

H-Net Reviews

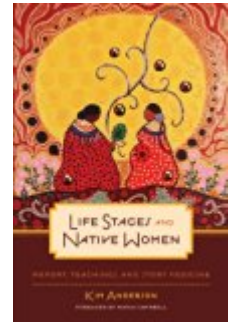
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kim Anderson. *Life Stages and Native Women: Memory, Teachings, and Story Medicine.* Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2011. 223 pp. \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-88755-726-2.

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Kim Anderson's *Life Stages and Native Women* is a welcome contribution to the literature on decolonization and indigenous women's health. Both an exploration of her personal experience as a native woman and an academic discussion of the multifaceted roles of women in northern Algonquian cultures, Anderson's work complements the existing body of Canadian work on aboriginal Canadian women's health. Moreover, her use of oral histories and her work with elders expands the existing literature on indigenous methodologies.

A reworking of her doctoral dissertation, Anderson's book explores native women's health in Cree, Métis, and Anishnaabek cultures from the vantage point of the life cycles of women in these communities. Her overall argument is that the health of the individual is interdependent with the health of the entire community, and that colonization disrupted that relationship. She starts with an overview, focusing specifically on the goal of promoting healing in the groups she discusses. Indeed, she seeks not to expose the violence and oppression of the colonial era, but to offer remedies for decolonization: "I believe that the recovery of our peoples is linked to 'digging up the medicines' of our past" (p. 4). In this sense, Anderson's narrative is gentle and empowering in its aim to expose past gendered and intergenerational traditions in northern Algonquian societies. She consistently strikes a careful balance between the exposure of tradition and a decolonizing approach.

Anderson's main sources are oral histories that she collected from fourteen elders spread across northern Ontario, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan. As she hails from among these communities, Anderson's methodological approach is as much a personal journey as a schol-

arly one. Her experience with elders is transformative, adding a demonstrative layer to her project of decolonization. Her multidisciplinary and community-oriented approach is an active, intentional contribution to healing in the communities she addresses. Even her discussion of the vicissitudes of collecting oral histories is couched in terms of acknowledging and honoring what can sometimes be a painful act of remembering.

After introducing the elder participants, *Life Stages and Native Women* turns to a chronological approach to understand women's health in indigenous communities. Her chapter on early childhood starts with conception and ends with the "walking out" ceremony for toddlers. This chapter focuses on the idea that babies and toddlers, regardless of gender, learn within their communities to "trust and depend on the world they had entered" (p. 63). The following chapter looks at childhood and youth, an era in which communities as caregivers foster trust and belonging in children, while introducing independence and responsibility. In this chapter, Anderson focuses on the balance of independence and interdependence, making the vital point that the overall community health and well-being relies on the integration and instruction of children in this stage of life. Without ever mentioning residential schools, Anderson manages to emphasize the great damage or disruption done not just to the children but to the overall communities they were forced to leave. At the same time, she offers an understanding of what would have occurred if children had not left, in order to offer some measure of knowledge for rebuilding.

In her chapter on early adulthood, Anderson focuses more specifically on gender, as it was at this point in the life cycle that gender began to inform more concretely

the experiences of her study subjects. Women's jobs in this phase, she posits, center on ensuring the sustenance of the community and caring for the young and old. Women ensure balance while safeguarding social relations. Curiously, she does not discuss pregnancy and child rearing in this chapter, claiming that she addresses these topics in a previous one on early childhood. And yet the earlier chapter does not discuss pregnancy and birth from a mother's perspective. Anderson might have achieved a more multifaceted understanding of the adult element of women's life cycles by covering these experiences in more detail.

The final chapter is devoted to elders, and is clearly one of great importance and centrality to Anderson's journey as well as her analysis. She explores three "levels" of elderhood, also from a linear perspective. The community elder is occupied with leadership and governance, as well as learning how to be an elder. The ceremonial elder has spiritual responsibilities with a focus on the health and well-being of the community, and the earth elder offers wisdom and philosophy. Anderson points out that in elderhood, indigenous women also encounter new areas of authority and power in relation to men: "it was the spirit of the old ladies that kept their communities alive in the past. This greater purpose as

'firekeeper' was an extension of their important position at the centre of the family and community" (p. 131). She also addresses childbirth in this chapter with specific reference to the role of grandmothers. A fascinating discussion, it nonetheless presents a structural incongruity as there is no discussion of birth in relation to mothers.

Despite this oversight, Anderson's study offers new insights and a tremendously positive approach to understanding the forces at play in ensuring health for native communities in Canada. In her quest to imagine a stronger way of life, she gently achieves a careful, nuanced view of the role of the community in health, well-being, and healing. She successfully achieves her goal of offering knowledge regarding opportunities for decolonization among the people she addresses, as well as her goal for personal growth in her belonging to her home community. While gender is not the focal point of her analysis, she highlights the roles of women in promoting health within communities, again offering opportunities for returning to traditional knowledge and healing practice. Anderson's work is a welcome addition to the literature on native women's health, nonnative understandings of the impact of colonization, the drive for decolonization, and oral histories.

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