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The Wrongfully Judged: A Study of Perceptions and Reality Regarding Indian Prostitution during the California Gold Rush

Michelle Khoury

The Gold Rush is romantically remembered in California history as an era of promise, hope, and opportunity. Miners from all areas of the country and from the world fled to the California mines with high spirits. In reality, however, the Gold Rush marked a time of despair for many of its participants whose dreams of prosperity were dashed. However, another cast of characters felt the misery and desolation of this era even more than the disheartened miners: the state's native inhabitants, and especially its native women. A great deal of research has been conducted regarding the violent exploitation of Indian women by rape and forced concubinage. However, historians have paid far less attention to Indian prostitution, which is a much more complex issue. Unlike rape, prostitution did not necessarily involve a clear-cut victim and offender. In fact, the circumstances varied from case to case. Perhaps the man was a poor and lonely miner, or conversely, he may have been racist and violent. In some cases the native woman was starving and desperate, or perhaps she was immoral and promiscuous.

Although scholars have paid much more attention to other minority prostitutes during this era— such as the Chinese, French, or Mexican— historians Albert Hurtado and Susan Lee Johnson have studied the

neglected Indian prostitute. Such a study is incomplete, however, if only one party's story is told. It is essential to examine both Anglo perceptions of Indian prostitutes as well as the reality of the matter, for these are two disparate, though related, issues. Whites often generalized, assuming all Indian women to be the same, and they allowed their prejudices to influence their perceptions of these women. The racist and ignorant attitudes of Anglos caused them to view Indian prostitution inaccurately, failing to recognize the complete picture of this complex practice.

It is evident that white perceptions of native prostitutes were shaped by racism and prejudice. In studying common attitudes of Anglos towards these women, it is important to examine a multitude of sources. Some important documents include popular magazines, contemporary newspapers, and diaries. These records reveal the racist and ignorant attitudes that Anglos held toward Indian prostitutes. Collectively, this literature reflects common views of native women as barbaric, ugly, filthy, and immoral. Popular magazines provide a fountain of information on Anglo attitudes concerning Indian practices. *Hutchings' Illustrated California Magazine* is a great example. In its April 1859 edition, the exceedingly subjective attitudes toward Indians were apparent: "these Indians are simply men and women, and without doubt the lowest in morality and intellectual ability on this continent."¹ This passage explicitly attacked the moral character of Indians.

Even more than the magazine's text, its illustrations provide insight regarding Anglo perceptions of Indian women. These images portrayed them in scant clothing, wearing revealing dresses or straw skirts with their upper bodies exposed. Their unusual garments, being very different from what was considered acceptable and ladylike in Anglo society, helped shape white perceptions of prostitutes. Because their clothing was far from modest, Anglos took these women to be inherently promiscuous and immoral. Additionally, the women were often shown participating in strenuous physical labor. Illustrations in *Hutchings'* displayed them panning for gold, gathering acorns, grinding seeds, and digging for roots (See Image 1).² The cultural disparities here regarding appropriate work in the domestic sphere help explain why native women were so misunderstood and accused. Whites were ignorant of Indian culture and failed to understand the traditional customs of these people. Thus, when they saw magazine illustrations of native females participating in unladylike work, they ignorantly dismissed them as barbaric and filthy.

It is also very helpful to examine the way contemporary newspapers portrayed these women. Most news reports at the time reinforced this ignorant stereotype of native prostitutes as filthy and uncivilized creatures. For example, in 1858 the Nevada *Journal*, quoting the Shasta *Courier*, reported:

The recent rains have had the effect of increasing the female portion of our "native" population. They may be seen gathered in small

² Hutchings, *Illustrated California Magazine*, April 1859.

groups squatted along our side walks during the day, especially from sundown to a late hour of the night. It is a pity and a shame that these poor degraded beings are, through the negligence of the general government, forced to procure their bread and clothing in a manner the most infamous. . . . They are a disgusting sore upon the face of this community ? a most vile nuisance, calling loudly for abatement.³

This news article is valuable for its vivid descriptions. The image of groups of native women “squatting” on the sides of streets in the evenings is very revealing. The choice of the word “squat” here is significant because it contributed to the idea of these women as unladylike and barbaric. Respectable Anglo women would not have been seen “squatting.” Furthermore, the last sentence, describing the prostitutes as a “sore,” powerfully exemplifies common perceptions of these Indian women. It is also important to note the territorial and possessive tone of this piece. The writer used terms such as “our side walks” to indicate that this community belonged to the superior white race and not to these dirty, “vile nuisances.”

Another telling news article comes from the 1855 Sacramento *Union*. This piece, entitled “Drunken Indians,” reported on exactly what the title indicates: “We noticed a troupe of Indians, male and female, on the Levee, yesterday, well lined with whisky, and in possession of an extra bottle or two to keep the lining

intact.”⁴ Articles such as this one reinforced notions of Indian prostitutes as shameful, immoral, and dependent on alcohol. The strong association of native prostitutes with whisky is one that the contemporary news did not ignore. A final example of a news source which showed no sympathy toward Indian women appeared in the *San Francisco Bulletin*, which quoted the *Yreka Union*. The article objected to “low-grade white men” who purchased Indian prostitutes with liquor.⁵ This brief excerpt indicates the way society viewed not only the prostitutes, but also the miners who hired them. These men were looked down upon and were considered second class. This passage additionally reveals Anglo notions of the prostitutes’ drunkenness, as well as the very cheap prices they required for their services. Once more, the contemporary press was in no way compassionate to the Indian prostitute.

Journals, particularly miners’ diaries, are an additional source of material which reveals Anglo perceptions. These personal accounts are enlightening because they were written without the intention of being read by others, and therefore, some of them provide extremely private experiences. These miners often experienced feelings of loneliness on the secluded frontier, and thus turned to prostitutes to ease the pain. The journals of Alfred Doten, which were edited and compiled by Walter Van Tilburg Clark, portray rich details of frontier life as a gold miner. Originally from

⁴ “Drunken Indians,” *Sacramento Daily Union*, February 27, 1855.

⁵ *San Francisco Bulletin*, June 10, 1858, in Sherburne F. Cook, *The Conflict between the California Indians and White Civilization* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), 339.

Plymouth, Massachusetts, Doten journeyed to California in 1849 with exuberance, youthfulness, and an appetite for adventure. He recorded several encounters with Miwok women. Below is an excerpt from his journal, dated September 20, 1852:

This forenoon two squaws came over from the Rancheria and paid me quite a visit – One of them was Pacheco’s wife – she had her child done up after their fashion and toted him round her back with a string over her head – As is as usual she was accompanied by an old hag of a squaw – I gave her several presents and made myself pretty thick with her and after a while I got her [erasure] and took her into my tent and [erasure] was about to lay her altogether but the damned old bitch of a squaw came in as mad as a hatter and gave the young gal a devil of a blowing up – Nevertheless I still left my hand in her bosom and kissed her again right before the old woman. She didn’t get cross at all but gave me a slap in the face and ran away laughing. . I told the little gal in Spanish to come up alone sometime and as she understood Spanish she said she would if she could ever get a chance.⁶

This passage illuminates Anglo-Indian relations. First and foremost, it suggests that native women were promiscuous. This young woman, who was married and had a child, seemed to be willingly conceding her

body to Doten with no fear or shame. She even agreed to try to return to him so they could resume their business. In other words, the encounter seemed to be completely consensual and in no way suggested that Doten violated this woman's body. This image of the Miwok prostitute is not one which reflected desperation and destitution, but rather promiscuity and immorality.

Another miner, Timothy Osborn from Edgartown, Massachusetts, also shared his experiences in a dairy. He worked near Miwok people and commented on their sexuality. His observations included discussion of the women's scant clothing, particularly their bare breasts. Osborn's descriptions depicted the Miwok not merely as lacking modesty, but as lustful. He interpreted this tribe's sexual custom of abstaining from copulation during certain seasons and permitting it in others to be animal-like. During the allowed times, he believed the women hunted for men in the most primitive, shameless manner. He wrote, "I have seen Indian girls, who, when they were 'in heat,' would fondle you around and in every possible way would ask you to relieve them."⁷ It is evident that Osborn identified the Miwok women to be overtly sexual during the permitted seasons. His views reflected those of the majority of the white miner population.

In studying native prostitution, it is important to realize that Anglo perceptions, as demonstrated through popular magazines, newspapers, and jour-

⁷ Timothy Osborn in Susan Lee Johnson, "Bulls, Bears, and Dancing Boys: Race, Gender, and Leisure in the California Gold Rush," *Radical History Review* 60 (1994): 18.

nals, failed to grasp the entirety of the situation. In reality, Indian prostitution was much more complex and convoluted than whites understood it to be. One feature of this practice that many Anglos disregarded was the *necessity* of the situation. Many people dismissed these women as dirty and sinful, not recognizing that they were often *forced* into prostituting their bodies. Although many whites did not acknowledge it, what drove these women to this dire practice was desperation. Recent scholarship has shed light onto this subject and has revealed a more complete picture. The Gold Rush signified destruction for Native Americans. Immigrants in search of gold drove them from their homes, captured their land, and diminished their resources. As a result, the native population faced starvation and destitution. Prostitution was a means to ease these harsh circumstances. Physiologist Sherburne Cook, who studied the population of North American aboriginals, explained, "It is clear. . . that the evil flourished primarily because of economic necessity, and not because the natives were any more prone to adopt the custom than other races under similar circumstances."⁸ In addition, historian Albert Hurtado pointed out, "The low prices that [Indian prostitutes] received for their services demonstrated their desperation."⁹ Modern scholarship, then, has corroborated that poor economic conditions and starvation were key forces in the development of this practice.

Another dimension that one must study in order to comprehend native prostitution is the grave consequences it produced. The complications it created help demonstrate that prostitution was not a lifestyle choice, but rather a required measure for survival. No one would elect to suffer from such conditions. One example is widespread venereal disease, particularly syphilis. According to an 1853 El Dorado County Report, starvation and destitution “[are] driving the squaws to the most open and disgusting acts of prostitution, thereby engendering diseases of the most frightful and fatal character.” The account continued, explaining that some women were “so far advanced with this disease that most of them were unable to walk.”¹⁰ This horrifying report was not the only one which commented on the widespread and lethal nature of syphilis. An Indian agent described a case of a young native girl: “the clitoris being entirely eaten away.”¹¹ The spread of venereal disease was responsible for the loss of a significant number of Indian prostitutes. It not only affected the population of the prostitutes, but also the future generation of natives. Hurtado explained, “Because syphilis had a negative impact on Indian birth rates, its presence in the native population had a special significance. With the population sharply declining, syphilis made it difficult to recover losses through reproduction.” California Indians at this time were dying in great numbers as a

¹⁰ E.A. Stevenson to Thomas J. Henley, December 31, 1853 in *The Destruction of California Indians*, ed. Robert F. Heizer (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 14-15.

¹¹ J. Markle to T.J. Henley, December 17, 1858 in *Indian Survival on the California Frontier*, Albert L. Hurtado (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988) 180.

result of contact with whites, whether it was because whites deliberately murdered them, inadvertently killed them with illnesses they brought, or arrogantly conquered their land and food supply. Thus, Hurtado stated that syphilis created an additional strain on the native population by impacting their reproductive ability.¹² Disease, death, misery ? this was the reality of the situation.

An additional piece in this picture is the social price prostitutes had to pay. Although punishment for adultery varied from tribe to tribe, many women suffered harsh penalties. Prostitutes were ostracized; they became outsiders within their own society. Thus, they were not only deplored by Anglos, but also by their own people. Hurtado expanded on this phenomenon:

Indian prostitutes ran risks in their own communities, as an 1851 incident in southern Oregon shows. After a young, one-eyed woman had intercourse with a miner for some food, her husband appeared and threatened her. The next day, another Indian came to the camp and begged the whites to leave the women alone. He added that among his people the penalty for adultery was the loss of an eye.¹³

This is a fascinating example of a social consequence of prostitution. This woman was branded permanently

as a criminal within her community. She was forever identified this way because of her missing eye. Cook examined other costs adulterous women had to pay, stating “jealousy might incite the husband or the brother to take action against the woman. Even more serious was the reaction when the female was not directly assaulted but yielded to moral or financial pressure.” He continued with records of prostitutes who were murdered by angry clan members or husbands for their transgressions. Cook explained that “such actions were infrequent, but they are indicative of the deep animosity which burned in the hearts of many Indians and which could find partial release in retaliation on their own kind.”¹⁴ So the social cost of prostitution went beyond mere ostracism, it sometimes entailed murder from tribal kin.

It is important to note that traditional customs varied according to the tribe, an important piece of the picture that Anglos overlooked. Marriage practices, social norms, and punishment for adultery differed according to the specific community. While the penalty for prostitution according to one particular tribe may have been the loss of an eye, for others, such as the Nissenan, Konkow, and Maidu people, the price was death.¹⁵ Conversely, some tribes allowed the practice to go unpunished. Perhaps these people sympathized, understanding the dire circumstances which necessitated it. Or maybe copulation was permitted during certain occasions or seasons, as the Miwok were accused of practicing. What is important to realize, though, is that whites did not usually distinguish

¹⁴ Cook, *Conflict*, 89-90.

¹⁵ Hurtado, *Intimate Frontiers*, 88.

these unique differences in tribal customs. Rather, they ignorantly generalized all natives to be the same.

The demographic composition of the Gold Rush population is another important factor in this discussion. Men significantly outnumbered women during this time, and California Indians constituted the largest class of women during the early 1850s.¹⁶ This population ratio helps explain how prostitution came to appear among the state's aboriginals. When examining the percentage of Miwok women in the Southern Mines—located near the San Joaquin River—it becomes clearer why so many of them became prostitutes. Johnson analyzed the demographic framework of the Gold Rush:

The Southern Mines were the destination of disproportionate numbers of non-Anglo-American immigrants, and the homeland for native peoples collectively known as Miwoks. So in the south, the absence of Anglo women was matched by the presence of large numbers of Miwoks, Mexicans, Chileans, French, and, later, Chinese. Of these, only the Miwok population included roughly as many women as men.¹⁷

This helps explain why Native American women became the earliest prostitutes. The answer is simple economics: the Indians were able to supply the high demand for women. As Johnson pointed out, this was especially true in the Southern Mines. Cook also commented on the supply and demand issue: “When

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the white race entered, . . . a demand [for female favors] was immediately created. . . . There was an excess of both unmarried males and males of other circumstances, who wished to take advantage of the opportunity offered by numerous native women.” He added, “The very bad economic condition of the native furnished a powerful incentive. . . It is easy to appreciate, therefore, how readily the native race might adopt this new means of improving its material condition.”¹⁸ Prostitution was an expedient way to escape the destitution and starvation from which these people suffered.

Indian prostitutes were wrongfully judged. Discrepancy between images and reality is not unique to this specific group of people. In fact, the problem of mistaken identity is very common throughout history; it existed long before the Gold Rush era and still exists to this day. It is clear that the realities of Native American prostitution went beyond the perceptions of nineteenth-century Anglos. Their descriptions were colored with racism and ignorance and therefore failed to grasp the complete picture of this complicated practice. Whites did not attempt to understand the circumstances surrounding it, or, to a certain extent, the circumstances which generated it. They considered these women promiscuous, immoral, and dirty. It is not that these perceptions were completely untruthful or fabricated; rather, they were inaccurate. They simply did not reflect a complete understanding of the entire situation for they often ignored or failed to recognize key pieces of the picture: the necessity of the situation, the physical and social consequences

¹⁸ Cook, *Conflict*, 82-83.

women suffered, the differences in tribal customs, and the demographic makeup of the time. Although white attitudes—as recorded in magazines, newspapers, and miner diaries—did not encompass all of these factors, they are by no means unimportant in our study of Indian prostitution. Conversely, they provide telling information regarding Anglo-Indian relations. It is by studying the perceptions of whites, in addition to these issues, that one may understand more comprehensively the complex practice of Native American prostitution during the Gold Rush.



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Image 1¹⁹

Michelle Khoury is a history major with an emphasis in United States History. She is currently a junior. Her favorite topics of study include Women's history, American Indian history, and California history. She is also a philosophy minor with a pre-law emphasis. This year, Michelle works with Santa Clara University's Residence Life as a Community Facilitator.

¹⁹ *An Indian Women Panning Out Gold*, 1859, Illustrated California Magazine.