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MCWP 50

June 8, 2023

Decolonization and the Liberation of Indigenous Women

Would de-stabilizing the patriarchy within North America be a sufficient act in order to implement lost forms of Indigenous harmony within society? At first glance, many would argue that the restoration of Indigenous harmony wouldn't require the destabilization of the patriarchy and that acts of restoration are not necessary for beneficent and productive communities.

However, the lack of harmony and peace within North America is supported by an active patriarchy. The patriarchy is especially detrimental to Indigenous identifying women.

Indigenous women are at the heart of the suffering from patriarchal standards and systemic brutality. Indigenous women within North America face many forms of violence, inequality, and suppression due to systems that colonization has implemented. Systems that have been created due to colonization include the hetero-normative patriarchy that North American society functions under. Therefore, acts of sovereignty and decolonization are needed to further Indigenous women's empowerment by working against the heteronormative patriarchy in North America. Indigenous women deserve a supportive community because in doing so, peace and balance between gender will be restored within society and result in a better environment for all.

In order to understand the sufferings contemporary Indigenous women face from the patriarchy, we must start at the origins of the patriarchy within North America. The patriarchy is a human made social construct which, according to author and professor on Native American studies—Stephanie Sellers, “centralizes men” in every facet of life such as “economically,

educationally, socially, spiritually, and physiology” (Sellers 83). Patriarchal standards were introduced to Indigenous tribes by white settlers during colonization. In order to do so, colonization was completed on a basis of sexual violence towards Indigenous women. The violations of the Indigenous woman’s body were justified by colonial and Christian beliefs. These beliefs under Christianity included the foundations of racism that was imposed on Indigenous women; white was pure and darker skin was attributed to stained and unholy souls (Miheuah 59). Along with preliminary racist ideals, it’s important to acknowledge the different societal norms regarding clothing, gender, and positions of power between Indigenous culture and Euro-Americans. Due to the lack of clothing Indigenous women wore and their close connection to nature, they were viewed by colonizers as hedonistic, dark-complected, primitive, sexual objects, in contrast to the standard more *modestly* dressed Euro-American white woman who was perceived as pure and innocent (59). This dangerous belief system is to blame for the thousands of Indigenous women who suffered at the hands of violence imposed by colonizers. It is also at the core of the creation of patriarchal standards.

As history denotes, the creation of intersectional identities of Indigenous women are based within a patriarchal society. Intersectionality refers to the various identities that are different from the hetero-normative patriarchal standard identity: the cis-white man. Indigenous women have intersectional identities; in this essay I will be referring to their race and gender as two of the significant causes of oppression and violence that demonstrates the necessity for decolonization and sovereignty. It is important to recognize that this does not mean that other intersecting identities such as sexuality, religion, and ability do not contribute to their adversities being in a hetero-normative patriarchal society. It is also crucial to note that the analysis of Indigenous women, culture, and overall identity by someone who does not identify as Indigenous

is a topic of controversy. This concept of “othering” is predominant within academic settings and should be handled with care amongst those who are studying an identity that is not theirs (Miheuah 5). However, as a woman, feminist, and a scholar, I find that the studies of Indigenous feminism and liberation is crucial to the health of all women in a patriarchal society. As Aboriginal feminist and activist Tina Beads says in an interview by Rauna Kuokkanen, “If we can use the Aboriginal woman as the model for how we’re going to build our response to women, then of course all women are going to benefit from that.” (Green 228). To be further conveyed, Indigenous culture and Indigenous feminism are wonderful examples for a North American patriarchal society that aspires to acquire a higher sense of gender and race equality due to their preliminary values and developing courses of action to combat oppression.

Given the delicacy of identity politics, the distinction of Indigenous feminism versus western feminism must be explicated. The difference lies within what each seeks; the pursuit of Indigenous feminism is to bring about decolonization in order to renounce pre-colonization equality within tribes, whereas western feminism advocates for equality that was never present within the world of Euro-American patriarchy (Mouchref 92). Euro-American culture has nearly never experienced a time period where women and men were treated with equal respect such as Indigenous culture. This further emphasizes the significance Indigenous feminism holds as the “model” for all feminism. The original Indigenous values set an example for universal feminism. In addition, the examination of Indigenous feminism should be separated from the “normative definitions of color” and is vital in the analysis of “cultural identity, nationalism, and decolonization” (Suzack 2). North American society can learn from Indigenous cultural values as an example of a non-hierarchical government and overall social positioning regarding gender and race.

Prior to colonization, Indigenous men did not often display sexual violence or uphold sexist values on account of Indigenous women's attire or biological makeup. Indigenous society functioned on a highly gender equal basis called egalitarianism. Having an egalitarian society meant that gender was not a factor in determining positions of power, who raised the children, job assignment, etc. Natives operated in a way that allowed whoever was best fit for the job to complete it. They believed that power is a higher position of responsibility for others and should not be utilized for personal gain (Sellers 27). The act of colonization instilled patriarchal concepts such as gender roles and gender hierarchy within Indigenous tribes. Gender roles is an additional concept brought forth from colonization and is a social construct that is created on the differences between women and men's biology. This biology that determines gender, also determines the roles and responsibilities men and women withhold in a career, home, social setting, and overall society (63). Colonization contained the tools that fostered the creation and internalization of these concepts; the formerly established gender and racial hierarchy of white settlers was taught and ultimately forced upon Indigenous tribes during colonization. Joanne Barker, a Lenape Indigenous woman, activist, and professor of Native American and Women studies, indicates that, "The social roles and responsibilities of heterosexual Indian men within bands and on the reserves was systematically elevated over that of women and nonheterosexuals by the institutions of Christianity, capitalism, sexism, and homophobia" (Barker 225). On accounts of brutality by white settlers, they demonstrated and implemented their ways of life as a way to steal Indigenous land. This fundamentally means that if colonizers were going to colonize on stolen land, the barbarity done in order to obtain this land also consisted of forced adaptation to their customs. Colonization ultimately accompanied many facets of violence which still lingers in the present day.

Furthermore, the installment of gender hierarchies within Indigenous tribes is shown within the government systems of tribes post-colonization, and specifically conveyed within the Indian Act of 1876. The Indian Act is a Canadian Parliamentary law that was designed to assist Aboriginal people into the Canadian, colonized, and patriarchal political system. It is essentially an act of subjection to the patriarchy, working against a sovereign Indigenous government. Within this act yields many detrimental policies to Indigenous women such as reversal of matrilineally organization and the removal of their responsibility within political settings. This act is a significant demonstration of forced sexist principles on Indigenous peoples, as it works, “in conjunction with an entire social structure defined by colonialism, capitalism, Christianity, heteronormativity, and racism, gender inequalities, sexism, and bigotries of various kinds” (Barker 224). This is just one of many political acts that target the wellbeing of Indigenous sovereignty. However each act that works to undo traditional Indigenous systems is an act out of colonialism that is rooted within modes to advantage the cis-white man. The significance of intersectionality of Indigenous women is highlighted here as colonialism inherently places them at the bottom of the hierarchical rank due to race and gender. This is the core of their sufferings.

The severity of the heteronormative patriarchy functions in virtually every aspect of contemporary life which inhibits Indigenous women liberation. The necessity for decolonization and sovereignty is emphasized when looking at one of the central ruling notions that society has implemented from colonization: sexism and gender inequality. The North American patriarchy puts men in a higher position than women which allows men to be in a higher position of authority to make decisions. It allocates men in power to enact and further maintain sexist ideals, “For Indigenous women, colonization has involved their removal from positions of power, the replacement of traditional gender roles with Western patriarchal practices, the exertion of

colonial control over Indigenous communities through the management of women's bodies, and sexual violence" (Suzack 1). Having unequal gender representation ultimately results in justified violence towards Indigenous women. The occupancy of a male dominant society leads to the favoring of the man and injustice for women. The patriarchal society supports men and overall gives men the security to complete acts of violence. According to the U.S Department of the Interior Indian Affairs in a 2016 study done by the National Institute of Injustice (NIJ), 84.3 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native Women are victims of violence which includes 56.1 percent that are also victims of sexual violence (Missing). The NIJ additionally finds that these Indigenous women are more susceptible to be murdered by their partners (Missing). These statistics show that violence since colonization has not slowed down. Nearly all Indigenous women have experienced violence in their lifetimes, a violence supported by a society established by colonization which was done on the footing of sexual brutality and other ferocities.

Moreover, the media has instilled stereotypes against Indigenous women which permits negative societal standards. Recognition of these stereotypes also comes with the awareness that they come from colonization. Examples of common stereotypes include slurs such as *squaws* or representations of mute and compliant Indigenous women within cinema and pop culture. Promoting these stereotypes within media such as films and literature, are not only disrespectful, but further supports colonial ideals. They work to desensitize consumers of the media to violence towards Indigenous women. These ideals consist of influencing what we should think Indigenous women's role in society should be, allowing sexual violence, and normalizing the lack of political representation. Acceptance of such content that is circulated throughout pop culture acts in controlling how women identify their value within society (Mouchref 89). This

conceptual framework and stereotypes are vital in conditioning consumers of the media and entertainment which works to justify the suppression of Indigenous women. It overall encourages society to believe that this treatment is warranted and overall keeps the patriarchy alive. All of which are a product of colonialism.

In essence, decolonization challenges and reverses patriarchal values and beliefs that are harmful to Indigenous women. Decolonization can be interpreted as the deconstruction of colonial created structures and systems of rank regarding gender, race, and other intersectional identities. Specifically to Indigenous women, by destabilizing the hetero-normative patriarchy, the destabilization of the implemented gender roles, false media representation, justification of violence, and lack of representation is complimentary. Decolonization's purpose is to remove hierarchies imposed by colonization and to mend the inequality between the current leading white race and those who are Indigenous (Mackenzie 3). Decolonization and Indigenous sovereignty inextricably support each other. Indigenous sovereignty is the separation from the leading North American government and initiates the independent governance of Indigenous tribes. This is critical in undoing the subjugation of Indigenous women because Indigenous tribes having full autonomy over themselves politically will also result in the disintegration of the patriarchal systems that was once forced upon their community.

Decolonization mustn't be understood as isolation from non-indigenous communities. Some may argue that implementing decolonization and following sovereignty is insinuating that Indigenous tribes be removed from their neighboring societies. Or that the resurfacing of traditional Indigenous practices and government systems alludes to "running away from the problem". However this is not the case. Sovereignty is a direct response and fight against the patriarchy by taking actions that make it known that Indigenous women (or all Indigenous

people) are not complicit to the social order that has been installed by colonization. From Mouchref's in-text interview with the two daughters of a well-known Indigenous activist from the 70s, Anna-Mae Pictou-Aquash, who was murdered on account of her protests, there is a conversation that suggests that advocates of traditional Indigenous practices desire to practically disengage with their neighboring societies almost entirely to regenerate the health of their tribes. One of the daughters, Denise Pictou-Aquash states, "If the next generation is going to be in any way successful in breaking down some barriers then they need to educate themselves in the same way the rest of the world does or they won't be equipped to fight the battles." (Mihesuah 137). This is a powerful statement as it emphasizes the need for education and integration in order to establish a better functioning society for all. It also recognizes that decolonization and sovereignty is not a problem with an ultimate single solution, but rather one that requires the active participation from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. The first step in re-writing the future of Indigenous women in North America is awareness and education. Sovereignty does not mean giving up the fight against colonial standards and removing themselves from American society; it is an act that fights for an equal place in society that will accept traditional or non-traditional Indigenous ways of life. It is about having the opportunity to choose.

Reclaiming traditional Indigenous governance practices from pre-colonialism works to empower Indigenous women due to the equal representation of women and men. As of the 1960s, only 6 percent of elected council chiefs and council members were women (Barker 225). The staggeringly low amount of women representation is a reflection of the increase in violence and injustice Indigenous women face and further demonstrates the necessity of a more sovereign government. This is because many Indigenous governance practices prior to colonization were not created on the groundwork of gender roles and racism. Prior to colonialism, Indigenous men

and women had equal power religiously, economically, and politically (Mihesuah 42). As mentioned previously, Indigenous views of power means having greater responsibility over others in their community and tribe and is not a method of self-benefit. It is also known that pre-colonial tribes functioned on a gender equal basis and were dependent on who was best fit for the job. These two modes of governance go against patriarchal systems of power and bring a balance in “power” to everyone and in a self-less, non-ego way that will benefit the peace in the community. Allowing the most equipped person for a large responsibility to be in a position of “power” gives women and other non-male identifying people a greater opportunity. This form of governance would bridge the gender gap within those in political positions. Having more women representation would give women a louder voice and influence decisions that would equally benefit those of all gender-identities.

Figures 1 and 2 (pictured below) represent Indigenous ways of life before colonization. As figure 1 denotes, Indigenous peoples followed the order of nature and lived in harmony with it. It is hypothesized that the hieroglyphs shown in figure 2 were created by girls of the Cahuilla tribe as a representation of their transition into a woman. This is significant in many ways as it sheds light on the respect Indigenous tribes had towards nature and women; they simultaneously paid respect to the seasons of their land and the seasons of the female form. Holding a ceremony for entering womanhood is another reflection of Indigenous values by acknowledging and celebrating the sacredness of a woman. Reclaiming sovereignty and undoing colonial systems does not necessarily mean that Indigenous or western society must hold elaborate and grand ceremonies to celebrate women (although that should be accepted as a practice), but to internalize the value of women tribes once had. (what is the recommended frequency that I integrate my visual aspect)

Although Indigenous women are on the frontlines of this agenda, there are various acts that anyone can do in support of decolonization. In order for the process of decolonization to be initialized, there must be a line of education and awareness, “understanding how western patriarchy distorts the lives of both men and women is a valuable and significant process in decolonization” (Green 46). Having an understanding of the connections between colonization and the disruption of Indigenous lives throughout history to today, gives society the strength to acknowledge that systematic racism and sexism can be undone. The more people are educated on the issues at hand, the more it will be spoken about, and the recognition fuels the progress. This will also turn the attention towards giving Indigenous women a louder voice. The concept of “herstory” allows Indigenous women to voice their experience and perspectives that are normally taught from a white cis-man’s point of view which we know of as history. Education from an Indigenous woman's experience will give people the opportunity to understand how colonization has impacted Indigenous women and why acts of decolonization are needed, “Native women inside and outside the academy speak of the interconnectedness of female, male, tribal, and racial oppression...they strive for liberation of all.” (Mihehuah 162). This connects back to the utilization of Indigenous feminism as a tool for all feminists and various forms of social activism due to their focus on intersectionality. As much as western feminism focuses on gender and sexism as an issue, it is imperative that there also is discussion of how race or other intersection identities contribute to the suppression under the patriarchy and that it is a consequence of colonization. The existence of feminism alone denotes the existence of the patriarchy (Green 21). Indigenous women and feminists acknowledge and speak on each thread of the patriarchal blanket.

Many Indigenous women utilize various art forms such as poetry, painting, performance, and more as a voice to express their experiences and convey the necessity of decolonization. Author, feminist scholar, and Indigenous woman of the Metis, Sarah Mackenzie, sheds light on the value of Indigenous women's plays within Canada as a key act against colonization. Their plays encompass "revisionist historical components" alongside correcting faulty conceptions of colonialism which works to implement a new understanding of history from an Indigenous women's perspective (Mackenzie 5). Not only do plays give Indigenous women an opportunity to correctly represent themselves and their history, but it is a highly efficient method of doing so due to its high entertainment factor. Furthermore, being based on visual delineation allows greater accessibility to people of varying educations and age groups and with a lower cost in comparison to cinema/television production. Indigenous women need outside support in order for creative modes of activism to succeed. A multitude of Indigenous women's organizations recognize colonialism as the root of their many facets of inequality and they believe that in order to move forward, Indigenous traditions should be redeveloped alongside political sovereignty (Green 145). When supporting Indigenous women businesses, purchasing their art, books, or any products, and thoughtfully listening to their story, you also are supporting decolonization and tribal sovereignty.

Decolonization undoes the harmful legacies of colonialism and allows for Indigenous women to participate in governing tribes which will instill previous forms of peace and equality within their tribes. Increasing tribal sovereignty will aid in creating an environment that facilitates the flourishing of Indigenous women. Indigenous feminism is a leading tool in aiding these movements and a louder voice with a bigger audience will only progress this social movement. Gaining support from non-Indigenous people will spread awareness about the

lingering effects of colonization on Indigenous women works to reverse dangerous human constructs such as gender roles and racial hierarchies. The deconstruction of the hierarchical and patriarchal society not only will benefit Indigenous women, but all women by creating a more inclusive society. North American regions can utilize their Indigenous history of harmony to rewrite their future for the betterment of all.

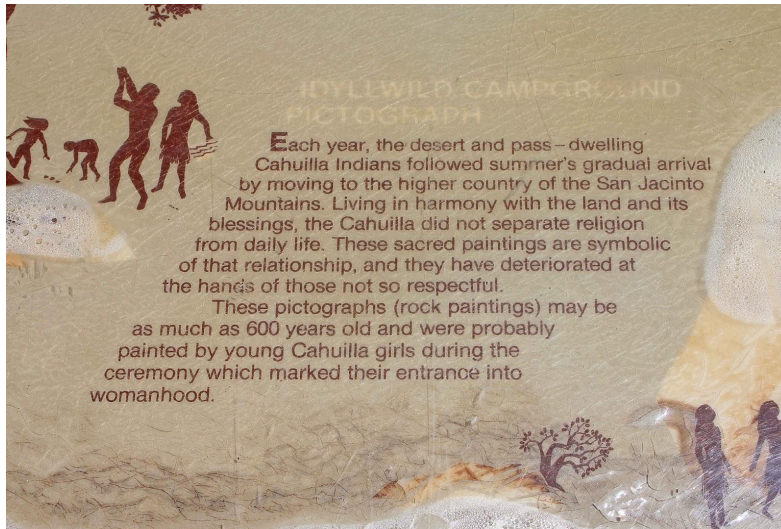


Figure 1. [IDYLLWILD COUNTY PARK \(San Jacinto Mountains, Riverside County, CA\)](#)

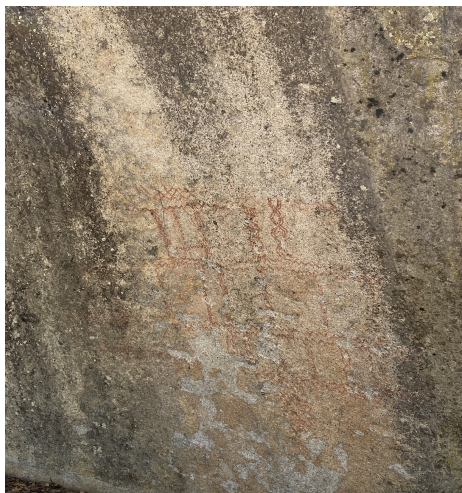


Figure 2. Hieroglyphs of chains and diamond shapes commonly thought of as rattlesnakes painted by women of the Cahuilla tribe. Photo taken by Sofia Bradley in Idyllwild, California.

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[their%20lifetime](https://www.bia.gov/service/mmu/missing-and-murdered-indigenous-people-crisis#:~:text=Overall%2C%20more%20than%201.5%20million,experienced%20violence%20in%20their%20lifetime). Accessed 5 June 2023.

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