Negotiating Gender in Native North America


Fay A. Yarbrough

At first glimpse, the temporal and geographical coverage of the books under review is quite disparate: Rebecca Kugel and Lucy Murphy have assembled essays that cover eastern North America from contact to 1900; Gunlög Fur’s monograph examines the Delaware (or Lenape) from the mid-seventeenth through the eighteenth century; Tiya Miles’s story of the Diamond Hill plantation in Cherokee country centers on the first half of the nineteenth century, though her discussion of how the house was preserved and memorialized brings her account to the present day; and Loretta Fowler’s anthropological study of the Arapaho begins in the mid-nineteenth century and ends almost ninety years later. What links these works together, however, is one central question: how did ideas about gender shape interactions between different cultures? The cultures in question are namely American Indian and European, later Euro-American, although these studies demonstrate the great variation possible within these categories. For example, native groups engaged in agricultural production to differing degrees; some chose to adopt African slavery while others rejected or modified it; they may have determined lineage matrilineally or patrilineally; and they responded to efforts to convert them to Christianity with everything from devotion to ridicule. Native people, moreover, noticed
that Euro-American attitudes toward native peoples varied depending on the entities involved: religious missionaries, state officials, federal authorities, or members of the military.

Kugel and Murphy’s anthology provides a useful starting point for discussing the other works under review as they have assembled a primer for scholars interested in gender among native peoples. The collection includes some of the most influential essays written about women in native societies, as well as a new introduction by the author whenever possible. These introductions are often as interesting as the original essays. For instance, Rayna Green describes her clear political agenda to engage the Red Power and New Feminist movements by including previously unheard native women’s voices when she wrote “The Pocahontas Perplex.” Green, furthermore, is disappointed that her theory remains relevant: non-Indians continue to use such images as “the princess” or “the squaw” to project their own meanings of gender and native identity onto the bodies of native women and then weave those representations into their own family histories, as well as such larger national narratives as the importance of Pocahontas to the survival of Jamestown, or Sacajawea’s assistance in the Lewis and Clark expedition. Another example is Theda Perdue’s introduction to “Cherokee Women and the Trail of Tears,” in which she illuminates the evolution of her thinking with regard to the declension model, which argued that Cherokee women’s status declined because of contact with Euro-Americans. In part, Perdue’s later examination of non-elite women led her “to the conclusion that women’s power and status were remarkably consistent and stable” (277). Nancy Shoemaker’s introduction reconsiders the kinds of primary sources she would use today to write “The Rise of Fall of Iroquois Women,” such as legal records produced by county and state officials in communities adjacent to native populations. Each introduction offers insight into the workings of the scholarly mind, including how an author approached a particular topic with regard to theory and historiography, and how an author’s thinking may have changed over time with the benefit of new evidence.

To give readers more insight into the process of producing scholarly writing, the editors appended many of the essays with primary source evidence used by the authors, including probate records, letters, baptismal records, personal accounts, and estate inventories. Indeed, the authors of the monographs reviewed here employ precisely these kinds of records along with interviews, newspaper accounts, state park literature, etc. Thus Carl J. Ekberg’s article does not merely state that native woman Marie Rouensa amassed a considerable estate including slaves, both of native and African descent, the reader also sees the inventory taken on August 17, 1725, which included Rouensa’s human property as “One old negro named Pierrot and
one negress named Brinbelle, married, 2400 livres”; “Two more negroes, one named Carod and one named Gollon, married 3500 livres”; “One Indian boy slave named Chinchchinan, 600 livres” (221). Ekberg suggests that Rouensa’s ownership of slave property demonstrated not only how acceptable slave ownership was in colonial Illinois society, but also, implicitly, how thoroughly Rouensa imbibed French culture and values; Rouensa not only accumulated wealth in the manner of the French colonists, she also disinherited her own son “for choosing to ‘remain among the savage nations.’” (214–5). Likewise, the baptismal records that accompany Susan Sleeper-Smith’s essay, “Women, Kin, and Catholicism: New Perspectives on the Fur Trade,” include information about births while also revealing larger networks of kin through the assignment of godparents. Sleeper-Smith posits that the Catholic religion did not diminish native women’s status in the Great Lakes region, but that native women used such Catholic religious practices as godparentage, which created networks of fictive kin or strengthened distant kinship ties by asking individuals to serve as godparents, thereby extending native kinship systems.

Kugel and Murphy divide the collection into two sections—one on theory and another on method. The essays in the theory section summarize the mythology surrounding native women as “princesses” or “squaws,” and then outline the reality of native women’s lives. For example, they often served as cultural mediators between indigenous groups and Europeans, and relationships between native men and women often operated in terms of complementarity rather than inequality. In other words, women in many native groups had “their own rights, duties, and responsibilities, which were complementary to and in no way secondary to those of men” (95). Kathryn W. Shanley, moreover, raises the important point that the concept of race had ideological power in native women’s lives. While Shanley acknowledges that race is socially constructed, she also asserts that race is “a term connoting an aspect of oppression” with real consequences for peoples’ daily lives that continues to shape boundaries between racialized groups (114). The methods section includes essays on different approaches to the study of indigenous women, such as biography or oral history. Other essays focus on native women as converts to European religions, their economic exchanges with Europeans, and their relationships with native men as the process of colonization continued.

The collection serves as an example of the “genealogy of scholarship” (xi). Authors reference other essays in the collection that have influenced their work, and one can trace how ideas that first circulated in these ground-breaking contributions made an impact on later publications, including the other books under review here. Thus Loretta Fowler’s 2010 study of Arapaho culture addresses change and persistence in native women’s gender roles
due to interactions with American traders, soldiers, miners, settlers, missionaries, and government officials, issues also discussed by Theda Perdue and Nancy Shoemaker. Tiya Miles builds on Theda Perdue’s work on gender in Cherokee society while answering Kathryn W. Shanley’s call to include race in the analysis when studying the lives of native women. Miles’s discussion of people of mixed African and Cherokee ancestry also resonates with Rebecca Kugel’s investigation of the life of Susie Bonga Wright, a woman of African and Ojibwe ancestry. And Gunlög Fur’s exploration of gender among Delaware Indians and how male Delaware leaders employed a specific diplomatic identity as women draws in part on the work of Eleanor Leacock and Nancy Shoemaker, both of whom discuss the important roles that native women played in diplomacy.

Fur extends this analysis in *A Nation of Women*, which centers on a statement made by a Delaware man in 1758 to colonial authorities: “We are but a women nation” (1). She grapples with the question of what Delaware Indians meant when they referred to themselves in this way in diplomatic negotiations, as they did for over a century, and how European colonists and native peoples employed this gendered language. For instance, the Iroquois described the Delawares in feminized language to “emphasize their weakness and dependency,” and then asserted Iroquois authority to speak to the colonists on behalf of the Delawares (164). Europeans and native groups also taunted each other by calling opposing groups women (164–8). Fur uses the Delaware reputation for being a “women nation” as a way to examine gender roles in Delaware society more broadly and how they changed and were changed by colonial contact with Europeans. She argues that because Delaware understandings of gender were not hierarchical, “to act the role of a woman involved responsibilities and prerogatives that lent honor to an individual in equal measure to that of the role of a man” (5). Moreover, because Delaware women had the authority to speak in such venues as council meetings about matters regarding land, which was often at the center of diplomatic negotiations between natives and European colonists, to act “as a woman” in diplomatic situations was to act as a peacemaker (22–3, 171). Thus for the Delaware, acting as woman was a respectable practice rather than an insult. Increased contact with Europeans, however, led to a decline in women’s participation in diplomatic interactions with European colonists, so much so that by the early nineteenth century “Delaware male informants stated unequivocally that there were no female chiefs and that women had nothing to do with councils” (208).

Fur offers several interpretations of how this gendered understanding of Delaware identity may have been construed by members of other native groups and European colonists. Humiliation, shame, and insult are at the center of Fur’s first interpretation. For a man to be made into a woman
implied military defeat, subjugation, and domination. Many of the English and the Iroquois agreed with this interpretation. Fur’s second interpretation suggests that some Delawares may have only grudgingly accepted this designation in diplomatic situations. Delaware leader Teedyuscung seemed willing to take on any role, including a subservient one, in order to preserve Delaware territory. Nevertheless, he also railed against “being ‘styled as a Woman,’ and felt it as a humiliation” (179–180). Finally, some Delawares may have used the idea of a nation of women to invoke older, precontact, and colonial practices of gender complementarity in which men and women had responsibility for specific actions in diplomatic relations, with women acting as conduits for transforming strangers or outsiders into friends and kin through the practice of adoption. Thus the Delaware mobilization of this identity as women recalled an honorable role as peacemaker that complemented the more aggressive, masculine Iroquois role in diplomatic relations with Europeans.

This honorable role as women stemmed, in part, from the colonial era gender relations that existed in Delaware society. Fur describes Delaware society as relatively egalitarian in terms of gender and class, with “little colonial evidence of any sort of permanent or inheritable social distinctions among the Lenapes and we find no class of people who were not directly involved in subsistence work or who could command the labor of others” (25). Women, in general, were responsible for performing agricultural work, as well as maintaining the home and caring for children. Men provided meat and were responsible for any martial activities. Further, meat for the household may then have come under the power of the woman to distribute (36–7). Fur suggests that control over the production and distribution of food “translated into influence over tribal organization” as food was a part of negotiations and religious rituals (20). Matrilineal descent determined children’s kinship status and village sachems, or chiefs, may have been chosen by the women of his lineage. Women also may have functioned as sachems, and Fur finds evidence of women at diplomatic meetings with European colonists, acting as representatives of other women in the Lenape community, and not merely as the companions of male sachems. For instance, in 1721, Swedish pastor Andreas Hesselius observed the arrival of a “Queen” and her entourage at a meeting between Lenape Indians, Seneca Indians, and Pennsylvania Governor William Keith (38).

Delaware women frequently interacted with the Moravian missionaries as well. While missionaries worried about the allegedly sexually promiscuous behavior of the Delaware Indians and the supposedly unnatural authority Delaware women exercised in their matrilineal families, some Delaware women were drawn to the missions by concern for their children. Christian towns often banned alcohol and sometimes missionaries provided food for
supplicants, both of which native women often found attractive for their children. The Moravians maintained “unusually egalitarian community practices” and insisted “on a substantial role for women” in community life, which also likely drew native women as converts (139, 156). Thus a religious structure and cultural system largely seen as patriarchal by modern observers could, in some ways, shore up native women’s authority within their families and villages. The Moravians’ recognition of female authority appealed to Delaware women, but ironically what disturbed missionaries about native women was the belief that they already had too much authority in their households. The missionaries at James Vann’s Diamond Hill plantation were also Moravians, indicating that, like the Delaware, Peggy Scott Vann and other Cherokee women may have been drawn to the Moravians for similar reasons. Fur cites Theda Perdue’s work and draws connections between Delaware and Cherokee conceptions of gender and social structures: matrilineal descent configured both societies, and women gained “ritual, political, and economic influence” because of their production of foodstuffs (204). Fur suggests that if Christian missionaries had been more adept at engaging native women and recognizing their responsibilities in spiritual matters within native cultures, they would have been far more successful in converting native groups to Christianity.

Like Fur, Tiya Miles examines how Moravian missionaries attempted to reshape native gender roles. Her book on the Diamond Hill plantation painstakingly recreates the life of its owner, James Vann, by plumbing the sources to present as accurate a portrait of him as possible. Vann was a man of many contradictions. Miles finds that while many accounts described Vann as nothing more than a profligate drinker prone to violence, even against the women in his household, Vann was also a zealous defender of the rights of fellow Cherokees. While Vann caroused in the slave quarters, drinking and presumably engaging in sexual relations with slave women, this intimacy did not translate into better treatment for his enslaved human property. He provided land to house the Moravian mission and school, but he did not profess to be a Christian (29). The son of a Cherokee woman and a Scottish trader, Vann was fluent in both Cherokee and English. While many authors have described James Vann “as nearly white in identity, cultural orientation, and actions,” Miles points out that Vann always identified himself and was identified by contemporaries as an “Indian” (168). Thus James Vann was not merely a belligerent drunkard whom neighbors predicted quite accurately would come to a violent end; he also militantly opposed Cherokee land cessions to the federal government and rose to political prominence in the Cherokee Nation as a member of the Cherokee Council.

Diamond Hill plantation functioned as a microcosm of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Cherokee Nation, a place where
traditional Cherokee practices and Euro-American practices coexisted, at times uneasily. With more than one hundred slaves, Vann became one of the largest slaveholders in the Cherokee Nation, representative of the Cherokee Nation’s larger acceptance of the practice of African slavery. He married several times and at least once practiced polygamy, traditional behavior that Americans frowned upon. He invited Moravians to establish a mission and school on his property, which seemed to demonstrate some acceptance of Christianity. Thus Diamond Hill was a location where people of different statuses, races, and religious affiliations met. Moreover, the story of Diamond Hill reveals the intimate effects of federal and state Indian policy on native lives. For instance, with little interference from the federal government, the Georgia state legislature enacted laws extinguishing the Cherokee government, “dissolving the Cherokee courts, [and] deeming Indians incompetent witnesses to testify against whites in the Georgia courts” before dispossessing the Cherokees of valuable land (176). After the passage of the Indian Removal Bill, Georgia enacted a lottery to redistribute Cherokee land to white settlers. Two local white men engaged in a gun battle over possession of Vann’s grand brick home while James Vann’s son Joseph and his family were forced to occupy one room of the house “at sufferance.” Georgia Guardsmen then set fire to the home and ordered Joseph Vann to extinguish the fire to save the home for someone else to take possession (179).

Miles takes particular care to illuminate the lives of the women of Diamond Hill as well. The stories of James Vann’s wife, Peggy Scott Vann, and the enslaved women Caty, Pleasant, Patience, and Grace permit Miles to discuss race and gender in the Cherokee Nation and the concrete effects of these ideologies on people’s lives. For instance, Miles describes Peggy Scott Vann’s personal servant Caty as Afro-Cherokee “in ancestry as well as cultural orientation,” born to black parents in the Cherokee Nation but fluent in Cherokee language and culture (91). Such individuals as Caty blurred the racial lines between people of African descent and Indians. In a departure from traditional Cherokee gender practices, Peggy Scott left her family upon marrying James Vann and joined his household. Traditionally, Cherokee men joined their wives’ households. Within the Vann household, Vann’s ownership of slaves meant that Peggy Scott did not perform the agricultural labor that had long defined Cherokee women’s identity and been the foundation for economic independence (109). Part of the federal government’s “civilization” plan for native peoples included replacing the agricultural labor traditionally performed by native women with labor performed by native men or enslaved blacks. Thus native men functioned as heads of households while native women lost economic and political power. Miles implicitly connects this new power relationship within native
households to an increase in domestic violence, which in her view includes violence against wives and slaves. James Vann was apparently a practitioner of both forms of domestic abuse and extended it to include terrorizing his mother, Wali Vann (111). Miles, moreover, links this new power dynamic in native households, the subjugation of Cherokee women to Cherokee men, to the subjugation of black slaves to their Cherokee owners. Miles then posits that these power hierarchies between Cherokee women and men and black slaves and Cherokee masters reflect the subjugation of Cherokee authorities to white officials in the federal government.

The heart of Miles’s book, in her words, is its depiction of life in the slave quarters (18). The slave experience could vary considerably on Vann’s plantations: some slaves lived close to the big house and had fairly regular contact with their Cherokee masters while other slaves lived in relative isolation, rarely seeing members of the Vann family or neighboring Cherokees or whites. Some of the Vann slaves socialized with James Vann himself or other Cherokees. The slaves also originated from different locations: Caty was born on Cherokee land, but Patience was born on the African continent; Vann purchased Grace from her bankrupt Virginian owner, and the Moravian missionaries brought Pleasant to Diamond Hill. The presence of African born slaves meant that some of the human property at Diamond Hill retained African cultural practices and languages, practices that sometimes had parallels in Cherokee cultural traditions. While early slaveholding practices regarding people of African descent were more flexible among Cherokee elites at the start of the nineteenth century, according to Miles, this rapidly changed, leaving “little difference between the ways that Cherokee elites and white elites were prepared to commodify their human property” (80–1).

Fur and Miles examine women as independent actors in Delaware society and on Diamond Hill plantation, respectively, while Loretta Fowler focuses on women as spouses in her cohort analysis based study of gender in Arapaho society. The period of influence for the five cohorts in Wives and Husbands spans the mid-nineteenth-century to 1936; that is, the first cohort’s birth years included 1815–1829, and they reached maturity at mid-century. Fowler “compared the cohorts in terms of how important events and new circumstances influenced lives and how Arapahos formulated and implemented strategies to cope with these conditions” (7). Age, then, becomes an important factor in Fowler’s analysis of how Arapahos responded to contact with Americans. Fowler does not, however, suggest that the members of each cohort were uniform in their behavior: Fowler makes intra-cohort comparisons of individuals of varying status, education, and gender as well. Her goal is to see how ideas about gender changed and were changed by the course of events in Arapaho history.
Fowler divides her study into three chronological sections: Arapaho life pre-reservation but post-contact with Americans, on the reservation in western Oklahoma after 1870, and after the Bureau of Indian Affairs bolstered assimilationist policies, particularly regarding the sale of land allotments in 1902. The first section outlines some basic structures of Arapaho society. For instance, women owned property, including the tepee, and they were responsible for moving household goods. They also prepared and distributed the family’s food. Women’s labor was just as important as their husband’s labor, which included protecting the tepee and providing meat. In fact, origin stories included gender complementarity, stressing that both males and females were sources of power and that the production of life required both (28). Children learned their responsibilities by watching adults and through play. Girls had toy meat racks used to dry meat, and boys practiced marksmanship with toy bows and arrows. Girls also had dolls that represented adult kin and could imitate their responsibilities to kin with these dolls.

Arapaho women also played an important role in diplomacy, largely as the partners of men, which differs from Fur’s depiction of Delaware diplomacy. A woman expressed her opinions and buttressed the influence of her husband by accumulating “extra food and household goods that her husband could give away to others or she could give away on his behalf to gain a reputation for generosity and leadership ability” (58–9). Fowler mentions the use of Margaret Fitzpatrick Adams, the daughter of a trader and an Arapaho woman, as an interpreter at treaty negotiations with American officials. She “sat next to the chiefs, dressed in a silk dress and elegantly decorated hat” (27). Fowler notes Adams’s appearance with little fanfare, but Fur would have added more analysis about what the use of a female interpreter may have meant about gender or women’s place in political life in native society. More generally, Fowler suggests that the Arapahos in this period adapted a strategy of conciliation in their dealings with Americans. As hunting territory receded and more Americans moved west, leading Arapahos sought to make allies of the Americans, a process in which women played a central part.

After the federal government pushed Arapahos onto their reservation in 1870, Arapahos adjusted their strategy for dealing with Americans. Fowler describes this “civilization strategy” as including some concessions to federal officials, such as being willing to send their children to day schools on the reservation and boarding schools away from the reservation, but also protecting some traditional Arapaho practices such as polygamy and communal work. This time period also revealed tensions between cohorts. Older, more established (in terms of reputation and prosperity) members of a cohort tended to support this “civilization strategy” while members
of younger cohorts also supported the Ghost Dance religious revival and its call for a return to traditional practices and beliefs, which appealed to people who had lost faith in the lodge system, “a series of age-graded societies…realized in partnerships between women and men” responsible for specific ritual and governmental duties (5). Fowler suggests that some of this tension was economic: reservation life kept younger cohorts from achieving the prosperity of older cohorts (195–6).

In 1902, Congress began to enact legislation permitting the sale of allotments: first by the heirs of deceased allotment owners, then by “competent” Indians, and finally by creating a process for “noncompetent” Indians to obtain permission to sell allotments. Through such measures, Arapahos lost more than 60% of their land base by 1928 (199). This shrinking land base meant that Arapahos could not sustain enough livestock to survive. The federal government deposited the proceeds from land sales and leases and distributed payments to Individual Indian Money accounts through agency superintendents. In other words, “individual ownership of land, reliance on a money economy, and the intensification of federal surveillance and control” characterized the final period in Fowler’s study (199). Ironically, federal policy could simultaneously privilege and disadvantage Arapaho women: agency officials were more likely to assign non-competent status to women regardless of their level of education, an observation with gendered implications that Fowler could explore more explicitly, but a woman’s lease payments from her Individual Indian Money account could be vital for a family’s survival. Single women might benefit from the security lease payments might provide, but they could not access the lease payments of their children; the children’s father collected those payments (245–51). Race could also be a factor in the behavior of federal officials: those Arapahos of mixed European and native ancestry were often subject to less control and supervision by federal officials. The response of younger cohorts to these dramatic changes was to exchange such traditional political models as the chieftanship or lodge system for elective government. Younger cohorts also turned more readily to peyotism, a practice present among the Arapahos from the 1880s that focused on ritual and individual experience.

Together the essays in Rebecca Kugel and Lucy Eldersveld Murphy’s collection and the monographs by Gunlög Fur, Tiya Miles, and Loretta Fowler illuminate the varied and nuanced processes of negotiation as Euro-Americans attempted to impose changes in native conceptions of gender and native peoples accepted, resisted, or refused those changes. Euro-Americans attempted to supplant native gender systems based on complementarity with gender hierarchy, rather than recognize native women’s relationships to land and agricultural production, their valuable contributions of food to ceremonial life, or their counsel in diplomatic negotiations. European colo-
nists pushed Delaware women out of council meetings. Euro-Americans introduced African slaves to native groups, like the Cherokee, as replacements for women as agriculturalists. Federal officials expected Arapaho women to be dependent on male family members. But native men and women adapted and resisted. Delaware men adopted the diplomatic role of women in negotiations with colonists and other native groups. Peggy Scott Vann embraced Christianity, reverted to her maiden name, and continued to work the plantation with her own slaves. Arapaho women frustrated federal authorities by continuing to make their own decisions regarding their land allotments and used the propensity of federal superintendents to declare native women non-competent, therefore incapable of selling or leasing their allotments, to hold on to land. The works here reveal that, while contact with Europeans and Americans changed some aspects of native gender ideology, indigenous peoples held fast to some ideas while reshaping others, a conclusion that should come as no surprise.