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AMERICAN INDIAN HISTORY OR NON-INDIAN PERCEPTIONS OF AMERICAN INDIAN HISTORY?

BY ANGELA CAVENDER WILSON

When the topic of writing about Indians comes up the first questions that come to mind are: Who is doing the writing? Why? And, what do the subjects have to say about this? These are questions that rarely have been considered by those in American Indian history, but they are extremely important when addressing the ethical and moral considerations that arise when subjects who can speak for themselves are written about by those outside the culture.

American Indian history is a field dominated by white, male historians who rarely ask or care what the Indians they study have to say about their work. Under the guise of academic freedom they have maintained their comfortable chairs in archives across the country and published thousands of volumes on whites' interpretations of American Indian history. Very few have attempted to find out how Native people would interpret, analyze, or question the documents they confront, nor have they asked if the Native people they are studying have their own versions or stories of their past. As long as history continues to be studied and written in this manner the field should more appropriately be called non-Indian perceptions of American Indian history.

To truly gain a grasp of American Indian history, the other historians—tribal and family historians—must be consulted about their own interpretations of and perspectives on history. The majority of academic historians has so far ignored these people and attempted to write in the field with only a portion of the information, using only some of the available sources. If an archive somewhere were filled with information relevant to a scholar's study, and she chose to ignore it, accusations of sloppy scholarship would be hurled from all directions. But if a scholar in the field of American Indian history ignores the vast number of oral sources, the scholar's integrity is safe—through the use of such excuses as:

"Indians have no records of this time period."

"I don't know any Indians who will talk to me."

"Oral sources cannot be validated and therefore are not trustworthy."

"Fact cannot be distinguished from fancy."

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“Oral accounts change with each generation.”

Would historians attempt to write a history of Germany without consulting any German sources? Would a scholar of Chinese history attempt to write Chinese history without consulting Chinese sources? Why is it that scholars in American Indian history have written so many academically acceptable works without consulting American Indian sources? Is it simply because most of our sources are oral rather than written? As more Native people are trained in history and call attention to these contradictions the excuses used by historians to exclude oral sources in their research will no longer be acceptable.

Stories in the oral tradition have served some important functions for Native people: The historical and mythological stories provide moral guidelines by which one should live. They teach the young and remind the old what appropriate and inappropriate behavior is in our cultures; they provide a sense of identity and belonging, situating community members within their lineage and establishing their relationship to the rest of the natural world. They are a source of entertainment and of intimacy between the storyteller and the audience.

These stories, much more than written documents by non-Indians, provide detailed descriptions about our historical players. They give us information about our motivations, our decision-making processes, and about how non-material, non-physical circumstances (those things generally defined as supernatural, metaphysical, and spiritual by Western thinkers) have shaped our past and our understanding of the present. They answer many other “why” and “how” questions typically asked by the academic community in their search for an understanding of “the American Indian past.” So while archival materials may offer a glimpse into the world-view of Native people, the degree to which they can provide information on the American Indian half of the equation is quite small relative to what can be gained through an understanding of oral tradition.

Work done in the fields of anthropology and folklore often has served to fill this void for historians in recent years, but even this work is often fraught with its own problems. Native people have, in most instances, had very little to say about the interpretations, analyses, and translations developed from the stories they willingly shared. It has been my experience that many of these works are filled with misinterpretations, mistranslations, lack of context, and lack of understanding (although certainly some exceptions exist in which scholars have been successful in incorporating Native voices into their work). At the very least these oral accounts collected by non-Indian anthropologists, ethnographers, and folklorists should be discussed with knowledgeable elders to determine the accuracy of their assumptions and the appropriateness of their use (preferably with those within the same family from which the original information was collected) before they are

used in contemporary histories.

Am I suggesting that all historians working in the field of American Indian history begin swarming to Native communities to record stories from our most precious elders? Absolutely not. I would not wish that fate on any Native group. For the few who have the sensitivity to address the ethical issues in the field and the desire for a more complete understanding of American Indian history I would suggest slowly developing acquaintances with Indian people and giving Native people from the community they are studying the opportunity to comment on their work while it is being written. Not only would this allow Native people input into how their history will be understood by the rest of America, it also would allow the academician the privilege of having community-endorsed work (credited in part to community members, I hope).

This kind of work is not something that can be accomplished on a six-month research grant. Rather, it means years of involvement, building trusting relationships with Native people. The scholar must understand the internal mechanisms Native people have for determining within their own communities whether they have information relevant to a scholar's study, whether they feel a scholar is respectful enough of their culture to share their valuable insights, who within the community is authorized and informed enough to share the information, and what information is appropriate to share. The rewards of this kind of scholarship may not come from a scholar's academic peers. Rather, the personal rewards reflected in the experiential learning process, the depth of understanding in analysis, and a sense of satisfaction in the realization of moral responsibilities should be enough to inspire many historians in the field of American Indian history to take this route.

For those historians who do not have this sensitivity or desire, the contributions they make to understanding the written word are significant, but the limitations of their work must be acknowledged. The idea that scholars can "sift through" the biases of non-Indian written sources sufficient to get at the Indian perspective is presumptuous and erroneous. These scholars should not discontinue their research in the field, but they should discontinue the pretense that what they are writing is American Indian history. This kind of scholarship remains, instead, American Indian history largely from the white perspective.