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Mary Schwandt and Maggie Brass (Snana): A Minnesota Pocahontas Story?

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I am happy to be part of this symposium, yet I am also very much aware of my outsider status. I am not native, I am not Minnesotan, I am not even American in terms of my birth (I am English). Worst of all, I am not a historian! Professionally, I am a literary critic. This may surprise some of you who have seen my 2009 book The War in Words: Reading the Dakota Conflict through the Captivity Literature since it seems so very—well—historical.

I mention all this not as an apology but as an explanation because I suspect my presentation is quite different from the others you will hear today. I trade in multiple interpretations, even ambiguity, not in a series of facts. I trade in texts, and politics, and popular culture, and education, all of which have profoundly influenced the legacy of the US-Dakota War. Let me tell you a little bit about The War in Words, because the work I did there on Mary Schwandt and Maggie Brass (Snana) encouraged me to go further and research the topic of my talk today. [1]

The *germ* for the book was simple. To chart changes in the captivity narrative form, I would attempt something new: analyze the captivity narratives generated by a single US-Indian war. I was already familiar with several narratives from the US-Dakota War of 1862, and I knew

that people remembered and interpreted the events very differently. So I selected twenty-four of what I hoped were representative captivity narratives from the hundreds that had been written or passed down orally.

I didn't want to mesh them into a master narrative but to present a series of kaleidoscopic perspectives. And I was committed to showing that these stories of capture and confinement were by and about Native Americans as well as by and about European Americans, because both groups "captured" each other in various ways. Rather than treat captivity narratives as literary artifacts, I wanted to see how many Dakota War survivors testified to their experiences and asserted their pre- and post-war identities through narratives like these. Yet although I found that captivity narratives were important vehicles for recording and interpreting information, I also found that they often reinforced stereotypes of "good" or "bad" Indians *whether the authors were native or non-native.*

Two complementary stories that first caught my eye involved the German teenager Mary Schwandt and the Dakota woman who has gone down in history as Snana (Tinkling) but who as an adult preferred to be known as Maggie Good Thunder (later, Maggie Brass). In the early days of the war, Maggie Good Thunder rescued Mary Schwandt from abuse and then adopted her to replace a recently lost daughter. My first attempt to piece together some of my research involved writing a conference paper titled "Mother and Child: The Dakota War Stories of Snana and Mary Schwandt." I have since questioned why I was particularly drawn to these texts. Yes, of course I could rationalize the neatness of analyzing the two women's stories in tandem. But was I also buying into sentimental, pro-Indian stereotypes of the kind that critic Philip Young discussed in his influential essay, "The Mother of Us All: Pocahontas Reconsidered"?[2] I want to argue today

that although there are other accounts of Dakota who saved whites and mixed bloods from harm during the war, the dominant culture has found the Schwandt/Brass connection particularly appealing.

My sense that this is the case was reinforced when the summer 2012 issue of Minnesota History (which is largely devoted to the Dakota War) placed a famous image of Schwandt Schmidt (as she was after her marriage) and Brass taken in 1899 on the cover of its Dakota War activities insert. I wonder if the Minnesota Historical Society also realized that the Schwandt/Brass story incorporates some of mainstream America's most enduring stereotypes involving the native woman as mother (i.e. protector) and lover (i.e. partner)?

In recent years native scholars as well as non-native scholars have moved beyond Philip Young in formulating native stereotypes, especially of women.[3] I will refer to their work when considering the typecasting in the different accounts of Schwandt's captivity, including the one by Maggie Brass herself.

But first I need to talk about "the Pocahontas Perplex," a term coined by Cherokee critic Rayna Green. [4] The Pocahontas Perplex holds that mainstream American culture tends to depersonalize native women into two categories: the Princess or the Squaw (a derogatory term for many natives). The Princess privileges European Americans over her own people—as in Pocahontas' supposed rescue of John Smith—while the Squaw—who is the "darker, negatively viewed sister" and "the anti-Pocahontas," as scholar Leslie Fiedler says—acts in an uncivilized, sly, abusive, and sometimes promiscuous way. [5] Although Green came up with her designation over thirty years ago, contemporary Indian commentators reiterate the same point. For example,

Devon Mihesuah (Choctaw) examines "the artificially idealistic" versus the "extremely pejorative" stereotypes of natives at the same time that she urges non-Indians to move beyond typecasting altogether and expand the tiny core of "notable" native women that includes Pocahontas, Sacagawea, and Zitkala-Sa. [6] A new addition might very well be Maggie Brass.

The story of Mary Schwandt and Maggie Good Thunder first appeared within one of the earliest full-length histories about the war, Charles Bryant and Abel Murch's A History of the Great Massacre (1864). After the war, when Bryant was employed to record claimants' testimony in settling property damages against the Dakota, he said he had heard horrific stories that he could not include in the officially abridged evidence but that he felt duty-bound to publish elsewhere.[7] Though purportedly written in the first person, Schwandt's eight-page story was editorialized by Bryant and Murch who demonized Dakota by incorrectly suggesting that she had been gang raped and by inserting other loaded comments. The single page that covers Schwandt's time with Maggie and Andrew Good Thunder presents a coercive filial relationship, as seen in such comments as "I was forced to call them father and mother" and "they ordered me out of the wagon, and compelled me to walk."[8] In this version Maggie is scarcely distinguished from her husband and both are stereotyped negatively; the cruel or at least callous characteristics often attributed to Indian men are here transferred to the couple. The text does not say Maggie Good Thunder protected or adopted Schwandt; instead it says that an Indian relative handed Schwandt over as a gift, an implied spoil of war. Thus in this version Maggie Good Thunder falls into the stereotypical category of Squaw.

Decades later, journalist Return I. Holcombe interviewed Mary Schwandt Schmidt, as she was then, took down her story, and published it in 1894, first in the St. Paul Pioneer Press

newspaper and then in Collections of the Minnesota Historical Society, that organization's official journal. Many other survivor stories also appeared in the Collections around the 30th anniversary of the war. Holcombe had persuaded Schwandt Schmidt to break her decades-long silence as a patriotic duty, and what she told him was very different from what had appeared in 1864.[9] The earlier text not only reflected Bryant and Murch's racist agenda but Schwandt's immediate post-war desire "to get away from the Indians." However, hindsight enabled her to provide a corrective by portraying her protector more positively. [10]

Let's shift gears for a minute now and consider the qualities ascribed to Pocahontas in mainstream American culture. The source for almost all the information about her comes from John Smith himself, and he was prone to romanticization, dramatization, self-aggrandizement, and ethnocentrism. What did Pocahontas do? She rescued John Smith from death when she was around eight or ten, she helped the English settlers, she converted to Christianity, she used an English name, she adopted Anglo ways, she married an Englishman (but not John Smith!), she learned Western-style literacy, and she became "a cultural broker."[11] But Philip Young in that essay I mentioned a minute ago points out the archetypal and mythic significance of this story which has its roots in folklore, namely, "The tale of an adventurer . . . who becomes the captive of a king of another country and another faith, and is rescued by his beautiful daughter, a princess who then gives up her land and her religion for his." [12] This kind of tale was so popular in the Middle Ages that medieval scholars call it "the enamoured Moslem Princess." Did you know that in The General History Smith uses several other rescue stories in addition to the one about Pocahontas, including his supposed liberation by the Moslem Lady Tragabigzanda? Chief Roy Crazy Horse, speaking for the Powhatan nation in 1995 shortly after the first Pocahontas

cartoon was released, believes that Smith's deliberate falsehood has been elevated over the centuries into "a national myth worthy of being recycled again by Disney."[13]

A key extract from "The Story of Mary Schwandt" reveals that Schwandt Schmidt conferred most of the same characteristics found in the figure of Pocahontas on Maggie Good Thunder: "Maggie was one of the handsomest Indian women I ever saw, and one of the best. She had been educated and was a Christian. She could speak English fluently (but never liked to), and she could read and write. . . . Maggie and her mother were both very kind to me, and Maggie could not have treated me more tenderly if I had been her daughter. Often and often she preserved me from danger, and sometimes, I think, she saved my life."[14]

The major difference between Pocahontas and Maggie Brass is that the former became the wife of an Englishman while the latter became the mother of a German girl. Thus both partners had kinship ties to each other, Pocahontas by marriage and Brass by formal adoption. (Intriguingly, the ceremony from which Pocahontas supposedly rescued Smith may have involved his initiation and formal adoption into the Powhatan tribe as a chief or werowance though Smith did not realize it.) Towards the end of her account, Schwandt Schmidt directly addresses her guardian in a surprisingly emotional way, considering she had not seen her since 1862, "wherever you are, Maggie, I want you to know that the little captive German girl you so often befriended and shielded from harm loves you still for your kindness and care, and she prays God to bless you and reward you in this life and that to come."[15] Here Schwandt Schmidt reaffirms her kinship ties to Maggie Brass and speaks to her as a daughter.

The story goes that in 1894, the matron at the Santee Agency, where Maggie and Charles Brass (Mazazezee) were then living, saw the Pioneer Press article, and showed it to her. [16] The following week Schwandt Schmidt received a letter from Brass which led to regular reunions between the two women, ongoing correspondence, financial assistance, and public recognition of their relationship. Sensing a newspaper scoop, Holcombe published an article about the women in the Pioneer Press and then pressured Brass to give her own version of the story, which she furnished in the fall of 1894 but which was not actually published in the MHS Collections until the 1898-1900 volume.[17]

And here we see yet another connection between the Powhatan woman Pocahontas and the Dakota woman Snana. As you probably know, Pocahontas has usually gone down in white history not by her formal native names, Amonute Matoaka, nor by her preferred married name, Rebecca Rolfe, but by her childhood nickname, meaning "the naughty or mischievous one." In this way Western culture has appropriated, arguably trivialized, and attempted to "authenticate" her image. Would you want to go down in history by your childhood nickname? I know I wouldn't. Maggie and Andrew Good Thunder converted to Christianity and used their Anglo names even before the Dakota War; decades later the only difference was that Maggie's married surname had changed to "Brass." We don't know for sure who decided that her account should appear under the name "Snana" but it was almost certainly Return Holcombe who probably believed that the translation of the Dakota word "Snana" reinforced the positive stereotypes of the rescue story. He may also have felt that he was being more respectful by using a native name. But was he?

I find it interesting that the Minnesota History insert I mentioned a little while ago also struggled a bit with names and information. The caption to the photo on its cover uses "Snana" throughout and doesn't use "Maggie" at all. Yet naming is crucial: witness the changing names of the war itself, as well as their connotations. When I first began work on The War in Words, the term "Dakota Conflict" was still acceptable, but when I published it ten years later, the term was—and is—not.

I have examined both the holograph version of Brass's story (signed "Maggie Brass"), which was written down by her son, and the published version, edited by Return Holcombe, and all the textual changes are very minor. Well, all but one. The single substantive change involves the title and Brass's name. The handwritten document states, "The Story of Maggie Brass and Her Experience in the Sioux Outbreak," but this was changed in the published version to "Narration of a Friendly Sioux: By Snana, the Rescuer of Mary Schwandt."[18] Note how the original title emphasizes Brass's non-native name and her own wartime experiences. The focus is on her and her words. But the published account describes Brass as "Friendly" (i.e., not savage), defines her as "the Rescuer of Mary Schwandt," (i.e., she needs to be identified as a rescuer and seen in relation to the person she rescued), and names her "Snana" (not Maggie Brass).

Brass's account further reinforces her adoption of European American cultural practices as indicated earlier in Schwandt Schmidt's version. For example, near the beginning she writes about her upbringing, "Although dressed in Indian costume, I thought of myself as a white lady in my mind and in my thoughts." Brass also reiterates Schwandt Schmidt's 1894 story in its emphasis on the loving relationship between the two women and Brass's desire to assuage her grief at her biological daughter's death by adopting another child, "The reason why I wished to

keep this girl," she says, "was to have her in place of the one I lost. So I loved and pitied her, and she was dear to me just the same as my own daughter." The narrative ends with Brass stating that she lost track of Schwandt after the war but recently learned that she was a married woman living in St. Paul, "Soon I went to visit her, and I was respected and treated well. It was just as if I went to visit my own child." [19] Indeed, other documents the women wrote from then on, especially Schwandt Schmidt's many letters and lecture notes on her captivity, continue the captor/captive connection (what I'm calling the Pocahontas trope), as do newspaper articles, photographs of the two women together, and personal interviews with them.[20] In fact, a Pioneer Press article dated 15 September 1895, which reports the first post-war meeting between the two women, is titled "After Many Years: Noble Indian Squaw Meets Again a Girl Rescued in 1862."[21]

I find it significant that both Pocahontas and Brass are essentially defined in mainstream American culture by their rescue of a vulnerable white captive. Pocahontas, of course, supposedly rescued Smith as he was about to be killed, while Brass's story continually contrasts the group she refers to as "the Indians" (meaning, the militants) with the Christianized, "civilized" group to which she says she belonged. Of course both women's saving acts were heroic, but the fact is that neither Pocahontas nor Snana would likely have entered the white historical record at all without a story of the capture, rescue, and release of a European American.

To reiterate, the major captivity events were initially Pocahontas' rescue of the captive John Smith and Brass's rescue of the captive Mary Schwandt. But there are more ironies here than meet the eye. Did you know that Pocahontas herself was captured by a military hawk,

Captain Argall, sometime after the purported Smith rescue? It was during her detention in Jamestown that she converted to Christianity and met and married John Rolfe. So from being a member of the captor group, i.e. the Powhatan Indians, Pocahontas herself became a captive. Following the US-Dakota War, Brass was interred in the infamous camp for native non-combatants outside Fort Snelling. Held captive by disease, starvation, and the elements, both Maggie's biological children died and a few years later she and Andrew Good Thunder separated. In these ways Pocahontas and Brass were held not just in cultural captivity but in physical captivity too.

Now I would like to discuss the design of and inscriptions on the Loyal Indians Monument erected in 1899 (on which Maggie Brass's name is inscribed) and the Schwandt Family Memorial erected in 1915 as "texts" that perpetuate white cultural stereotypes. At the end of the nineteenth century, when many Dakota War participants were dying out, millennialism seems to have encouraged a spate of war-related memorials, monuments, and publications. For example, 1899 saw the completion of a monument sponsored by the Minnesota Valley Historical Society (one of many they sponsored) and voted into being by a special act of the state legislature. It permanently recognized the contributions of a select few Dakota who took extraordinary measures to aid whites and mixed bloods. The 1902 publication Sketches Historical and Descriptive of the Monuments and Tablets Erected by the Minnesota Valley Historical Society includes the Society's classification of Dakota into several categories including the basis on which names were added to the monument: "There were a few Indians, constituting a small but grandly noble element, who were faithful in their lives for the preservation and salvation of those of the unfortunate white people."[22] Further stipulations

required that the subjects be full bloods, that they should have been loyal throughout the entire war, and that "They were to have actually, by personal effort and in a practical manner, saved the life of at least one white person."

Such stringent requirements reduced the list to five, identified by native name, definition of name, and Anglo name (John Other Day, Paul Mazakutemane, Lorenzo Lawrence [Elden Lawrence's great grandfather], Simon Anawangmani, and Mary Crooks). But the book made special note that "at the proper and appropriate time [i.e. after her death] the name of another Indian woman will be added to the list above given. This will be that of Snahnah (Tinkling) now Mrs. Maggie Brass of Santee Agency."

The words on the inscription itself state, "Erected AD 1899 by the Minnesota Valley Historical Society to commemorate the brave, faithful, and humane conduct of the loyal Indians who saved the lives of white people and were true to their obligations throughout the Sioux War in Minnesota of 1862, and especially to honor the services of those here named." These words are under a banner saying "HUMANITY." Other banner inscriptions presumably on the three other sides of the square are "PATRIOTISM," "COURAGE," and "FIDELITY."

Devon Mihesuah, a member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma and an academic, states, "Stereotyping American Indians is a form of racism that causes numerous problems, not only for those who are stigmatized, but also for those who perpetuate the myths." She adds that the media and other entities often promote "a distorted reality of Indians" whether unrealistically positive or negative.[23] Let me be clear: of course these six people acted heroically. But were they being tokenized by white culture in pro (rather than con) stereotypes? Let me be even clearer:

were there really only six Dakota who performed such heroic acts? Why the criterion that they be full bloods? How might saving a white person's life "by personal effort and in a practical manner" be judged (rather inconsistently, I suspect)? And why wait until the heroes were dead before inscribing their names on the monument? For all that white culture took the unusual step at that time to commemorate the deeds of six Dakota, the criteria for selection assured only a tiny number and encouraged bystanders to conclude that the exceptions proved the rule . . . especially as this monument stands close to the Birch Coulee Monument commemorating the soldiers who died at the Battle of Birch Coulee.

For some years Schwandt worked to raise funds for a memorial to her family at the site where they died. The State of Minnesota eventually appropriated $200 for a monument which was dedicated in her presence on 18 August 1915. On the surface, the Schwandt Memorial presents the Dakota in a stereotypically negative way as seen in the uncompromising inscription: Schwandt's family are "Martyrs for Civilization . . . Murdered by Sioux Indians." This accords with other portions of her narrative where she dwells on the horrors of her experiences before Maggie Good Thunder adopted her. Indeed, Maggie's care contrasts sharply with the behavior of those Schwandt Schmidt calls "the savage and brutal Indians."[24] Here is her narrative's conclusion, "In the hope that what I have written may serve to inform the present and future generations what some of the pioneers of Minnesota underwent in their efforts to settle and civilize our great state, I submit my plain and imperfect story."[25] By becoming Christian, taking an Anglo name, and saving a captive, in 1862 Maggie too was becoming "civilized" in Schwandt's eyes.

More recently, the two women's stories have been yoked together in an educational context. The 1989 edition of Northern Lights, the Minnesota history curriculum for sixth grade originally written by Rhoda Gilman, included Alomina Hurd's escape and Good Star Woman's march to Fort Snelling within a larger, more coherent narrative history. Gilman did not contribute to the new edition of Northern Lights in 2003 but makes this comment about it, "the curriculum was revised into a single book and the text was changed from a narrative to a series of episodes and examples." It dropped the Good Star Woman account (though it kept the Hurd) and added extracts from Maggie Brass's and Mary Schwandt's stories.[26] While these complementary texts do enact cultural cooperation, their inclusion may inadvertently provide another instance of stereotyping and sentimentality.

But apart from school textbooks, let me end by considering what non-native Minnesotans today think about the story of Mary Schwandt Schmidt and Maggie Brass. The sesquicentennial of the war has thrust the events of 1862 back into public view. But even so it's probably true that most people have a very limited knowledge of the US-Dakota War, which may signify cultural amnesia and guilt about what happened to Dakota people after the hostilities ended. As a final insult, many Dakota were demonized in inflammatory white-authored captivity narratives. (In fact, in 1925 Schwandt Schmidt wrote to historian Marion P. Satterlee, "I remember well after the outbreak the country was flooded with unscrupulous persons that wrote a lot of sensational stuf it mattered not if it was true as not just so they could sell thear books and the more lies they wrote the better they could sell thear books. . . .")[27] Today's Dakota elders, activists, and historians have tried to convey their side of the story. And they have had considerable success.

Non-native historian Carrie R. Zeman—my co-editor for A Thrilling Narrative of Indian Captivity: Dispatches from the Dakota War, a captivity narrative that has not been published since 1863—believes that modern memory of the war involves a very interesting sleight of mind: "Public opinion of Dakota people is now reversed; people generally believe that almost all the captives were adopted into Dakota families and treated as well as Maggie treated Mary. So it's become an archetypical story for the modern Dakota-sympathetic point of view. In that sense more Minnesotans have 'heard' (received and internalized) the story of Maggie and Mary than have heard their names."[28]

Remember the question mark in the title of my talk? Well, I'm going to let you decide whether Maggie Brass is a nineteenth-century Midwestern Pocahontas. But I will say that the one big difference between the two women is that while Pocahontas herself has no voice, meaning she is always spoken for both by white culture and by her own people, the Powhatans, Maggie Brass does have a voice. In addition to her narrative we also have authentic images and other documents showing that Brass could read and write. Moreover, after years of silence, Schwandt Schmidt and Brass resumed their relationship as middle-aged women. So unlike Pocahontas, Brass was not stuck forever in a kind of mythic, romanticized youth, though particularly among whites the dominant story of her life was always her rescue of Schwandt. And I'm going to end on that note. Instead of tying together all the loose ends, I'm going to leave them unbound for you to weave into your own pattern.

[1] Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola, The War in Words: Reading the Dakota Conflict through the Captivity Literature (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2009).

[2] Philip Young, "The Mother of Us All: Pocahontas Reconsidered," Kenyon Review, 24.3 (Summer 1962): 391-415. Rev. as "The Mother of Us All: Pocahontas," in Three Bags Full: Essays in American Fiction (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972): 175-203. See also "The Pocahontas Archive" at http://digital.lib.lehigh.edu/trial/pocahontas/essays.php?id=5 and http://www.squidoo.com/pocahontas for introductions to her.

[3] For a native perspective based on Mattaponi oral history, see The True Story of Pocahontas: The Other Side of History, by Dr. Linwood "Little Bear" Custalow and Angela L. Daniel "Silver Star" (Golden, CO: Fulcrum, 2007).

[4] See Rayna Green, "The Pocahontas Perplex," Massachusetts Review 16.4 (Autumn 1975): 698-714.

[5] See Green, "Pocahontas," 701.

[6] See Devon A. Mihesuah, American Indians: Stereotypes and Realities (Atlanta: Clarity Press, 1996), 9, and Mihesuah, Natives and Academics: Researching and Writing about American Indians (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1998), 45.

[7] See Charles S. Bryant and Abel B. Murch, A History of the Great Massacre by the Sioux Indians, in Minnesota. 2nd ed. (Chicago: Rickey and Carroll, 1864), iv. See also, Derounian-Stodola, War in Words, 104-16.

[8] Bryant and Murch, History, 341-42.

[9] See Derounian-Stodola, War in Words, 111-14.

[10] See Derounian-Stodola, War in Words, 111.

[11] See Margaret Szasz, Between Indian and White Worlds: The Cultural Broker (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001).

[12] Young, "Mother," 196.

[13] Quoted at http://www.powhatan.org.

[14] Mary Schwandt-Schmidt, "The Story of Mary Schwandt: Her Captivity during the Sioux 'Outbreak'—1862," Minnesota Historical Society Collections 6 (1894): 470-71.

[15] Schwandt-Schmidt, "Story," 471.

[16] See Mary Schwandt Schmidt, "Recollections of My Captivity among the Sioux the Year of 1862," ca. 1929 (n.d.), Mary Schwandt Schmidt Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, 48-49. Also quoted in Derounian-Stodola, War in Words, 113.

[17] See Derounian-Stodola, War in Words, 232-39.

[18] "The Story of Maggie Brass and Her Experience in the Sioux Outbreak," Miscellaneous Manuscripts, Minnesota Historical Society Manuscripts.

[19] Quotations in this paragraph are from the following pages in "Narration of a Friendly Sioux: By Snana, the Rescuer of Mary Schwandt," in Minnesota Historical Society Collections 9 (1898-1900), 428, 429, and 430.

[20] See Derounian-Stodola, War in Words, 106-14 and 232-39.

[21] "After Many Years: Noble Indian Squaw Meets Again a Girl Rescued in 1862." Pioneer Press, 15 September 1895.

[22] Quotations in this paragraph from Sketches Historical and Descriptive of the Monuments and Tablets Erected by the Minnesota Valley Historical Society (Morton, MN: Minnesota Valley Historical Society, 1902), accessed on 20 August 2007 at http://www.rrcnet.org/~historic/monument.html.

[23] Mihesuah, American Indians, 113, 115.

[24] Schwandt-Schmidt, Story, 471.

[25] Schwandt-Schmidt, Story, 474.

[26] Email from Rhoda Gilman to Zabelle Stodola, 30 September 2011.

[27] Mary Schwandt Schmidt to Marion P. Satterlee, 19 December 1915, Marion P. Satterlee Papers, 1879-1937, Minnesota Historical Society. Also quoted in Derounian-Stodola, War in Words, 47.

[28] Email from Carrie Zeman to Zabelle Stodola, 27 February 2012. See also our book, A Thrilling Narrative of Indian Captivity: Dispatches from the Dakota War, by Mary Butler Renville (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2012).