Indigenous Motherhood in the Academy, Building Our Children to Be Good Relatives

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INTRODUCTION

Motherhood is a term used to describe the ability for a woman figure to take on the role of mother. Mothering on its own is no easy task and requires balance and care. When we examine the added layer of Indigenous identity and motherhood, we become a part of Indigenous motherhood. Holding the sacred role of being an Indigenous mother and then pairing that with a role in the academy combine to create a unique balance of honoring one’s identity, which includes the scars of the past and the push against the western culture that pervades higher education institutions. A part of the pushing back includes living our values in the effort to build our children into being good relatives. Indigenous communities value relationships as well as the embodiment of our tribal cultures and upbringing. These values are the exact opposite of campus climate and culture at many higher education institutions.

In this article, as an Indigenous mother I conceptualize and analyze how Indigenous motherhood is impacted by historical trauma. Then, I move on to how we heal and create a pathway for our children, the seeds of our future. After, I define the concept of Indigenous motherhood and then proceed to discuss Indigenous motherhood in the academy, including ways we can counter the institutional culture while raising children. Finally, I conclude with implications and recommendations.
OVERVIEW OF INDIGENOUS MOTHERHOOD AND THE IMPACT OF HISTORICAL TRAUMA

In this section, the following areas are discussed: colonization and settlers, boarding school, loss of parenting and languages, forced sterilization, and loss of community. Each of these forces has contributed directly to impact Indigenous motherhood on a broader level, while some continue to manifest in various ways within institutions of higher education. In the discussion of historical trauma, it is not the focus on the past but the naming of that which came from our oppressors and colonizers to help us learn how to heal. Each of those, which are named, also have profoundly impacted the current state of Indigenous motherhood.2

Colonization and Settlers

While colonization within the United States began in the 1400s, for some tribal communities that contact began as late as the 1800s and continues to permeate our systematic structures and ways of living daily, including the notion and value of individualism and capitalism. The first onslaught of colonizers in touching ground in the Americas used the spirit of relationship building, which was an inherent part of the Indigenous/tribal peoples’ ways of living, in order to decimate and cause harm to our communities.3 The notion of relationships from this point forward was forever impacted within our tribal communities. Settlers’ interactions with the community included the physical violation of many women through the rape or trade of women for something of “value,” resulting in the dehumanization of women in our communities.4 Not only were the relationships and role of women impacted, but the core values that had at one time guided our communities and societies have been influenced, to some degree, by western and settler cultural values.5 More than 56 percent of Native American and Alaskan Native women have experienced violence in their lifetimes and one in three will have experienced violence over the course of a year.6 Native women face murder rates at ten times the national average as well. The impact that colonization has had on our communities in all parts of the Americas, and specifically the United States, continues to be felt in my generation, my children’s generation, and their children’s generation.

Boarding Schools

The first American Indian boarding school was established by Captain Richard Pratt in 1879 as the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania.7 This school was one of the first recognized to have forcibly removed Indigenous children from their parents, families, and
communities and assimilated them by cutting their hair, stripping them of their traditional clothing, and “training” them in industrial programs. There were numerous other religious-based, government-supported, or privately owned boarding schools that had attempted to assimilate American Indian communities by force, all of which were modeled after Carlisle Indian Industrial School. Boarding schools intentionally broke down the family and community structures that had been a part of our tribal communities for centuries. Those who attended boarding school and those left at home were forever impacted through this loss and many are still mourning. Boarding schools can be attributed to many of the issues that have impacted our communities, including the role of parenting, language attrition, and cultural loss among many others detrimental outcomes.8

Loss of Parenting and Languages

Colonization and settlers ushered in the beginning of the diminishment of the role of parents and presence of our languages in our Indigenous communities. Upon contact, there were efforts to both assimilate and commit genocide against tribal nations.9 When our people escaped these efforts in order to avoid death, it broke down our community and family structures. As mentioned earlier, Indigenous women were raped and dehumanized as objects, which further eroded the place of women in western society and ultimately within their own communities. Patriarchy pervades our communities to this day.10 The role of boarding schools, which removed children from their homes, was yet another attempt at breaking down family structures and forcing assimilation. This removal resulted in an automatic loss of language as boarding schools forced the use of English and many children were punished for speaking their tribal language. Meanwhile, Native American children were sometimes removed permanently from their homes, which severed ties to their origins, identity, and ability to use their first language.11 Even when children were eventually able to re-unite with their families, a disruption had already occurred in the community. Moreover, they had been assimilated to various degrees at their boarding school; the traditional parenting and community role in raising children was lost. In turn, those children who grew up without the experience of being raised in the traditional way before contact would became adults and raise children of their own, continuing the impact on recurring generations. Along with the disruption to parenting traditions, the forced assimilatory use of English has forever impacted our communities, as learning it to interact with settlers caused our communities to lose their own languages. At one time, Indigenous languages would be the first and only languages spoken in the home to guide, instruct, and raise our children. Currently, English has taken that place
in many of our tribal communities. There were once more than 300 Indigenous languages spoken in the United States, with approximately 175 remaining today. Without restoration efforts, it is also estimated that there will be at most 20 still spoken by 2050.¹²

**Forced Sterilization**

In the 1960s and 1970s, the ability for many Native Americans to have children was coldly and violently robbed from them with the epidemic and harmful practice of forced sterilization. The agency Indian Health Services, previously under the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the provider where most Native Americans sought healthcare, engaged in this practice. These institutions were meant to uphold treaty rights and obligations by the federal government. During this time, Native women who would seek the services of a doctor, for various reasons, would often be sterilized without their consent,¹³ a detrimental health practice that violated the rights of many Native women.

Despite forced sterilization being outlawed in 1974, its practice on Native American women continued until 1976. The estimate of Native American women who were sterilized at that time range between 25 and 50 percent.¹⁴ Medical doctors had the viewpoint that Native Americans could not control their own birth rates and were below the status of the settlers. Tribal communities still feel the ramifications of this practice even today because the decline of their populations has led to a small percentage of Native American peoples. The population rates are but one impact, however. Others consequences include depression, familial breakdown, and the dehumanization of Native women as their ability to carry a child was robbed from them involuntarily. Imagine the number of children who would be living today, who could have helped maintain language and culture, which we are attempting to hold onto today.

**Loss of Community**

When considering all of the detrimental impacts of colonization, the settlers’ invasions into our communities, the boarding schools, the loss of language, the effects on parental roles, and the forced sterilization, the breakdown in community created the most impact. The patriarchal influence from western society derided our matrilineal and even patrilineal values and beliefs.¹⁵ Even within our traditional societies before contact, Native women held a sacred and unique place in our communities. This was seen through their exhibiting leadership, maintaining cohesion of the community, or fulfilling the role of mom, grandma, auntie, or sister. Native women were dehumanized at the point of European contact with our communities, resulting in the increasing numbers
of missing and murdered Indigenous women. The dehumanization of Native women continues to impact us in countless ways. Other factors include U.S. government policies of relocation and termination of tribes, which impact where Native women and their families live, all of which have compounded into a loss of community deeper than we may ever know.

Another example of loss of connection to the mothering bond between mothers and children took place when children were forcibly removed to attend boarding schools, causing a disconnection of parenting that has impacted many generations of mothers who have not had examples of bonding through touch, emotions, and traditional processes. This is deeply connected to loss of community.

The impact, which all of these factors have on Indigenous peoples, is still felt currently in all tribal communities and families, no one is untouched. This is the reality that Indigenous peoples in the United States are facing. As we continue to acknowledge how each of these has impacted our communities, families, and especially our women and children, then we can name our oppressors and begin the healing process.

HEALING AND CREATING A PATHWAY FOR OUR SEEDS

The healing process for our communities is ongoing and will continue to occur for generations to come. We are at a place where we recognize the state of our communities and are beginning to balance living in a society and a community, which have been plagued and forever impacted by the colonizers’ hands. Presently, we are seeing more individuals, namely women, standing in their strength to create a pathway toward healing and education for their children, their community, and the betterment of future generations. In this section, I discuss some of the healing process, which includes honoring our ancestors’ plight, remembering our family’s legacy, and re-storying the meaning of family and motherhood.

Honoring Our Ancestors’ Plight

Honoring our ancestors’ plight means recognizing that the journey of our ancestors, including males, females, and other relatives, was not easy. Despite the journey through colonization, contact, attempts at assimilation, and genocide, our ancestors survived. They survived the impact of boarding schools, removal, relocation, forced sterilization, and so many other atrocities so that we could live and make contributions for future generations. Indigenous peoples have been seen as an obstacle and threat to modern society. Because of this, we experienced these cowardly acts and wars being waged on our communities. Many
of us have a story in which our grandparents, parents, and we ourselves were not supposed to be here. For example, I think of my Nez Perce side in which I had a relative, Ollokot, who was of the Wallowa Band Nez Perce and Chief Joseph’s brother. Wallowa Band Nez Perce resisted being forced on the reservation. This act of resistance became the Nez Perce war of 1877. During the Battle of Bear Paw in Montana, my great-great-great grandfather Ollokot was killed in battle. Ollokot was known as a war chief for the Wallowa Band Nez Perce and was also close to his brother Joseph, or Hinmatóowyalahtq’it. Ollokot only had one child, a daughter name Sarah, who later became Sarah Conner. Sarah then went on to have my great grandfather Gilbert Conner and then my grandmother Antoinette “Toni” Conner who in turn had my father, David Williams. I remember that I am only so far removed, the sixth generation of descendants of Ollokot. My daughter is the seventh generation. Over the course of those six generations, these attempts at assimilation continued. Nevertheless, because of the resilience and fight of our ancestors in battle, we are here today. Retelling our ancestors’ stories honors their plight, so we remember how we survived. We remember that we carry their blood in our veins, we hold the strength and resilience, which our ancestors possessed in fighting and praying for their great, great, great grandchildren. We need to retell these stories so that our children, their children, and so forth can remember how we survived and know the story of battles that were lost and won all at the same time.

Embodying Our Families’ Legacy

In the honoring of our ancestors’ plight, we may also begin to revisit the journeys that our families have made, which includes remembering and acknowledging our family’s legacy. There is a legacy of survival in all of our Indigenous communities. Whether our families were touched by war, reservations, relocation, boarding schools, or loss of language and culture, we are still here, that is our families’ legacy. For some individuals, their families might have been known in the community as traditional hunters, gatherers, or medicine people, or they might have been those that converted to Christianity. In many of our communities, people take pride in being among those who preserved their language and traditions. However, we all must acknowledge that though we did not necessarily choose who our families are, we were chosen for them. Many families and communities are learning how to heal from the impact that colonization, Christianity, and policy has had on them. Our family legacy is the survival of all of these things. We tell our children about their great grandparents and grandparents and how they survived boarding schools, relocation, loss of family, diabetes, and alcoholism. We tell them, moreover, that there was a tide that turned with
their parents, who became the ones to reclaim our tribal, community, and family identities.

Re-storying the Meaning of Family and Motherhood

Core values guide our communities and families in our daily lives. Though we have been impacted by colonization, we have also been resilient in remaining connected umbilically to the lands from where our ancestors came or have settled. We know that many of our ancestors lived in their home communities for centuries or settled in these areas through either their own nomadic journeys or forcible removal. This connection includes the acknowledgment that there are core values that tie us to our places, communities, and families. Over time, some of these core values have eroded to a degree due to the boarding school era and relocation among many other factors, such that they have impacted the well-being and health of our communities. This erosion has impacted our family structures, parenting styles, and abilities. There are some communities who lived together in one house or place that occupied as many as twenty to thirty people. Now that has been segmented and reduced into a single family of mother, mother and father, and the children, changing the meaning of family and ultimately motherhood. Conversely, some may not have lived in a structure together and instead would reside within close proximity to one another and traveled together during the seasons as an entity. Now, that lifestyle no longer exists. Those old ways of living deeply embedded the notion of relationships, respect, reciprocity, and responsibility. These were manifested and defined within our own tribal languages. Currently, these terms still live on, whether they were lost in tribal language or spoken in English. These values stem from the old ways of living, even the ways the family is broken down on a daily basis. We always have a responsibility to love and care for our families, both the immediate and the extended. Our meaning of family has always been there; we just need to re-story it so that we remember the ways in which it has manifested. Yet in many ways, it has remained the same as it always has. That includes remembering that motherhood, and all its duties and roles, has changed over time, but we still remain as valuable and necessary to our children and those whom we take in and care for as our children.

**INDIGENOUS MOTHERHOOD**

Indigenous motherhood has transformed over time, while we acknowledge the role these detrimental events have had on its evolution. We also remember that despite these horrific encounters and their shattering impact could have had on mothers, we have continued to be mothers...
and maintain that role for our own children, nieces, nephews, and others in the community. Indigenous motherhood on a broader level is caring for and mothering even those who are not our children so that they will grow up and pass those values on to our communities and eventually to their own offspring. Indigenous motherhood is looking out for others, which includes not only remembering our communities’ core values and teaching them but also emulating them in our own daily lives. Then, as we become mothers to our own children, we embody the past generations’ experiences of loss and life in the effort to make it something beautiful and meaningful in order to perpetuate our culture and language may also be carried on so that their lives were not in vain. Because Indigenous motherhood is healing, it carries with it the remembrance of the events that shaped our families and communities. It also includes making decisions about where our children will be enrolled as tribal citizens, where they will grow up, how connected to family and community they will be, and how we will ensure they are confident and strong in their own identities. Indigenous motherhood is a beautiful and sacred role that carries on the connection from one generation to the next.

**INDIGENOUS MOTHERHOOD IN THE ACADEMY**

Indigenous motherhood in the academy adds one more facet to the roles of Indigenous motherhood, that is, the additional layer of expectation and balance of position within institutions of higher education, which were ultimately established for assimilation to silence the voices and histories of Indigenous peoples. For many Indigenous mothers who find themselves working in the academy, this balance weighs the reality of being removed from home while being authentically Indigenous within their respective departments and programs. This section highlights how Indigenous motherhood in the academy resists western culture by balancing our Indigeneity in the ivory towers, exerting our sovereignty and nationhood through our children, intentionally building good relatives, and remaining connected to home, an umbilical connection to place.

**Balancing Our Indigeneity in the Ivory Towers**

Our children are born into the environment and community where we currently live. That means we, as Indigenous mothers, must be conscious of how and what we will expose them to as new Indigenous individuals in this world. A part of that responsibility as Indigenous mothers is how we honor who we are and how we live our tribal and Indigenous ways of being while in the ivory towers. This means as we
consciously work daily within our roles as professors, administrators, researchers, and staff on a campus of higher education, we remember we are in these roles to fulfill that purpose. It further means that we are always Indigenous in these positions and when we interact with others, we have an opportunity to educate and dismantle the systemic structures that have rendered our people invisible. Sometimes in our positions, we may find ourselves the only Indigenous faculty member, staff member, or administrator, which makes our position that much more important for us to educate, advocate, and create change on our campuses to include an Indigenous perspective and increase our representation. As Indigenous mothers, when we have our own children, we have to balance our responsibilities in these positions and those of motherhood, as they often blend together; many times, our children find themselves on our campuses for events, office visits, and a variety of other reasons. Therefore, we must continue to honor our Indigenous ways of being so that when our children come to campus, they are not met with racism, hate, or ignorance. Balancing our Indigeneity means always advocating for our voices to be heard, honoring place, and deconstructing the ivory towers so they become more representative of who we are.

Exerting Our Sovereignty and Nationhood through Our Children

As we become Indigenous mothers, we begin to think about the larger picture. We often start to recollect on our own purpose and the ways in which we help make this world a better place for our new soul to enter this world. This includes ensuring that we have an understanding and grasp of who we are in our tribal nations and home communities, which sometimes may be separate. In contemplations of our lineage and ancestors, we start to think, with our partners, where our son or daughter will find their home as tribal citizens. Sometimes, this is prescribed in society, whether that be matrilineal or patrilineal. Even within these types of societies, parents want their children to know their other tribes and communities. When we consider how assimilation and contact has impacted our tribal communities, there are many that no longer determine where their offspring find citizenship as it is now based on where they may receive the most support or are even allowed to enroll. Because of settler colonialism and the intrusion of quantifying our blood, we are faced with whether our children can be enrolled even if they are full-blooded Native American with multiple tribal nations represented.22 There are still limitations on where they can enroll, as many tribes still hold the half- or quarter-blood requirement. There is a movement occurring within tribes to change this practice so that our
children can acknowledge all of their tribes in their blood quantum or even moving to a different way of accepting new citizens through descendancy, participation, and other factors. Therefore, in our thought process and planning as Indigenous mothers, we begin to plan the life our children can lead and in a place where they will find their citizenship home. This is a part of exerting our sovereignty and nationhood.

**Intentionally Building Good Relatives**

An important core value for many Indigenous communities and tribal nations is that of relationships. Within our communities’ relationships, we are connected to each other at a communal level. This means that even if we are not related, when we introduce ourselves and become acquainted with one another, we try to find someone in common we both know or a way that we might be connected. This is a part of building community. Thus, building our children to be good relatives includes encouraging them to value relationships and demonstrating that value in our own lives as Indigenous mothers. This can relate to how we assert relationships as valuable in our daily heartwork in the academy by building connections across campus with Indigenous faculty, staff, and non-Indigenous relatives. It can be done in how we center our interactions with people, which is similar to how we would in our own communities, as opposed to upholding the hierarchical and western constructs of the academy. As an example, often in meetings individuals interrupt each other and talk over one another to get their point across. For Indigenous people, this is not the norm. Communicating our norm can help individuals in meetings realize that not everyone functions in this way and can work to transform our space to be more inclusive and respectful. Additionally, we honor our relationships by asserting the importance of family in the academy away from home. Meaning our children relate to people with whom we have good relations with and refer to them as uncle or auntie. This not only removes the stigma of hierarchy in the academy for those with whom we work but places value on them, showing our children that family is important, even when we are removed from our home communities. For my daughter Roxie, I refer to all my colleagues as Roxie’s auntie or uncle. I have found that even those who are not Indigenous miss that familial connection in their lives and feel honored to be referred to in this way. Being a good relative includes honoring who we are in our own values, showing respect, and building strong relationships with others. When we demonstrate that to our children, especially within the ivory towers, it starts to fragment the foundation of western influence and insert our own Indigenous ways of being. We can encourage this with our children in the academy, at their schools, and in our homes.
Remaining Connected to Home, an Umbilical Connection to Place

In the positions of Indigenous faculty, staff, or administration, we often must move away from home. This means being separated by distance from our home communities and, consequently, our own children do not grow up with their grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Moreover, they are not able to participate in the ceremonies and community activities that occur throughout the year. So, how do we help our children remain umbilically connected to their homes, relations, and culture? One of the ways that we can do this is to visit home as much as possible. For some, this means traveling a few hours to home and back, but for others it can mean an extended car or plane ride. Even though it may be time consuming, in the end, it is rewarding for our children to know the mountains, water, and the feeling of home in the places in which we grew up. Though we are separated by distance, we can also ensure that they participate in the cultural ceremonies in our communities, including the first food ceremonies, receive their Indian/tribal names, know the dances, and recognize the songs performed at home. Our children can feel that connection to home even when separated by distance. This can be accomplished with technology using Facetime, video calls, posting pictures of our children online (if appropriate), and fostering constant interaction with grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins. We can surround our children with the feeling of home with pictures in our houses and stories of our families and communities, within our tribal languages as much as we are able. As Indigenous mothers, we are responsible for our children and that their children know where home is and the culture, land, and sacredness that are tied to it.

Implications and Recommendations

There are many ways that we can connect who we are in our individual tribal nations and on a broader Indigenous perspective, and how we view the impact of Indigenous motherhood. It is important to acknowledge both sides of pain and survival in the histories of our communities and families, both of which has impacted our approach of being an Indigenous mother. When we add the layer of Indigenous motherhood in the academy, raising a child becomes more nuanced when considering who has access to her or his culture and family influence. Therefore, writing about these perspectives can illuminate the mainstream perceptions of being a mother in the academy. Often motherhood in the academy focuses on the promotion and tenure process, the infiltration of white male privilege, and lack of policies to support our needs.
as mothers. These important realities impact our ability to be the Indigenous mothers who we were meant to be.

The hope is that from this article, first, one can begin to reflect on their own experiences as Indigenous mothers and, second, those who are not from our communities can start to understand the unique experiences we have when raising our children and navigating the academy. The first step is to start building on what has been highlighted in this article. My hope is that other Indigenous mothers in the academy begin sharing their voices and perspectives, which will force the academy to listen to us and perhaps cause our communities to understand the unique situation we are in through mothering while simultaneously balancing the scholar role. When you add having a child who is gifted, has a disability, has a terminal illness, or is struggling in other ways to fulfilling our roles as Indigenous mothers in the academy, that makes the journey and process that much more nuanced. Another recommendation includes creating more resources that support Indigenous mothers when they are away from the community through increasing access to language, books, and other means in order strengthen our children’s identities. This also means the academy needs to be accepting of mothers when they need to be away for ceremonies or even the process of giving birth and what that means for our respective tribal practices. The academy should listen to our journeys, it should also grant more support for faculty, staff, and others to take traditional leave when needing to travel across states and to provide more opportunities to build community on campus with other Indigenous mothers or Mothers of Color.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, there is a deep and complex reality of the ways in which Indigenous motherhood has been impacted by the historical traumas that still plague and lurk in our communities. Conversely, there is a concerted effort to heal our communities, this begins by acknowledging and connecting our past to our current state of existence. Indigenous mothers have a unique role within their children’s lives and the community. When adding the layer of working in the academy, the places where our communities are forgotten in their histories and Indigenous contributions in many ways remains invisible, a reaffirmation is needed for how we embody our Indigenous identity in these institutions to honor who we are, not only for our children’s sake but for our own well-being. This article has illuminated the complexity of working in the ivory towers, yet honoring and incorporating the important role of community, being a good relative, and exerting our sovereignty through our children to remain connected to home. This analysis deepens the important role that Indigenous mothers have in the academy and within our communities. We are the ones who must remember the
past, articulate the legacy, bridge the healing process for our children, and remain steadfast in our own tribal and Indigenous identities. It is a beautiful and sacred role to be Indigenous mothers in the academy, which calls for us to strive for balance, remain steadfast in our advocacy, be passionate in our heartwork and most importantly, do all of this from a place of love for our children and our home communities.

**AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

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**NOTES**

1. In this article the author uses we, our, and I interchangeably to acknowledge that when we talk about our experiences they are unique to everyone, yet they are intertwined with other Indigenous peoples’ experiences and values.

2. This publication is focusing on some areas that are pertinent and directly connected to Indigenous motherhood. The work of Maria Brave Heart has been pivotal in expanding our knowledge and understanding of the impact of historical trauma. A piece of work to reference is: Maria Brave Heart, Maria Yellow Horse Brave, Josephine Chase, Jennifer Elkins, and Deborah B. Altschul, “Historical Trauma Among Indigenous Peoples of the Americas: Concepts, Research, and Clinical Considerations,” *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* 43, no. 4 (2019): 282–90.


NOTES


14 Jane Lawrence, “The Indian Health Service and the Sterilization of Native American Women,” American Indian Quarterly no. 3 (2000): 400.


16 Amber Richelle Dean, Remembering Vancouver’s Disappeared Women: Settler Colonialism and the Difficulty of Inheritance (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015).


19 Re-storying in an Indigenous perspective means that we are claiming our truth and narrative through the way in which we see, narrate, and retell stories of our family, communities, and people in a way that honors and empowers us.


21 Anderson, A Recognition of Being.
