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Honored and Thriving: The Squaw Law and Eradication of Offensive State Place-Names

Rebecca Sockbeson

In 2000, the testimony of tribal members powerfully influenced Maine state policy when legislators voted to enact LD 2418, aimed at eradicating offensive state place-names containing the word “squaw.” This commentary outlines the policy development of LD 2418 into the law now titled “An Act Concerning Offensive Names.” An examination of the process that brought the law into being and current statistics documenting socioeconomic factors affecting indigenous women establishes the urgency of the legislation, which is yet to be passed in forty-one US states. As this paper discusses, the word “squaw” is as hateful as the “N word,” and for this reason, in this commentary the “S word” will be used instead.

LD 2418, sponsored by Passamaquoddy Tribal Representative Donald Soctomah and commonly referred to as the “Squaw Law,” amended previous legislation that had eradicated state place names with the “N word” to also include removal of those with the “S word.” The law was further amended in June 2009 to include state place-names with any derivation of the “S word,” such as “squa.” One of the initial challenges in the course of the policy development was to convince the state legislature that “squaw” was an offensive word. Although Passamaquoddy and Penobscot members of Maine Indian Tribal-State Commission (MITSC) confirmed that this term is highly offensive to many tribal members, some debate followed about the extent to which the “S word” is offensive. Some contended that the term simply means an Indian woman; many others insisted that the term is highly insulting and derogatory, meaning whore or a woman’s

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private parts. MITSC heard several tribal members state that the “S word” is hurtful and hateful to them, just as the “N word” is hurtful and hateful to black people.¹

As Penobscot Tribal Representative Donna Loring lobbied the legislature to better understand the impact of the word, she invited those members who misunderstood its meaning as merely “Indian female” to “go to Indian Island, call a woman ‘squaw,’ and see what type of response you get. You can’t legislate how people use words, but you can legislate state names. The word has basically been anglicized and used in a hateful manner.”² MITSC voted unanimously to draft legislation to eliminate the “S word” from place-names and attempted to have this introduced to the Second Regular Session of the 119th Maine Legislature. By one vote the Legislative Council initially failed to accept Representative Soctomah’s bill (then LR 3466) into the Second Regular Session of the 119th Legislature. On appeal, however, the Council voted 9–0 to allow the bill into the session, which was subsequently passed April 3, 2000.

As this commentary now engages with historical context, contemporary statistics, and personal testimony, it is important to consider the Waponahki, who are indigenous to the land. This commentary enacts a textual weaving grounded in Waponahki ways of knowing and being.

WAPONAHKI HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Before European invasion, the Waponahki people numbered more than twenty tribes throughout Maine and the Maritimes. Entire tribes were wiped out via genocidal bounties and germ warfare; in some cases the people survived population depletion of 97 percent.³ Today five tribes remain: the Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, Mi’kmaq, Maliseet, and Abenaki. The history of the Waponahki existed far before European invasion: The people have lived on what is now known as the territory of Maine in the United States and Eastern-most Canada in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia since time immemorial. Entire tribes were wiped out via genocidal bounties and germ warfare; in some cases, the people survived population depletion of 97 percent. As peoples of oral tradition, Waponahki ways of knowing and being have been passed down from generation to generation. Much of the documented history, on the other hand, has been recorded by non-Waponahki anthropologists and historians, and is considered by many Waponahki to be inaccurate and biased.⁴ The following dates and accounts will provide relevant context for the discussion of policy development processes that follows, specifically legislating the removal of the “S word” from Maine state place-names.

The Waponahki initially served as guides and hosts, teaching the Europeans how to survive and thrive on the land. The Waponahki values of generosity and hospitality were quickly taken advantage of by the Europeans, who began their abusive treatment of the Waponahki as early as the mid-1500s.⁵ As the Europeans began taking over their lands, kidnapping and murdering the people, the Waponahki began to defend themselves and fight back. The Waponahki became highly skilled at using European guns they had acquired through trade, with the result that in 1632, English authorities prohibited their sale to the Waponahki.⁶ This act was yet another way of taking power away from the Waponahki, and one that also furthered their intended decimation.



By His EXCELLENCY

WILLIAM SHIRLEY, Esq;

Captain-General and Governor in Chief, in and over His Majesty's Province of the *Massachusetts-Bay*, in *New-England*, and Vice-Admiral of the same, and Major-General in His Majesty's Army.

A PROCLAMATION.



HEREAS the Indians of *Norridgewock*, *Arreaguscook*, *Wewenock* and *St. John's* Tribes, and the Indians of the other Tribes inhabiting in the Eastern and Northern Parts of His Majesty's Territories of *New-England*, the *Penobscot* Tribe only excepted, have, contrary to their solemn Submission unto His Majesty long since made and frequently renewed, been guilty of the most perfidious, barbarous and inhuman Murders of divers of His Majesty's *English* Subjects; and have obtained from all Commerce and inhuman Murders of divers of His Majesty's said Subjects for many Months past; and the said *Indians* have fully discovered an inimical, traitorous and rebellious Intention and Disposition;

I have therefore thought fit to issue this Proclamation, and to Declare the *Indians* of the *Norridgewock*, *Arreaguscook*, *Wewenock* and *St. John's* Tribes, and the *Indians* of the other Tribes now or late inhabiting in the Eastern and Northern Parts of His Majesty's Territories of *New-England*, and in Alliance and Confederacy with the aforesaid Tribes, the *Penobscot* only excepted, to be Enemies, Rebels and Traitors to His Most Sacred Majesty; And I do hereby require His Majesty's Officers of this Province to embrace all Opportunities of pursuing, capturing, killing and destroying all and any of the aforesaid *Indians*, the *Penobscot* excepted.

AND WHEREAS the General Court of this Province have voted, That a Bounty or Encouragement be granted and allowed to be paid out of the Publick-Treasury to the marching Army that shall be employed for the Defence of the Eastern and Western Frontiers from the Twenty-fifth of this Month of *June* until the Twenty-fifth of *November* next;

I have thought fit to publish the same; and I do hereby promise, That there shall be paid out of the Province-Treasury to all and any of the said Officers, and above their Bounty upon Enlistment, their Wages and Subsistence, the Premiums or Bounties following, viz.

- For every Male Indian Prisoner above the Age of Twelve Years, that shall be taken and brought to *Boston*, Fifty Pounds.
- For every Male Indian Scalp, brought in as Evidence of their being killed, Forty Pounds.
- For every Female Indian Prisoner, taken and brought in as aforesaid, and for every Male Indian Prisoner under the Age of Twelve Years, taken and brought in as aforesaid, Twenty-five Pounds.
- For every Scalp of such Female Indian or Male Indian under Twelve Years of Age, brought as Evidence of their being killed, as aforesaid, Twenty Pounds.

GIVEN under my Hand at *Boston*, in the Province aforesaid, this Twelfth Day of *June*, 1755, and in the Twenty-eighth Year of the Reign of our Sovereign Lord *GEORGE the Second*, by the Grace of *GOD*, of Great-Britain, France, and Ireland, KING, Defender of the Faith, &c.

By His Excellency's Command,
J. WILLARD, Secy.

W. Shirley.

GOD Save the KING.

Printed by John Draper, Printer to His

the Honourable His Majesty's COUNCIL. 1755.

FIGURE 1. British 1755 proclamation offering 40 pounds for an adult Indian male and 20 pounds for the scalp of an Indian woman or child.

From the seventeenth to the early eighteenth century, the history of the people includes massive massacres and wars with the Europeans.⁷ During this time, indigenous leaders developed a political alliance to challenge European warfare, the Waponahki Confederacy, which lasted into the 1860s.⁸ In the early 1700s, Queen Anne of England commenced compensating her people for Native American scalps and bounties began to be paid for the scalps of Waponahki. Issuing such bounties after prohibiting gun sales to Native people grossly disadvantaged them in defending themselves and made it easier to kill off the Waponahki.⁹ A specific bounty for Penobscot scalps was issued in 1755, about one hundred years after the Waponahki gun prohibition.

In an attempt to halt the decimation of Penobscot from the 1775 scalping bounties, Penobscot Chief Joseph Orono, accompanied by a delegation of Penobscots, pledged an alliance with the English in Watertown, Massachusetts.¹⁰ In 1818, the Waponahki and the state of Massachusetts signed a treaty establishing and allocating reservation

lands.¹¹ In 1820, when Maine became a state, no longer part of Massachusetts, the tribes negotiated for a tribal political representative with the state of Maine. At that time, the Waponahki of Maine were considered wards of the state.¹² In 1842, the positions of tribal representatives in the Maine House of Representatives went into effect, and are still current today. Maine is the only US state with tribal representatives.¹³ Chosen by tribal elections, the Penobscot and the Passamaquoddy each have a representative in the House, and each has the authority to speak and to sponsor legislation. These are, however, the only two seats in the House of Representatives that are prohibited from voting.¹⁴

From the early 1880s until the early twentieth century, Waponahki children were sent to federally operated residential schools, primarily the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, where students were not permitted to speak any Native language.¹⁵ During this time, reservation life was imposed. With the people no longer able to move throughout the region and live off the land, the Waponahki way of life and the traditional economic system was disrupted. A dramatic shift in work and economic subsistence occurred as the people moved from traditional hunting and fishing to a heavier reliance on making and selling baskets, guiding, logging, and construction.¹⁶ In 1924, Native Americans won citizenship status, but were not given the right to vote in federal elections until 1954.

The Second World War and the 1950s marked many transitions and further dislocation for the Waponahki. The Waponahki endured severe poverty and unemployment during this time. Many Waponahki men enlisted in the military and joined the war effort overseas, while wartime disruptions forced numerous remaining Waponahki families to leave their reservation communities for factory jobs located in the Boston, Bridgeport, and Hartford areas. These migrations off-reservation had the result of imposing a significant shift from Native languages to English, as off-reservation schools enforced English-language only policies, and teachers went so far as to approach parents in their homes to encourage them to speak only English with their children.¹⁷ In 1952 the first bridge was built between the home of the Penobscot Indian Nation, Indian Island, to Old Town on the mainland.¹⁸ The right to vote in state and local elections was granted to the Waponahki in 1967, twelve years after the right to vote in national elections. Maine marks the last US state in the to grant Native people such as the Waponahki the right to vote.¹⁹

The 1970s and 1980s saw a series of legal challenges for land and changes in legislation. In 1972, the Passamaquoddy tribe and Penobscot Nation filed a lawsuit claiming two-thirds of the State of Maine.²⁰ The claim included 12.5 million acres of land granted in treaties that had not been ratified by Congress. The Penobscot and the Passamaquoddy were relying upon the Indian Nonintercourse Act of 1790, which dictates that Indian lands can only be acquired with the approval of the United States Congress.²¹ The land in question thereby would remain under the continuing ownership of the Passamaquoddy and Penobscot. In 1975, the Penobscot and Passamaquoddy were granted federal recognition, which gave reservation communities access to much-needed federal funding for housing, education, and infrastructure. In 1980, the Maine Indian Claims Settlement Act was signed into law. The act recognized that the treaties

had not been ratified by Congress, but it did not award the tribes ownership of their previous landholdings. Instead, monetary compensation was granted so they could buy back certain lands within their traditional territories.²²

With these events the Waponahki people began to return to their own ways of thinking and to dismantle the frame of colonization that held them tightly within systems that were crushing and overpowering them as Waponahki people. As we move along that path towards renewal, my own story as a Waponahki woman and researcher is one of many.

MOBILIZING TRUTHS OF INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND GIRLS

It would be impossible for me to write about the Squaw Law without invoking a deep connection to my identity. As my mind and heart are the same, I approach my research knowing that many Native women's hearts are heavy. Poverty and crime statistics also reveal the realities of what indigenous women in Maine, the United States, and Canada face in the legislative development of the Squaw Bill. My intent in humanizing the following statistics is to position them as more than mere numbers, to register and mark the reality we as Native women face. We are more impoverished than any other demographic group; statistics show that indigenous women have the highest rates of socioeconomic distress of any racial or ethnic group in Canada or the United States.²³ In the state of Maine we are four times more likely to be poor than white women.²⁴ In Canada almost half (47%) of Aboriginal women are living in poverty.²⁵ We are the least likely to be homeowners in our own homelands.²⁶ We have the highest suicide rates of any population group in the country and are two to seven times more likely to commit suicide than white people.²⁷ The Canadian Task Force on Preventative Health Care reports that Native women are more likely to attempt suicide than Native men, but our men are four times more likely to "succeed" in their suicide attempts.²⁸ Because the majority of suicides are committed by young people, mothers grieving their children's untimely deaths are secondary victims.

In April of 1997, I organized a gathering of more than fifty Waponahki youth to attend a conference, where Mary Basset from Sipayik, the Passamaquoddy reservation in Pleasant Point, Maine, facilitated a Re-evaluation Counseling workshop. She had us all sit in a circle, then asked us to stand if we ourselves or any of our friends or family had ever tried to, or had committed, suicide. Everyone stood up. I wept, overwhelmed at seeing these familiar statistics come alive, at the pain reflected on the faces of the Native youth in our circle. Suicide statistics come screamingly alive at funerals of young suicide victims. My personal experiences attending such ceremonies are among the most painful of my life. In the youth circle, Mary Basset went on to remind the group that as Waponahki people, "we were not supposed to be here." Addressing the genocidal bounty document we have survived (fig. 1), Mary paralleled high suicide rates experienced by indigenous communities with a need to acknowledge the initial and ongoing attempts to eradicate our people. The fact that *we are still here* speaks to the extraordinary resilience and values of kinship care intrinsic to Waponahki people, which has helped us survive and thrive in contradiction to the loss imposed by colonial oppression.

COLONIZATION, SEXUAL VIOLENCE, AND THE “S WORD”

Racially motivated sexual violence against indigenous women is repeatedly analyzed as central to colonization.²⁹ This history of sexual violence is inseparable from various uses of the “S word.” The literature points to varying interpretations of the word, but the scholarly consensus is that it is a harshly degrading negative term to use in reference to a Native woman. Mark Monmonier asserts that for Indian women it is not a neutral term, but rather an offensive reference that can mean “whore” in various indigenous languages.³⁰ While Monmonier also remarks that most mainstream white Americans understand the “S word” to be inoffensive, evidence for this mainstream view is sorely lacking. In contrast, other scholars find the “S word” to be intentionally offensive and to have violent impacts. Some identify the “S word” to mean “prostitute,” “female genitalia,” “angry Indian woman,” or “Indian princess.”³¹

In the fall of 1999, shortly before the legislation was passed, I spoke on the phone with a representative at the Native American Rights Fund (NARF), when it was relayed to me that the term was analogous to the “C word” and that European invaders had Anglicized the “S word” from the Algonquian word *sque/esquao*, or “woman.” That many members of NARF are Native American attorneys lends support to this history. Europeans would use the “S word” as an incitement, grabbing Native women’s crotches and violently raping and assaulting them.³² Although NARF’s definition was offered during the process of legislation discussion, it was not used by the media because the “C word” is considered by many mainstream Americans to be deeply offensive. Instead, commercial media outlets, such as *20/20*, used the Webster’s dictionary definition of “squaw,” an offensive word for American Indian people generally, and American Indian women, particularly. Parezo and Jones likewise explain that in terms of offensiveness, the “C word” is a contemporary analogy to the “S word.”³³ Their research refers to the sexual violence associated with the term during the 1850s California Gold Rush, when Native women were consistently referred to as the “S word” as they were kidnapped, raped, and killed.³⁴ *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* documents extensively how sexual violence against Native women has built the nations of Canada and United States, and documents the horror that the “S word” has heaped upon Native women:

When I served as a nonviolent witness for the Chippewa spearfishers who were being harassed by white racist mobs in the 1980’s, one white harasser carried a sign that read, “Save a fish; spear a pregnant squaw.” During the 1990 Mohawk crisis in Quebec, Canada, a white mob surrounded an ambulance carrying a Native woman who was attempting to leave the Mohawk reservation because she was haemorrhaging after giving birth. She was forced to spread her legs to prove she had delivered a baby. The police at the scene refused to intervene.³⁵

In Indian country, there is no more offensive term that refers to Native woman than the “S word.” Perhaps most importantly, together with every Native woman in my circle of relatives, acquaintances, and colleagues, I understand and experience the word to be the most denigrating way to refer to me, a Native woman.

Although the extensive and historically complex etymology of the “S word” warrants a thorough study on its own, such an undertaking is outside the scope of this commentary, nor would it necessarily contribute to my arguments in support of the legislative and lobbying work of the Waponahki people to remove the word from mainstream usage. This is not to say that within its own Algonquian context the primal good inherent in the “S word” should be forgotten or set aside, but rather to emphasize the purpose of this legislation: to insist that we will no longer permit our language to be used by those who have violated us as Native women. With this Maine legislation, the reminder of that historical moment when our grandmothers were only a receptacle for the invader’s sperm dies. We did not give up our own word to name ourselves as Algonquian women, but we silenced the voice of the violator. The significance of the legislation is that resituating of voice and position.

Moreover, not only do such policies set the normative behavior for institutions and governments, but also through law, racism has been and continues to be institutionalized and made systemic. The assimilationist policy and genocidal intention of the residential school system, for example, was based on the supremacy of whiteness.³⁶ When racism is ignored in policy considerations and institutional practice, it is in effect, tolerated and perpetuated.³⁷ Indigenous peoples of Canada and the United States are legislated against more than any other groups and more laws in both countries have been enacted to respond to Native people as a “problem” than any other group.³⁸ Given that race is not a biological reality, its legacy serves only to legitimate lingering colonial power and re-legitimate neocolonial forms of domination and subordination.³⁹ Legislation against indigenous peoples is simply another tool of racism wielded by the colonial apparatus. To address racism and interlocking systems of social oppression, Calliste and Dei discuss “an educational and political action-oriented strategy for institutional and systemic change.”⁴⁰ According to Tuhiwai-Smith, such decolonization engages the social oppression created by imperialism and colonialism at multiple levels.⁴¹ A word of empowerment, decolonization reclaims human rights and revitalizes indigenous languages, cultures, and humanity. Decolonization offers the hope that racism will be contradicted by anti-racist strategies.

“S WORD” STORIES AND DECOLONIZATION

This section provides context for the legislative development of the Squaw Law. Many stories wove this law into being: stories of sexual harassment, abuse, badgering, and violence. While I include my personal experiences with the “S word” in this commentary, my strand is only one of many threads woven into the policy. I took an active role organizing for this bill and had distinct responsibility for lobbying and testifying. The political climate at the time was particularly intense, with many Maine Indian issues on the table. Significantly, a state referendum had recently denied the Waponahki tribes the ability to have our own casino. Representative Soctomah explained to me that, given our recent media presence on the casino referendum, the political timing was positive to introduce the Squaw Law; that is, due to the political loss of rights to

a casino, he and others felt that legislators would support an alternative bill that would not require state funding in the ways that a casino might do.

Because story-sharing mobilizes change, it guided us in weaving the base of our policy. At the beginning of the process, I was joined by numerous Waponahki women at a meeting in Augusta, where we shared our stories about the pain associated with the use of this word. At the time, I was not aware of how the ways in which we were organizing were within our Waponahki intellectual tradition. A few people were hesitant to move forward in the process, either fearful of the harsh and racist response from white power or reluctant to believe we could make change. My mother, a Penobscot tribal councillor, served an integral role in initiating the political energy of the group. She motivated them, speaking strongly about the need to make this legislation happen: if we didn't do it, then no one would. She reminded us that "only Indians are going to really care about and make change for other Indians." More than fifty Waponahki women traveled to the legislature the day that the hearings took place.

In my testimony to the legislature, I referred to my research on the poignant history of the origins of the "S word." I also shared my own first experiences with the "S word," both in the initial meeting with the other women and in my testimony to the legislature to help them understand the importance of eradicating the word from state place-names. As a little girl, I had never heard it. Then in 1980 I began attending an off-reserve Catholic school where I was the only Native child. While there were a handful of other children of color, the school was predominantly white. In fourth grade, I was part of the subsidized hot lunch program. One day I had just received mine and was walking with my full tray to find a place to sit. This was an anxiety-filled daily occurrence. I often felt worried after receiving my lunch about where I would sit, whom I would sit with, and where I would be welcomed. I wore two long braids and glasses. As I walked toward the tables with my tray full, I neared an older boy, the son of a well-known doctor. This boy, who had tremendous social capital and the unearned privilege of being a white male in a predominantly white context, said my name in a very friendly way. I felt good in that moment that he, in particular, had sought my attention. I looked up as he tripped me, my lunch flying from my hands, my glasses popping off my face as I fell to the ground on my knees. My eyesight was always terrible, and I could not see well without my glasses. Then I heard him call me "Dirty Squaw!" and the children at his lunch table laughed.

I was humiliated. I felt confused since I had never heard that word before, but I sensed that it had something to do with me as a Native person, given the boys were slapping their mouths with their hands. A male teacher who had witnessed it all picked up my glasses, grabbed the boy by the arm, and scolded him. Later the boy was forced to apologize. I was alone in the coatroom when he approached me with the same friendliness I had hoped for before, only this time he apologized. He said that he didn't mean anything by it, because he thought that the "S word" was a word for an Indian girl. I don't remember what else he said, but I distinctly remember feeling embarrassed. I didn't want to revisit it; I wanted it to go away. I readily accepted his apology. I didn't want any conflict and I didn't want to be singled out. In fact, I even

related to him that it was not a problem. There were other times I was called the “S word” as a child, but this is the most lasting story that I remember.

The incident in my story took place in 1982, shortly after the passing of the original offensive place-names bill that eradicated the “N word.” At the time, tribal leaders had attempted to include the “S word” but this was rejected by the legislature, and the bill subsequently passed to eradicate only state place-names with the “N word.” Soctomah explained that there was a fear by tribal leaders at the time that trying to push for the “S word” to be included on the offensive names bill of 1978 might have compromised the land claims case. In the process of developing the legislation, Soctomah was questioned by legislators as to why he, a Native man, was sponsoring it. His answer, which he shared with me, shows that Native men are also affected by the treatment of Native women: “In a tribal group, you can’t direct something at one person without affecting everyone, I heard this word a lot growing up and knew first-hand the damage done by it. . . . I was raised by women and that motivated me.”⁴² Indeed, more than half of the Native men in the United States and Canada have been raised by single mothers. Moreton-Robinson explains that the sexual exploitation of Native women plays a significant role in damaging indigenous peoples as a whole and is a significant reason for high rates of socioeconomic distress.⁴³

She further attributes this to miscegenation, a process through which “Indigenous men’s dignity and identity have suffered because of the sexual exploitation of Indigenous women.”⁴⁴ Violent miscegenation was first directed at indigenous women with the use of the “S word,” which was used as an incitement for some white men to rape indigenous women.⁴⁵ (Although same-race violence upon Native women is also a harsh reality, that too is a painful legacy of colonialism and oppression.) To O’Shane, the impact of violent miscegenation is the imposed mixing of blood and races/ethnicities of peoples. Native men, therefore, also suffer a legacy of brokenness from the sexual oppression of Native women. Racially motivated rape “takes the dignity and power away from the Indigenous men”⁴⁶ and imparts a devastating impact carried in the blood memory of our indigenous brothers, fathers, grandfathers, uncles, sons, and nephews.⁴⁷ Andrea Smith acknowledges how such sexual violence is rooted in colonial oppression: “The history of sexual violence and genocide among Native women illustrates how gender violence functions as a tool for racism and colonialism among women of color in general.”⁴⁸ I remain concerned about the possibilities of words like the “S word” being used as a potent tool of colonialism to justify rape, and how those possibilities inform present-day conditions of indigenous society.

As a ten-year-old child, I chose not to report the incident at school to my family because I didn’t want attention paid to my difference, or any further conflict. My experience exists in stark contrast to children’s reactions to racial harassment today, which speaks to the power of the progress made by decolonizing laws. In 2005, Danielle Altvater (Passamaquoddy), a ten-year old girl, initiated her own research, and then wrote and delivered a speech to her elementary school about how offensive this word is and the importance of the law. Danielle Altvater’s words reveal the importance of the law for a Passamaquoddy girl. She was the same age as I was when I was violently made aware of the word. Her awareness represents implications of this legislation

toward effective decolonization: "All women are strong in many ways, and I'm not just talking about Native women. Women of all races. Native women were very strong to point out how hurtful the use of squaw is, and to work to eliminate the word from everyday use."⁴⁹ As an adult reading her words against the background of being racially harassed as a child, I feel mobilized to act, and as I analyze the law today, I am hopeful that this legislation will aid the progress of positive social change and decolonization. While girls are still being called the "S word," the difference is that today there is the curricular space to engage with the truth of this word and its history.⁵⁰ There has been progress countering its ahistorical definition as "merely" a descriptive word for a Native woman.⁵¹

DISCOURSE OF DEHUMANIZATION AND THE "S WORD"

After the testimony by Waponahki women, the Squaw Law received national media attention. This was likely a result of the efforts of Passamaquoddy Tribal Representative Soctomah and Penobscot Tribal Representative Donna Loring to publicize the bill. When the prime-time news magazine *20/20* contacted Soctomah, many tribal members were excited about the national coverage for issues that were usually invisible. Loring flew to New York City for an interview, where she shared the excitement and enthusiasm felt by Waponahki tribal members. Many people from our communities prepared to watch the episode, anticipating a positive impact on the upcoming vote in the legislature. The *20/20* piece aired on the evening of March 10th, only five days before this bill was to be voted on. It turned out to be a fitting climax to the racism that we had endured throughout the entire legislative process. John Stossel ran the story as part of the "Gimme a Break!" feature that week. Barbara Walters and Stossel claimed that the name change was totally unnecessary. The *20/20* piece mocked the issue and characterized it as futile, unnecessary, and a waste of taxpayers' dollars. Walters suggested, erroneously, that we don't know what we want to be called, Indians or Native Americans. She was tired of all the political correctness. Stossel responded by repeating, "Gimme a break." Walters asked, "What do they want next, their land back?" We watched in shock and disbelief. They had transformed our moment of celebration, happiness, and recognition into one of pain and helpless anger. Their denial of racism was a painful reminder of the power of discourse to dehumanize.

The piece concluded with Stossel repeating "Gimme a break!" and Walter commenting, "They don't even celebrate Columbus Day!"⁵² Walters apparently believed that Native people should celebrate a holiday that, as numerous indigenous people have made clear, devalues and disregards Native Americans. bell hooks puts these kinds of mass media events into a larger societal context: "Looking at the impact of mass media on the self-esteem of black children/children of color is important because they encounter a pedagogy of race and racism long before they enter any classroom settings . . . in a classroom where children are taught that Columbus discovered America, as though the continent was previously uninhabited, children are being covertly taught that Native American people and their culture was not worthy or valued."⁵³

In her account of how the legislation was negotiated, Maine House of Representatives tribal representative Loring speaks about the importance to settlers of dehumanizing the Waponahki in order to keep us colonized.⁵⁴ She compares the tactic to one she learned from her military experience in Vietnam. Just as Army training taught US soldiers to see the Vietnamese as not human, our people have also been dehumanized. When a media figure such as Barbara Walters scoffs at Maine Indian people wanting their land back, she undermines and dehumanizes a people in order to justify the occupation and takeover of their territory. This dehumanization of Waponahki people also facilitates their continued colonization.⁵⁵ Walters's and Stossel's attitudes protect national identity in service of controlling land. If people are subhuman or uncivilized or reduced to the "S word," their subjugation can be more easily rationalized, and facilitate the loss of their rights to possessions of any sort.

Loring comments on this event in her book, *In the Shadow of the Eagle*, which chronicles her time as a tribal representative in the Maine House of Representatives:

I expected something like this, but not such negativity from Barbara Walters. I must say I was really disappointed and surprised at her ignorance and total disrespect for Indian issues . . . I am certain that had this been an African-American organization or group targeted by those insensitive comments, they both would be apologizing profusely and maybe even looking for another job! How could they get away with such disrespect toward Native people on national television?⁵⁶

Loring references the heaviness felt by Native people as an outcome of the discourse of denial of racism.⁵⁷ The 20/20 incident with Barbara Walters remains a clear example of how the colonization and control of our lands has required the continued and public dehumanization of us as a people.

CONCLUSION: POLITICAL WILL AND RED HOPE

Poverty statistics show that right now there are hungry Native children with mothers unable to feed them. As I write about the Squaw Law, I am reminded that the hearts and minds of our women must be honored, and those realities shared in every context. These realities—however painfully embedded in our daily, hourly lives—are invisible in mainstream society. Penobscot Elder ssipsis, a writer and activist, once told a group of my Waponahki female peers, "As Native people we have to think about white people every day and white people don't ever have to think about us."⁵⁸

Many of the women organizing well understand the 1755 genocidal bounty calling for the scalps of our ancestors, including the lower value placed on Penobscot women's lives; her scalp or capture was worth half of those of a Penobscot man (fig. 1). These scalping bounties were prevalent along the eastern seaboard, and, as Mi'kmaw lawyer Pamela D. Palmater indicates, they "represented the first state-sanctioned cases of murdered and missing Indigenous women."⁵⁹ Today, Native women in both Canada and the United States continue to suffer a disproportionately high risk of violence and are six times more likely to be murdered than non-Native women. Many of us know at least one woman who has gone missing and is unaccounted for. According

to the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC), in 2010 there were 582 documented cases of known women who were missing and murdered. To provide a comparison, "if this figure were applied proportionately to the rest of the female population there would be over 18,000 missing Canadian women and girls."⁶⁰ Even worse, since these figures were released in 2010, NWAC estimates that there are more than 1,200 missing and murdered women. In proportion, this equates to more than 30,000 non-Aboriginal women and girls.

The violence associated with the "S word" is heavily linked to both dehumanizing Native women and normalizing their disappearance. The social acceptance of this 1,200 missing and murdered number marks the contemporary genocidal bounty on Native women's lives. Indeed, if 30,000 non-Aboriginal Canadian women and girls went missing, a national crisis would be rightfully proclaimed. Indigenous women deserve similar human rights. These are the truths that drove Waponahki women to organize, testify, and celebrate the passing of the Squaw Law. Before passage of the Squaw Law on April 3, 2000, the process of reclaiming humanity was deeply engaged to create those necessary spaces I call Red Hope. Firsthand knowledge of oppression was able to directly inform policy development. Many of us wept tears of victory, as it meant the overdue honoring of all the Native ancestors who came before us, who suffered so violently and unnecessarily. Waponahki women organizing for the Squaw Law were mobilized by their own direct knowledge of our harsh realities and claimed the role of victors in the process of social and political change. Reclaiming our identities and humanity meant dismantling the racialized epithet celebrated in place-names throughout our state, making space for the honoring and thriving to happen.

The Maine legislation removed twenty-five state place-names containing the "S word" from locations in seven counties.⁶¹ "Big Squaw Mountain," for example, was changed to "Big Moose Mountain." Maine was the second state in the nation to do so, after Montana in 1999. Businesses, however, were not held legally accountable under the legislation, and most chose to keep the "S word" in their establishments' names, such as the racist epithet "Big Squaw Mountain Ski Resort." This local business owner publicly denounced the legislation as harming his business and "justified" his decision by saying he personally often uses the "S word" to refer to his wife.⁶² As of 2008, nine of the fifty states have passed similar legislation eradicating offensive state place-names with the "S word."⁶³ Progress may seem slow, as the majority of states need to step up and support the rights of indigenous women. As the late Penobscot elder, scholar, and basket maker Rene Attean cautioned, "White people tend to think we are like a convenience store, they like to come in and buy the candy, the M&Ms of our culture and spirituality and leave behind all the cleaning products, like the oppression, colonialism and racism."⁶⁴ As in the past, if Native women are to become honored and thriving, instead of missing and murdered, such change will require the political will of non-indigenous people to meaningfully engage with the more difficult task of taking up Attean's "cleaning products" to address colonial oppression and racism. Also critical is the acknowledgment of Red Hope: that indigenous people will continue to be the leaders in asserting our rights in order to effect social and political change.

NOTES

1. Maine Indian Tribal-State Commission, "Proposal to Drop 'Squaw' from Place Names in Maine" (Indian Tribal-State Commission Documents, Paper 15, 2000).
2. Author, broadcaster, and tribal representative Donna Loring, interview with the author, January 20, 2010.
3. Daniel N. Paul, *We Were Not the Savages: A Mi'kmaq Perspective on the Collision Between European and Native American Civilizations* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2000); Russell Thornton, *American Indian Holocaust and Survival: A Population History Since 1492* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987).
4. Paul, *We Were Not the Savages*; "Penobscot Nation Oral History Project," collaborative research, Penobscot Nation and University of Southern Maine, 1993.
5. Harald Prins, "Turmoil on the Wabanaki Frontier, 1524–1678," in *Maine: The Pine Tree State from Prehistory to the Present*, ed. Richard W. Judd, Edwin A. Churchill, and Joel W. Eastman (Orono: University of Maine Press, 1995), 97–119.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. *Peskotomuhkati Wolastoqewi Latuwewakon; A Passamaquoddy-Maliseet Dictionary*, ed. David A. Francis, Robert M. Leavitt, and Margaret Apt (Fredericton: Goose Lane Editions, 2008), 3–11.
9. Paul, *We Were Not the Savages*.
10. *The Wabanakis of Maine and the Maritimes: A resource book about the Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, Maliseet, Micmac and Abenaki Indians*, ed. American Friends Service Committee (Philadelphia: American Friends Service Committee, 1989).
11. Ibid.
12. Donna M. Loring, *In the Shadow of the Eagle: A Tribal Representative in Maine* (Gardiner: Tilbury House, 2008).
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. *Peskotomuhkati*, 3–11.
16. *The Wabanakis*.
17. *Peskotomuhkati*, 3–11.
18. Darren Ranco, "Environmental Risk and Politics in Eastern Maine: The Penobscot Indian Nation and the USEPA" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2000).
19. *The Wabanakis*.
20. Ibid.
21. *Peskotomuhkati*, 3–11.
22. Ranco, "Environmental Risk."
23. Statistics Canada, <http://www5.statcan.gc.ca/cansim/a26?lang=eng>; United States Census Data, <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/race/censr-28.pdf>.
24. Ibid.
25. "Women and Poverty," Women's Legal Education and Action Fund, http://www.leaf.ca/education/documents/EdHO_Women_Poverty.pdf.
26. "United States Census Data," <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/race/censr-28.pdf>.
27. "Centers for Disease Control and Prevention," <http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/wisqars>.
28. Ibid.
29. See Andrea Smith, *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2008), 15; Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin' Up to the White Woman* (St. Lucia:

University of Queensland Press, 2000); Ward Churchill, "A Question of Identity," in *A Will to Survive: Indigenous Essays*, ed. Stephen Greymorning (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004), 59; Winona LaDuke, "Foreword," in Andrea Smith, *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2008), ix–xviii.

30. Mark Monmonier, *From Squaw Tit to Whorehouse Meadow: How Maps Name, Claim, and Inflame* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

31. See Debra Merskin, "The S-Word: Discourse, Stereotypes, and the American Indian Woman," *Howard Journal of Communications* 21, no. 4 (2010): 345, doi: 10.1080/10646175.2010.519616; Nancy J. Parezo and Angelina R. Jones, "What's in a Name?: The 1940s–1950s 'Squaw Dress,'" *American Indian Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (2009): 373, doi: 10.1353/aiq.0.0058.

32. Native American Rights Fund, conversation with the author, 2000.

33. Parezo and Jones, "What's in a Name?," 373.

34. Ibid.

35. Smith, *Conquest*, 28.

36. Bernard Schissel and Terry Wotherspoon, *The Legacy of School for Aboriginal People: Education, Oppression, and Emancipation* (Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2003).

37. Joyce Green, "From Stonechild to Social Cohesion: Anti-Racist Challenges for Saskatchewan," *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue canadienne de science politique* 39, no. 3 (2006), 507–27, doi: 10.1017/S0008423906060215. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith, reminds us, the term "indigenous" is not a racial indicator; it is more often a political identification locating a people to an ancestral homeland and signifying a shared history of relationships and impacts associated with colonization. Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1999). We who identify as indigenous peoples base our identities and the principles and patterns of our relationships and interactions on integral connections of people to territory and land. According to the Elders, the land is in the hearts and minds of the people; see Sharon Helen Venne, *Our Elders Understand Our Rights: Evolving International Law Regarding Indigenous Peoples* (Penticton: Theytus Books, 1999). In the context of oppression, being indigenous can be racially constructed because being Native or Aboriginal is racialized by society, individuals, and institutions. Superficial features and society's ideological reactions to these physical features racialize indigenous identity (an indigenous, Aboriginal, or Native person is typically perceived by the dominant society as someone having brown skin, dark hair, and dark eyes). Racial profiling is one obvious result of the racialization of indigenous peoples in Canada and the United States. Racial profiling of indigenous peoples involves the attribution of negative stereotypical characteristics based on stereotypical physical identifiers, and is commonly played out in public spaces where a binary power differential exists in the relationship, i.e. teacher/student.

38. Vine Deloria Jr., *American Indian Policy in the Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985); Churchill, "A Question of Identity," 59; Sandy Grande, "American Indian Identity and Intellectualism: The Quest for a New Red Pedagogy," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 13, no. 4 (2000), 343–59, doi: 10.1080/095183900413296; Vine Deloria Jr., *Spirit and Reason: The Vine Deloria Jr. Reader* (Golden: Fulcrum, 1999).

39. Rejecting three premises of racial ideology, Critical Race Theory (CRT) holds archaic humans did not have distinct subspecies, contemporary humans are not divisible into biological races, and as biology, race has no scientific value. Derived from the Civil Rights movement in the United States, it is notable that CRT was developed in a legal context to disentangle the racisms embedded in US laws and legal system. See Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2001). CRT is particularly significant in education policy in partnership with legal policy, either preceding legislation or invoking it. Policy here is defined as anything the government formally decides to do or not to do. See Frances Abele, Carolyn Dittburner, and

Katherine A. Graham, "Toward a Shared Understanding in the Policy Discussion about Aboriginal Education," in *Aboriginal Education: Fulfilling the Promise*, ed. Marlene Brant Castellano, Lynne Davis, and Louise Lahache (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2000). Hence, policy and law are relatives that need to be reunited in understanding how racism is perpetuated. Furthermore, for the colonization of indigenous peoples, the colonial enterprise has necessitated racism. In his seminal work extending critical race theory to indigenous people, in the process of developing Tribal Critical Race Theory American Indian scholar Bryan Brayboy locates racism as a colonial apparatus and identifies colonization as endemic to society. Brayboy points out that while CRT, developed by black civil rights lawyers, addresses the racism experienced by African Americans, it is TCRT that engages with both the racialization of American Indians and the impacts of colonization. Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy, "Toward a Tribal Critical Race Theory in Education," *The Urban Review* 37, no. 5 (2006), doi: 10.1007/s11256-005-0018-y.

40. *Power, Knowledge and Anti-Racism Education: A Critical Reader*, ed. George J. Sefa Dei and Agnes Calliste (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2000).

41. Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*.

42. Tribal state representative, author, and historian Donald Soctomah, conversation with the author, January 11, 2010.

43. Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin' Up to the White Woman*.

44. *Ibid.*, 166.

45. Merskin, "The S-word: Discourse, Stereotypes," 345; Churchill, "A Question of Identity," 59.

46. *Ibid.*, 166.

47. Pat O'Shane, "Is There Any Relevance in the Women's Movement for Aboriginal Women?" *Refractory Girl: A Journal of Radical Feminist Thought* 12 (September 1976): 31–34, quoted in Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin' Up to the White Woman*.

48. Smith, *Conquest*, 15.

49. Danielle Altwater, "Indian Island School Speech Contest Essay" (presentation, Indian Island School Speech Contest, Indian Island, ME, May 14, 2005).

50. See Rebecca Cardinal Sockbeson, "Waponahki Intellectual Tradition of Weaving Educational Policy," *The Alberta Journal of Educational Research* 55, no. 3 (2009), 351–64, ajer.synergiesprairies.ca/ajer/index.php/ajer/article/view/741; Rebecca Sockbeson, "Cipenuk Red Hope: Weaving Policy toward Decolonization and Beyond," PhD diss., University of Alberta, 2011, <https://era.library.ualberta.ca/files/w08929935>; US Department of Education, White House Initiative on American Indian and Alaska Native Education, *School Environment Listening Sessions Final Report* (Washington, DC: 2015), <http://sites.ed.gov/whiaiane/files/2015/12/81326-SchoolEnvir.-394-260.pdf>.

51. Churchill, "A Question of Identity," 59.

52. Loring, *Shadow of the Eagle*, 45.

53. bell hooks, *Teaching Community; A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 95.

54. Donna Loring interview, January 20, 2010.

55. *Ibid.*

56. Loring, *Shadow of the Eagle*, 45.

57. Verna St. Denis and Eber Hampton, *Literature Review on Racism and the Effects on Aboriginal Education*, prepared for Minister's National Working Group on Education (Ottawa: Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 2002).

58. Author, activist, and artist sspis, conversation with the author, October 15, 1995.

59. Pamela Palmater, "International Women's Day: Indigenous Women Still Not Equal in Canada," *CBC News* (March 7, 2015), <http://www.cbc.ca/news/aboriginal/international-women-s-day-indigenous-women-still-not-equal-in-canada-1.2985100>.

60. Native Women's Association of Canada, *Ontario Women's Health Network E-Bulletin*, "Voices of our Sisters in Spirit: A Report to Families and Communities" (Fall 2009), <http://www.ownh.on.ca/pdfs/Voices%20FINAL.pdf>.
61. Loring, *Shadow of the Eagle*, 45.
62. Pam Belluck, "A County Has a Word for It. Problem Is, It's 'Moose,'" *The New York Times*, February 21, 2002, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/02/21/us/a-county-has-a-word-for-it-problem-is-it-s-moose.html>.
63. Marisol Bello, "Pressure for Place Names to Drop 'Squaw,'" *USA Today*, April 30, 2008, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/washington/2008-04-29-namechange_N.htm. These are the most recent statistics I have been able to locate.
64. Sockbeson, "Cipenuk Red Hope," 103.