



September 2010

Restoring the Balance: First Nations Women, Community, and Culture

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Recommended Citation

Rodríguez de France, M. (2010). Restoring the Balance: First Nations Women, Community, and Culture. *The International Indigenous Policy Journal*, 1(2).

DOI: 10.18584/iipj.2010.1.2.4

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Restoring the Balance: First Nations Women, Community, and Culture

Abstract

With empowering stories and histories from twelve Aboriginal women who are leaders in different contexts and communities, the book acknowledges and celebrates the contributions of Aboriginal women to diverse fields of work and disciplines such as art, culture, politics, language, law, community, education, and social activism. About the Authors Eric Guimond is an assistant director at the Strategic Research and Analysis Directorate at Indian and Northern Affairs Canada. Gail Guthrie Valaskakis was a Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Concordia University and was a leading authority on Aboriginal Media and Communication. She passed away in 2007. Madeleine Dion Stout is a former nurse and founding director of the Centre of Aboriginal Education, Research, and Culture at Carleton University.

Keywords

First Nations traditions, feminism, Aboriginal women, gender imbalances

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The book, dedicated to Gail Guthrie Valaskakis who passed away in 2007, is organized into four thematic units: 1) Historic Trauma; 2) Intellectual and Social movements; 3) Health and Healing; and, 4) Arts, Culture, and Language. The editors offer a succinct explanation of each theme in their introduction suggesting the need to consider Aboriginal women's participation individually and collectively for the advancement of cultural continuity and community development both of which are forces of self-determination.

As a prelude to each chapter, artwork by Aboriginal women serves as the 'door' through which the reader is invited to enter a world of words that through diverse writing styles illustrate the times and lives of women who have "successfully navigated beyond gender and racial discrimination, and are moving toward the reforms that will bring lasting changes" (p. 3).

In order to better understand such reforms, the authors affirm it is necessary to understand the historical aspects that have shaped the present. Consequently, the first theme explores several views of historical trauma from the perspective of four writers who take on different lenses to analyze the social and moral implications of colonization in the welfare system, in education, in the psychological and emotional dependency on individuals and in communities, as well as in the misrepresentations of Aboriginal women in demographic dynamics and issues of equality, all of which are issues 'never properly voiced out and represented' (p. 20). Although these accounts are written from an Aboriginal perspective, the authors do not present an often encountered 'us/them' position (Aboriginal vs. non-Aboriginal)

within scholarly work but, rather, offer a balanced view of the issues. This unit ends describing the case of Sandra Lovelace as an example of the legal changes that Aboriginal women have led, which serves as an introduction to the second theme of Intellectual and Social Movements.

This thematic unit highlights the lives of women who have counteracted established norms and organizations by serving their communities as chiefs, academics, intellectuals, and in other roles, which have required capacity building, accountability, and compromised team work. In the chapter written by Dr. Jo-ann Archibald, the reader is invited to learn more about the lives of five women, who were the first to occupy faculty positions at mainstream Canadian universities. The last chapter of this theme describes the Sisters in Spirit Campaign, which has gained support as a result of the persistence and engagement of women within various sectors of society across Canada. The chapter contains accounts and testimonials of women, who have lost mothers, daughters, nieces and other female relations as a result of violent crimes.

Marlene Brant-Castellano's chapter introduces the third theme of which Health and Healing are the focus. Brant-Castellano describes traditional roles within communities and societies using her own upbringing as an example before moving to a community based approach to understanding healing and wellness. The description of several health initiatives assists the reader to appreciate not only the need for established programs but also to recognize that healing takes different forms throughout life and that spiritual healing is fundamental to regaining a strong sense of identity and communal growth. In this regard, the next chapter by Gaye Hanson describes cultural competence as an ethical space developed within family, community, and within research and policy.

The last three chapters of the book are dedicated to the theme of Arts, Culture, and Language. The merging of historical accounts and the description of ongoing efforts from

individuals and organizations offer the reader a clear sense of the need to revitalize and restore these expressive ways of life within communities. The first chapter in this unit examines the lives of seven artists in an attempt to describe the complexities of what the arts are, how they represent a people, and how they infuse spiritual and emotional connections among individuals and nations. Through the lens of a curator, the second chapter looks at the value and relevance of cultural artefacts as representations of cultural dynamics, and community development and cohesion. The author offers a useful historical account of the emergence of some such artefacts that began as “curiosities” or souvenirs and later found a place in the economic system of many communities. The last chapter of the book addresses the challenges and triumphs around issues related to language: strength, loss, recovery, revitalization, and preservation bringing to a full circle the recognition of women as central contributors to community development and cultural continuity.

In holding with its title, the book “restores the balance” through the ideas that are presented and while it is not formulaic, the historical accounts provide the reader with a clearer understanding of the issues and offer an ample and, at times, detailed discussion of the topics at hand. Those interested in learning about history from diverse perspectives (i.e., social, pedagogical, spiritual) would benefit from reading this book, which is presented in a ‘reader friendly’ approach and, thus, accessible to general audiences. Further, the book offers opportunities to consider the implications for pedagogical practices and for policy development from socio-cultural and socio-economic perspectives.

Additionally, those who are less familiar with some of the challenges and victories that Aboriginal Nations have faced and achieved would find this book insightful not only because it is written from an authentic Aboriginal perspective but also because it is specific to the

challenges and victories of Aboriginal women who have been the moral, social, economic, educational, and spiritual fibre that has woven communities in this place called Canada.