Death in the Wild: How Women’s Views on Death Exposed Racial and Colonial Views During American Western Expansion

As a 2017 fellow in the Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship, my project investigates Western Expansion in the 19th century United States through the lens of gender and race. The phenomenon of Western Expansion is broadly seen as the movement of our country westward. Groups of pioneers struck out to get cheap land in the West, starting new lives for themselves and fulfilling the nation’s destiny of encompassing the entire continent. My project focuses on reframing this common perception of Western Expansion to instead focus on the Native Americans whom the settlers invaded; specifically, I am investigating the interactions between white women and Native Americans.

Instead of romantically expanding outward into open land, the theory of settler colonialism reorients this process as an invasion and takeover of Native Americans lands by white settlers. Daiva Stasiulis and Nira Yuval-Davis define settler colonialism as “societies in which Europeans have settled, where their descendants have [become and] remained politically dominant over indigenous peoples, and where a heterogeneous society has developed in class, ethnic, and racial terms.”¹ Within this framework, women had an enormous influence over colonization of the West simply by being in charge of planting “civilized” society there; by organizing and running white life on their farms, they showed the clear standard to which the white settlers expected the Native Americans to conform.²

For this reason, I wanted to investigate further into the women’s role in colonization of the West. When you historically differentiate women’s point of view from men’s, you often discover new, interesting, or more complex layers to trends and events. I thought that women may have had a different colonial perspective than men on Native Americans. Therefore, I decided to direct my project towards reading women’s diaries, letters, and reminiscences about both their journey across the country and their new lives in the West. These documents are housed in different archival libraries across the country. The two that I used were the Bancroft Library here on campus, as well as the Oregon Historical Society in Portland.

However, in reading through these sources and secondary literature, I found that women did not have a drastically different perspective on Native Americans than men did. They viewed Native Americans through the lens of many stereotypes that they were expecting. One of the main stereotypes was the violent, dirty, and uncivilized Indian. For example, Melissa Clawson wrote that in Oregon “Indians were terrible mean… very barbarous.”³ These Native Americans were the stuff of women’s nightmares, lacking humanity altogether. Another prevalent stereotype was the Noble savage, seen in Mary Parkhurst’s description of a “tall fine looking Indian” approaching their wagon.⁴ These Native Americans bravely accepted their misfortunes, maintaining their dignity in the face of destruction. Somewhat surprisingly, the next most

² Lillian Schlissel, Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey (Ann Arbor, 1982), 17.
common stereotype was Native American beggars. Sarah Royce complaining about the annoyance of “begging and pilfering Indians” that were regularly approaching their wagons. These Native Americans, who either were hungry due to a depletion of resources by settlers, or were expecting an exchange of gifts upon meeting as was Native American custom, were simply dismissed or belittled by settlers.

Research by Glenda Riley in *Confronting Race: Women and Indians on the Frontier, 1815-1915* suggests that women were capable of adapting some of these extremely negative opinions of Native Americans to better reflect their real interactions as they crossed the trails, while men often weren’t capable of the same. However, while this research explains in broad strokes the relationship between white women and Native Americans, and how it differs from men’s, it does not delve into how their relationship functioned in specific situations. To this end, I wanted my research to examine a finer point of interaction between white women and Native Americans. As I read through primary sources in the first half of the summer, I looked for examples of other themes to focus on.

I chose to examine how death functioned in the relationship between settler women and Native Americans. Death was an enormous part of these women’s lives both on the trails and once they arrived in their new homes. Disease was the number one reason for fatalities of settlers crossing the overland trails, as well as the number one way in which settlers slaughtered Native Americans. Along these lines, many women counted the number of graves her party passed each day as a method of honoring the lives that had been lost before them. Indeed, many were also aware entering the trip that some in their group was likely to die, as shown by Lorena Hays pondering “Who of us will die on our way to California?” in her diary. Therefore, my new question became as follows: how did female settlers view settler deaths in comparison with Native American deaths, and what does this tell us about their opinions of the Native Americans they encountered? To best examine this, I close-read the diaries and reminiscences specifically for examples of deaths and burials of both groups of people, and analyzed each instance for word use, tone, and themes. Then I compared how these two groups were treated within the topic of death.

When female settlers encountered fellow settler deaths, they often responded with deep sadness. For example, when Rebecca Nutting’s train came across a trailside grave of a young man that had been traveling a week ahead them, she wrote: “We never knew of what he died...We all felt very very sad/ He had seemed a very nice boy was so full of life and fun/ He was a lovely singer/ His singing could be heard for a long distance on still evenings/ He was only 17 years old/ He was a handsome boy.” Clearly, she felt profound sadness at the simple loss of life of another settler, despite being unrelated. She easily honors him as a well-rounded person, as many women did for any settlers they encountered buried in the ground. Along those lines, Eliza Snow wrote about the death of fellow settlers on the trail: “The burial of the dead by the wayside was a sad office, and so sad, that, had it not been for a genuine feeling of sympathy for the bereaved, I would not have witnessed its performance.” This comment highlights that their sadness relating to death was extended beyond the person who had passed away, to include grieving loved ones. The death of a settler was a community affair in which the members felt for each other and supported each other through hard times, simply for the sake of doing so.

7 Rebecca Nutting, “A Sketch of the Life of Rebecca Nutting (Woodson) and Her Family,” pp. 18, Bancroft Library, Berkeley, California.
In contrast, settler women Native American deaths in a startlingly different light. For instance, on her journey Westward, Lorena Hays wrote, “We are going to see a tree, in the top of which is an Indian buried. Our tree proved not to have an Indian in it. There were only buffalo skins and sticks fastened up in the tree. Some thought one had been buried and others not.”\(^9\) It is clear from this quote that there were vibrant rumors and fascination with Native American death, which drove settlers to seek out foreign Native American burial sites. This contains no respect for the Native Americans who had died. Similarly, while passing by the site of a battle between two tribes of Native Americans, Frances Sawyer wrote that “Mr. Sawyer and I drove off the road a short distance to see one of the Indians who had been killed. It was the most horrible sight I ever saw. Four or five arrows were sticking in his body and his scalp was gone, leaving his head bare, bloody and ghastly… we women are safe and secure from danger, and may rest in peace and comfort, if we don’t dream of dead Indians.”\(^10\) Again, this implies an active conversation about Native Americans who had died, and underscores the settler’s voyeurism of these deaths. The women did not sympathize with or honor the Native Americans who had died; rather, they gawked at their bodies for a thrill of horror, and then considered how this affected themselves and their own mental well-being.

These examples demonstrate that settler deaths created a sense of inclusive community. Women respected their fellows who had died and were deeply sad about the loss of human life. Further, they worked hard to honor them, despite the constraints of trail life. In contrast, these women gawked voyeuristically at Native American deaths, objectifying them for their own entertainment. Women operated out of curiosity instead of respect, and created a spectacle out of a sad occasion. Therefore, my conclusion from this is that women viewed Indians as less human.

My next step in research is expanding on how this dehumanization by white women relates to their other roles in settler colonization. I also plan to compare women’s perspectives with men’s diaries, to see if both genders of settlers shared a similar perspective on death on the frontier. And although there are not many sources that include the Native American point of view, as Native Americans kept oral histories, I would like to include their perspective in this study of different views of death.

\(^10\) Frances Sawyer, “Overland to California, 1852” pp. 7, Bancroft Library, Berkeley, CA.