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Of Baggage and Bondage: Gender and Status among Hidatsa and Crow Women

MARTHA HARROUN FOSTER

INTRODUCTION

Despite growing awareness of early Great Plains observers' preconceptions regarding native societies, many recent attempts to understand pre-reservation Indian women's roles continue to reflect the misconceptions of these early observers and later ethnographers. The purpose of this paper is to explore problems inherent in the evaluation of Hidatsa and Crow women's roles and status. This examination utilizes a widely accepted model of Great Plains women's roles and status to facilitate that appraisal. Although aspects of this analysis pertain to Great Plains people generally, this paper will focus on the Hidatsa and Crow specifically.

The first European visitors tended to see native women in light of their own European cultural heritage. To some they seemed slaves of their husbands and brothers; a few saw them as free children of nature. Very few early observers noted differences in women's roles among tribes, and even fewer attempted to examine Native American society through the women's eyes. Even the few early Euro-American female writers, such as Margaret Carrington, were, for cultural and personal reasons, more inter-

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ested in warfare, government, clubs, and societies—organizations regarded by European and Euro-American reporters as male-dominated. With occasional exceptions, such as Linderman's *Pretty-shield* and small parts of Denig's *Five Indian Tribes*, anthropologists and historians did not become interested in native women's roles and status or in women's perspectives of their own society until the 1960s.

In the 1970s, anthropologists Alan Klein, Margot Liberty, Katherine M. Weist, and others suggested a model for native Great Plains women's roles and status based on a foundation laid by earlier scholars such as Oscar Lewis and John Ewers.¹ This model presents an "historical materialist framework" for a decline in status of nineteenth-century Great Plains women resulting from economic factors, including the fur trade and acquisition of the horse and gun.² This decrease in status manifested itself in an increased workload, increased polygyny, and loss of control over trade. Klein states that "women's position was comparable to men's prior to the complete integration of the horse and heavier reliance on the buffalo trade" but notes that this integration resulted in a relative decline in the position of women.³ Similarly, Liberty and Weist describe a loss of status due to the fur trade and acquisition of the horse.⁴ For purposes of clarity, this model of status decline due to the horse and fur trade will be referred to as the Great Plains model.

The pervasiveness of this model in historical and anthropological writing is illustrated by Richard White's recent history of the West, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own*. In his brief summary of Plains Indian history, White maintains that "the benefits of the horse accrued disproportionately to men" and that "men of wealth appeared in what had once been egalitarian societies" (emphasis mine). He writes that not only did Plains women have more work to do, but polygamy and the taking of women captives also increased (the strong implication being that women's status decreased).⁵

This paper explores the relevancy of this Great Plains model to the evaluation of pre-reservation Hidatsa and Crow women's roles and status. These groups permit a critical analysis of this model because they were once one people who shared a horticultural, sedentary lifestyle and subsequently diverged into distinct groups with different lifestyles. As the Crow moved westward, they became seminomadic hunters. If, as Crow culture became distinct and diverged from Hidatsa culture, nomadic Crow women

lost status, the thesis that semipastoralism and a nomadic lifestyle resulted in a loss of status for Plains women would be supported. This analysis indicates that the model does not apply to these related groups and that it distorts the evaluation of their roles and status. Although it is not within the scope of this paper, examination of this model suggests that such analysis of other Great Plains groups would be a fruitful area of study.

THE GREAT PLAINS GENDER/STATUS MODEL

Margot Liberty's description of this model divides the occupation of the Great Plains by native people into four periods in which status is evaluated relative to four general cultural categories: (1) economics, (2) politics and warfare, (3) religion and healing, and (4) personal autonomy. Given that the evaluation and definition of status are individually and culturally variable, this paper will, for reasons of clarity and organization, accept these categories of status evaluation. This paper will also define status generally as the relative position of an individual within a group, or of a group within a society, as it pertains to these four categories.

According to the model, big game hunting dominated the "Early Period." In this Lithic-stage economy, women gathered plant resources, which were essential to subsistence, and therefore are assumed to have had "positions of relative equality" with men. A "simple egalitarian" social structure existed. Later, in the Archaic stage, the development of new technologies led to utilization of new resources. The need for group cooperation grew. Women participated more in the hunt, thereby enhancing their position in the social structure. This was a period of small-scale egalitarian groups. Women made important subsistence contributions, and, as in many hunting-and-gathering societies today, they had positions of equality.⁶

The "Formative Period," or horticultural stage, included the development of horticulture and more complex societies. Among horticultural peoples, women's status increased, since they played a greater role in subsistence activities. Within the still-nomadic groups, women retained the relative equality with men that they had enjoyed in the Lithic stage.⁷

For the Hidatsa and Crow, the "Equestrian Era" began in the early to mid-1700s with an increased use of the horse and ended in the 1880s with the disappearance of the buffalo herds. This was a

time of unrest marked by increased warfare due, in part, to the acquisition of the horse and gun. Access to large game became easier, and a higher standard of living resulted in increases in population and social complexity. Horticultural peoples began to hunt buffalo and modified their farming activities. The importance of women's economic role decreased. However, they did not lose status in the areas of personal autonomy and ceremonial life to the extent that nomadic women did. In "Plains Indian Women through Time," Margot Liberty observes that "among the equestrian tribes the status of women declined sharply, as might be expected in an economy where aspects of pastoralism—nearly always a masculine realm—became ascendant."⁸ Hunting increased men's status, because the meat belonged to them—marked by their arrows. Women assumed "near-slave status," with vast increases in labor needed to tan hides, produce leather goods, and move increasingly large tipis and accumulations of personal possessions; increased baggage led to virtual bondage. Many scholars attribute the loss of women's traditional economic and social power to the growing dependence on the fur trade. They maintain that men controlled trade profits and the distribution of goods received from women's leather production. Women married at an earlier age, their subsistence contribution declined, and the incidence of polygyny increased, leading to an overall loss in status among nomadic women.⁹

This Great Plains model also covers the reservation period. However, because of the dramatic changes in Hidatsa society during the later part of the nineteenth century, that period is not addressed here.

THE PROBLEM OF EVIDENCE

An important area to be considered in the exploration of this model's relevance to the Hidatsa and Crow is the problem of evidence. What direct evidence for the model exists in historical, ethnological, and archaeological records, and what is the character of that evidence? Archaeological evidence, by its nature not sex-specific, cannot tell us how women, specifically, lived their lives. Men who were primarily interested in trade collected the earliest historical and ethnographic information. Later, male explorers gathered information but made no attempt to sort out their own cultural biases and values. Some of the information

is vague and grossly inaccurate.¹⁰ After the turn of the century, more complete ethnographic studies were carried out, but, by then, only the old peoples' memories of pre-reservation days remained.¹¹

With the increased awareness of male sex bias in the 1960s, writers attempted to deal with the lack of information from a women's point of view.¹² Katherine Weist attributed the problem to "a situation wherein male ethnographers interviewed male informants, using male language about a male-dominated world," and to primary interest in the "dramatic male roles" in hunting, warfare, and religion.¹³ Early ethnographic reports, full of the colorful and dramatic, seldom reported important day-to-day activities. Women and their activities were "invisible." As Rayna Reiter has illustrated, "[W]hat women do is perceived as household work and what they talk about is called gossip, while men's work is viewed as the economic base of society and their information is seen as important social communication."¹⁴ Dominant groups in society control expression. Subordinate groups are muted and must express themselves through dominant ideologies and modes of expression. This results in their being unable to express their view of the world, which is one reason why male observers have failed to "hear" women.¹⁵ Sally Slocum asks a question seldom answered in accounts of Hidatsa and Crow life: "What were the females doing while the males were out hunting?"¹⁶ A few ethnographers, including Alfred Bowers and Frank Linderman, did make serious efforts to cope with this problem and are referred to extensively in this paper.¹⁷

Broadly speaking, early Euro-Americans viewed Native American history through the lens of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century religious, scientific, and economic theory. However, one must deal with more complexities than simply the contrasts between European and Native American social and political thought. Very real differences existed among French, English, and American perspectives. These differences affected early accounts of the original inhabitants. To further confuse the issue, Native American ideology itself was certainly not a homogeneous whole. Each group had distinct beliefs, perceptions, and objectives that must be understood independently of others. Their perceptions of the world changed over time. Additionally, within individual societies, people had differing points of view, for example, between old and young, male and female.

Some of the problems associated with the ethnographic and historical data are of a basic and general nature. Even forms of reference and basic organization of material are part of a Western heritage and may or may not apply to the problems of understanding Native American culture and the role of women in general. Alice Kehoe points out, for example, that Western separation of the religious and the secular results from a Semitic dualism that is reflected in our dichotomy between primitive and civilized. She observes that this contrasting pair and others like it "are logical but never fit well any real life situations."¹⁸ Similar dichotomies, such as our interpretations of male/female or public/private, are Western creations and are not necessarily applicable to the Hidatsa and Crow.

Kehoe reminds us that Foucault thought ethnology had the potential to explore the nature of humans and of societies "back to their epistemological bases."¹⁹ But Foucault also warns that each society has its own "rules of exclusion" and determines what is "true" and what is "false."²⁰ As Hayden White points out, the irony of this dilemma is described in part by the meaning of Foucault's "tropes of catachresis":

[N]o two things are similar to one another in their particularity. All language therefore constitutes an abuse insofar as it gives a single name to things different in their "internal natures," their locations in space, or their external attributes.²¹

When Kehoe states, "[C]ontrary to Foucault's vision, ethnology worked from Procrustean European epistemes, stretching here, lopping off there to make the subjects fit the beds prepared," the difficulty that she envisions was, in part at least, predicted by Foucault.²² Like Procrustes's victims, aspects of Hidatsa and Crow culture do not fit models created to explain events seen from a Western perspective or written in the "language" of Western culture. Furthermore, in the study of nineteenth-century Hidatsa and Crow, we not only have the problem of Hidatsa and Crow "language" but also the "language" of the reporters. Ethnographic and historical data regarding Hidatsa and Crow women must be used with understanding and caution, but it can provide important information about aspects of Hidatsa and Crow cultures that will increase our understanding of women's roles and status.

HIDATSA AND CROW ETHNOHISTORY

A brief recounting of Hidatsa and Crow culture history will help in evaluating the Great Plains model. Alfred Bowers indicates that the proto-Hidatsa/Crow group separated from Siouan peoples in the area of present-day Minnesota and Iowa. Three separate but linguistically similar Hidatsa/Crow groups then moved to areas north of Devils Lake, the headwaters of the Red River, the lower Sheyenne River, and perhaps the Knife River. They consisted of both horticulturalists and hunters, some of whom then moved to the Missouri River and settled in the general area of the Mandan on the Heart River. According to Bowers, these groups developed gradually from an "independent village system to a more centralized tribal organization." The Mandan and Hidatsa, already culturally related, developed a new relationship that developed without major conflict and benefited all.²³

Bowers states that the first group, the Amatihis (Awatixa), moved from eastern South Dakota to the Heart River and then to the mouth of the Knife River by 1550. Archaeological evidence suggests that Hidatsa may have been on the Knife River as early as 1100.²⁴ In time, part of the Awatixa group separated, continued westward, and became the Mountain Crow. Bowers suggests that the second group, the Amahamis (Awaxawi), arrived on the Missouri "probably" in the seventeenth century and that the third group, the Hidatsa-proper, arrived later but before the arrival of the Europeans. The Hidatsa-proper are described by Bowers as nomadic, having "lost their corn."²⁵ A Hidatsa informant, however, told Gilbert Wilson that, although the Hidatsa-proper no longer grew corn, they did grow ground beans and wild potatoes before coming to the Missouri River.²⁶ After settling with their relatives on the Missouri River, they resumed the cultivation of corn. Part of this Hidatsa-proper group continued westward to become the River Crow.

The Crow separation from the parent group, the Hidatsa, probably was gradual, with small groups moving away over a number of years. Jeffery Hanson suggests that the Crow, who were "pre-adapted" to a nomadic existence because of their hunting experience, gradually replaced horticulture with hunting. Gordon Hewes suggests that the Crow originally may have taken maize-horticulture with them to the Yellowstone in eastern Montana.²⁷

In an effort to synthesize all of the available information, Hanson concludes that the separation must have occurred between 1675

and 1750, before the Crow acquired the horse. The cultural development that accompanied the change from horticulture to nomadic hunting, including the medicine bundle system, kinship structure, and sodality structure, must have taken at least that much time to develop. Inconclusive archaeological evidence suggests that the move to historic Crow territory could not have been before 1675.²⁸ That, of course, does not preclude an earlier separation and movement to some other location.

In any event, by 1804, Lewis and Clark and Larocque described the Crow as a distinct people who had severed permanent ties with the Hidatsa. Hostile groups, the Sioux and the Assiniboine, had moved into the territory between the two.²⁹

HIDATSA AND CROW LIFE: TWO WOMEN'S VIEWS

The first recorded observations of Hidatsa and Crow life were made after the Hidatsa-Crow separation. La Verendrye visited the Mandan-Hidatsa villages in December 1738. By the late eighteenth century, traders living in the Mandan-Hidatsa villages were familiar with the Crow trading there. Lewis and Clark made the first detailed comments on Hidatsa/Crow life when they visited the area between 1804 and 1806. In 1805, Larocque also journeyed into Crow territory. In the 1820s and 1830s, other adventurers and traders lived with, visited, and commented upon Hidatsa and Crow life. Some of these, including James Beckwourth and Edwin Denig, spent decades among the northern Great Plains Indians. These early traders and explorers commented on men's and, to a far lesser extent, women's roles among these groups.

In the 1930s, anthropologists such as Frank Linderman, Robert Lowie, Gilbert Wilson, and Alfred Bowers used informants, including women, who remembered the buffalo days (before 1880). They recorded less male-oriented and ethnocentric observations of Crow life.³⁰ Linderman interviewed Pretty-shield, a Crow medicine woman born in the 1850s, who summarized the life of Crow women from the 1850s to the 1870s as follows:

We women had our children to care for, meat to cook, and to dry, robes to dress, skins to tan, clothes, lodges, and moccasins to make. Besides these things we not only pitched the lodges, but took them down and packed the horses and the travois, when we moved camp; yes, and we gathered the wood for our fires, too.³¹

To this list of women's activities we add the following: dig and preserve roots, gather and preserve fruit, decorate clothing and bags, haul water, and saddle the horses.³² According to Pretty-shield, the men were busy with "war, killing meat, and bringing it into camp, horse-stealing, and taking care of horses."³³

Maxi-diwiac (Buffalobird-woman), born around 1840, described the daily life of Hidatsa women from the 1840s to the 1870s to Gilbert Wilson. Women cleared the garden area for planting, planted corn, squash, beans, and sunflowers, built the watching platforms, drying racks, cooking booths, and fences, cultivated the crops, dug the storage pits, and shelled, dried, and stored the crop.³⁴ In addition to their horticultural activities, the women processed meat and skins, made clothing, basketry, and pottery, built and repaired the earthlodges, made tipi covers, cared for the children, cooked, unsaddled and unloaded the horses, and collected wood.³⁵

According to Buffalobird-woman, Hidatsa men "should be off hunting, or on a war party." Men's responsibilities included the defense of the village and the crops, helping with the heavy beams in the building of the lodges, helping set boundaries of the gardens, and burning brush cleared from the gardens.³⁶

APPLICATION OF THE MODEL TO HIDATSA AND CROW LIFE

The preceding discussion summarizes the basic Hidatsa and Crow division of labor during the equestrian stage—the time during which the status of nomadic women is said to have declined dramatically. Using Liberty's four basic criteria for determining women's status—(1) economics, (2) politics and warfare, (3) religion and healing, and (4) personal autonomy—I will examine Crow and Hidatsa women's roles to determine whether they conform to the Great Plains model. If pre-reservation Hidatsa and Crow societies fit that model, a difference in status among the women of these groups, even though they were closely related linguistically and culturally, should exist. The nomadic equestrian (lower status, according to this model) Crow women's roles should indicate a decline in status after the separation of the Crow people from the horticultural (relatively high status, according to the model) Hidatsa.

One of Liberty's criteria for determining status is economics: "subsistence contribution and control over critical resources, in-

cluding production and distribution of valuable goods."³⁷ Concerning this criterion, Klein, Liberty, and Weist state that the buffalo hunt became man's work, and the hunter controlled distribution of meat and hides. Further, Liberty writes that men now controlled trade decisions, women's subsistence contributions declined, women's workload increased, and, in some groups, "female roles in leather production reached what has been called near-slave status."³⁸

Other writers also have emphasized the importance of such economic factors as production and distribution in determining status. According to Friedl, Brown, and Sanday, when men control production and distribution, women's status is correspondingly low. If women's subsistence contribution and control over critical resources had declined, the Great Plains model would be supported.³⁹

Production among the Hidatsa and Crow has been well documented. As noted above, provision of vegetable foods, whether grown or gathered, was women's responsibility. In communal hunting among both groups, the entire community participated. According to the model, the situation changed after the acquisition of the horse. Men did the hunting and controlled the meat supply, which became an individual rather than a communal resource. However, among the Hidatsa and Crow, communal hunts continued as an important hunting technique. According to Bowers, ideally "all shared according to their ability to dry and store meat."⁴⁰ Even as men's individual hunting began to produce a greater percentage of the group's meat, women did not lose control of it. Crow women did not give up their right to distribute meat and hides, whether they participated in the hunt or not. Both Hidatsa and Crow men surrendered the fruits of the hunt to their wives, for as one male Crow informant reported, "everything belonged to them!"⁴¹ Even when an individual hunter brought meat to camp, he took it to his wife, who had the right to distribute it as she saw fit.⁴² Such evidence among both the Hidatsa and Crow does not support the proposed decline in women's participation in economic processes.

Besides their role in subsistence production, women continued to play a significant role in the preparation of trade items. Trade practices at the Mandan-Hidatsa villages were reported as early as 1738 by La Verendrye.⁴³ He noted the importance of corn and other horticultural products in trade, as did later reporters.⁴⁴ Edward Bruner has called the Mandan-Hidatsa trade center "the central

market place of the Northern Plains," where horticultural products produced by women formed the basis of trade.⁴⁵ Hidatsa women took full part in this trade and had control over goods received.⁴⁶

Nomadic groups came to trade first at the traditional centers and later at posts set up by Euro-Americans. Products prepared by women, such as dried meat, clothing, and dressed skins, were important articles of trade. As noted above, many authors commented on the near-slave status of Native American women, referring to the fact that they did all of the work involved in dressing hides but did not fully share in the profits. For the Crow, that assertion is contradicted by the eyewitness accounts of Denig and Le Forge.⁴⁷ In *Memoirs of a White Crow Indian*, Le Forge states that "after the women and children got what they wanted . . . the man had left but little margin for buying."⁴⁸ Traders' awareness of women's importance in trade is reflected by the fact that their inventories included supplies intended to serve the needs and fancy of Hidatsa and Crow women.⁴⁹

The shifting emphasis to production for trade did cause change. As Alan Klein pointed out, the ability to produce large surpluses created "strains in the social fabric" of Great Plains groups. He maintains that sex and age statuses were "exacerbated by the new mode of production."⁵⁰ Strain must surely have been present, but the evidence at hand does not argue for a decline in women's status. Also, other stresses may have distorted existing customs. The devastation caused by war and disease is so bound up in the events of this time that it is difficult to isolate its effect relative to a changing economy. Regardless, an examination of Hidatsa and Crow women's roles shows no evidence of an accompanying decline in women's status.

The second category listed for determining women's status is politics and warfare. This category will not be discussed at length, because Hidatsa and Crow women's roles remained essentially the same in these two areas. The political involvement of Hidatsa and Crow women remained similar except in one significant area—the participation of Crow women in council meetings. Rudolph Kurz, a Swiss artist and employee of Denig's at Fort Union knew both the Hidatsa and the Crow. In the early 1850s, he wrote of the Crow,

Crows are noted for the good order maintained in their villages; but we may assume this has reference more particu-

larly to good conduct on the part of men than of women, since in that tribe women take the liberty of going to the deliberative council, where they enter the discussions and make the braves listen to reason, a proceeding never heard of in any other Indian nation.⁵¹

Contrary to the model, participation by Crow women in the political sphere may have increased over that of Hidatsa women, who did not speak and were not present in councils.⁵²

Both Hidatsa and Crow women participated in warfare to some extent. The Crow celebrated the deeds of a few women warriors, but women's wartime roles, especially among the Hidatsa, were basically defensive.⁵³ Again, women in both groups played important roles.

Similarly, Hidatsa and Crow women participated about equally in the third category of status evaluation, religion and healing. There is general agreement that Great Plains women's rich contribution to religious and ceremonial life did not decrease.⁵⁴ Hidatsa and Crow women, in particular, played important parts in essential ceremonies. Societies and ceremonies in which women participated differed among the Hidatsa and Crow, but women continued to hold important places in each. Hidatsa women's White Buffalo Society held ceremonies to attract buffalo, and their Skunk Society performed dances to celebrate the killing of enemies.⁵⁵ Crow women held high office in the Sun Dance, became directors of the Tobacco Ceremony, and joined the Tobacco Society along with their husbands. They participated in sweating, vision seeking, and healing.⁵⁶ Crow women received visions and became medicine women, as Pretty-shield did.⁵⁷ In general, Hidatsa and Crow women participated fully and to a roughly equal extent in religious and ceremonial life. There is no decrease in status evident in their participation in these areas.

Personal autonomy is the last and most often cited of the four criteria for measuring status. This general category can be broken down into several areas. First, the manner of spouse selection will be examined. Among the Hidatsa, a young woman's family usually arranged her first marriage, after which she could choose a mate for herself.⁵⁸ Similarly, Crow women did not usually pick their own mates when they were young, although they had some choice in the matter.⁵⁹ In both groups, a young man might try to elope with a woman without giving horses and gifts to his prospective in-laws. In the traditional and most honorable way,

however, the suitor offered horses and gifts to the woman's family, and, if the man was acceptable, the two families reached an agreement about gifts.⁶⁰ Hidatsa and Crow did not differ substantially in this regard.

Postmarital residence among the Hidatsa was usually matrilocal.⁶¹ More options existed for the Crow, and informants differ in opinion as to the placement of lodges.⁶² The fact that Hidatsa women inherited and worked in their mother's fields made matrilocal residence the most practical arrangement. Because of restrictions on a man's relationship with his in-laws, when a new son-in-law moved into the lodge, a new room was built for the young couple; if it could not be completed in time, the couple lived temporarily with the husband's family.⁶³ The addition of a room to an essentially one-room lodge was not possible for the Crow, whose similar in-law restrictions may have discouraged strict observance of matrilocal residence traditions.⁶⁴ Nor did a strong economic incentive for matrilocal residence exist among the Crow as it did among Hidatsa. A Hidatsa woman expected to inherit her mother's house and fields if she stayed in her mother's home.

Another aspect of personal autonomy, marriage patterns, is essential to this discussion of status. Polygyny is one of the criteria most often cited as indicating a decrease of status. In Hidatsa families, the oldest sister married first and eventually became head of the household. If her sisters were close in age, they would, ideally, also marry her husband. A great age difference among the sisters would probably mean that the younger sister might marry a different man and live with his family. It was not considered a good situation among the Hidatsa to have two sons-in-law living in the same lodge (except in the case of extreme age difference). The oldest sister or sisters married to the same man usually inherited the lodge, garden, tools, and household goods, creating a strong incentive for sororal polygyny. A younger daughter marrying outside the family lost, to some extent, the financial and social security of her family.⁶⁵

According to Bowers, prominent Hidatsa men "invariably had two or more wives."⁶⁶ As a man's social status and obligations grew, so did the workload. The status of women increased by having such a husband in their household, and they assisted him in his efforts. They often encouraged their husband to find another wife to help with the added responsibilities.⁶⁷

Polygyny also occurred commonly among the Crow. The Crow viewed sororal polygyny as the most satisfactory situation be-

cause, theoretically, sisters would get along well.⁶⁸ Among the Crow, each wife had her own lodge more often than was common among the Hidatsa. Residence was subject more to personal preference and economic ability.⁶⁹ Although polygyny was not as prevalent among the Crow as among the Hidatsa, Denig estimated that one-half of the Crow men had a "plurality of wives."⁷⁰ Larocque reported that some Crow men had just one wife and that these men "reason upon the folly of those that take many wives, and say that it is impossible for them to live happy and quiet as their wives are jealous & forever wrangling."⁷¹

Another factor encouraging polygyny during historic times concerns the high ratio of Hidatsa and Crow women to men, a situation caused primarily by constant raiding and warfare and the resulting loss of warriors.⁷² Whether a similar situation existed in prehistoric times, before the acquisition of the horse, is not known. Among the Crow, the habit of keeping female captives instead of killing them also increased the women-to-men ratio, because these women often decided to stay with the Crow.⁷³ With more than twice as many women as men, both Hidatsa and Crow women considered polygyny to be in their best interests. Having a man in her household to provide meat and protection increased a woman's prestige and the security and welfare of her family.⁷⁴

Polygyny among the Hidatsa and Crow should be viewed in terms of the everyday lives of these women. Often their closest relationships were with other women, especially within their own family. Sororal polygyny tended to strengthen a woman's position rather than weaken it. Sisters protected one another from domestic aggression, and sisters were often able to present a united front to further their mutual interests. Isolated women tended to have less freedom, were less mobile, made fewer important decisions.⁷⁵ For the Crow, sororal polygyny, ameliorated some of the disadvantages to women caused by a lack of strict matrilineal residence traditions. Wives were not isolated among members of a strange, unrelated family.⁷⁶

Consideration of polygyny is essential, because it is frequently cited as an indicator of loss of status, even as an indication of "slave" status. European observers, quick to interpret polygyny as unnatural and immoral, thought it degrading to the women involved. However, among the Crow as among the Hidatsa, women accepted the situation because of its advantages. Usually, only good providers and men of high status married more than one woman. The wives of such men shared in their economic

security and prestige. Crow women did not find the situation degrading, often taking pride in their marriage to such men.⁷⁷

Although wide variation in styles of polygyny did exist among individuals, overall differences between Hidatsa and Crow practices did not. If the practice of polygyny indicates a lowered status for women, its common presence among both the horticultural Hidatsa and the nomadic Crow is not indicative of any change in Crow women's status.

Crow childbirth practices also resembled those of the Hidatsa. Both Hidatsa and Crow women continued their usual work before and after childbirth.⁷⁸ In early historic times, neither allowed the presence of men at the time of birth.⁷⁹

Many early observers noted the ease with which Hidatsa and Crow men and women divorced.⁸⁰ These observations scandalized many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers and made some twentieth-century readers envious. The transfer of property, easily divided by custom, created few disputes. Young children invariably went with their mothers, older boys with their fathers.⁸¹ For Hidatsa women, divorce of the first husband was a little more difficult, according to Truteau. Truteau also wrote that, upon learning of European customs, Native Americans reacted with horror, considering it a "monstrous thing for a man and woman to be so indissolubly bound together as never to get loose."⁸²

Two stories illustrate the diversity of marital experiences. Wolf Chief, a Hidatsa, married many times. Three of his wives chose him; he chose seven of them. Four of his wives left him, and he left four; two marriages ended in general disagreement, and one wife died. Few families invited Wolf Chief to live with them, because he was not considered a good son-in-law.⁸³ Grey-Bulls, a Crow, also married several times. Two women chose him, he chose one, and a relative chose another for him. One wife left him, he left one, and the Lumpwoods kidnapped the third.⁸⁴

Another custom that illustrates the similarities between Hidatsa and Crow divorce customs is the "throwing away" of one's spouse. During the Hot Dance, a person gained stature by "throwing away" or divorcing a spouse. Most European observers reported men throwing away their wives, but women throwing away their husbands was not unheard of among the Crow. This custom was adopted by the Crow from the Hidatsa, and Crow women may have taken more advantage of it than did Hidatsa women.⁸⁵

As with polygyny, other marital customs among the Hidatsa and Crow have considerable individual variation but do not seem

to vary greatly between the two groups. One practice that did differ was Crow kidnapping. Fox and Lumpwood society men had the right to kidnap each other's wives for a few days in the spring of each year. They could kidnap wives of rival club members if these women were former lovers. Occasionally, women consented to and even arranged the kidnapping. However, kidnapping put a marriage in jeopardy, since the husband, through fear of ridicule, would not protect his wife from an attempted kidnapping nor take her back again even if she wished it. She could deny having had a sexual relationship with the kidnapper and refuse to go, but, if she was not truthful (or not believed), the kidnapper's friends could abduct her. She might hide during this time (there are cases of women protecting one another this way), or she could "throw herself on the former lover's generosity" and probably be spared. Her parents might also intercede and ask the men to stop.⁸⁶ If the kidnapping attempt succeeded, the new husband and his family respected the kidnapped woman as a wife and gave her valuable gifts. The man did not keep her long if she did not wish to stay, leaving her free to find a new husband—but not her former one.⁸⁷

No comparable custom existed among the Hidatsa. The frequency of rape was high among the Hidatsa, but rape, usually punished by a beating, differed considerably from kidnapping in the opinion of both groups.⁸⁸ Hidatsa and Crow saw rape as a shameful thing, whereas the Crow community accepted kidnapping.⁸⁹ The kidnapped woman was treated with honor. Her face was painted and she rode through camp with a famous warrior (a great honor among the Crow). Her new family treated her well, giving her an expensive elk tooth-decorated dress worth as much as four good horses and conferring on her the status of wife.⁹⁰

It is unclear to what extent the custom of kidnapping represents a loss of women's rights and a decline in status. Surely some women suffered from this custom and sought out the protection of other women and their own families during this time of year. But the motive of the kidnappers was to cause their rivals, not the women, to suffer and be humiliated. The husband of the kidnapped woman lost something of great value, while the woman, as noted above, received gifts and was honored. Beaver-woman, in "A Crow Woman's Tale," explains that both she and her husband suffered from her kidnapping. She lost her dream of being the honored woman to cut down the sacred Sun Dance tree; her husband lost his life from grief. It is difficult to measure who

lost more or which spouse's status suffered.⁹¹ Two Leggings, a Lumpwood warrior whose wife was kidnapped, explained that the purpose of kidnapping was to teach his people, both men and women, to endure hardship without complaining.⁹²

Early travelers frequently commented on sexual freedom among the Hidatsa and Crow.⁹³ Both of these groups applied a double standard in the ideal, which honored chastity among women but did not encourage men in that direction.⁹⁴ A faithful man had an important part in the Sun Dance, but other men ridiculed him for the lack of variety in his life.⁹⁵

Both Hidatsa and Crow men were more likely to punish a mate for infidelity than were their wives. A husband might condone and even encourage infidelity as part of a trade arrangement or ceremony but might punish his wife's clandestine affairs by beating or divorce.⁹⁶ Neither the Crow nor the Hidatsa approved of excessive beatings. Severe beatings might cause a Hidatsa woman to divorce her husband or enlist her brother's protection. Crow "people gossiped about a man who habitually beat his wife" and Crow women, like Hidatsa, had the option of leaving their husbands.⁹⁷

Women with unfaithful husbands, on the other hand, had only the option of divorce in both Hidatsa and Crow groups. However, many women, proud of a husband who was attractive to other women, did not mind, so long as his affairs did not jeopardize their marriage. After all, the wife was the object of envy and received increased status by association with such a husband.⁹⁸ The evidence, therefore, does not suggest a change in women's status from the Hidatsa to the Crow, since these customs are similar.

These analogous Hidatsa and Crow customs contrast with the model's predictions in which, among nomadic groups, sexual equality ended with the introduction of the horse and the gun. Thereafter, according to the model, the situation became one of increasing male dominance and decreased personal autonomy for women. Kathleen Gough and Katherine Weist summarize factors associated with "the prevalence of male dominance": the ability of men to control institutions such as punishment or death for female adultery; the emphasis on female chastity and denial of divorce to women; and the ability of men to control child-rearing.⁹⁹ A marked cultural change in these areas would indicate a decline in the status of women among the Crow, as contrasted with that of the Hidatsa. Contrary to the model's predictions, this did not occur. With one exception, institutionalized kidnapping among the Crow,

the remarkable similarity between Hidatsa and Crow customs continued. Margot Liberty asserts that, during the equestrian stage, the age of marriage for women was lowered, polygyny "clearly increased," severe beatings of wives became "universally" accepted, and female suicide rates increased.¹⁰⁰ No Crow historical or ethnographic evidence supports these conclusions.

Lastly, the model maintains that, among nomadic women, the advantages resulting from the acquisition of the horse were outweighed by the burden of increased possessions made possible by this new method of transport. Liberty states that these changes resulted in increased labor for nomadic women.¹⁰¹ However, the evidence does not establish the extent to which the labor of moving camp increased as a result of the acquisition of the horse. The labor involved in packing dogs and carrying heavy loads on one's back was considerable. Further, no data suggest that women resented the increased number of possessions; the contrary appears to be true. Regardless, an increase in labor due to the accumulation of additional material possessions does not automatically indicate a lowering of status or even a decline in the comfort of one's lifestyle. Nowhere is it reported that Crow women avoided the labor of moving camp. In fact, evidence exists that Crow women enjoyed moving. For example, Pretty-shield observed, "I loved to move, even after I was a married woman with children to take care of. Moving made me happy."¹⁰²

APPROPRIATENESS OF THE MODEL TO THE HIDATSA AND CROW

The Great Plains model includes three periods discussed in this paper. Women's status during the Early Period, or Lithic and Archaic stages, is generalized from comparative anthropological data. No historical or ethnographic data are available for the Crow in this time period.¹⁰³ Archaeological data can, at best, provide only limited nonsex-specific information. Margot Liberty, referring to a point made by Alan Klein, states that women "*probably* had relatively high status" [italics mine].¹⁰⁴ No specific data could be found in support of this position.

The Formative Period, or horticultural stage, is better documented. Specific historical information supports general anthropological data about horticultural societies and specific Hidatsa archaeological data.

Crow data do not support the position that nomadic equestrian women lost status in almost all areas during the Equestrian Era. In an examination of the four general criteria for evaluating status (economic, political, religious, and personal freedom), insufficient evidence was found to justify the conclusion that "the status of women declined sharply." One custom, kidnapping by Crow men's societies, does raise a question. Overall, however, Crow women enjoyed status similar to that of Hidatsa women. In fact, in the political arena, Crow women participated more fully than Hidatsa women. There is no historical or ethnographic evidence to support the conclusion that customs such as polygyny increased. Furthermore, using polygyny as an indicator of status is very uncertain under circumstances where warfare, disease, and female-to-male ratios of larger than two-to-one cloud the meaning of a custom usually considered to be demeaning to women. Other claims, such as that of the "near-slave status" of nomadic equestrian women, do not find support in the ethnographic record. Differences in women's status among the Hidatsa and Crow do not support the model. In fact, similarities between the groups suggest that this model is inappropriate when applied to Crow women.

Crow women such as Pretty-shield felt that their life during these times was far superior to pre-horse or pre-reservation days. As Pretty-shield put it, "[T]he happiest days of my life were spent following the buffalo herds over our beautiful country."¹⁰⁵

TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF CROW WOMEN'S STATUS

With so much evidence to the contrary, one wonders why acceptance of the model and assumptions of Hidatsa and Crow women's inferior status are so widespread. The common picture of Crow women as drudges burdened with physical and cultural baggage is not easily dispelled. The earlier discussion of evidence suggested ways in which the historical record reflects the cultural heritage of the observers. One reason for the model's acceptance is that it fit so neatly into current theories of gender relations; as a result, researchers did not question the veracity of these assumptions.

As mentioned previously, early traders and later ethnographers entertained certain presumptions as to the nature of status.

For example, biological determinism influenced many observers of native Great Plains life. These observers (almost exclusively male) inferred that biological differences resulted in different "natural propensities or different activity profiles."¹⁰⁶ Women, because of physical characteristics and the need to bear and nurture young, tended toward "safer" activities, closer to home (such as gathering). Men, however, being larger and stronger, participated in more "difficult" and dangerous activities such as hunting. When applied to Great Plains peoples, these theories led to the conclusion that hunting was a totally male pursuit and to the further assumption that all of the meat and its by-products belonged to males. Additionally, the perception of women as the "weaker" sex led many early observers to view Great Plains women as virtual slaves, forced to do many "masculine" chores such as hauling heavy loads and farming.

Observers also identified women as having social and physiological roles "closer to nature." They saw women as burdened with demeaning reproductive and domestic work, as opposed to public work, the source of power in society.¹⁰⁷ As Stephanie Coontz and Peta Henderson explain in *Women's Work and Men's Property*, the concept that politics (public work) is a "higher sphere derives from state societies where the political realm can coerce the domestic one."¹⁰⁸ However, they suggest that "a remarkably consistent aspect of simple societies is the fact that political leadership confers neither power nor prestige, and is frequently ignored by domestic groups."¹⁰⁹ Traders and ethnologists misunderstood domestic power in Hidatsa and Crow society and assumed reproductive and domestic work to be demeaning.

Simone de Beauvoir and Shulamith Firestone offer a feminist version of biological determinism, suggesting that the original cause of women's oppression was the unequal distribution of reproductive labor. De Beauvoir sees women as restricted to a nurturing role, while men were free to pursue a creative one. Again it is Western, male-dominated thought that views the domestic, nurturing role as restrictive, uncreative, and inferior. This ethnocentric view cannot be projected cross-culturally or assumed to be appropriate when applied to Hidatsa and Crow women.¹¹⁰

Theories of sociobiology have also encouraged a misconception regarding Indian women's roles. According to these theories, although behavior is genetically based, individuals strive to maximize the number of their (or close relatives') genes passed on to the

next generation. This theory explains male dominance as arising through universal traits, such as male aggression, which have a genetic basis. It also explains divisions of labor by sex, assuming a biological/genetic basis that ultimately creates dominant, public-oriented males and stay-at-home females.¹¹¹ Early observers, noticing that Great Plains men were more aggressive than women in such noticeable activities as warfare, assumed male dominance in all other areas of life.

While these theories make previous interpretations of Hidatsa and Crow women's status easier to understand, the question of why Crow women's status did not decline as predicted remains. Claude Meillassoux proposes a biological theory of gender relations that is relevant to the Great Plains experience. In "The Pregnant Male," he suggests that the "great historical endeavor of man has been to reconquer the reproductive function over women and to fight off the incipient power derived from the latter's procreative capacities."¹¹² Needless to say, this view has earned him criticism for viewing gender relations from the perspective of man as the "central figure, the decision maker, as one competing with other men for women."¹¹³

Despite this criticism, elements of Meillassoux's theory apply to the Great Plains experience. It seems ironic that, in some societies where men most value their children, women are most subjugated. Meillassoux suggests that it is precisely in those societies that are organized around previous or future generations that men most need to control the source of reproduction. For example, in matrilineal societies, where a man's lineage is identified more with his sister's children than his own, he is less concerned with the autonomy of his wife and is less interested in controlling her. Scholars have always assumed Hidatsa and Crow matrilineal structure to be one of the reasons for the relatively high status of women in these cultures. Meillassoux offers us a clue as to why this may be so.

Meillassoux offers another interesting insight into the strategies used in subjugating women. He demonstrates how ideology controls society by means of myths and beliefs. Meillassoux suggests that, because of men's anxiety over women's reproductive powers, men convert women's source of power into a source of vulnerability and powerlessness.¹¹⁴ Leela Dube explains how this process works. In a large part of India, the seed symbolizes the father's contribution to reproduction, and the field or earth the mother's. The seed is the essence of the new child, the field merely

provides nourishment. As such, a woman "is only a vehicle for the offspring of the man," and it is his lineage that is extended. This symbolism is projected into the economic sphere, where a woman's production, no matter how great a percentage of the household's, is seen as the man's property. Sexual symbolism provides the rationale for economic subjugation as well.¹¹⁵

Hidatsa and Crow women's experience differed considerably from that of women in India. Symbolism also projected into the Hidatsa/Crow economic sphere, but it supported women's ownership of production, land, and homes. Crow women were partners in work and ownership. In Crow creation stories, Old Man Coyote created women out of identical materials as men (not from a part of man) and gave them equally essential roles to play. Crow women are not passive vehicles but active *partners*, created equally.¹¹⁶ Symbolic/cultural theories are helpful in understanding the dynamics of sexual inequality and how, in some societies, male dominance is perpetuated. The fact that these theories also aid in explaining the ability of women to maintain equality in such societies as the Hidatsa and Crow is often overlooked.

Symbolic interpretation has led to other cross-cultural misconceptions as to women's status. Widespread interpretations postulate a universal male fear of female reproductive powers and processes. These are often expressed in "pollution" fears and consequent prohibitions.¹¹⁷ Based on incomplete cross-cultural data, these theories ignore contradictory cultural variation. For example, Jane Goodale points out that in Kaulong (New Britain) society, women's "dangerous" pollution does not lead to passivity or subordination. Kaulong women "are unconcerned, for the most part, about their potentially polluting effects on men."¹¹⁸ Similarly, "pollution" fears among the Hidatsa and Crow did not indicate lower status. On the contrary, they considered menstruation, pregnancy, and childbirth to be "medicine" or power. Reproductive processes were dangerous because they could cancel other medicine and weaken men's powers. Far from seeing these processes as "pollution," the Hidatsa and Crow regarded them as confirmations of strength.¹¹⁹

Symbolic/cultural theories, while often used to explain continued male dominance, can explain the maintenance of women's positions in society, even after considerable economic change and cultural stress.¹²⁰ When a strong ideology supports women's personal autonomy and their economic and religious positions, as in matrilineal societies such as the Crow, a model based primarily on

economic factors is incomplete. Status is the product of a variety of factors. To suggest that one theory, whether it is economically, biologically, or psychologically determined, can answer all of our questions as to status is to miss the point of this complexity. Status is a culturally complex issue that cannot be answered by any model that does not take into consideration cultural variables. The complex causes of inequality, and therefore of degree of status, depend on cultural values that are socially determined.¹²¹ Any discussion of gender, including that of the status of women, cannot be complete without discussion of these issues.¹²²

SUMMARY

In summary, analysis of the Great Plains gender relations model fails to predict the Hidatsa/Crow experience. The data do not substantiate the supposed egalitarian lifestyle characteristic of the "Early Period." While comparative information from other pre-state level societies is informative, it is not definitive. The model portrays Plains society as progressing from an era of gender-status equality to a loss of status for women in the Equestrian Era. There is insufficient information to support that conclusion. In addition, the comparative data underlying the concept of a pre-horse egalitarian lifestyle are presented by perceptive feminists such as Eleanor Leacock, who are able to recognize women's power. The data supporting a proposed decrease in status among Great Plains women, however, derive from observations made by male traders and explorers, widely recognized for their inability to "see" women. Where these men mention women at all, it is usually in the context of slavery or prostitution. The predicted lowering of women's status in the Crow equestrian, hunting society did not occur, even though women's status in other economically similar Great Plains groups apparently did decrease.

When the status criteria suggested by Margot Liberty are used as a basis for appraising relevant gender relations theory, it becomes apparent that no single theory provides for or explains the Crow experience. An economic model yields few clues as to why Crow women's position withstood the economic and social stresses of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the status of other Plains women apparently declined. The biological determinist concepts have little relevance, except to account for non-Crow reporters' perceptions and biases. However, certain of

the symbolic/cultural theories are instructive and useful in answering why Crow women's status did not decrease.

These theories explain how beliefs and attitudes sustained the traditional position of Crow women through generations of economic and social stress.¹²³ Early ethnographic evidence, meant to be uncomplimentary, provides clues to Crow women's traditional position. Early observers saw Crow women as aggressive, overbearing, and sometimes ugly.¹²⁴ If "beauty is as beauty does," then Crow women certainly did not meet the ideal of nineteenth-century European and Euro-American femininity. Ethnographic evidence shows that Crow women were physically strong, confident, and relatively assertive in politics, trade, and marriage. It is precisely these "unfeminine" characteristics that enabled Crow women to maintain their position within society. The evidence suggests that women's status endured in the face of economic change. Crow women maintained their traditional and important roles in religion, trade, and distribution. Personal autonomy did not decrease. Public political participation of Crow women increased. Crow women's position relative to Hidatsa women did not change substantially. This traditional position manifested itself symbolically in Crow culture. The importance of tradition, of the spiritual world, and of matrilineal kinship are often ignored or misunderstood by Western observers.¹²⁵ These aspects of Crow culture were a source of strength for Crow women. That situation differs considerably from the one described by Leela Dube in India. There, the concept of women as merely passive receptors akin to a fallow field translated into low status and economic position. Contrary to the model's prediction, traditional Crow society continued to support women's economic importance. Crow men did not question women's economic rights, including the symbolic ownership of and right to distribute meat and animal products, and ownership of craft work and the lodge. As Henrietta Moore argues, "[C]ultural ideas about gender do not directly reflect the social and economic positions of women and men, although it is true that they originate within the context of those conditions."¹²⁶

While many feminist writers maintain that Western women are the victims of an ideological hegemony that perpetuates their low status irrespective of their economic contribution, Crow women may have benefited from a more favorable egalitarian tradition. Roger Keesing writes that "it is precisely the power and role of dominant ideologies to render contingent social/economic/po-

litical relationships as external, self-evident, beyond doubt or change."¹²⁷ This review suggests that, because of the traditionally "self-evident" relationships that existed in Crow society, drastic changes in social, economic, and political relationships—attributed elsewhere to war, disease, and the fur trade—did not affect Crow women to the degree predicted by the Great Plains gender relations model.

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