rights and cultures in the face of tremendous pressure to assimilate and disappear. Devon A. Mihesuah, professor of history at Northern Arizona University, explores the life and death of Anna Mae Pictou-Aquash, whose activism within the American Indian Movement (AIM) has been largely subsumed in the narratives of the men whom the mainstream American media has defined as being the leadership of the American activism in the second half of the twentieth century. As Mihesuah states, Pictou-Aquash's life "demonstrates what it means to be a modern Native woman aggressively fighting racial, cultural, and gender oppression" (p. 204). Her life also details some of the experience of Indian peoples as they left the reservations and moved to urban areas to find employment and a way out of the grinding poverty of the reservations. Pictou-Aquash and others provide examples of the variety of feminist activity within and outside of Native America. Detailing Pictou-Aquash's struggle as a woman within AIM, Mihesuah argues that the failure of 1970s feminism to recognize the commitment that women of color to fighting racial oppression made it problematic for them to be both self-identified feminists and activists for their communities. Finally, her activism and the stand she took as part of the American Indian Movement forcefully demonstrates the "possible fate of outspoken individuals who displease their government and members of their own organizations" (p. 205). Pictou-Aquash's unsolved murder during

the era of Pine Ridge Reservation's "reign of terror," possibly at the hands of AIM supporters who believed she was an FBI informant (a piece of information that the FBI probably planted in the minds of the AIM leadership) provided a harsh lesson.

>From start to finish, the biographies presented in *Sifters* are equally compelling and complex, each providing glimpses into the worlds in which Native women have made choices about their lives in the past 500 years. In addition to the two biographies detailed here, the volume includes the following: "Mary Musgrove: Creating a New World," by Michael Green; "Molly Brant: From Clan Mother to Loyalist Chief," by James Taylor Carson; "Sacagawea: The Making of a Myth" by Donna Barbie; "Catharine Brown: Cherokee Convert to Christianity" by Theda Perdue; "Lozen: An Apache Woman Warrior," by Laura Jane Moore; "Mourning Dove: Gender and Cultural Mediation" by Dee Garceau; "Gertrude Simmons Bonnin: For the Indian Cause" by P. Jane Hafen; "Lucy Nicoliar: The Artful Activism of a Penobscot Performer" by Bunny McBride; "Maria Montoya Martinez: Crafting a Life, Transforming a Community" by Terry R. Reynolds; "Alice Lee Jemison: A Modern 'Mother of the Nation'" by Laurence M. Hauptman; "Delfina Cuero: A Native Woman's Life in the Borderlands" by Phillip H. Round; and, "Ada Deer: Champion of Tribal Sovereignty" by Nancy Oestreich Lurie.

This anthology is an important contribution to the growing scholarship on Native American women and would be an excellent selection for use in classes in Native American and Women's history.

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Citation: Kathryn Abbott. Review of Perdue, Theda, ed., *Sifters: Native American Women's Lives*. H-AmIndian, H-Net Reviews. March, 2002.

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