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“Tell Me a Woman’s Story”: The Question of Gender in the Construction of Waheenee, Pretty-shield, and Papago Woman

Christine Colasurdo

Scholars today generally accept the fact that early Euro-American anthropologists, trained in a fledgling discipline, carried out to the field a suitcase full of cultural biases. In his study For Those Who Come After, Arnold Krupat notes how these biases shaped early American Indian autobiographies which, while providing vivid detail, were written mostly by white editors.¹ He enumerates the questions a late-twentieth-century reader must pose when perusing the genre, since early Native American texts in general “are always the consequence of a collaboration”:

it is useful to know, as far as we can, just how they were made. How many workers, for example, were involved in the production of the final text, and what did each contribute to it? Do variants of a given version exist, and, if so, what were the differences in the production of each? How well did the various workers (Indian informant-speaker, white editor-transcriber, and also apparently in all cases at least one translator, usually part-Indian and part-white) know one another’s language? Under what auspices was the text produced and what claims were made for it? (7)

Though difficult to answer, such questions are nonetheless crucial to ask if readers are to adequately assess such a paradoxical genre. As David Murray queries, “What are we to make of works which announce themselves as autobiography but also claim on their title page to be ‘by’ a white editor, or by an editor who has conflated two separate lives into one, without fully acknowledging his own role in the process?”² The very question of what defines a life story has also been discussed by Julie Cruikshank, who in her preface to Life Lived Like a Story observes, “Those of us raised in a Western tradition tend to approach life history with certain preconceptions about what constitutes an ‘adequate’ account of a life.”³ An informed if not skeptical perspective is of great value, then, to the reader of these early twentieth-century stories, which were so often molded into a shape the white editor intended.⁴ It must be noted, however,

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that Krupat’s insightful questions, along with similar ones proposed in David Brumble’s *American Indian Autobiography*, tend to overlook autobiographies of Native American women. And yet these autobiographies prove to be doubly complex, given that American Indian women have been subjected not only to racial but gender bias since whites first arrived on the continent. As Gretchen Bataille has pointed out, Native American women have endured centuries of Euro-American stereotypes: “The trappers who desired Indian women, the missionaries whose religion dictated that women be regarded as inferior, the painters who saw Indian women as romantic figures – all were viewing Indian women from a decidedly ethnocentric position.”6 The question must be asked, then, How were Native American women represented in their autobiographies? Were these constructions different or similar to those of Native American men? And were the editors’ motives the same as those of the editors of the men’s? In *American Indian Women: Telling Their Lives*, Bataille and Kathleen Mullen Sands note that, “On the rare occasions American Indian autobiographies have been analyzed and discussed, the results have often been incomplete or muddled. . . . Autobiographies by American Indian women are almost never considered, or at best are lumped with male narratives and regarded as less important.”7 It is precisely this terrain – the question of gender in the shaping of Native women’s stories – that I would like to traverse by taking a close look at *Waheenee* by Gilbert Wilson, *Pretty-shield: Medicine Woman of the Crows* by Frank Linderman, and *Papago Woman* by Ruth Underhill. I have chosen these texts because in each one the white editor claims that he or she has constructed an “authentic” portrait, or as near authentic as possible, of an older Native American woman who has lived through white acculturation. The three books were also written and published around the same time (1927, 1932, and 1936, respectively), when mainstream white America fully accepted the assumption that Native culture was inferior and was only beginning to wrestle with emerging feminist concerns. It is my intent to contrast Wilson’s and Linderman’s lesser-known “autobiographies” with Underhill’s well-known *Papago Woman* to outline briefly some of the issues underlying the construction of these texts; namely, how the gender of the editor can shape a story, how the gender of an informant can shape a story, how the gender codes of each culture might shape a story, and how the relationship between men and women comes to bear on the autobiographical process.

The first book, *Waheenee*, had for a subtitle when first published, “An Indian Girl’s Story told by herself to Gilbert L. Wilson.”8 In fact, as Brumble has pointed out, this autobiography was never “told” to Wilson but was compiled from several sources.9 It chronicles the life of Waheenee-wea, or Buffalo-Bird Woman, an Hidatsa woman approximately eighty-three years old. Wilson had previously published an autobiography about Waheenee’s son, Edward Goodbird, and used the English-speaking Goodbird as interpreter to obtain information from his mother.10 The name Waheenee appears to be fictitious, as Wilson
refers to Waheenee as “Mahidiwia” in the foreword to his autobiography of Goodbird, and Brumble refers to her as “Maxidiwic” in his bibliography, *An Annotated Bibliography of American Indian and Eskimo Autobiographies.* The name Waheenee will be used here, if only because it is the title of the book and how this woman has come to be known.

The book’s chapters, which outline the various daily routines and traditional attitudes Wilson believed characterized a nineteenth-century Hidatsa woman’s life, take the reader from “A Little Indian Girl” to “The Voyage Home.” Narrated in the first person, the autobiography provides a seemingly intimate view of Waheenee’s thoughts – from birth to marriage to the adjustment to Euro-American culture. Born around 1839, Waheenee passed her childhood on the banks of the Knife and Missouri Rivers in an area now known as Knife River Indian Villages National Historic Site in North Dakota. Her tribe, the Hidatsas, moved from summer to winter camps every year, living in earth lodges which the women built and owned. An agricultural community, the Hidatsas not only hunted buffalo but also grew corn, beans, and squash, and picked wild June berries. The narrative opens with Waheenee’s birth and naming:

I was a rather sickly child and my father wished after a time to give me a new name. We Indians thought that sickness was from the gods. A child’s name was given him as a kind of prayer. A new name, our medicine men thought, often moved the gods to help a sick or weakly child. So my father gave me another name, *Waheenee-wea,* or Buffalo-Bird Woman. In our Hidatsa language, *waheenee* means cowbird, or buffalo-bird, as this little brown bird is known in the buffalo country; *wea,* meaning girl or woman, is often added to a girl’s name that none mistake it for the name of a boy. (W8)

Waheenee was born shortly after a devastating attack of smallpox in 1837 that nearly destroyed the tribe. Waheenee’s great-grandmother, White Corn, tells the little girl of the smallpox infection, when Waheenee “used to creep into her [great-grandmother’s] bed when the nights were cold and beg for stories” (W9). As shown by this anecdote and others, Waheenee’s life is marked by women – her mother, her mother’s sisters, her grandmother, and her great-grandmother. Since sororal polygamy was a tribal tradition, Waheenee had more than one mother. She was raised not only by her mother, Weahtee, but by her mother’s sisters and her grandmother, Turtle, who was “old-fashioned in her ways and did not take kindly to iron tools” (W19). When Waheenee was six years old, her mother died, and in order to cheer her “old Turtle” made her “a dolly of deer skin stuffed with antelope hair” (W22). This doll and another remain in Waheenee’s arms for several chapters, as she grows to a young girl, helping to plant corn, prepare food, and build the seasonal earth lodges. In chapter six, for example, she mentions that her grandmother made a “little bed for my dolls.
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The frame was of willows, and it was covered with gopher skins, tanned and sewed together. In this little bed my sister and I used to put our dollies to sleep” (W57). It is only when Waheenee has a puppy to care for that she forgets about her “dolly.”

By the age of twelve, Waheenee is being trained to take care of a family. “Soon you will be a woman and marry,” Waheenee’s mothers remind her (W90). Two chapters later, Waheenee recounts two romantic attachments she had, which curiously dissolve when the time comes for her to marry. Chapter thirteen, entitled “Marriage,” opens, “And so I grew up, a happy contented Indian girl, obedient to my mothers, but loving them dearly” (W117). Her husband is chosen by her father, and the wedding ceremony is described in purely cultural terms. The chapter ends ambiguously: “And so I was wed” (W126). Nothing is mentioned of the new couple’s life, as the next chapter begins, “My young husband and I lived together but a few years. He died of lung sickness; and, after I had mourned a year, I married Son-of-a-Star, a Mandan. My family wished me to marry again; for, while an Indian woman could raise corn for herself and her family, she could not hunt to get meat and skins” (W127).

The four remaining chapters tell of Waheenee’s life with her second husband, a buffalo hunt, the birth of her son, and a perilous journey back to the tribe’s summer home. The epilogue, “After Fifty Years,” evokes a tragic, sentimental tone, similar to that found in many other Native American autobiographies: “I am an old woman now. The buffaloes and black-tail deer are gone, and our Indian ways are almost gone. Sometimes I find it hard to believe that I ever lived them” (W175). Such a sentiment might well be warranted from someone who witnessed the removal of her tribe to a reservation (an event conspicuously avoided in the narrative). However, a strange conclusion – an acceptance of the white man’s “progress” – colors Waheenee’s closing reminiscences: “My little son grew up in the white man’s school. He can read books, and he owns cattle and has a farm. He is a leader among our Hidatsa people, helping teach them to follow the white man’s road” (W175).

Follow the white man’s road? This closing remark is not insignificant. Suddenly what appeared to be a simple narrative of one woman’s life becomes a self-satisfying prophecy for the white editor. Wilson’s agenda is made even more explicit in his other autobiography, that of Edward Goodbird’s. There the conversion to white Christian culture is explicit. Wilson has Goodbird state of Waheenee, “My mother sighs for the good old times. ‘Children were then in every lodge,’ she says, ‘and there were many old men in the tribe. Now that we live in cabins and eat white men’s foods, the children and old men die; and our tribe dies!’ But this is hardly true of the Christian families” (p. 26). Even more explicitly, Goodbird’s autobiography ends: “For myself, my family and I own four thousand acres of land; and we have money coming to us from the government. I own cattle and horses. I can read English, and my children are
in school. I have good friends among the white people, Mr. Hall and others, and best of all, I think each year I know God a little better. I am not afraid.” According to these two “autobiographies,” then, Waheenee is the symbol of the fading Hidatsa culture, and Goodbird a sign of its prosperous Anglicized, Christian future. In his article, “From Speech to Text,” David Murray notes,

It is important, then, to place the upsurge of interest in Indian material generally, both at the popular and scholarly anthropological levels, in relation to the actual decline in autonomy and independence of Western Indians. As they became subject peoples they became, ironically, objects of white attention, comprehended in all senses, and it is against the powerful popular myth of the Vanishing Americans that these texts need to be seen.12

Murray helps define the enormous chasm between an informant’s speech and the editor’s construction. He notes that white editors’ claims of “authenticity and objectivity” are “deeply problematic.” Wilson’s postscript to Waheenee could well serve as an example of one such “problematic” claim, since there the reader is reassured,

The stories in this book are true stories, typical of Indian life. Many of them are exactly as they fell from Waheenee’s lips. Others have been completed from information given by Goodbird and Wolf Chief, and in a few instances by other Indians. The aim has been not to give a biography of Waheenee, but a series of stories illustrating the philosophy, the Indian-[sic] thinking of her life. In story and picture, therefore, this book is true to fact and becomes not only a reader of unusual interest but a contribution to the literature of history and anthropology. The author and the artist have expressed and portrayed customs, places, and things that are purely Indian and perfect in every detail. (W189)13

But is the reader convinced of these “perfect” details, when Wilson writes of his “adopted mother”: “Waheenee is a marvelous source of information of old-time life and belief. Conservative, and sighing for the good old times, she is aware that the younger generation of Indians must adopt civilized ways” (W189). One could argue that in these two sentences Wilson condescends toward Waheenee as a woman, Indian, and elderly person. Condescension is also apparent in the book’s subtitle – “An Indian Girl’s Story” – which inappropriately describes an eighty-three-year-old woman and a story in which half of the narrative takes place in her adult life. Worse, there is some question as to who Waheenee actually is, since her words are sometimes her own, sometimes the creation of Wolf Chief and Goodbird. Perhaps the supreme contradiction to Wilson’s objectivity is the fact that while he was sent by “Dr. Clark Wissler,
Curator of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History, to begin cultural studies among the Hidatsas,” and his work “continued through successive summers for ten years,” his story of Waheenee is offered not to adults but to “young readers” (W4). A Native American woman – one who has survived several horrifying waves of smallpox and the removal to a reservation – is considered a topic worthy only for white children’s entertainment and edification. It is indeed curious that late-twentieth-century readers such as Brumble have failed to notice this fact.1 For while the story itself, with its extremely detailed descriptions, is intriguing to an adult reader, its “Supplement” is explicitly intended for “young Americans” (W183). In it the reader is instructed in the arts of camping la Hidatsa: “Young Americans who wish to grow up strong and healthy should live much out of doors; and there is no pleasanter way to do this than in an Indian camp. Such a camp you can make yourself, in your backyard or an empty lot or in a neighboring wood” (W183). This supplement, only two pages from Waheenee’s mournful reminiscences for the “old ways,” is not unlike a Boy Scout manual, illustrating exactly how Euro-American boys can put eagle feathers in their hair and pretend they are Indians in their backyard. They are shown how to build a pole hunting lodge, how to broil meat, and how to parch corn as Waheenee did.

The problems arising from this autobiography, then, stem from Wilson’s editorial assumptions about two groups of people of which he is not a part: women and Native Americans. His assumption that an Hidatsa woman’s life makes for children’s reading casts a terrible shadow over his claims of “authenticity and objectivity.” And his hegemonic assumption that Euro-American culture is “civilized” – and that Native Americans must be subjected to it – deepens the gloom surrounding the veracity of his “purely Indian” descriptions. One might well ask, Where does the life of Maxidiwiac – the actual woman upon whom Wilson based his story – blend into the white ethnographer’s assumptions about what an Indian woman’s life should be? Does Waheenee’s doll really mean that much to her, or was Wilson influenced by his own cultural assumptions that little girls were fond of dolls? Or did he, in writing a story for “young readers,” consciously portray Waheenee sympathetically to “young Americans” by having her share a similar love for a toy? And what of her obedience to her father’s wishes for her to marry? Was Waheenee truly “contented,” or was Wilson presenting – consciously or unconsciously – a role model for his young female readers to follow? And finally, what of the autobiography’s conclusion? Is this acceptance of Euro-American culture Waheenee’s true “indian-thinking,” or is it what Wilson considered appropriate for the conclusion of his story? Is her “sighing for the good old times” consistent with such a sentiment – or did Wilson trivialize Waheenee’s pro-Indian stance to validate his government’s presence in what were once her tribe’s village and hunting grounds? Such questions remain difficult if not impossible to answer, given that Waheenee’s
“voice” is a construction and not truly narrated, but the fact that they must be raised illuminates Waheenee’s racial and gendered encumbrances.

Gendered encumbrances persist in Pretty-shield: Medicine Woman of the Crows. Originally published as Red Mother in 1932, Pretty-shield shares certain characteristics with Waheenee. While Linderman does not make his audience explicitly known as Wilson did, Linderman’s book, like Wilson’s, is decorated with illustrations by a Euro-American artist, implying its use as a children’s book. The language of Pretty-shield, like that of Waheenee, is simple enough for a young reader to understand. A dedication to his granddaughter, Sarah Jane Waller, might also imply its intended reader. The narrative is arranged chronologically like Wilson’s, with approximately the same number of chapters. The same attempts to establish “authenticity and objectivity” exist, too, in that the first page of the book is stamped with a thumbprint and the inscription, “I told Sign-talker the things that are in this book, and have signed the paper with my thumb.” However, Linderman chose to write the book in his rather than Pretty-shield’s voice, and the result is a sort of interview, with Linderman posing questions and Pretty-shield responding. In this sense the chasm between the white male editor and Native female informant is more honestly depicted: Linderman places himself in the narrative, thereby attempting to illustrate plainly the strained nature of relations between himself and his informant.

In his foreword, Linderman is forthright about his authorial intentions, which, unlike Wilson’s, are the result of his years spent as a trapper, hunter, and cowboy. Born in Ohio in 1869, Linderman moved to Montana in 1885. His years in Montana are recounted in his memoirs, Montana Adventure: The Recollections of Frank B. Linderman. He is not a trained anthropologist, and yet he displays a genuine interest in documenting Pretty-shield’s life as a Crow tribeswoman. His opening sentences attest to the difficulty of such a task for him:

Throughout forty-six years in Montana I have had much to do with its several Indian tribes, and yet have never, until now, talked for ten consecutive minutes directly to an old Indian woman. I have found Indian women diffident, and so self-effacing that acquaintance with them is next to impossible. Even when Indian women have sometimes acted as my interpreters while gathering tribal legends they remained strangers to me. I had nearly given up the idea of ever writing the life of an old Indian woman when Pretty-shield delighted me by consenting to tell me her story. (PS9)

Linderman is careful to explain why he chose Pretty-shield as his informant. He considers her advanced age, her “keen mentality,” her “willingness to talk,” and her status as a medicine woman in a “great Crow clan” to be adequate reasons (PS9-10). But he adds that Pretty-shield is especially appropriate, since
she is a relative of Plenty-Coups, the famous Crow chief whose autobiography he has already written.17 In this respect he is like Wilson, who had already published the story of Edward Goodbird before turning to a female informant. It would appear that both men first sought out the stories of men, then turned to women for stories for “young readers.” Linderman also explains the choice of material for the autobiography, which is Pretty-Shield’s childhood and young adult years. He claims that Pretty-shield refused to talk about her tribe’s adjustment to white oppression, saying “There is nothing to tell, because we did nothing. . . . There were no buffalo. We stayed in one place, and grew lazy” (PS10).18

Much to his credit, Linderman begins the autobiography by allowing the reader access to the interview process. He describes the environment in which he and Pretty-shield discuss her life:

I was kindling a fire in an old-fashioned cannon stove occupying a corner of a room in the unused school building at Crow Agency when Pretty-shield entered with her interpreter, Goes-together, wife of Deer-nose, the Indian Police Judge. My back was toward the door, and besides this, the March winds from the plains rattled the window sashes so noisily that I did not hear the women’s moccasined feet until they were by my side. I felt relieved. They had promised to come; but knowing the natural shyness of Indian women I had been fearful that they might disappoint me. (PS14)

This short passage tells the reader a remarkable amount about the story about to ensue. One learns that the interview takes place in an impersonal setting – neither Linderman’s house nor Pretty-shield’s – and one which represents Euro-American culture. It is an “unused” school built by the American government for the Indians. It appears uncomfortable – drafty and abandoned. The women’s moccasined feet evoke their “self-effacing” character, and Linderman’s relief at their arrival connotes both a certain modesty and victory – he will have his story. The fact that the interpreter, Goes-together, is the wife of the Indian Police Judge tells the reader that Euro-American acculturation has already occurred, and that Goes-together is not only bilingual but most likely bicultural. Linderman’s journalistic style – his attention to detail, casual tone, and interview format – produces a kind of realism that Wilson’s autobiography lacks. Linderman places himself in the story so that the reader is aware of his intentions, his communication with Pretty-shield through sign language and Goes-together’s interpreting, and the story’s development. His editorial modesty – he claims in his Foreword that working through an interpreter presents a certain “mutation” for the story, and that “If I have failed to let my readers know her the fault is mine” (PS11) – lends a genuine tone which wears well for him with later readers concerned about his “authenticity and objectivity.” That Linderman begins his narrative with a sigh of relief for Pretty-shield’s arrival reminds the reader, too, of the
tenuous relationship between informant and editor, and the likelihood of flaws. As Mullen Sands writes,

Autobiography is a very human form of literature and must be approached humanely by scholars, teachers, and critics. Perfection is desirable in any genre, but it is often not achieved. Still, one may find a work valuable and valid despite its flaws – and even sometimes because of them – as long as one recognizes the flaws and evaluates them judiciously in terms of the overall worth of the work.\textsuperscript{19}

In noting the flawed nature of his literary endeavor, Linderman protects himself from the criticism one might launch at Wilson’s “perfect” details. The reader is made immediately aware of the editor’s uncomfortable stance towards his feminine informant – whether Indian women were truly “self-effacing” or simply appeared so is almost irrelevant – and is therefore alerted to the strained relations influencing the narrative and consequent female (self) representation.

Approximately seventy-four years old at the time of the interview, Pretty-shield was born around 1857 “across the Big [Missouri] river from the mouth of Plum Creek in the moon when the ice goes out of rivers [March],” when “Yellow-calf, and his war party, was [sic] wiped out by the Lakota” (PS18). Born into the powerful Crow “Sore-lip” clan whose members included Plenty-Coups, Pretty-shield – like Waheenee – was named by a male relative, her grandfather. Linderman asks Pretty-shield if Crow women ever name their children. “‘Yes, sometimes,’ she said. ‘A wise-one, even though she be a woman, possesses this right’” (PS19). It is through this discussion that Linderman learns of Pretty-shield’s power. “I named my own children, and all of my grandchildren. My Helpers, the ants, gave me all these names” (PS19). Prompted by Linderman, Pretty-shield recounts her childhood. At an early age she was given by her mother to a bereaved aunt whose family had been killed by the Lakota. Although her mother was a Mountain Crow, she lived with her aunt among the River Crows, and saw her mother when the two tribes met. At one of these meetings Pretty-shield’s mother gave her a doll, which she “undressed and dressed” until she “wore it out” (PS25).

Like Waheenee’s childhood, Pretty-shield’s was spent in playing games and helping her aunt. With her doll and a play-lodge, she pretended to be an adult woman, preparing food and caring for her doll as if it were a baby. When Linderman asks Pretty-shield to talk about her parents, presumably to find out more about her childhood, the narrative jumps to her mother’s death, when Pretty-shield was thirty-two years old. On the day she died, Pretty-shield’s mother was visited by her two dead sons. She tells her family that she is going to “the beyond-country,” then dies in her sleep (PS42). Whereas Pretty-shield – or Linderman – only presents information about her mother in the form of a death scene, information about her father lasts for several pages. “‘I am hiding
nothing from you, Sign-talker,’ she said seriously. ‘My father had one bad fault that we knew about. He liked other women besides my mother pretty well; and yet he was always kindly, never cross. His heart was big’ (PS43). She mentions how her father belonged to a secret society, The-war-clubs, and as a warrior was ‘kindly’ to his enemies. Linderman asks if the Lakota killed her father, and learns that it was the coming of the white man instead:

Smallpox killed him, and more than a hundred others in one moon. . . . We did not know what sickness it was. We did not scatter, as we ought to have done, and the bad-sickness got into every lodge before we knew its power. My people became terrified and died. I was not yet seventeen years old, just married. . . . I will not try to tell you how awful it was. When a woman sees whole families wiped out, even whole clans, and cannot help, cannot even hope, her heart falls down and she wishes that she could die. (PS45)

Although Pretty-shield often appears “merry as a chickadee” to Linderman, at this point she breaks off the interview, apparently from sadness. Linderman – unlike Wilson – is comfortable enough with the relationship between himself and his informant to allow a somewhat anti–Euro-American sentiment into his text. The impact of smallpox is made painfully, powerfully apparent. He is also comfortable enough to divulge his informant’s socioeconomic position, his “payment” for her story, and his desire to speak her language – more information than the New York anthropologist felt compelled to share.20

From this point on in the narrative Pretty-shield recounts – again, in response to Linderman’s prompting – her first encounter with white men, various tribal stories and myths, and several anecdotes from her childhood. From these details emerges a disclosure of such importance that Pretty-shield forbids Linderman from writing it down; it is her vision. And yet he does. Pretty-shield tells of seeing three women at the creek who disappear into the water. Upon dipping her bucket, she sees a female “sprite” looking up at her. She screams, faints, and upon waking finds herself in her mother’s lodge with her face painted in red death paint. “‘Ahhh, you have written down my words,’ she said, reproachfully. ‘If you put them into a book nobody who can read will believe them; and yet they tell only the truth’ ”(PS128). It is difficult to discern from these cryptic pages whether Linderman recounts his informant’s vision out of sheer cultural indifference – it is as anecdotal to him as Pretty-shield being chased by a buffalo cow – or whether the medicine woman, insulted by the interviewer’s transcription, stops herself from divulging more. Regardless, the result is not the poetic, grandiose sophistication of Black Elk Speaks. Pretty-shield’s vision is presented in a personal rather than national context. As Bataille and Sands point out, “Female autobiographers in general tend toward the
tradition of reminiscence with a focus on private relationships and examination of personal growth – personal experience reflected upon. Women’s autobiographies generally concentrate on domestic details, family difficulties, close friends and especially people who influenced them.”21 These characteristics are indeed true of Wabenee and Pretty-shield. Yet one must question whether they are the result of the informants’ conscious selection of material or the editors’ reception and shaping of it. The fact that Pretty-shield appears to be uncomfortable in recounting her vision, and that most of her stories are about accidents and humorous events, leads this reader to wonder if the unreckoned details of her life as a medicine woman from a prestigious clan within the Crow nation would not provide a very different sort of narrative. The questions must be asked: Did Linderman receive this information and choose not to include it in his narrative? Or did Pretty-shield, constrained to telling “girlhood” stories and presenting herself “merry as a chickadee,” choose not to provide intimate details about her life, her medicine, and her tribe?22

At the beginning of the interview, Linderman asks his informant to speak only “a woman’s story,” which he later admits “had prevented Pretty-shield from telling many of her own adventures” (PS55). This gender-based editing influences the content of the narrative. The informant herself is not completely at ease with such a selection process. At one point, in order to defend a story which is about a little boy and not a little girl, Pretty-shield remarks, “I am trying to tell you only a woman’s story, as you wished. I am telling you my own story. The medicine-gun is a part of it, because I was with the boy who found the medicine-gun” (PS78). At a later point, when Pretty-shield generously offers a pouch of tribal tobacco seeds to Linderman and suggests that she could tell a story about them, he disagrees and orders her instead, “Tell me more about your life as a little girl” (PS86). Still later, when Pretty-shield decides to tell a tribal story, she claims that it is worth telling because “You have asked me for only a woman’s story, and I have found one. It is about a woman I used to know, a woman and a mouse; and even the mouse was a woman-mouse, so I will tell you the story” (PS118-19). With the insistence on a mouse’s gender it would seem as if Pretty-shield were mocking her interviewer. Worse, at a moment of true intimacy, Pretty-shield excludes Linderman from the very topic he would like to discuss:

“We girls had always liked to slide downhill on sleds of buffalo brisket . . . [and] sometimes we fell off.” Her chuckling grew into merry laughter, till turning to Goes-together she hastily recounted such a fall, speaking, without signs, in Crow. By this, and the merriment of both women, I guessed that these details were not for me. “That didn’t amount to anything,” said Pretty-shield, again serious. “It was just a woman’s joke. Now I will go on with my story.” (PS52)
The fact that Pretty-shield tries, in a self-conscious manner, to tell “only a woman’s story,” and yet denies Linderman “a woman’s joke,” belies the strained nature of the interview. Because Pretty-shield is “supposed to” talk only about “women’s matters,” her story is essentially contrived; she is not comfortable talking about “women’s things” with a white male interviewer and therefore tends to stray to general tribal stories. Or perhaps the Crow medicine woman simply does not view the world as her Euro-American interviewer does; perhaps “women’s things” and “men’s things” are simply “tribal things.” The fact that the last few chapters discuss an “unwomanly” thing—war—and that the stories are Pretty-shield’s own, testifies to the fact that the division between women’s stories and men’s stories can and does blur, regardless of culture. It is not so surprising, then, that the autobiography terminates not with “womanly” or “maternal” concerns but with tribal concerns: the battle with Custer against the Lakota, the encroachment of the white man, and the disappearance of the buffalo. Linderman finally asks his informant to discuss Long-hair, a famous Crow chief. “She appeared almost shocked. ‘In the beginning you said that you wished me to tell only a woman’s story. Do you now want me to tell you a man’s story?’” (PS213). Perhaps Linderman himself realized by the end of the interview that it was best to ask both “men’s” and “women’s” stories. The last chapter, in perfect contrast to Waheenee’s conclusion, discusses the horrific events surrounding the disappearance of the buffalo, the tribe’s addiction to “white man’s whisky,” and the destruction of the tribe’s horses by white ranchers. “She quickly curbed the anger that these thoughts had aroused. ‘I have not long to stay here,’ she said, solemnly” (PS252). The autobiography ends with the same March winds blowing. The interview was completed within a month—a short time compared to Wilson’s ten summers, and yet the reader is left with a distinct portrait, not the two-dimensional composite of Wilson’s “mother.”

However, in comparing both Waheenee and Pretty-shield to Ruth Underhill’s Papago Woman, one encounters fundamental differences in style, structure, and intended audience. This brief autobiography, originally published in 1936 as Memoir 46 of the American Anthropological Association, was reprinted as a book in 1979 and supplemented with two new chapters.23 Intended for scholars of anthropology rather than “young readers,” Papago Woman is considered by Rayna Green to be “one of the very best narratives, relatively unintruded upon by its hearer, from a remarkable woman with acute memory and an eye for women’s culture.”24 The 1979 edition includes a foreword by Ruth Benedict, which, although written in 1933, was published for the first time in 1979. Here, children’s illustrations have been replaced by photographs, allusions to an “adopted mother” or “red mother” are absent, and no attempt is made to portray the female informant as “merry” or “sighing for the good old times.”

After she had already published a novel and worked as a social worker in New York and abroad, Ruth Underhill pursued a career in anthropology in her late thirties at Columbia University, where she studied with Franz Boas and
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Ruth Benedict. Her assignment to work with the Papagos in Arizona came from Boas. As Joyce Griffen mentions in her short biography,

She [Underhill] believed that Franz Boas, chair of the department, may have thought of her as marginal and perhaps a frivolous divorcee, merely entertaining herself. When the time came for her to do her fieldwork, however, Boas offered her a small amount of money for research with the Papago, a then little-studied tribe. According to Underhill, Boas assisted her because he felt that two classes of people, women and Jews, had not gotten what they deserved.25

With the money Boas gave her and a small amount from her father, Underhill loaded an old car and drove out west to the Papago Reservation in 1931, where she would return three more times until 1933. In Tucson she met Lapai, an Indian who spoke some English, Spanish, and Papago. Lapai introduced Underhill to a kinswoman, Maria Chona, who was supporting herself by making baskets in Tucson. Upon Underhill’s request, the anthropologist, her informant, and her interpreter went by car to the more remote areas of the Papago Reservation, where Chona was born and raised. Located in southern Arizona near the Mexico border, the area which became the Papago reservation is composed mostly of desert and was therefore undesirable to white settlers. This provided Underhill with an opportunity to witness an aboriginal culture essentially untouched by Euro-Americans. Therefore, while her narrative is published later than Wilson’s or Linderman’s, it describes a tribal culture that pre-dates the Hidatsas’ and Crows’ white acculturation. Nancy Oestreich Lurie explains,

With the Gadsden Purchase of 1853, her [Chona’s] people’s territory was cut across by the Mexico-Arizona border, but even during her first marriage well into the 1860s the Papagos of southern Arizona were relatively isolated from American contact. They looked toward Mexico as the source of alien goods and ideas, tending to seek things as they desired rather than having them thrust upon them. Any bilingualism among these people involved Spanish.26

Underhill’s autobiography begins by summarizing this history and geography. In a scholarly tone that contrasts sharply with Linderman’s or Wilson’s, she opens with the background of the Papago and Pima tribes, who were originally one people but divided into two tribes in the late nineteenth century. She abstains from any claim that Chona becomes anything more than an informant, stating, “During most of this time the narrator of the following autobiography, Maria Chona, acted as informant, hostess, guide, and means of introduction to the various villages, in most of which she had relatives or descendants. Chona is a corruption of the Spanish name Encarnacion, with
which the old woman had been baptized on a childhood trip to Mexico” (PW32). Underhill’s claim to authenticity is asserted not through intimacy and friendliness with her informant, as Linderman and Wilson are eager to assume with their subjects, but through professional distance. And instead of attestations to absolute truth – that the story was recounted as it fell “from her lips” or thumbprinted for veracity – the reader is provided with a detailed description of the exact strengths and shortcomings of both researcher and informant:

Most of it [the story] was taken through an interpreter, for, though the writer spoke a little Papago and Chona a little Spanish, it seemed desirable that her words should be transcribed exactly. They were not taken in text but in as accurate a translation as the writer, engaged in a study of Papago grammar, could work out. The wording, therefore, expresses Chona’s thought as accurately as may be.

The arrangement, however, is the writer’s. Chona is ninety years old and her memory works with the fitfulness of age, presenting incidents in repetitious confusion. The only possible system was to write each one separately, add to it all the amendments which occurred to her during the years of our acquaintance, and then to question her patiently about the chronology until the correct order was worked out. (PW33)27

To her discredit, Underhill condescends toward Chona at the same time that she admits that she herself has regretfully altered the narrative. Yet she defends her editing, stating that “For one not deeply immersed in the culture, the real significance [of Chona’s descriptions] escapes” one (PW33). She admits that she “felt most deeply the objections to distorting Chona’s narrative” but that

if it had been written down exactly as she herself emitted it, there would have been immense emphasis on matters strange to her but commonplace to whites and complete omission of some of the most interesting phases in her development . . . the story has elaboration and emphasis at some points where she would not have placed them, and it stops short where she would have found repetition comfortable. It is an Indian story told to satisfy whites rather than Indians. (PW33)

In the opening pages Underhill also explains, as Linderman does, her reason for choosing Chona. Not only is she “not the aberrant type which so frequently attracts the attention of the white investigator,” she is from an important family within the tribe:

She accepted her culture completely, and one reason for choosing her was that she had come into contact with so many of its important phases. As a woman, she could take no active part in the ceremonial
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life. But her father was a governor and a warrior; her brother and one husband were shamans; her second husband was a song leader and composer. And a Papago woman’s history is interesting in itself, because, in this culture, there persists strongly the fear of women’s impurity with all its consequent social adjustments. (PW33)

The fact that these sorts of concerns were outlined in the autobiography itself rather than in a preface might be due to the fact that it was not published as a book but as a memoir in an anthropological series. In any case, the result is a sort of blending of Wilson’s and Linderman’s editorial styles: like Wilson, Underhill is transparent in the narrative itself — the first person pronoun is Chona’s — but her opening pages disclose her intentions and flaws much in the same way as Linderman’s interview process. She is therefore both present and absent in the text. Having disclosed how she built her story, she disappears once the story begins.

Maria Chona grew up at Mesquite Root, a village at the foot of Quijotoa Mountain in the center of the present-day Papago Reservation. Born around 1942, Chona recalls that her earliest memory was of her father waking her each dawn to fetch water, since there was none at Mesquite Root. Like the rest of the tribe, Chona’s family lived in a straw hut with a small entrance. At that time, the women wore no clothes, since the weather was mostly sunny. In the afternoon Chona would play games or run at the racetrack with her cousins. It is interesting to note that whereas Chona had a doll, the male children had dolls, too. “We went to a sunny place and made ourselves dolls of mesquite leaves tied with strings of corn husk for arms and legs and head. . . . The boys had men dolls and they would take them away and say, ‘We go hunting.’ ‘Well go,’ said the wives” (PW39). By the age of ten Chona could no longer play with her cousins because she was needed at home to grind seeds and corn for gruel while her mother made baskets and pottery. Since her father, “The Gambler,” was the tribal chief and spent his days discussing penalties for wrong-doers or simply gambling, Chona’s mother worked hard to feed her brothers and sister. Sometimes her father would hunt deer, and the entire family would accompany him to Mexico, so that they could get stalks for their baskets or clay for their pots. The family would also seasonally pick cholla cactus. Perhaps the most impressive imagery in this text is of the tribe picking cactus, making liquor with its fruit, and becoming “beautifully drunk”:

They broke off the new stems with tongs and rolled them around on the ground to get the thorns off, and then baked them all night in a big pit. They smelled fresh and fine when they came out. When the big pit was roasting slowly in the night, the women threw green cholla stems on the campfire ashes to cook. We pulled them out, knocked off the thorns, and ate them hot. Ah, good, good, food! We ate nothing
else for those three weeks. Green things! . . . It was good at Cactus Camp. When my father lay down to sleep at night he would sing songs about the cactus liquor. And we could hear songs in my uncle’s camp across the hill. Everybody sang. We felt as if a beautiful thing was coming. Because the rain was coming and the dancing and the songs. (PW39-40)

Even the stories of war against the Apaches are imbued with a certain poetry. Chona tells of her father going to war, and the various tribal rituals concerning proper warrior conduct and the role wives played. The women were forbidden from interacting with the men after they had killed. “Many, many songs they sang but I, a woman, cannot tell you all” (PW42). Chona does, however, describe in detail the fighting and her father’s return: “They [her father and uncle] stopped fighting right away because an enemy’s death lets power loose. You must take care of yourself until you have tamed that power or it will kill you. You could not stand against arrows with such power around you” (PW42). Although “even a Slayer’s woman” is not told what happens in war, Chona is privileged several times with stories from her father. The reader is allowed to hear her father sing a traditional song “all alone in the night” to purify himself after killing an Apache woman: “Alas! / Something I know / Clearly I know / I killed an Apache woman / She was crying. / And now light has come to me” (PW44).

It becomes apparent, then, that although Chona is traditionally forbidden many things in her tribe because she is a woman, the fact that her father is chief and that she takes an interest in his activities results in her knowing a great amount about “men’s things.” She confides in Underhill, “I learn everything that the men sing” (PW46). During one ceremony she is kept in the dark with her grandmother, but “my father told me afterward, for I am a woman to whom a man can tell solemn words and she will remember them well” (PW46). Even more important, the reader learns that, like Pretty-shield, Chona has healing power, and “dreams” and “sings” – two characteristics of medicine men. While her younger brother is destined to become a medicine man, Chona, too, discovers that she has the ability to dream. “I used to dream of the white clown. Perhaps it was because some day I was going to marry one. It may be, for I have magic dreams” (PW51). She recognizes that she could not “go into the desert” and have visions like her brother: “I had no time; I had to work. But in those days I used to see things that no one else saw. Once a song came to me. I cannot tell you when it came but I think it was when I was very little. You see, I come from a singing family” (PW51). There is a certain bittersweet tone to these excerpts, implying Chona’s desire to be like her father and brother. She is at times apparently ambivalent: “I could not go out alone on the desert as they did. Why should I want to? That is man’s work and no woman with a right heart wants to be a man. But I was excitable. My heart was not cool. When I
finished my work, I always wanted to race, and I was a good racer – the fastest of all the girls. And I was a gambler. Yes, always I have been a gambler and a lucky one.” It is interesting that she claims to have exactly the same abilities as her father. And in a powerful passage, she tells how she was prevented from becoming a medicine woman:

Then once we went to the Cleared Land to visit a brother of my grandmother. My father asked him to sing over me to see what was the matter. He sang all night, and in the morning he said, “You could be a medicine woman.” “That cannot be,” said my father. “We have one medicine man in the house and it is enough.” So the medicine man said he would take out my crystals. He leaned over me and sucked them out of my breast, one by one. They were as long as the joint of my little finger, white and moving a little. He said, “Look, I have taken them out before they got big.” Then he made a hole in a giant cactus and put them inside. Then he looked at me and said, “They will grow again, for it is a gift.” (PW52)

The crystals do indeed grow again, for later in life when Chona’s brother is about to die, he teaches her many cures, and she inherits his role. Chona is known as a medicine woman who heals newborn babies by pushing up the soft spots on their heads. Repeatedly she refers to herself as “one who knows things,” and claims that “even though they took my crystals out, there was always something in me” (PW72). However, most of her life is spent not as a medicine woman but as the wife of two husbands, working hard to prepare food, raise children, and make baskets. The first husband, by whom she has only one child who survived, accepts a second wife out of courtesy to the girl’s father. Polygamy was acceptable in Papago culture, and it was considered polite to accept a wife when offered. However, Chona, angry and proud, leaves him. He dies shortly later, calling her name, and Chona is heartbroken. “I used to go behind a hill, away from the house, and cry half the day. He almost took me with him. Does this happen to the whites?” (PW78). Her family then has her marry a second man, older and wealthy, with whom she has several children. “But I felt bad. I did not love that old man” (PW78). After his death, yet another man proposes to marry her, but she declines, too tired to cook and take care of anyone but herself.

Before either of her marriages, however, Chona experiences menstruation, and Underhill devotes an entire chapter to the exhaustive ritual surrounding this stage in a young woman’s life. The taboos surrounding the event were numerous in Papago culture. “Girls are very dangerous at that time. If they touch a man’s bow, or even look at it, that bow will not shoot any more. If they drink out of a man’s bowl, it will make him sick. If they touch the man himself, he might fall down dead” (PW57). Young women were isolated at this
time from the rest of their family and the tribe by staying in menstruation huts, little straw huts where one could only sit and lie down. “It is a hard time for us girls, such as the men have when they are being purified. Only they give us more to eat, because we are women. And they do not let us sit and wait for dreams. That is because we are women, too. Women must work” (PW58). During the entire month following menstruation, the young women fast and dance as a sign of their “coming of age”: “At last the moon had come around again and they gave me a bath. It was over. I looked like half of myself. All my clothes were gone. All our dried corn and beans were eaten up. But I was grown up.... After all that work, I did not menstruate again for a year!” (PW61).

Unlike Waheenee’s “sighing for the good old times” or Pretty-shield’s anger against white ranchers, Chona’s autobiography ends on a more positive note. Such an ending could have been due to the fact that in their desert environment the Papagos did not experience the same invasion of Euro-Americans as the Crows and Hidatsas, nor were they dependent upon buffalo. In any case, the reader is not presented with the “Vanished Race” image. In fact, Underhill ends her work with quite the opposite – the endurance of Papago culture into the twentieth century. The last chapter ends with Chona making her beautiful baskets. Even though she claims that old age is not “beautiful,” the reader is not left to pity her but to understand her simply as a ninety-year-old woman. “Don’t you think my baskets are good? I make them all day – all day long, and the young women do the cooking. While I work I hear voices: ‘Put a turtle there! Put a Gila monster here! Here put a zig-zag.” (PW86). Readers are allowed to view her not as a stereotype of the Indian woman or “red mother” but as a human being.

These three autobiographies, then, offer different levels of understanding. While one proposes to categorize “Indian-thinking” in the composite of an “Indian Girl,” another, in its attempt to present a “woman’s story,” is influenced by the assumptions (of both editor and informant) of what a “woman’s story” should be. Indeed, one could argue that Linderman and Pretty-shield never actually agreed on what a “woman’s story” is. Only the third author escapes from reinforcing stereotypes about Native American women. This is not to argue that Papago Woman is free from class bias, cultural bias, or even condescension toward the elderly, or that a shared gender between editor and informant results in seamless sympathies or shared agendas. Indeed, one could argue that Underhill’s assumption of common ground regarding gender might have also produced distortions in her text. But the fact that Underhill herself was breaking the constraints of her own culture’s gender codes by doing field research underscores a level of success in Papago Woman that Waheenee and Pretty-shield lack. This persistence on the part of Underhill, as well as Chona’s desire to practice many habits traditionally belonging to Papago men, results in a level of detail that transcends stereotyping, detail that is represented most clearly in the lengthy
discussion of menstruation and childbirth in *Papago Woman*. Both topics are undeniably “women’s stories” and yet are conspicuously absent in *Waheenee* and *Pretty-shield*.

Underhill makes explicit her feminist goal: “My first weeks among the Papago were spent almost entirely with women. This was a fortunate accident. It provided an insight into one side of tribal life not usually explored by my male colleagues” (PW91). That Underhill herself had experienced discrimination in Euro-American culture – she was expected by her professors to marry rather than pursue a career, and when she did pursue a career even Franz Boas doubted her intentions – makes her a likely candidate for listening and comprehending another “woman’s story.” When one has experienced the dilemma of being silenced or stereotyped by a culture, one may be able to discern the silence of other more readily, or may be able to hear a story where the oppressor does not. Brumble discusses silences in *American Indian Autobiography*:

But if a Sioux warrior tells us about his life by describing his deeds, if he tells us nothing about how his personality developed, I hope that we can recognize that, still, he is telling us something essential about his personality, that we are being allowed a glimpse of the way this man sees himself. If Maxidiwiac (Waheenee) makes nothing explicit about just how it was that she came to be the person she is; if she tells us about her farming, about her plants, about the time she spent on the platforms in the fields, singing songs and frightening away the birds, keeping watch for the boys who loved to prey on the sweet corn of the unwary, if she does all this, why should we lament that she has not told us about the “turning points” in her life? We should realize that in all her talk of fields and plants and her deeds, we may catch a glimpse of self very different from our own.31

Such a point of view is helpful when considering Native oral histories that often emphasize tribal rather than personal stories; however, Brumble assumes in the above paragraph that silences in a text are inherently empowering and a positive characteristic of a culture. While this might be true of certain Native cultures, it is not true of Euro-American culture, and, since Native American autobiography is traditionally the result of a collaboration between Euro- and Native American contributors, not all silences in a text are necessarily Native-created and benign. I would suggest that the silences in Wilson’s and Linderman’s texts might well be the result of a woman talking to a man.32 The task of the reader of today, then, is to understand the possibility for both silences. It is not to rush to condemn white editors such as Linderman and Wilson, whose texts remain interesting as historical attempts to document Hidatsa and Crow culture. Nor is it to rush to validate them, overlooking flaws that could perpetuate
stereotypes of Native American women. It is a skeptical yet sympathetic reader who will do justice to these stories, appreciating their place in that strange but rich genre of "autobiography" where two races and genders have collided as well as collaborated.

Notes

1. Arnold Krupat, For Those Who Come After: A Study of Native American Autobiography (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). Krupat notes that although the "rigorously trained workers sent into the field by Franz Boas after the turn of the century" were "conscious of their status as scientists," their work erred from too rigid translations (p. 6). For a comprehensive understanding of the history and theory of Native American autobiography, see Hertha Dawn Wong's Sending My Heart Back Across the Years: Tradition and Innovation in Native American Autobiography (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).


4. As Krupat, among others, has noted, the beginning and ending of the well-known autobiography Black Elk Speaks was written not by the Oglala Sioux but by his white editor, John G. Neihardt. See Krupat, For Those Who Come After, pp. 128-29.

5. H. David Brumble III, American Indian Autobiography (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). Brumble does briefly mention several women's autobiographies, including the three works discussed here. However, whereas his remarks are pertinent and insightful, the focus of this work is upon men's autobiographies.


8. Gilbert L. Wilson, Waheenee: An Indian Girl's Story (1927; rpt. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981). All succeeding quotations from this text will be noted by the abbreviation "W" and a page number.

9. Brumble, in his American Indian Autobiography, explains how Wilson compiled the autobiography from sources such as his own earlier anthropological study, Agriculture of the Hidatsa Culture: An Indian Interpretation (p. 13). Brumble notes that "Jeffrey Hanson, in his introduction to the welcome[d] reprint of Waheenee: An Indian Girl's Story Told by Herself to Gilbert L. Wilson, has not a word to say about the composition of the book, and so does nothing to correct the erroneous impression left by its subtitle" (p. 6). Brumble also criticizes the work of Bataille and Sands (see note 7) for taking Waheenee's subtitle literally and assuming that Waheenee had a significant role in the composition of the narrative (pp. 15-16).

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13. Wilson notes in his foreword how he came to study the Hidatsa culture, and how the autobiography was constructed: “During these [ten] years my faithful interpreter and helper has been Edward Goodbird, grandson of Small Ankle, a chief of the Hidatsas in the trying years following the terrible smallpox winter; and my principal informants have been Goodbird’s mother, Waheenee-wea, or Buffalo-Bird Woman, and her brother, Wolf Chief. The stories in this book were told me by Buffalo Bird-Woman. A few told in mere outline, have been completed from information given by Wolf Chief and others” (W4).

14. In his *Annotated Bibliography* David Brumble recommends *Waheenee* with enthusiasm, unconsidered about the fact that Wilson “fabricated” the autobiography, and also repeats material from his other publications. Brumble believes that the book “deserves to be reprinted,” failing to add that Wilson intended the book for young readers (p. 92). Rayna Green, in her bibliography *Native American Women* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), is even less critical, calling *Waheenee* an interesting “personal account by a[n] Hidatsa woman on the frontier” (p. 106). As Wilson himself admitted, the book was not a personal text but a composite.

15. Frank B. Linderman, *Pretty-shield: Medicine Woman of the Crows* (1932; rpt. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1972), p. 7. All succeeding references to this text will be noted by “PS” and a page number.


17. Frank B. Linderman, *American: The Life Story of a Great Indian, Plenty-Coups* (New York: World Book Company, 1930). This autobiography shares many similarities with *Pretty-shield*. Illustrated by the same artist, H. M. Stoops, its dedication is to Linderman’s grandson rather than granddaughter, and Plenty-Coups’s thumbprint adorns its first page in the same way that Pretty-shield’s print speaks for her book’s “authenticity.” However, its content is solely “men’s things,” with an emphasis on Plenty-Coups as a public figure. Linderman ends the book with Plenty-Coups outlining a future agenda for his people: “My whole thought is of my people. I want them to be healthy, to become again the race they have been. I want them to learn all they can from the white man, because he is here to stay, and they must live with him forever. They must go to his schools. They must listen carefully to what he tells them there, if they would have an equal chance with him in making a living” (p. 308). Wong provides insightful analyses of Plenty-Coups’s autobiography and *Pretty-shield* in her *Sending My Heart Back*.

18. Pretty-shield’s remark is similar to one made by Plenty-Coups in Linderman’s *American*, where he too declines to speak about the period of time when the Indians were adjusting to the disappearance of the buffalo and the coming of white culture: “But when the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened. There was little singing anywhere” (p. 311).

20. Linderman writes: “Pretty-shield stopped talking to look at the sun. ‘I must go to my place now, Sign-talker,' she said, wrapping her blanket around her. ‘My grandchildren will be hungry. I will come again in the morning.' I knew her ‘place,' a bare shack where she and nine grandchildren slept upon the floor. ‘Stop at the Trader’s store,' I said, giving her four silver dollars. ‘You pet [bet],' she laughed, in her pidgin English. How much I wished that I could speak Crow!’ (PS39). It is apparently Linderman’s anti-modern, naturalist disposition that influences the narrative as well. In chapter 12 he fails to make Goes-together understand the word “chickadee” and philosophizes about modern society: “To her, as to most moderns, red or white, a bird is a bird. To these unfortunates there are ‘little’ birds and ‘big’ birds, and here their ornithology ends” (PS152).


22. “Intimate” is a relative term, and certainly some readers may find Pretty-shield’s stories to be exactly that. However, as one sees in Papago Woman, the reader is presented with detailed accounts of menstruation, childbirth, and marital separation – topics that are indisputably more revealing than what Pretty-shield divulges.


27. Several years later Underhill mentioned briefly – in more biased, ethnocentric terms – her frustration with Chona, in a foreword to Nancy Oestreich Lurie’s autobiography of Mountain Wolf Woman (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1961). Underhill wrote, “I collected the disjointed statements of an ancient Papago woman, too old to organize and tell a connected story” (p. viii). She does not allow for a Papago narrative style to explain Chona’s storytelling.

28. Like Wilson’s and Linderman’s texts, this story is full of fascinating details: “If we wanted to stay in our houses, the girls had to run for water far, far up the hills and across the flat land to a place called Where the Water Whirls Around. . . . A big water hole was there full of red mud. Oh yes, our water was always red. It made the corn gruel red. I liked that earth taste in my food. Yes, I liked it” (PW36). The division of labor according to gender was distinct, and Underhill has Chona observe this early on: “You see, women had to run in those days. That was what saved their lives. Many hours they had to run, and when they came back every family had two little jars of water to last for the day” (PW36).

29. Underhill claims in part 3 that “Chona had never shown anger at this occurrence [losing her crystals]. She seemed to feel that it had happened in accordance with the laws of nature” (p. 92). Chona does express some regret, however, in the autobiography: “So I always sit back if I cannot cure. But I could have cured if I had not given away my crystals. Yes, I could have done much” (p. 84).

30. Chona’s feelings about dreaming, like her interest in other activities reserved for men, appear to be mixed. She is aware that she is denied access to them because she is a woman, and yet she claims to do them anyway. She tells Underhill numerous accounts of dreams throughout the book. However, in part 3, when Underhill asks why women aren’t allowed to participate in ceremonies, she is answered by Chona and her female friends with perhaps one of the most quoted passages in the book: “You see, we have power. Men have to dream to get power from the spirits and they think of everything they can – songs and speeches and marching around, hoping that
the spirits will notice them and give them some power. But we have power.' When I [Underhill] looked a little surprised, the answer was: 'Children'” (p. 92).


32. The silence imposed upon women by men has been exhaustively studied in feminist criticism. For a random sampling, see: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics (New York: Routledge, 1987); Susan Gubar, “‘The Blank Page’ and the Issues of Female Creativity,” in The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory, Elaine Showalter, ed. (New York: Pantheon, 1985); and Nelly Furman, “The Politics of Language: Beyond the Gender Principle?” in Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism, Gayle Green and Coppélia Kahn, eds. (London: Methuen, 1985). In strong contrast to the early-twentieth-century autobiographies discussed in this paper is Cruikshank’s Life Lived Like a Story, where the collaboration between editor and informant is exhaustingly defined and women’s stories are given full play. There, Cruikshank collaborates with three Yukon women to comprehensively document an oral culture.