

TAKING UP THE MANTLE AND MAKING IT HER OWN

a review by
Lynne Norris Murray

Mary Ann Jacobs, Cherry Maynor Beasley, Ulrike Wiethaus, Editors. *Upon Her Shoulders: Southeastern Native Women Share Their Stories of Justice, Spirit, and Community*. Blair, 2022.

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Upon Her Shoulders: Southeastern Native Women Share Their Stories of Justice, Spirit, and Community, a collection of stories and poems that the editors term “contemplative reflections” (xxii), amplifies the voices of Native women, primarily from the Lumbee Tribe in North Carolina. These editors – Mary Ann Jacobs, Cherry Beasley, and Ulrike Wiethaus – view stories as empowering, weaving past and present together to preserve culture, to maintain community, and to determine how “shared knowledge . . . fits her own needs” (xvi). The book’s dedication to Rosa Winfree, Ruth Revels, and Barbara Locklear honors the elders who preserve a culture that colonialism tried to silence, while also tirelessly continuing a path towards social justice for the women who will come after them. The collection also captures new voices who embrace their collective past and use their knowledge to advance their futures.

The editors divide the book into three themes: community, spirit, and justice. Each editor introduces the theme and writers followed by the stories. Each part ends with “In Closing: Contemplating the Words of Wisdom by Our Women Elders,” a patchwork of voices from notes posted on the walls during conferences and workshops. A list of reflection questions and a short bio of each contributor aid the reader in delving deeper in the stories.

The title of Part I, “Make Yourself Useful, Child,” comes from Mary Ann Elliott’s early life lesson from her grandmother that

everyone, including children, is expected to contribute to the community. For women in this section, usefulness benefits beyond the immediate of day-to-day living, but also the community’s future well-being. Lumbee elder Ruth Revel surmises, “You do not have to do it all, but you can help others do more than you did” (15). Revels took on the challenge of helping others first through persevering discrimination to gain a teaching job. After hearing a racist comment from a fellow teacher, Revels chose to do more to address inequities in her community. Becoming the first executive director of the Guilford Native American Association and member of the North Carolina Mental Health Commission, she utilized her talents to address adult literacy that grew into Native Industries, which provided jobs and daycare to the chronically unemployed.

Learning to serve is a common thread that runs through the stories of teachers in this section, from Mary Alice Pinchbeck Teets using music to teach “self-respect, hard work and good ways of living” (32) to Cherokee Elder Marie Junaluska who translates English into Cherokee language that keeps the culture “thriving” (43). The impetus for learning is to preserve the community’s values and culture and to work toward social justice in the world beyond. Many women describe their purpose as spiritual; the path will be difficult at times, such as facing obstacles of racism and navigating their Native identity within mainstream



Young Healer, 2020 (virtual drawing, 8.5x11) by Raven Dial-Stanley

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

societal ones. Barbara Locklear prays that she “will live a good path” (46). From her perspective as an elder she writes, “I now see that what is truly important is not the things that I leave behind, but the path that I make for others to follow” (47). The path is not designed for others to follow lockstep in her footsteps, but to continue making one’s own. Cherokee Madison York, an aspiring medical doctor, stands at the beginning of her own path in her poem, “My Questions for Creator”: “I want to help / but I am not sure I can walk both paths.” York feels the obligation to honor her ancestors and that of her healing call, which requires her to follow the society’s course. She seeks guidance from her Creator to “span . . . the two walks” (11).

Spirituality is explored more fully in Part 2, “Spirit Medicine,” which shares its title with Kim Previa’s essay. In her work as a life coach, Previa embraces the spiritual in her approach called “eyes of my heart” (67). Seeing through the eyes of the heart

allows one to connect with another in a genuine way that disperses loneliness and fear. Previa concludes with “As we trust the divine, then things can change and shift because we are free to be ourselves” (70). The women in this section share how reliance on the spiritual gave them strength to persevere through traumatic experiences and find the freedom Previa describes.

Spiritual entities Clan Mother and Three Sisters respectively provide guidance to Daphne Strickland and Charlene Hunt. In Iroquois culture, the Clan Mother is honored for her wisdom and power. Responsible for the well-being of the tribe, she advises the Chief and oversees ceremonies. The Three Sisters provide sustenance for the tribes. Represented as corn, beans, and squash, they demonstrate the interconnectedness of the community. Corn provides the stalk for the beans to climb, and squash’s shade preserves the moisture for growth.

Strickland assumes the identity of Yellowbird in sharing her suffering from raising a violent child at her mother’s request, grieving her sister’s untimely death, and caring for her mother after a debilitating stroke. Yellowbird relies on the Clan Mother within, who guides her decisions, until she ultimately sees the Clan Mother in herself. For Charlene Hunt, the Three Sisters represent “a deep spiritual connection not only with the Earth, but also with our souls” (90). Caring for her ailing father, she understands the cyclical nature of life. As her father loses strength, she gains strength by becoming corn, “helping to hold my father up” (92).

Gayle Simmons Cushing’s poem “Patchwork Images” opens Part III, “Getting Justice When There Was None,” and provides part of the book’s title. The last stanza likens women’s roles to a patchwork quilt: “The responsibility of being Native woman was placed upon / Her shoulders at birth, / Blanketed – like a patchwork quilt – around her body” (106). Less of a burden and more like a comfort, a patchwork quilt suggests different patterns, colors, and fabrics that represent individual women’s contributions to the whole community. The stories in this section relate what Jacobs describes as “Indigenous restorative justice designed to bring peace and balance to the community” (97–98). An excerpt from Ruth Dial Woods’s dissertation documents her experience at the Alcatraz Occupation in 1969–70, a protest designed to create an autonomous cultural center on Alcatraz in accordance with the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie. Kay Oxendine, who as a child was told in history class that “all Indians were dead” (136), dismisses erasure through her writing, radio shows, and Native organizations. Non-violent protests, educating others, amplifying Native voices are the means by which women in this collection seek justice for their communities.

Each woman featured in this volume takes up the metaphorical mantle and adds her unique contribution to the fabric design, providing vibrant images of proud, thriving Native cultures. Olivia Brown poses in her poem, “Native American”: “We are still here, / Hidden by our education and modernisms. / Do you see us?” (56). Yes. Yes, we do. ■