

Native America: The Struggle to Be Heard

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WRITER'S COMMENT: When my professor told us to write a story about a "living saint," I hadn't a clue where to find one. Yes, there are people who do good all around, but I didn't want just anyone. I wanted someone who was doing something that I could connect to and which had an impact. It was early morning when I had the epiphany to write about Chiitaanibah Johnson. I quickly Googled Johnson, found her Twitter account and sent her a message. I had learned about Johnson just a week before in my Native American Literature class. Her story is not an uncommon one, but it is a vital one. I personally have watched classmates stay silent as Native Americans were discussed in a stereotypical and racist manner. It is important that such stories finally get told to the world.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: One of the major assignments in my UWP 111A Photojournalism course is the Saints Alive Project, for which each student must find a local living "saint" and document some specific aspect of her or his life that makes that person saint-worthy. The subjects of the articles my students write don't necessarily need to be religious; they may simply be humanitarians who make efforts at improving the lives of others. Amanda Aguilar wrote her article on Chiitaanibah Johnson, who is Navajo and Maidu, and who was thrust into a leadership role within the Native American community after publicly standing her ground against an ill-informed professor. In her article, Amanda deftly paints an honest and compelling picture of this courageous young woman while also shedding light on the everyday challenges Native Americans face. In her article, Amanda

gets to the essence of Johnson, who boldly encourages her fellow Native Americans to “stand up for themselves and for the accurate representation of their histories.”

— Ken Andersen, University Writing Program

DAVIS, Calif. — The stage lights shone on Chiitaanibah Johnson as she sat in a wooden chair with her head down, showing a timidity wholly absent off stage. A leather and beaded turtle totem hung from her neck.

Across from her sat Rich Hebert, who plays Beverly Weston in Capital Stage’s production of *August: Osage County*. “If you’re going to live here,” said Hebert, “I *want* you to live here. You understand?”

Johnson replied softly, barely lifting her head, “Yes, sir.”

The quiet words and downturned eyes of her character Johnna Monevata were gone a week later as 21-year-old Johnson sat in an empty classroom recalling the events that occurred last fall on the California State University, Sacramento campus (Sac State).

“That story got so big,” she said.

In September of 2015, Johnson, who is a junior English major at Sac State, publicly disagreed with her American History professor, Maury Wiseman, who, during a lecture, stated “genocide” was too strong of a word to describe what happened to Native Americans because it implies intention. Johnson, who is Navajo and Maidu, collected research supporting that genocide did in fact occur; during the next lecture, she raised her hand to present this research to him.

Wiseman did not welcome Johnson’s disagreement, and their discussion became heated.

“When I went into it I was like ‘Don’t sass him,’” Johnson recalled with a smile. “‘Keep it professional.’ But he just started getting rude and defensive.”



Chiitaanibah Johnson stands in costume inside the Capital Stage theatre where she plays Johnna Monevata, a Cheyenne Native, in August: Osage County.

Wiseman accused Johnson of “hijacking” his class before threatening her with expulsion, said Johnson, who stood her ground—despite no support from classmates.



Chiitaanibah Johnson, who spends her time fighting for accurate representation of Native Americans, stands beside a “Lady Justice” painting on a building wall in downtown Sacramento, near Capital Stage.

“How many people here do you see outraged about the fact that you said genocide didn’t happen? It’s me and you,” Johnson told Wiseman. The majority of Americans, Johnson said, “don’t see Native Americans on a daily basis; we’re fucking invisible.”

This “invisibility” is due in large part to the relative lack of media coverage concerning Native Americans. According to CDC data from 1999 to 2011, Natives were more likely to be killed by police than any other group, including African Americans. However, the media rarely cover these deaths. Matt Agorist, in an article for The Free Thought Project, theorizes the topic is not “divisive” enough, meaning most Americans don’t feel strongly one way or another about police brutality against Natives.

“I care because I’m Native,” said Johnson, “and unfortunately, that’s really how it works in this country.”

Kaitlin Reed, a Ph.D. student in Native American Studies at UC Davis, and a Hupa and Yurok Native, agreed that few people in class, even her graduate classes, bring up Indigenous issues, and when they do they are not taken seriously.

“Often times, when I’m that person [bringing up settler colonialism and Indigenous issues], I feel like the rest of the class is like ‘Alright, she said her bit about colonialism, let’s move on,’” said Reed.

According to the U.S. Census, Native Americans and Alaska Natives make up only 0.9% of the U.S. population. They are one of the smallest minorities in the country—and in the classroom. Moreover, when students like Johnson speak against the status quo, frequently they are deemed out of line. Johnson still recalls how her classmates laughed at her and were excited to see her get in trouble for speaking against her professor. Johnson is not, however, the first Native student to stand up asking a teacher or professor to speak the truth.

“Johnson’s isn’t an isolated event,” says Reed. “She’s special because she made it so public. She didn’t let it be just an instance in that class. She made sure it started a bigger conversation.” However, Reed notes that standing up and being vulnerable in these situations, as both she and Johnson have done, is an emotionally draining experience.

“I bawled my eyes out after I left that classroom,” said Johnson, “I called my dad, and I could not calm down. I was like, ‘I just got in trouble.’”

What Johnson didn’t know when she walked out of class distraught last September was her fight had only begun. An unprecedented media frenzy descended, and Johnson was left drowning in it.

“I’m speaking for my entire race every time I open my mouth,” said Johnson, remembering how panicked she felt last fall as she went to media interviews and to Sac State’s Office of the President.

Johnson walked a precarious line when she suddenly became the voice of her “entire race.” Popular thinking often groups all Native Americans as one, when in fact they are vastly diverse groups of people with differing perspectives, values, traditions, and languages.

According to Johnson, at a panel held by Sac State after the incident between Wiseman and herself, a Navajo man, and member of Sac State’s Native American club, stated the “issue” involving Johnson “has been extremely divisive to the Native community on campus.” While some applauded her, Johnson said, others felt she was causing unnecessary trouble for the Native community.

“I feel like I’ve been thrown all these responsibilities,” said Johnson, reflecting on the effect her actions have had on the Native community, “and now I’m Speaker of the House for every Indian in America when I didn’t ask to be. I just asked for the teacher to tell the truth.”

Johnson doesn’t regret her actions, though. In retrospect, she is grateful that her story has touched many people who were in her same situation and didn’t know what to do and either got in trouble or made themselves feel guilty because they stayed quiet. Johnson has shown Native Students it’s okay to stand up for themselves and for the accurate representation of their histories.

In an Op-Ed by the American Indian Students Association at California State University, Northridge, titled “Solidarity with Chiitaanibah Johnson,” Association members said they “have been very timid about revealing [they] are Native American, because people change

their views and opinions once they know.”

However, after hearing about Johnson’s courage to speak up, one member “committed to never again being timid to raise her hand in class and defend her culture.”

While Johnson has taken on the fight to voice the truth of Native America, her face still scrunches up at the word “activist.”

“I think just being a Native person in America, if you ever stand up for yourself, if you ever speak up for yourself, that’s considered activism. There are so few of us left, and there is so little of what we have that is ours that [when] a Native person stands up and says, ‘Hey! You can’t do this,’ everyone says ‘Activism!’ To me that’s not activism, but to [others] it is.”

Today, Johnson’s “activism” comes in her social media and her acting, through which she is working to improve the representation of Native Americans on stage. In *August: Osage County*, Johnson’s character Moneveta is a Cheyenne Native. It’s one of the only plays Johnson’s read, she says, with a portrayal of a Native American freed from stereotypes. For Johnson, acting is just another



Chiitaanibah Johnson and her cast mate, Jessica Brooks, put on make-up in their dressing room at Capital Stage before a showing of August: Osage County.

way to inform the world of Native America, and according to her *August: Osage County* cast mates, Johnson approaches her acting with the same amount of passion and boldness that fuels her fight for Indigenous people.

In recent months, her fight has centered on the Dakota Access Pipeline, a \$3.78 billion project to transport up to 570,000 barrels a day of crude oil from North Dakota to Illinois. The pipeline is being built near the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in North Dakota, upsetting the tribe, who argue it will disturb sacred sites, infringe on past treaty promises and tribal sovereignty, and poses a significant danger to their water supply. Non-violent protestors have been gathering at the construction site since January, when the government approved the pipeline.

“I’m sure my followers are sick of me on Twitter,” Johnson said. Most of what she posts on the social media site is links to petitions, sites

where people can donate money to help protestors and provide videos reports of what's happening at the construction site. Many of the videos revealed protestors being maced, attacked by dogs, and arrested by armed guards.

For Johnson, the events at Standing Rock are just repeating history. "If this turns into another Wounded Knee or anything like that, I guarantee you," Johnson says punching her fist into her hand to emphasize each word, "after everybody's dead then everyone's going to care."

Johnson is referencing the 1973 siege of Wounded Knee, South Dakota by members of AIM, the American Indian Movement, and Oglala Sioux activists, who accused the U.S. government of failing to fulfill their treaties with Native Americans. For 71 days, gunfire erupted on both sides of the conflict, killing two Native activists and paralyzing one federal agent.

The Dakota Access Pipeline protestors are taking a peaceful approach this time, keeping guns out of their movement. However, it took months for some major news networks to air coverage of the protest.

"It makes it really hard to fight when people don't listen," said Johnson. Protestors continue to fight, nevertheless, and media coverage of their efforts and mistreatment has been increasing since September.

If Johnson's experience helping to give voice to the struggle of Native America has taught her anything, it's that she wants to be a leader for her people. Her biggest inspiration is Annie Mae Aquash, a Mi'kmaq Indian from Canada and a powerful figure in AIM. Tears fill Johnson's eyes as she describes Aquash. "She was a leader by just being who she was. She was resilient and optimistic," said Johnson. "People really looked up to her, and she took care of people."

Aquash's body was found on February 24, 1976 with a bullet in the back of her head. While rumors swirled for years about whether the government killed Aquash, two former AIM members were sentenced separately to life in prison in 2004 and 2010 for her murder.

However, for many like Johnson, Aquash is still one of the greatest leaders to come out of AIM, and her death only increases their reverence.

"I want to be like her," Johnson says, her voice breaking. "I know I have a lot of work to do, but, just within my own rights, [I want to] be somebody like that for my people."