

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Choctaw Women in a Chaotic World: The Clash of Cultures in the Colonial Southeast. By Michelene E. Pesantubbee.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9dw4z3mb>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 29(3)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Hilden, Patricia Penn

Publication Date

2005-06-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

in the primary documents of this literature, as Sivils suggests in his chosen name for the collection, *Chinnubbie and the Owl*. Posey frequently deployed a figure of his own invention named Chinnubbie Harjo, who was a great orator but also a trickster hero, with all of the ambiguity that the term carries in the Native American canon. In the story from which this collection draws its title, Chinnubbie wins a costly bow-and-arrows set in a storytelling contest. He does so partially by conflating himself with the Creek medicine men and prophets, the *hillis haya*, who, as a badge of their expertise, often wore owl's feathers or carried stuffed owls (30–31). In the story, Chinnubbie Harjo deploys an owl to attest to the verisimilitude of his tale (31). Sivils writes that “Posey’s prophets are also tricksters,” and indeed it is an interesting contribution of Posey’s work that tricksters and wise men are so often conflated (31). Like Chinnubbie Harjo, the trickster whose name became Posey’s own pseudonym, and the Creek wisdom signified by the owl, Posey and his work are richly enigmatic and serve both cultural and critical desires (11). This collection thus enriches and complicates our understanding of the late Indian Territory milieu of which Posey was a vibrant node. Surely now, with this collection and the works of Littlefield and Womack, we can all recognize his central importance in Native literary studies.

Tol Foster

University of Wisconsin, Madison

Choctaw Women in a Chaotic World: The Clash of Cultures in the Colonial Southeast. By Michelene E. Pesantubbee. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005. 240 pages. \$39.95 cloth; \$21.95 paper.

Choctaw Women in a Chaotic World addresses an important lacuna in much Native American historiography by examining the lives of women of one southeastern North American nation, the Choctaws. As is the case with most histories of Native America, women have been almost completely neglected by historians of the Choctaws, whose major sources, the writings and testimonies of male European explorers, conquerors, and settlers, have consistently overlooked or misunderstood the activities of Native women, including those they enslaved, used for their sexual gratification, married, or lived with in stable unions. With this work, Michelene Pesantubbee contributes to the project already undertaken by several other historians (including Patricia Galloway, Theda Perdue, and Karin Anderson): writing women back into their own histories and the histories of their nations. In addition to adopting many of the now time-honored techniques of women’s history (for example, reexamining familiar primary sources in order to find and articulate the presences of women, asking both fairly simple questions—“Where were the women?”—and more complex ones—“How was this event/catastrophe/transformation understood by women?”), Pesantubbee rejects the deference that afflicts many indigenous historians, who are so anxious to meet “professional standards” that they ignore the information carried in their own stories and

languages. Without apology, Pesantubbee explores the stories she has heard since childhood about Choctaw women, building on narrative details to speculate about events in the eighteenth-century colonial past.

Given the dearth of works that combine indigenous and Western approaches, Pesantubbee's book comes as a welcome addition that both extends how we think about the tribal past and enlarges our understanding of how being born into the indigenous world offers access to often-secret tribal ideas and stories that are not necessarily available to outsiders. Familiarity with that world prevents most indigenous historians from developing an unwarranted sole reliance upon the "official" or written documents so cherished by historians concerned with upholding professional standards. Pesantubbee's short introduction, which summarizes these concerns, is especially useful for students.

The work is organized into six thematic chapters plus a conclusion. Each takes up a different aspect of Choctaw life in the eighteenth century and explores it from the point of view of women. Throughout, Pesantubbee finds that women are absent in most extant documents, despite the considerable power and prestige that they enjoyed within Choctaw society before the arrival of Europeans. The Europeans misunderstood women's roles, and the depredations of invasion and conquest altered the behavior of both women and men, resulting in a gradual diminishment of women's status.

Pesantubbee focuses on a term commonly understood to describe outstanding Cherokee women: *beloved woman*. She is aware that this term, with all its varied and sometimes unclear ceremonial and political meanings, is still used in Choctaw stories and activities. Therefore she postulates that the designation *beloved* in the Choctaw world must have had the same deep historical roots more readily traced in Cherokee history. Moreover, because "the feminine" continues to be of considerable importance in Choctaw traditions, Pesantubbee is certain that the roles women played as both providers of food (performing agricultural labor and gathering food) and as mothers gave them at least as much importance in preinvasion Choctaw society as men, who supplied game, protected the tribe from capture by other tribes, and exacted retribution for captures and other breaches of tribal protocol. *Choctaw Women in a Chaotic World* establishes that the preinvasion world included both communally honored women and women given the high honorific name *beloved*. Pesantubbee simultaneously argues that the name *beloved*, together with the respect and honor it marked, gradually disappeared in the course of the early-eighteenth century as French activities forced dire changes in women's lives. Once the French began capturing and enslaving Choctaw women, once they and their enemies (the English and the Spanish) began to use mutually hostile tribes to capture significant numbers of indigenous women and children for the slave trade, women were no longer free to work their fields, gather wild foods, go about their business publicly, or even fight as warriors, torture their captives, and so forth. As Choctaw men increasingly protected women from outsiders, so women in turn were ever more restricted to spaces close inside villages or even inside their homes.

Pesantubbee argues that these changes set off a chain reaction that forever altered the writing of Choctaw history. Because the all-male invaders

and colonizers rarely saw post-invasion women taking a public role in Choctaw life, they did not record such activities. When they did write about women, moreover, they did so with the prejudices brought from their homelands, often assuming that Choctaw women were as subordinate to patriarchy as were European women of the time. Thus the documentary record—so valued by professional historians—is often silent on the worlds of Choctaw women, where lives unfolded in spaces to which male outsiders had less and less access. Whether the term *beloved* was still assigned to some women within the nation thus remains undocumented and, to a great extent, unknown.

Chapter 2 turns to a more general description of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century world of the lower Mississippi Valley, a layered description meant both to help explain women's disappearance from the record and to account for their relative disappearance from Choctaw public life. As Pesantubbee and many other historians have shown, this was a terrible time of death, capture, disease, and destruction for Choctaw people, a time when struggles among rival European invaders involved virtually all the Indian peoples of the region. As agricultural production was increasingly compromised (not least by the captivity or sexual enslavement of Native women), and as Europeans fostered a profitable Indian slave trade and turned Native attentions to the deerskin trade, the once-balanced economic world of Choctaw people turned not so much upside down as inside out. Women, once the providers of food for families and communities, began to disappear from view, living lives tightly restricted by the community's men, who were anxious to protect mothers, sisters, wives, and daughters from the sex- and slave-hungry Europeans. That these women's worlds became highly secretive, as Pesantubbee notes, is not surprising.

The European invaders were not only adventurers or profit seekers; they included those committed to gaining Indian souls for the Catholic church (which had earlier determined that they, unlike the Africans, *had* souls). Pesantubbee devotes the next chapter to an examination of the history of the Jesuits in the Mississippi Valley. The author shows how Catholic teachings and practices, as well as the mostly negative attitudes toward women brought with the European priests, began to transform traditional Choctaw ceremonial activities and, more importantly, male Choctaws' attitudes toward Choctaw women. Because women's ceremonial roles in Catholic rituals were never more than token and were always less important than those of men, Choctaw attitudes gradually began to resemble a model familiar in Europe. These factors, like those outlined earlier, further restricted and reshaped women's lives, not only removing them from public life but also providing justification for that removal.

Chapters 4 and 5 continue this narrative of the marginalization and silencing of Choctaw women both within their own societies and in the increasingly European world in which they all now lived. Synthesizing the arguments of numerous contemporary historians of the colonial period in this region and relying upon some French primary sources, Pesantubbee continues her story of the implacable narrowing of Choctaw women's worlds and the growing disdain for their roles in the Choctaw community. These

chapters are also interesting for the plentitude of information Pesantubbee provides about the growing slave trade, which increasingly drew Indians and Africans into a side-by-side enslavement. Although she clarifies the extent of this enslavement, she does not provide a precise and thorough narrative of the relationship between Africans and Native Americans.

Pesantubbee joins many other writers in identifying enslaved Africans as West Africans—a laudable effort, no doubt, to provide more specificity than the generalized term *African*, which reduces a vast continent's varied peoples to one. Acknowledging the fact that enslaved Africans came from many parts of Africa, however, is surely just as important as acknowledging the fact that Africa is not a single place with a single people. That this book fails to do so is another example of the deleterious effects of narrow specializations-within-specializations in academia. Just as dozens of historians of African slavery remain mostly ignorant of the character and extent of Native American slavery (and more generally of Native American history), so Pesantubbee and dozens of other historians of Native America ignore the sophisticated and essential histories of enslaved Africans in the United States and West Indies. Michael Gomez is among the few historians whose scholarship might have lent nuance to this important facet of Pesantubbee's story. Because relations between self-identified African Americans and Native Americans are increasingly the focus of attention (not least because some tribes are deciding what percentage of "blood" constitutes a tribally acceptable criterion for tribal membership), a clear understanding of the origins of African slaves, their experiences, and the culture that they created out of their own practices and those they learned among Indian comrades would deepen our understanding of Indian women's lives in this period.

Choctaw Women in a Chaotic World concludes with a brief look at the continuities of Choctaw tradition and lifeways, continuities that shifted and changed but that held together some essential facets of Choctaw life. Pesantubbee argues that despite the gradual loss of the all-important Green Corn ceremony (a ceremony that continued to shape the years of neighboring nations) and despite arguments that this loss marked the virtual disappearance of Choctaw traditions (particularly those dependent on women's central participation), the continuance of Choctaw mortuary traditions, which rely on the work of women, demonstrates a living Choctaw world in which women continue to play an essential role.

This work, then, offers information that will be new to many readers, although much of it can be found in the research of other historians. Because Pesantubbee has gathered up all the facts and all the stories in these other works, she has done historians of women a great service. Her extensive citations of incidents of Indian enslavement will also become grist for new mills. If the book has a serious flaw, it lies in its repetitiousness. We are told over and over that Choctaw women's lives were restricted and harmed by the various processes of colonization and that their absence from both from history and present-day Choctaw understandings of women's importance are due to these pernicious, European-imposed practices and attitudes. Eventually readers may begin to skip large chunks of text, having gotten the points much earlier on.

A second quibble concerns a practice found in many texts about Native America. This is the anthropologist-imposed custom of naming the whole group of Choctaw people in the singular—"the Choctaw." The effect is to reduce tribal peoples to anthropological objects rather than allowing them a vivid individuality and particularity. Skeptics may experiment with substituting any other ethnic group's name in the place of "the Choctaw," so that all Italians are known as "the Italian" ("the Italian believes that. . ."), or all Asians are described as "the Asian." No one would do this unless intent on denigrating that group, yet Native nations continue to find themselves rendered in the singular, even by members of the nations themselves. I wish Pesantubbee would abandon this outsider-imposed practice so that her future work will not produce that constant sense of dislocation from the world of every other group of people. Nevertheless, this is a small objection. In general, Pesantubbee's book is useful, not least for those who have long argued that the historical record's silence on women's lives is not an accurate reflection of their significance in Indian history.

Patricia Penn Hilden

University of California, Berkeley

A Colonial Complex: South Carolina's Frontiers in the Era of the Yamasee War 1680–1730. By Steven J. Oatis. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004. 399 pages. \$65.00 cloth.

Recently, scholars of Native American history have been seeking to reevaluate the colonial history of the American Southeast. This book, written by Steven J. Oatis, makes a contribution to that effort. It seeks to define the Southeast as a "frontier complex" (Jack Forbes's words), which the author alleges will allow for a "more complete and balanced picture of South Carolina's frontier relationships" (8).

Oatis's methodological approach is admirable and, as a Yamasee Indian and scholar of the history of American Indians, I must confess that I was attracted to his methods of analysis regarding the behavior of empires. Indeed, Oatis has used the traditional white colonial sources quite effectively. He also has parsed the works of the last generation of American Indian historians and benefited from their methodological successes and mistakes. He is to be applauded for envisioning a new way of looking at the frontier.

However, I was disappointed in his failure to understand and research Yamasee society in the past and in the present. Usually American historians are monoculturalists even when they study Native American societies, and this work is no exception. The established history and ethnology of the Yamasee people is totally absent from this book. Since this book is the author's revised dissertation, I was perplexed that he was never pointed in the direction of previous scholarship on Yamasee people. Oatis never draws upon James Howard's "The Yamasee: A Supposedly Extinct Southeastern Tribe Rediscovered," *American Anthropologist* 62, no. 4 (August 1960). In 1962,