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Refusing “to lie low in the dust”:
Native Women’s Literacies in Southern New England 1768-1800

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English 788/Honors
Professor Siobhan Senior
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What makes no sense at all is that too many people, including school students, are still unaware of our indigenous historiography and are holding many myths and misconceptions. Too many teachers have told me they cannot find literature about us. We have been defined in so many ways, good, bad and ugly, and so much more bad and ugly than good, that even the most intelligent human being would become perplexed...

Joan Tavares Avant (Mashpee Wampanoag), *People of the First Light*

The connection between knowledge and power, the awareness of the exploitation of knowledge by the interests of power to create a distorted historical record, is central to resistance narratives.

Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature*

Introduction:

Wampanoag Mashpee elder Joan Tavares Avant has dedicated her time as a scholar to researching the representations of her tribe throughout American history and beyond—and, more importantly, her focus has been on sharing these findings with a larger audience. This is sometimes difficult when considering some of the questions I received while discussing my research into colonial-era literacy in New England: Are there really still Indians here? Or, Indians *wrote* during the colonial period? The frustrating misconceptions surrounding Native people in New England are doubled when considering the misconceptions surrounding Native women—not only were indigenous¹ women oppressed due to their ethnicity, but they were also oppressed by their gender. While some Native men such as William Apess (Pequot) and Samson Occom (Mohegan) were at least able to carve a hard-earned space for themselves through their exceptional writing skills and political and social activisms, Native women were not afforded the same educational opportunities. Indeed, once European settlers arrived in New England with their Christian and patriarchal views, the righteousness of Christianity, and a sense of entitlement, Native women's previously empowered roles were under attack.

¹ I use “Native” women and “indigenous” women interchangeably throughout this study, defaulting to tribally specific designations whenever possible.

We must remember that indigenous literature is resistance literature. Native writing, especially that from colonial New England in the later eighteenth century, represents voices that were continuously repressed. Traditionally, knowledge and power are manipulated and distributed in a way that leaves certain groups behind—and, as this research will show, there were many attempts to leave Native women behind educationally, psychologically, and socioeconomically. In particular, this new system of English communication, thrust upon Native tribes, automatically marked the white European settlers as superior, concurrently marking any other culture as lesser or inferior. Tribes across New England were then subjected to an incomprehensive education that ultimately perpetuated the gap between native and non-native. Native women especially found themselves battling through two layers of oppression when they wanted their voices heard, and yet they navigated the many obstacles valiantly—producing letters and depositions across Southern New England, right alongside their male peers.

Unfortunately, though the earliest Native male writers (namely Apess and Oocom) have reached near-canonical status in the genre of early American literature, examples of Native women's writing are hard to come by. Not because women were not writing at the time—they were. Rather, Native women were not directly given the means to express themselves in the political or social arenas. Women received education in literacy at the most basic level and needed writing only for the most elementary communicative purposes. This was a direct attempt to continue the oppressive practice of the Anglo-American inspired patriarchy.

Even still, Native women persevered in the face of little to no political or social influence afforded them. They wrote. Their writings were intelligent, fluent, and worthwhile. It is now our job as researchers and critical thinkers to rediscover these works and give them the credit and voice they are due. To continue this effort, I will be focusing on the writings of Native women

writers from southern New England in the late eighteenth century. These women were writing at the same time and in the same general region as Samson Occom and William Apess, and yet their writings are largely inaccessible in comparison. Even so, their examples illustrate perspectives and observations that are just as valid as their male peers, and more must be done in order to understand and properly value these Native women writers. As learners, it is our responsibility to prove to larger audiences that the double dose of oppression given to Native women did not meet its mark—women continued to adjust to the new systems imposed upon their tribes by the new westernized system. Native women even produced writing that was completely pertinent to the issues of their time, despite the best efforts of school systems and white educators and attempting to restrict women to domestic pursuits.

Luckily, this strength that early Native women exhibited carried to future generations. Joan Tavares Avant describes her grandmother, Mabel Avant, as one who “held strong views and would stand up and fight for what she believed in at a time when women were not generally accepted in political circles” (57). About a century more recent than the examples I researched, it is immensely satisfying to realize how the legacy of resistance continues even as the arena of oppression changes with time. Avant’s grandmother, Avant herself, and assuredly many others across New England were able to balance their fight for empowerment in a way not necessarily dictated by Anglo-American standards. Avant remembers that “after [raising] her family [her grandmother] continued to stand up for what she believed. She would teach her own people about the Wampanoag history by any means she could” (57). Avant’s grandmother did not fall into motherhood and domesticity as a final resting place in the way colonized expectations predicted. Instead, she continued to work toward bringing knowledge to her people and all interested in learning.

The fact, though, that the works of Avant's forebears are still so inaccessible speaks to the continued presence of oppression when it comes to the study of literatures and cultures. As individuals and as a collective nation, we have made great strides toward recognizing the importance and validity of cultures other than the Anglo-American traditions, but we have yet to shed our continued negligence in order to ensure that all writings and the cultures they represent are getting equitable attention. Indigenous New England women, in particular, have earned their place next to recognized Indian scholars such as Apess and Occom, and yet these women are largely absent from our American studies syllabi.

In *Resistance Literature*, Barbara Harlow underscores the responsibility of the audience when it comes to understanding the voices of the oppressed: "The critic, the viewer, like the artists, is necessarily, inescapably involved in the historical process, and the involvement exhibited by the dynamics of the works themselves. The narrative works of resistance literature directly confront the critic and the artists with the responsibilities of that involvement" (78). It is up to us, the audience, to confront the societal norms—be they patriarchy, class, ethnicity—and to carve out the oppressive factors influencing the writers and the literature so that we may empower the voices attempting to communicate. To take it one step further: as current students, educators, administrators, citizens of a country built upon the oppression of tribes across the nation, it is essential for us to pay attention to the oppressors and the oppressed. Harlow's message, then, is that of understanding. Modern-day audiences must work toward an active understanding of the power struggles occurring simultaneous to the writings of oppressed individuals.

Donna Loring, who served as representative for the Penobscot Indian Nation in the Maine legislature from 2000-2002, illustrated the severity of oppression that still exists today:

We need to face the fact that this country was built on the bodies of Indian people—indeed, there was a holocaust on these shores. Once we know our country's history, we can work to improve policy and practice. Then and only then will we be capable of empathy with other countries and cultures. Then and only then will we be prepared to look outside our protected shell and actually help other countries. Then and only then can we start building a new legacy of respect within the global community. The struggle to educate and be educated continues. (254)

Loring's words never fail to remind me why I feel Native women's writing ought to be preserved and shared. We must begin to acknowledge the oppression that so fiercely affected colonial New England's Native women and their writings *and* the oppression that is currently happening due to how little attention primary sources from colonial New England Native women are receiving. In this study, I will examine the world of early Native women such as Hannah Babcock and Sarah Keetoh (both Wampanoag), and Mary Secutor and Sarah Simon (both Narragansett). In spite of having significantly fewer educational opportunities than their white peers and their male peers, these women were able to expose the intense oppression they faced on a regular basis. Although achieved in a very different, less direct manner than the Native men's examples, Native women's influence in Southern New England is evidenced by the letters and depositions they created.

A Note Concerning the Scarcity of Primary Sources Written by Native Women:

It is not as if examples of Native women's writing are not out there—it is only that scholars and historians have yet to rediscover works that have long been overlooked or considered unimportant. Historically, Native women's writings have been deemed inconsequential and the documents, treated with little to no respect, did not always survive. Those that do survive are not necessarily in peak condition. Considering how little care women's literacy has been given, it is really not too far a stretch to imagine how the preservation of any

Native women's writing might have been neglected, leading to less intact sources available today.

Aside from lack of preservation, Native women's writing was hardly encouraged—as in it was not encouraged beyond the most basic, communicative level. As historian Hilary Wyss explains, “Once basic literacy (that is, the ability to read the Bible) was acquired, girls tended to go on to sewing while boys went on to master the additional literacy skills of writing and arithmetic” (“Beyond the Printed Word” 119). Writing was not an encouraged route for women to take and as soon as the most basic understanding was achieved, Native girls were pushed into activities that would prepare them for a life of domesticity. By having an educational path so predetermined and concrete, many Native women found themselves stuck in a world of silence: being defined only by this new system of education and expectations that left them virtually voiceless under the new colonial regime of the written word.

It is also important to note that, pre-colonization, there was a significantly smaller divide between the genders in most Indian cultures². As white, male settlers arrived at and colonized present-day New England, they tended to seek male tribal representatives to negotiate with and make decisions with that affected the tribe as a whole, as patriarchal practice dictates³. This gradual turnover from gender as having little to do with leadership abilities to gender being the sole characteristic defining one's ability to lead or influence decision making left many Native

² Carol Devons, whose work centers on the Ojibwe tribe in and around Minnesota/the Great Lakes region, discusses how the roles of women changed post-colonization in her book *Countering Colonization*. Though a different region, her analysis proves pertinent: “the newly created “tradition” of gender hostility and symbolic polarity was a symptom of changes that had taken place in the social relationships between women and men... Female interests and expectations continued to be unique from those of males. The difference was that these distinctions, the separate ways and values, no longer had a comparable significance that was accepted throughout the community” (117). With colonization came the foreign, gendered, and inequitable expectations of Europeans

³ In *Countering Colonization*: “The introduction of Western religions, economies, and social patterns into the third world has often provided men with knowledge and skills that create both a real and symbolic male power over and above that found in the indigenous culture...Native women held on to traditional ritual practices, patterns of childrearing, and, to the extent possible, economic responsibilities, thereby increasing the emphasis on female values and separateness” (122). Colonialism widened the previously small gap between Native men's and women's roles.

women in silence, with some attempting to catch up in the new colonial field that listed literacy skills as requirement. But many women did catch up. In spite of the many colonial and patriarchal factors working to place Native women in predetermined paths, women harnessed the power of the written word to express and defend themselves in colonial New England.

Canonizing Early Native Writers: Occom and Apess

In order to best understand the work of Native women writers, we must also look at the types of contributions from their Native male contemporaries. William Apess and Samson Occom, who are considered the two earliest major regional indigenous authors of the eighteenth century, enjoy near-canonical status—they appear at least once or twice in anthologies covering colonial New England. Or, they have books devoted to their resurgence thanks to a prominent literary scholar, such as Barry O’Connell’s book on Apess’s writings *On Our Own Ground* or Joanna Brooks’s book *The Collected Writings of Samson Occom, Mohegan: Literature and Leadership in Eighteenth-Century America*.

Lisa Brooks (Abenaki), describes the integral role that Occom and Apess played in harnessing the colonially introduced power of writing to work toward tribal preservation and self-determination. These writers, she shows, sought to instigate change for their people and traditions.

Even as Native students and scribes were obliged to use the language of subservience in addressing colonial officials, their writings often subverted it, exposing the pretentiousness of the convention. . . both [Occom and Apess] used their writing ability to compose petitions on their community’s behalf to the political bodies that had the power to transform the conditions that oppressed them. (226)

Admirably, these writers harnessed a completely new communication system in order to protect their lands and subsequently connected cultural traditions. What Wyss calls “writing Indians”

were able to work toward protecting their tribe's assets while simultaneously upholding a sense of self and individuality in the face of serious cultural and political oppression.

Occom was one of the first Native people to publish in English. He gained the tools to do so under the study of Eleazar Wheelock, a missionary and founder of Dartmouth College. Wheelock intended to model other Native educational practices after Occom's success as a scholar, minister, and published writer.

Wheelock's fascination with Occom's success did not last too long, however. After extended fundraising trips in England to raise money for Native education, Occom realized that Wheelock was using the majority of the funds raised to support white education⁴. It was not long after this that Wheelock's and Occom's working relationship ceased. Occom published his book of Hymns and the Execution sermon for Moses Paul, in which he especially began to use his voice and education in order to directly defend his tribe and other tribes' voices and rights. Wyss discusses a post-revolutionary petition that Occom write for the Brotherton and New Stockbridge Indians in order to illustrate the disillusionment that Occom adopted after realizing the hypocrisy of Wheelock and many of his peers:

Occom also uses the language of tyranny, slavery, and freedom. He writes to "the most August Assembly, the Congress of the Thirteen United States": "We rejoice with you and Congratulate you that after a long struggle, under the Tyrannic Hand of your invious Elder Brother, you have broke the Slavish Chaine and the galling yoke, and by your firmness & steadiness, [illegible] and Great Courage; you have got your Freedom Liberty and Independence" (1785 CHS). Though this passage celebrates the newfound independence of the American colonies, its language also suggests a parallel to the inferior position of Natives" ("Writing Indians" 142).

⁴ Wyss discusses a letter from Occom to his friend John Bailey: [Occom] bitter complains about his former mentor Wheelock's misuse of the funds Occom spent two years collecting in England... "In Short, he has done little or no good to the Indians with all that Money we collected in England, Since we got home... there has not been one Indian in that Insitution this Some Time... All that money has done, is, it has made Doctor's Family very grand in the World" ("Writing Indians" 143). Occom is aware of Wheelock's unfair allotment and chooses to longer stand beside Wheelock because of it.

Wyss selected a portion of his writing that clearly illustrates his political and social savvy while using the written word. He draws a clear connection between the freedom that America fought for during the Revolutionary War just prior to his petition and the freedom and equality that Occom hopes to help achieve for his tribe and others across the Northeast and beyond. Occom wrote, “I am Now fully Convinc’d, that the Indians must have Teachers of their own Colour or Nation,—They have very great and reveted Prejudice against the White People, and they have too much good reason for it—they have been imposed upon, too much” (qtd. in Wyss “Writing Indians” 145). Even though Occom has been educated separately enough to use words such as “they” when referring to other Native people of his tribe and others, he still feels the injustice enough to identify the racial tension between Anglo-Americans and Native people. Occom not only identifies the unequal treatment Native people receive, but he justifies it. He uses his written mastery in order to directly blame the “White People” who “impose” upon the indigenous people. Because Occom was educated according to Anglicized standards, he is acutely aware of the injustice in treatment and equity for Native people and uses his writing—directly—in order to bring about the change he desires.

Apess is perhaps best known for two of his many essays: “Indian Nullification of the Unconstitutional Laws of Massachusetts Relative to the Marshpee Tribe; or, The Pretended Riot Explained,” and his “Eulogy on King Philip.” Both are confrontational and defensive. Through the mastery of European writing skills and literacy, Apess acknowledges the increasing tribal dissatisfaction with settler treatment. The “Eulogy” in particular remarks on the increasing unjustness of state government: “Who stood up in those days, and since, to plead Indian rights? Was it the friend of the Indian? No, it was his enemies who rose—his enemies, to judge and pass sentence. And we know that such kind of characters as the Pilgrims were, in regard to the

Indian's rights, who, as they say, had none, must certainly always give verdict against them" (291). Apess is not only calling out the past mistakes that have set many Indians up for negativity and insecurity regarding his or her self-image, but Apess is uniting present and future support under the evidence of past injustice.

Apess's "Eulogy on King Philip" from 1836 is an important one because its purpose is to memorialize the 'last' of Native people in New England, King Philip, when the author identifies as a Native person in New England. This is referring back to King Philip's War, 1675-1678, which was understood to have eliminated Native people from New England entirely. By writing this "Eulogy" speech nearly two centuries later, Apess is putting the blatant misunderstanding of this war's effect on tribal populations throughout New England on display. This speech, too, takes place just before Cherokee removal from 1836-1839. He was forcing the acknowledgement of the large numbers of indigenous people still present in the Northeast and beyond, and directly speaking to his audience about the obvious and increasing mistreatment of Native people under the guise of "no longer existing."

This plan shows that Apess, while writing the "Eulogy," and even "Indian Nullification," had a deep, natural understanding of literacy and how it can affect change and equity. His essays also display the intensive level of writing mastery that Apess had achieved by the early nineteenth century. In the face of extreme oppression, he was able to successfully find his voice and use it in such a way that gave value to tribes across New England and their experiences against colonists. Melissane Schrems, in her yet-to-be-published article "The Case of the "Indian Queen": Mashpee Rehearsals for *Indian Nullification, 1786-1798*" discusses the importance of Apess's writing within the literary canon. According to Schrems, the scholarship of William

Apess was an integral part of tribal and activism in the continued struggle for Indian independence across the nation, but especially in the proximal New England area:

In 2005 Robert Warrior would hold Apess up as the very model of contemporary writing of Native American fiction. Warrior joins [Barry] O’Connell, [Polly] Stevens and [Theresa] Gaul and includes Apess in the collection of early Native activists and nonfiction writers, arguing his essential “contribution to Native intellectual history” holding value as a “significant 19th century voice” as well as in the present-day. Warrior puts Apess forward as “a model for historically focused approach to Native life than one emphasizing static notions of culture or strict attention to texts absent the material realities . . . that Native literature reflects. In 2006 Patricia Bizzell agreed and focused on Apess as a historian and literary critic in his own right. She argues that Apess operated as a cultural broker who “made use not only of the content of Puritan historical writings, but also of their rhetorical techniques, adapting them for historical purposes.” (3-4)

What is most appealing about Schrems’s ideas is how Apess is considered “a model” and as “a historical and literary critic in his own right.” This idea moves beyond the intended affect that Apess desired to have on his audiences—both native and non—and gives him the credit as a scholar that he deserves. He was not only writing as an activist, he was writing as a means to preserve his experience as a Pequot man (and the experiences of those around him) in the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century.

Recovering Native Women Writers:

While Native women also wished to incite change, their methods may have been quieter. Native women were still affected—arguably more so—by the restrictions placed upon tribes, and the writing they produced reminds us of an entirely unique form of oppression that is not only social and political, but also psychological. Native women, more so than their male counterparts who were at least recognized through their maleness, were made to feel as if they were incapable of creating anything of value and that their highest aspiration ought to be that of marriage. So, evidence of Native women’s writing is rare, but not nonexistent. As Robert Dale Parker, a

researcher who recently published an entire collection of writings, *The Sound the Stars Make Rushing Through the Sky* by Ojibwe author Jane Johnston Schoolcraft, proves: “Indian writers left far more writing than literary historians imagine. If we look enough, we will find it. So far, we simply have not looked enough” (ix). Here, Parker identifies one of the main issues facing the study of Native women’s literature from colonial America: there are not enough researchers willing to look for sources, let alone analyze them.

As settlers stripped tribes of their land, resources, and sometimes their individual freedoms, so too did they strip pieces of identity and tradition away to be replaced with westernized norms. This meant, unfortunately, that Native women were subjected to new, divisive treatment and behavior that seemed to place them on a different plane of existence.

While the political and social arenas are obvious areas in which a woman’s influence and power took a substantial hit, the area of literacy is another important one. As education (at least through Anglo-American standards) became more common in Native communities, reading and reading comprehension became more widespread. Writing, however, was largely considered to be the domain of masculinity—a place where women need not venture in order to spend more time learning various types of “housewifery.” In her article “Beyond the Printed Word: Native Women’s Literacy Practices in Colonial New England,” Hilary Wyss discusses Native women’s journey through the settlers’ educational system and discusses how the various types of mistreatment affected the population. Even though Wyss does not focus on a particular tribe, she does call attention to the very important theme that Indigenous New England women were not given the same educational opportunities for literacy as men. They were held to different standards and did not benefit from the same privilege that manhood held and bonded men from across racial divides.

When compared to the more prominent examples of their male counterparts, it would seem as if Native women's contributions to the early American canon were inconsequential. But, this lack of evidence speaks more to the heavy hand patriarchy played in a Native women's education. Hilary Wyss, who has devoted much of her time as a researcher and scholar to studying and compiling early Native women's writing, expands on the absence of Native women's writing in her article "Beyond the Printed Word," and mentions how inherently necessary it is to look beyond what is currently accessible. The uneven contributions are a direct product of the inequitable treatment of women—especially Native women. Wyss writes, "This absence, I would argue, is only part of the larger story of Native women's textual production—a story complicated by a gendered colonial hierarchy that devalued women's intellectual abilities; colonial ambivalence about Native women's role in education; and a modern set of assumptions about textuality and literacy practices that leaves no space to explore colonial Native women's self-expression" (118-19). The lack of space created for Native women was intentional, thanks to the colonists' unwillingness to incorporate women and their perspectives of the time. By not giving women the equalizing tool of a comparable education, the "gendered colonial hierarchy," as Wyss so aptly describes it, was able to keep women from publically mixing themselves with any sort of overly analytical or otherwise anti-colonialist sentiments.

Even as education was becoming increasingly widespread in the 18th century among Native people, instruction was gendered. A woman being included in an educational setting was not enough to guarantee equal footing: "Although women were increasingly included in writing instruction through the eighteenth century, colonial presumptions about writing's suitability for "masculine" pursuits such as business, ministry, and politics still meant that women were barred from its most obvious economic benefits as a consequence of their gender" (123). Wyss

discusses the very real divide between the sexes and how much of an effect it had on silencing the potential work of women. The western standards already set into play for centuries imposed themselves upon Indigenous tribes and created strict gender boundaries that were not necessarily stringent prior to the meeting of cultures. Women were expected to be educated between a very slim margin of acceptability, and were not to contribute to the continuance of any sort of education—Native or non—afterward. Wyss points out the wide margin of error as she illustrates the many contributions that women were able to make through the European medium of the written word. Even though some examples (as we will see in later sections) might not be the height of English literary style, the examples certainly highlight the social, political, and literary aptitude of Native women.

Wyss continues to explore the complicated relationship between literacy and Native women in her article “Native Women Writing: Reading Between the Lines.” She reasons that the crop of available work is so necessarily small and specific because sources that were not written by a woman and yet demonstrate a woman’s thoughts in some way “hold an entirely different kind of cultural position than do the words Native women themselves have written with pen, ink, paper, and most importantly, access to the conventions of English literacy” (120). The English literacy standards being so unforgivingly applied to all Native individuals eventually became a sign of status. If a person, especially a Native person, could hold their own in the written and spoken English language, they might just have a shot at being taken seriously. This, of course, applied to the men. For the women, writing was simply considered to be beyond them—an activity better left to the men. Women instead were lucky enough to do the housework and read a book that wasn’t the Bible every now and again. Writing that women were producing was largely

for communication purposes—a line or two in a journal here, a page or two to a letter to a friend there. Other examples either did not exist, were not kept, or have not yet been rediscovered.

Women in Wheelock's School:

While there were other schools in addition to Moor's Indian Charity School that focused on educating Native children according to Westernized ideals, Wheelock's school in Southern New England—Lebanon, Connecticut specifically—is of particular importance concerning the literacy and education of women not least because it made available a sizeable corpus of writing by indigenous people in the colonial period. Thanks to Dartmouth Digital Library Initiatives' exhibit *Manuscripts Related to Samson Occom and Eleazar Wheelock's Early Indian Students*, researchers and students have ready access to letters illustrating Wheelock's opinions regarding the education of women as well as writings by young Native women. While there are many examples of questionable practices from Wheelock (such as the mishandling of funds raised and allocated specifically for support of the Indian school), I am, for the purpose of this section and context of this paper, focusing on Wheelock's expectations and representations regarding Native women and their writings. Wheelock's treatment of women writers and the types of writing produced by women under his educational supervision shows just how inequitable the education systems were.

Reverend Eleazar Wheelock, most widely known for being a proprietor of education with the founding of Dartmouth College in the late eighteenth century, contributed greatly to the educational and social divide between Native men and women. Wheelock's experiments with Indian education began after Wheelock met and was impressed by Samson Occom's intellectual prowess. Wheelock was inspired to both take Occom on as a mentee and to begin Moor's Indian

Charity School so that other Indians could be educated just as Occom was and considered successful by the same white standards. Wheelock conveys his intentions “to procure six likely Male Youth of the Six Nations to be conducted hither to the school under my love for an education in such Part of learning as may tender them more useful among their tribes and particularly to be fitted for Interpreters” (Dartmouth Digital Library Initiatives). In the letter, Wheelock does not express any intention to showcase the success he has achieved in educating Native girls, nor does he speak of any hope to recruit more female students⁵.

Exploring Wheelock’s differential approaches to male and female education, Wyss explains that his mission was to create “civilized” Indians who could in turn convert their respective tribes. Boys could learn husbandry, physical labor, how to become schoolmasters, ministers, or missionaries, while girls were taught housewifery and some writing. In theory training in how to be a schoolmistress was included, though Wyss finds, “...there is no evidence that any of Wheelock’s female students attained the level of schoolmistress” (“Mary Occom” 392).

Even within an inherently inequitable structure, then, goals for women were not being met. Not only were these goals not being met, but Wheelock’s female students were also expected to earn their keep in a tangible way that exceeded similar expectations of boys: “Unlike the boys, who lived at the school and followed a more highly developed curriculum, girls boarded with local English families, from whom they were to learn the art of housewifery—or,

⁵ As quoted in 1761 letter from Eleazar Wheelock to Sir William Johnston. In the letter, Wheelock does not express any intention to showcase the success he has achieved in educating Native girls, nor does he speak of any hope to recruit more female students. What’s even more disturbing, as Wyss expands upon in her article “Beyond the Printed Word:” “[Wheelock] never reprinted any letters from his female students, suggesting that at least in his mind their experience was peripheral to that of the men he could train as schoolmasters and missionaries” (124). Native girls were considered considerably less useful than their male peers, and Wheelock seemed to be the first to remind his female students of this apparent fact. Female students seemed more of a necessary byproduct in Wheelock’s educational plan to turn out the “Indian Scholars” that he could then turn around and showcase as a success when raising money for his school.

as some later complained, for whom they worked as servants” (“Mary Occom” 393). Even though Wyss shows boys were also expected to pull their own weight in terms of groundwork and other physical labor that Wheelock could then highlight for fundraising, boys were at least receiving a curriculum that could potentially help them navigate the colonial system after their time at the school. Girls, on top of receiving only one day of instruction, were made to live with white families to learn domestic skills—as if the domestic skills they could have been learning at home with their original families were inferior to European standards. In exchange for room and board, girls were expected to fulfill demands that some, as Wyss illustrated, interpreted as servitude. The preparations girls were receiving, in spite of their one-day-a-week lessons at Wheelock’s schools, more accurately prepared them for a life confined to the home and to service for others.

Wheelock’s educational system, in other words, set Native people up for failure. As Lisa Brooks describes:

As the Seneca leader Red Jacket told Timothy Pickering, “We had told you that our old way was to use wampum and not writing. . . . You know there is not one in our nation who knows writing. Therefore we are obliged to turn our faces to the British to know what the writings are when we receive them.” Pickering had in fact urged Six Nations to educate their children at places like Wheelock’s school in order to avoid such deceptions. (224)

It would seem as if Native individuals were stuck between a rock and a hard place: either send their children to schools that were little more than thinly-veiled attempts at assimilation, or allow the colonists to continue taking advantage of their tribes and the lack of mastery in the arena of literacy. As Brooks gathers, it seems that the colonial government, completely aware of the advantage they were taking by forcing a foreign form of communication on tribes, were dangling this form of independence from English translators in front of tribal leaders deciding what to do with their children’s education in an increasingly divided world—and all the while ensuring that

the most logical choice also results in tribes adopting an integral part of Anglo-American culture. Female students, then, were at an automatic disadvantage.

Mary Secutor and Sarah Simon: Narragansett Women Negotiating Wheelock

Narragansett letters by Mary Secutor and Sarah Simon illustrate the often disheartening experiences of Native women in Wheelock's school and colonial New England. Their letters, while not necessarily inciting a "call to action," remain some of the few most accessible examples of Native women's writing. They outline the intense and often internalized oppression that Native women faced, and the admirable levels of mastery these women were able to afford in literacy skills and writing.

Two letters, written separately by these Narragansett women are available on Dartmouth Digital Library Initiatives. Both are addressed to Eleazar Wheelock and both display varying levels of uncertainty compared to works by Apess and Occom. This lack of confidence with the written word is easily understood as both women were under the educational supervision of Wheelock. Their audience, then, was one of authority on a more personalized, student-teacher relationship. And their education, judging by the letters, did not seem comprehensive enough to adequately prepare these women for anything beyond writing for the barest communicative purposes.

With that being said, the following examples are integral to our current understanding of indigenous New England writers. These women, through their letters, grant current researchers and interested parties a glimpse into the perspectives of the oppressed. The ways in which these women view themselves show present-day scholars what colonial society expected from them—and how low these expectations truly were. Just because these letters were not structured for

larger audiences or published and distributed in pamphlets like the writings of Oocom or Apes does not mark these texts as worthless. Rather, these examples, however scarce, are just the beginning in terms of understanding the oppressed within an already oppressed group in colonial New England—Native women.

Mary Secutor, wrote to Wheelock a number of times in her own hand. Each letter contains examples of drastic self-deprecation and conveys a sense of insecurity and humility befitting of an disempowered individual made to feel sub-second class. In particular, I would like to focus on a letter dated 11 March 1768, which apologizes for a night of public drunkenness. While the other letters—discussing a changed mind regarding a marriage proposal, an intention to leave the school for feelings of inadequacy, a prior apology for a public drunkenness infraction—similarly outline the shame and incapacity that women were made to feel, this letter spends a great deal of time on self-reflection in a staggeringly negative way. Secutor's destructive attitude does not encourage her to continue her studies in literacy or the pursuit of any sort of mastery, rather it shows the sort of subservient role that Wheelock and society expected of her.

Secutor opens with language that immediately announces her as a meek, humble, and repenting woman: "I Mary Secuter do with shamefacedness acknowledge that on the evening of the 8th I was guilty of going to the tavern & tarrying there with much rude & vain company till a very unreasonable time of night" (Dartmouth Digital Library Initiatives). What is immediately apparent from her language choices is that, unlike her male peers, she is unable to use the language of subservience to mask her true analytical feelings of colonial oppression—rather she has, through comprehensive efforts on the settlers' patriarchal system, adopted the popular opinion of women, especially Native women, being fit only for roles of submissiveness. Secutor

chooses words such as “shamefacedness,” “guilty,” and “unreasonable,” all of which mark her as the complete and utter wrong-doer in the situation. Her audience, namely Wheelock, can immediately dismiss her as a threat due to the almost paralytic feelings of regret the writer conveys. Secutor essentially rendered herself defenseless in the face of society’s standards.

This is not by any means asserting that her voice is or was actually worth *less*. Her voice illustrates the adverse effect that literacy and an education like that which Wheelock offered had on Native women. This skillful portrait of guilt and personal responsibility by Mary Secutor, though, also feel a bit rehearsed. Secutor’s choice of phrasing and vocabulary seem to imply that Secutor is following a formula: if she agrees to take the blame in the format that is expected of her and repent self-deprecatingly, she will gain the forgiveness she desires. She seemed to be giving Wheelock exactly what he wanted to ensure he felt as if his methodology was effective: effusive guilt and responsibility coming from this Native woman. By parroting the obligations expected of her, Secutor was able to come across as compliant, shamed, and meek while simultaneously asserting a sort of independence in her ability to navigate Wheelock’s system in order to gain the spiritual and social forgiveness and acceptance that she most likely desired.

Present-day scholars are able to catch a glimpse of the extreme measures that this patriarchal and colonial system forced women to take to heart. When there are no recognized representatives of one’s race *or* gender to oppose this colonial and patriarchal infringement upon a Native woman’s right to develop as a strong individual capable of making her own decisions and achieving at high levels, it becomes increasingly difficult to find a voice amidst the myriad viewpoints expressing the opposite opinion. This opinion quite literally attempted to strip Native women of their self-worth while concurrently preparing them for a submissive role in an eventual marriage.

Wyss discusses the importance of primary sources directly authored by Native women: “These [letters by Native women] are rich sources of information and they perform some of the functions of writing, such as recording events and relating messages, but they hold an entirely different kind of cultural position than do the words Native women themselves have written with pen, ink, paper, and most importantly, access to the conventions of English literacy” (“Reading Between the Lines” 120). From Mary Secutor’s letter, we are able to see exactly what the conventions of English literacy were teaching Native women—how to feel shame regarding one’s identity. While men like Occom and Apess were making direct denunciations against colonial ways they found disempowering⁶, women like Secutor were left at a disadvantage. Although Native women were given the chance to learn communication via the written word, they were simultaneously taught how their ethnic backgrounds and gender were wrong and substandard, all while teaching these Native women an entirely new vocabulary that acted as a means to further oppress them. If the only words one was taught to associate with oneself were negative—“guilty,” “unreasonable,” “shamefaced,” etc.—then the most probable conclusion is that one would eventually begin to identify with such negativity. The tool of literacy was not yet of any use because Native women were not given any means of self-empowerment that would allow them to participate in this new colonial system and economy.

Secutor continues to find herself in a position where she feels it necessary to grovel for her former level of acceptance, no matter how infinitesimal this acceptance. She writes, “I deserve to be turned out of this school & be deprived of all the privileges of it—I desire to lie low in the dust therefor & do now ask forgiveness of God, the Rev. Doc. Wheelock, his family

⁶ As Samson Occom wrote in his Execution sermon, “I am here before this great concourse of people at this time, to give the last discourse to the poor miserable object who is to be executed this day before your eyes...” (5). Or, as William Apess opens his *Indian Nullification*: “The writer hopes that the public will give him credit for an intention to adhere rigidly to the truth, in presenting his views of the late difficulties of the Marshpee Tribe, as it is as much his wish as his intention to do justice to all his brethren...” (*On Our Own Ground* 163).

and school, and all others whom I have hereby offended...” (Dartmouth Digital Library Initiatives). The level of self-criticism and the intense degree of punishment she feels she deserves displays just how much Anglo-American expectations were made to influence a Native women’s feelings of self-worth and acceptance. Because she did not adhere to the standards set by her schoolmaster and society at large, she automatically assumes she is less than human and deserves “to lie low in the dust.” Her adopted voice, though, does present her as unthreatening—thus making her demand of forgiveness (however veiled it may be) seem unthreatening. Perhaps she knew what she was doing after all.

Staying true to the literary tradition that more clearly connects to Wampanoag women’s traditions denoting the importance of the home and the community, Mary Secutor attempts to redefine her current shame-filled place in the community to a place that is once again accepted and respected. By making herself the guilty party and taking all of the blame, Secutor is securing the type of forgiveness and permission that she desires in order to rejoin her home in a socially respectable way.

*

Sarah Simon, a classmate of Mary Secutor, writes in a similarly critical self-deprecating tone, but they also recall Brooks’ idea that Native individuals were able to harness colonial standards of communication in order to maintain some level of independence and identity. Rather than opening with an immediate apology and admission of guilt and remorse, Simon begins straightforwardly: “This is to inform you that I won’t be having of your advice if you please Sir” (Dartmouth Digital Library Initiatives). Even though she is adhering to all of the niceties and expectations of Euro-American expectations by addressing her letter “Rev. and Hon.

Sir” and concluding “if you please Sir,” she is able to disagree with Wheelock, and assert her independence.

In the next couple of sentences, however, Simon backtracks:

...That is I am so much unwell that I am not able to do any, work the gratest part of my time: and my being so unwell it make me unesa, because I it is no prophet to the School for any one to be here [?] too worry good to themsilves or others. but Sir when I am well I am willing to devot myself to the cause that is if I thought [?] should do any good in the world there should nothing in this life should discourage me— (Dartmouth Digital Library Initiatives)

She attributes her decision to leave the school for the duration of her illness to the sickness itself, and assures Wheelock that her studies at his school are “the gratest part of [her] time.” Her gratest life accomplishment is supposed to be, according to Wheelock and Anglo-American expectations, the measurable achievements in the school system that is teaching her to fall into the same patterns of meekness and subservience expected of women in colonial America.

Where the excuse may not be enough to convince Wheelock of Simon’s proposed sincerity, she also includes a reason more closely related to Wheelock’s sense of economic prudence. Simon feels that she is of “no prophet” to the school if she is not well enough to perform at the standards expected of her and conveys this sentiment to Wheelock. For the record, Simon did not need to ask Wheelock’s permission—she could have run away and returned home at any time. But, by writing and asking for his permission, she is, to the best of her abilities, showing Wheelock her value as a Narragansett woman and forcing him to acknowledge her as an individual. By appealing to Wheelock’s sense of fiscal responsibility and concern, she is sealing the deal. She seems to be avoiding the possibility of becoming indebted to an Anglo-American who would most certainly make her pay for his educational services. Simon also exercises her realization that she is financially dependent upon Wheelock. By playing up her illness, she is communicating her inability to work and make her keep in terms of the work she “owes”

Wheelock for her education. Whether this was intentional or not on Simon's end, it at least speaks of the awareness she has acquired concerning the type of economy the colonial system worked around and her ability to navigate that area in order to secure the acknowledged respite she desires through this letter to Wheelock.

Hilary Wyss continues this idea and explores the balance Simon achieves between humility and mastery in her essay "Gender and Native Literacy in New England:" "Sarah [Simons]'s obsequious tone demonstrates that she has mastered the rhetorical form in which Natives were expected to address white men like Wheelock. Sarah could have done what many of Wheelock's students had done before her—left school without his permission. Instead, she negotiates to the extent she can with pen and ink" (405). Simon has found a way, through the written word, to express herself to the dominant population. She respectfully displays her understanding of the Anglo-American cultural norm of letter writing and lowers herself to the level expected of her as she practically begs for a pardoned return home. Perhaps by showing her mastery of writing and communicating with someone considered more powerful than herself, she is attempting to demonstrate her ability to be a good, Christian, Native woman without remaining at the school. Like Secutor, Simon hopes to find a way to leave the school in good standing so that she may be free to pursue familial and community strengthening instead. In any case, her letter to Wheelock walks a fine line between showing off her ability to communicate her needs effectively and throwing itself back into defensive loops that serve to show her humility and 'willingness' to be subservient. But, like Secutor, Simon's goal is to remove herself from Wheelock's school and return to her home. There is a definite possibility that these later markers are an act put on to have her request granted—in which case her understanding of the English communication system is very perceptive and developed.

Where the content of her letter excels, the presentation of Simon's letter to Wheelock falls short. The original letter scan is blotted with cross-outs, ink blots, and the handwriting suggests a less-than-completely-confident hand. In a time when the presentation of handwriting and penmanship itself was of the utmost importance, this sort of presentation regarding her writing skills did not bode overly well for inspiring confidence in her audience. It is important to note, as was explored earlier in this paper, that this sort of handwriting is not actually her fault. In Wheelock's school, women were sometimes only allowed to attend classes one day a week. The rest of their focus was domestic training that prepared students for various forms of housewifery. So, beyond a basic reading comprehension and literacy skillset, not much was required of Native women as far as an education goes—even in New England. The poor penmanship only illustrates the true inequity of the educational system in place—women did not receive the opportunity to develop their handwriting or written presentation because society deemed these skills masculine as opposed to feminine. This serves only as another form of oppression pertaining to Native women. By keeping Native women from presenting their thoughts, desires, or opinions in a visually appealing and accurate way would give Native women too much influence over their own individuality.

Hannah Babcock and Sarah Keetoh: Wampanoag Women Using Their Voices:

Wampanoag women contributed to the written defense of their tribe and their lands, such as Hannah Babcock and Sarah Keetoh, who authored a deposition attempting to spotlight the unfairness surrounding the land sale of Mary Sunkoson to Ebenezer Crocker during her sickness. It was not that these women simply held counsel to another writer responsible for the presentation of this deposition or that they collaborated with white or male peers in order to write

it. No—Hannah Babcock and Sarah Keetoh are the sole authors of this deposition designed to defend a sickly woman being taken advantage of by white settlers. The unfairness does not strictly sit with the availability of the deposition, however. Historian Melissane Schrems, who has recovered these remarkable texts, indicates in her essay “The Case of the “Indian Queen” that the General Court and the Mashpee overseers alike had approved the ‘sale’ of the widow Sunkoson’s land. Schrems also explains that until 1796, no one—not the board of Mashpee overseers or anyone—was aware of the sale’s size: about 50 acres were approved. Imagine their surprise when Crocker claimed the sale encompassed the full 200 acres. Schrems postulates, “It is possible that the Widow Sunkoson did not know [the size of the sale] either (13). This blatant attempt at land acquisition by taking advantage of a Native woman of little social or political importance did not bode well with Hannah Babcock and Sara Keetoh, who created a deposition to say:

that they heard Mary Sunkason an elderly woman of Marshpee say after she recovered from a fit of sickness in which time she was told she made a deed to the Ebenezar Crocker of the land...in Marshpee—that she did not know at the time what she did...Hannah Babcock and Sarah Keetoh further say they visited said Sunkason several times in her sickness and that at the time she was bereaved of her senses and futher sayeth not. (Babcock and Keetoh deposition 5/22/1797)

These women recognized that Sunkoson was being taken advantage of and immediately took action—in the form of writing—in order to defend Sunkoson and her right to her own land. Their action is significant. Decades later, Apess uses Mary Sunkoson’s example in his essay “Indian Nullification.” In the essay, he calls her “Indian Queen” and cites her as evidence of the advantage many colonists were taking regarding land sales. There are few examples of such a woman-centric movement of defense, and yet these women wasted no time in using the Anglicized tools of writing and petition to achieve a means to end: defending another woman of their tribe and her right to the land she owned.

Crocker's attempt to acquire Sunkason's land was immoral not only in the attempt to take advantage of a sick, elderly woman—but also because her socioeconomic class placed her in a vulnerable position. As Wyss emphasizes, “By the end of the eighteenth century a great many Native women in New England were brutally poor; they led a bare subsistence existence with few opportunities, never mind the leisure actually to write” (“Reading Between the Lines” 123). Due to unequal treatment and opportunity from the dominant white males, Native people often fell into poverty. Without the tools of literacy and an understanding of their worth, Native women especially were unable to achieve fiscal independence. This caused a dependence on colonial government that continued to undermine Native women's status. The cycle of poverty in and of itself was enough to create silence. As we can see by Sunkason's inability to defend herself from being taken advantage of, Babcock and Keetoh chose to be Sunkason's voice and speak in her defense against the system and individual hoping to take advantage of a silent victim.

Through their clear, concise, and matter-of-fact defense, Babcock and Keetoh were at least able to call attention to the blatant example of Crowley's encroaching upon a Native woman's lands while simultaneously dismantling her authority. These women were able to employ their collective knowledge in order to help their tribe, preserving the influence of their traditions and lands. Explaining this historical dynamic, Joan Tavares Avant writes:

Under the law, the court would then send notices to the heirs whose land abutted the part selected by the petitioner, telling them to appear for a hearing on a certain day. Like as not, though, the heirs couldn't make out the fancy legal talk in those notices, or they were afraid they had done something wrong, or they were just plain too scared or too poor to leave town and go all the way up to the city. Anyway, if those heirs didn't show up for the hearing, the case was forfeited automatically, and the petitioners got the part they wanted....I guess a lot of people think it's funny how easy it is to fool we Indians...But I can tell you that it's not funny to us. In fact, it eats at our hearts. (66)

Avant's commentary on her grandmother, who faced these conditions over 100 years after Mary Sunkason, emphasizes the degrading affect that these legal interactions have on Native people. She helps us to see the tradition of Wampanoag literary protest across generations. It's not that indigenous women were not writing, it's that gender, ethnicity, Christianity, and even poverty obstructed the words of Native women. Women like Schrems and Avant have uncovered the continuous traditions of female protest and are currently working to make this knowledge widespread.

Conclusion:

Concerning the startling lack of Native women's writing examples, Wyss by far has what I found to be the most interesting point. She postulates that the lower numbers of Native women's works lie in another possibility: "Perhaps silence can be read as other than absence or lack. Perhaps, just perhaps, it is a statement, a refusal" ("Reading Between the Lines" 122). Given such credit, women are considered an unmovable force in the face of Anglo-American adversity. Rather than thinking of silence as a consequence of sparse educational services and social and political disempowerment, perhaps we can think about the silence as a choice. Native women persisted, quietly, to refuse colonization and the inequality and inequity being thrust upon them. Or, women pursued different forms of communication: such as oral speeches and depositions, basketry, beading, or other forms depending upon the tribe that still conveyed a meaning while staying truer to tribal traditions.

Native women's voices continue to wait, quietly, for the opportunity to heal the extensive neglect and scorn their abilities have been given. Schrems asserts, "We need to start combing even more aggressively through the primary documents where we will find, as I have done, that

Native women were speaking to power and using their words to protect tribal lands and tribal sovereignty” (2). These women were using their voices efficiently and persistently in order to preserve tribal individuals, land, and authority. Schrems also notes a necessity—researchers need to make finding and understand Native women’s texts a priority. When Native women’s writing—which was just as insightful and relevant as any European or Nativemale example—is given equitable treatment and credit, then their voices and all they resisted will be vindicated. By not making these examples just as much of a priority, we are perpetuating the oppressive habits that individuals like Wheelock made commonplace. As we’ve explored, Native women did not simply “lie low in the dust”; they used their voices to make significant strides for themselves, their tribes, and their rights as individuals. It is time we, as researches, scholars, students, began acknowledging this achievement comprehensively.

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