

“The Problem of Pocahontas ”: Colonialism, Stereotypes, and Personal Identity in Janet Campbell Hale’s *Bloodlines: Odyssey of a Native Daughter*

Nicole Vance

English

Supervisor: Leigh Matthews

Abstract:

*As a genre, traditional autobiography has historically been an exclusive domain, most accessible to the male writer. In contrast, the memoir genre has broadened the field of life writing and has granted a voice to members of marginalized groups. As acknowledged by various literary critics, the memoir form, which is less ego-focused, has been especially important to female writers who often express personal identity in relation to their surrounding communities. However, this link between the self and the communal can be damaging, especially in a dominant culture that perpetuates stereotypes about minorities. In this research paper, I analyze the manifestation of racial stereotypes in Janet Campbell Hale’s memoir *Bloodlines: Odyssey of a Native Daughter* (1993) and explore the ways in which the author, who comes from a mixed blood family, attempts to discover a strong sense of personal identity in a culture dominated by images of the Indian Princess and her reviled, darker twin, *The Squaw*.*

From the earliest days of colonialism in North America, the relationship between the Indigenous population and European settlers has been fraught with tension and conflict. Paradoxically, in spite of the history of dehumanization of Native peoples in Canada and the

United States, the American Indian was, and arguably remains, a highly romanticised figure. Although today we are more attuned to cultural sensitivity, images of noble Tonto and brave Pocahontas still reverberate in our cultural consciousness. In this paper, I will analyze the manifestation of racial stereotypes in Janet Campbell Hale's memoir, *Bloodlines: Odyssey of a Native Daughter* (1995), exploring the ways in which the author struggles to discover and maintain a sense of personal identity in modern America, a society which still clutches onto images of the beautiful Indian Princess and her reviled, darker twin, The Squaw.

Throughout Hale's memoir, the author combines her own personal experiences as an American Indian woman with the histories of her paternal and maternal ancestors. At surface level, this family and tribal connection could be viewed as a source of empowerment; as Hale speaks to the children of the Idaho Coeur d'Alene tribal school, she reminds them that being a "tribal person is something special, something non-Indian Americans don't have, and it can be a source of strength" (Hale xix). Indeed, this focus on communal relationships is prominent in Hale's narrative. As critic Frederick Hale remarks, the author "emphasizes the centrality of personal relationships and the impact of turning points in her life on her psychological development...rather than episodically relating individual achievements" (F. Hale 69). Furthermore, Hale's perspective on the inherent strength associated with her indigenous identity is noteworthy, especially given that historically, Native groups have been denied agency by a dominant white society, a society whose citizens, critic Daniel Francis argues, "have always formed their impressions of the Indian without much reference to actual Native people, and especially without hearing what Native people might have to say about their own situation" (Francis 109). This willful ignorance has been especially damaging to the Native women, who have largely been represented according to the strict binary of virtuous and beautiful Indian Princess or else the "debased, immoral" squaw woman (Francis 121).

However, despite her positive affirmations regarding her heritage and communal ties, Hale also hints at the notion of family as a source of dysfunction and damage. Although her words to the school children are positive, Hale muses that, if the situation were different, "I might say a few things more.... [because] some families will, if they can, tear you down, reject you, tell you that are a defective person." (xxi). These private thoughts hint at the darker reality of Hale's upbringing in a mixed-blood family plagued by racial ambivalence and, more disturbingly, deeply ingrained patterns of internalized prejudice.

As the memoir progresses, Hale elaborates on the nature of her family's dysfunction. In the essay entitled "Daughter of Winter", Hale chronicles her relationship with her volatile and embittered mother, Margaret. A victim of domestic abuse, Margaret regularly whisks her daughter away from her family home on the reserve so that Hale's childhood is marked by a series of dislocations, patterns of "runnin' towards a new beginning, a fresh start that somehow never pans out" (27). Trapped with her mother, an "absolute master" (61) of emotional and verbal abuse, Hale recounts how her mother's mental illness and worsening arthritis is exacerbated by a vicious cycle of poverty: "We're so poor, Mom and me, so damned, damned poor...I remember being hungry at school, feeling faint" (30). Perhaps most troubling is the notion that such patterns of neglect and abuse are inherited. Years later, as Margaret lies upon her death bed, she reveals that her own family "mocked her...the way she walked...the way she talked" (59). While Hale herself admits that it is possible that Margaret is confusing her daughter's childhood with her own, the possibility of cross-generational dysfunction acts as a catalyst for Hale to piece together her ancestry in an attempt to understand the causes of Margaret's animosity towards her daughter, and although "the particular cause...is never clarified...the cycles of abuse are clearly fueled by the internalized racism that reaches back along Hale's bloodlines" (Finnegan 75).

Arguably, it is within one of the latter essays of Hale's memoir, "The Only Good Indian", that the truly insidious nature of this prejudice is exposed. As a relative of Dr. John McLoughlin, a chief founder of Oregon City, Hale's mother takes great pride in her white ancestry, while simultaneously denigrating her Indian blood. In a particularly telling passage, Margaret warns young Hale about the importance of maintaining proper behaviour in order to earn the approval of white people. Over and over, Margaret drives in the message that Janet must be a "Good Indian...clean and neat, hardworking and sober" (113). Moreover, as Hale gets older, she is informed that she must also be "the kind of woman men respect" (113). Other family members reinforce these messages about the imbalance of power between whites and Indians, for although her mother's sisters "[are] poor, uneducated, working-class...they [make] no effort to disguise the fact they [look] down on us because we [are] Indian" (115).

Interestingly, despite the obvious disdain that her white relatives have for Margaret and her Indian husband, Hale also observes that the exotic Indian "other" is an object of fascination for her family, and, by extension, the dominant white culture. Later in life, Hale overhears her

blond cousins bragging that they have native ancestry (“Their great-great-grandmother was an Indian princess, you know” (115)), although they are careful to note that this connection is slight, as Hale notes that it seems that “a little [Indian blood] is enough” (115). Here, Hale hints at one side of a deeply engrained image of the Indian woman that has permeated the European mindset, namely the noble, chaste, self-sacrificing Indian Princess. Such an image of the Indian woman has dominated the American cultural landscape for centuries. In her analysis of the American fixation on the “Pocahontas perplex”, critic Rayna Green, herself a Cherokee Indian woman, observes the problematic nature of this stereotype:

Both her nobility as a Princess and her savagery as a Squaw are defined in terms of her relationships with male figures. If she wishes to be called a Princess, she must save or give aid to white men. The only good Indian— male or female, Squanto, Pocahontas, Sacagawea, Cochise, the Little Mohee or the Indian Doctor—rescues and helps white men. But the Indian woman is even more burdened by this narrow definition...for it is she, not the males, whom the white men desire sexually (703).

Here, Green highlights a key feature of the problematic nature of the “good” Indian woman; as Western literary convention would have it, in order for an Indian woman, the Princess, to be “good”, “she must defy her own people, exile herself from them, become white, and perhaps suffer death” (704). In order to be acceptable in the eyes of both her family and her greater society, therefore, Hale is expected to fall in line with this idealized and romanticized image of the virtuous, compliant and self-deprecating Indian princess.

Although she is not precisely able to articulate why her mother’s comments about proper behaviour are so grating, it is arguable that some part of Hale recognizes the unfairness and outright absurdity of her situation. Regardless of her behaviour, she is so condemned by her obvious Indian ancestry that only outright rejection of her roots and capitulation to the whims of white society will offer any relief. Hale, however, rejects the notion of the classical Indian girl of the colonized West, a lifeless, flat figure whom author and poet Pauline Johnson described as a “‘doglike’, ‘fawnlike’, ‘deerfooted’, ‘submissive’, ‘crouching’ book heroine” (Johnson 273). This description is somewhat ironic, for although Johnson, a mixed blood Mohawk woman, used her celebrity to attract attention to the plight of Native people in Canada in the late 19th century, her conformity to the princess image in her dress, mannerisms, and writings (catered to the tastes of her European audience) “stultified [her] effectiveness as a writer and limited her effectiveness

as a spokesperson for Native people” (Francis 120). Hale, on the other hand, is vocal in her rejection of this idealized and confining label; unlike her mother, Margaret, and her Gram Sullivan, Hale “[does not] care to be a good Indian” (Hale 113).

Although Hale opposes the sanitized Western image of the “Good Indian” and cannot identify with the Indian Princess ideal, it seems that the alternative identity imposed upon her is equally, and more explicitly, damaging. If Hale is not willing to be the Princess, she will be delegated to the Squaw, the “darker twin” who, in popular culture and literary tradition, “share[s] in the vices attributed to Indian men—drunkenness, stupidity, thievery, venality of every kind—and [who] lives in shacks on the edge of town rather than in a woodland paradise” (Green 711). According to scholar Denise Lajimodiere, this coarse, denigrating stereotype stems from the inability of early colonial powers to recognize the social values and gender roles of the indigenous groups:

[These men’s] observations reflected their cultural biases, and, perhaps, reflected a desire to manipulate relativity to accommodate expectations that American Indian women were to be held in low regard in their tribal societies because women were subservient to men in European societies. (5)

Such a crude, derogatory view of American Indian women proves to be damaging to both Hale herself and to her female relatives. Hale and Margaret are both victims of terrible domestic abuse at the hands of their white (and in Margaret’s case, Indian) spouses and Hale is shocked when a complete stranger refers to her as a “dirty Siwash”, a terrible, denigrating word with “the power to cut like a knife” (Hale 119). Worse still, the internalization of this cruel stereotype, and all the negative associations which it invokes, plagues Hale all her life. Margaret warns Hale that she must never become one of the “other kind, the bad ones, the drunken, lazy louts” (113). Most disturbingly of all, Hale distantly recalls soaking her “hateful brown hands” (140) in bleach in a futile effort to whiten them, thereby distancing herself from the image of the dirty, crude Indian girl and making herself acceptable to her white classmates.

Ultimately, Hale finds herself in an intolerable position. Limited as she is by both the abuse and dysfunction of her own family and by the domineering forces of white society at large, she finds herself adrift from her home. While her daughter and niece strive to reconnect the family, Hale acknowledges that she herself can never be a permanent member, and that she is “one of [the] broken-off pieces now” (xxxiii). Although her self-imposed separation from the

Coeur d'Alene tribal land is a source of heartache for Hale, it is arguable that her independence is, in a way, her best hope for survival. Bolstered by the courage which has "been bred into [her]" (xxi), Hale strives to carve her own niche in the world, separate from the stifling Princess/Squaw dichotomy and its "poetic images having to do with visions of spirits, drums and feathers, shape-shifters and eagles and things" (187). Like other American Indian women, Hale "needs a definition that stands apart from that of males, red or white...she [must] be defined as Indian, in Indian terms" (Green 714).

For over one hundred years, critics such as Pauline Johnson, Rayna Green, and Denise Lajimodiere have been calling out for an end to the limiting colonialist definitions of American Indian women. Although progress has been made, one need only look to Hollywood and to the products of popular culture to see that much more work must be done. In chronicling the experiences of herself, her family, and of the Coeur d'Alene people, Janet Campbell Hale joins a long line of American Indian women who have fought for an identity free from the boundaries of Eurocentric fiction and myth, and who have sought to lay the fantasy of Pocahontas and her sister, the Squaw, to rest.

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