

AN AESTHETIC FRAMEWORK FOR THE QUESTION OF INDIGENOUS  
FEMINISM, AUTONOMY AND LEADERSHIP:  
CONFRONTING A HISTORY OF COLONIAL  
MALE DOMINANCE

by

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DEDICATION

This paper is dedicated to the strong, amazing Indigenous women who work tirelessly for their children, their families and their communities. They offer inspiration to future generations and to those who are privileged to work with and learn from them.

It is an honor to work with these women, especially those who have offered their time and wisdom to this study. Their input has been invaluable.

Blue Dawn Little, Oglala Lakota from Pine Ridge Reservation  
Janet Routzen, Minneconjou Lakota from Rosebud Reservation  
Pauline Wilson, Oglala Lakota from Pine Ridge Reservation  
Veronica Valandra, Oglala Lakota from Pine Ridge Reservation

I also dedicate this work to my children and my grandchild. They have stood by me and encouraged me when my work has taken me away for long periods of time. I love you with all my heart.

Finally, to my family and friends, and the professors who have supported my work. I thank you for helping me to realize the dream of achieving this life goal.

Wopila tanka. Mitakuye Oyasin. Thank you. We are all relatives.

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## ABSTRACT

This research study focuses on the question of whether Indigenous women are successfully assuming leadership positions in order to address critical issues impacting their lives, their families and their communities, despite the historical implications of imposed male dominance since European contact. It explores the various avenues women have undertaken to confront the impacts of male dominance and whether they have advanced in their endeavors to alleviate the struggles and demands of their own lives, the lives of their children and families, as well as their tribal nations. Additionally, the question of whether the feminist movement is relevant to Indigenous women is explored.

This research involves a multidisciplinary approach, with a focus on Indigenous methodologies, the determinants of which are covered in the text. Oral interviews have also been incorporated as supporting material, thanks to women participants from the reservations of South Dakota.

This exploration of avenues Indigenous women have taken in challenging male dominance illustrates that they are utilizing various approaches to advance healing and growth. Despite such challenges as single parenthood, they are making strides to become educated in order to better address obstacles to healthy communities. Additionally, women are developing organizing strategies in order to confront violence, substance abuse, poverty and lack of education. Likewise, through spirituality, activism and the arts, they are finding a voice of resistance.

Through this research study, it has been determined that women are also confronting male dominance that has not only been imposed on their communities from without, but has also pervaded their lives through lateral oppression. Their particular methods of confrontation act as foundational steps toward the creation of healthier lives for themselves, their children and families, their communities and their tribal nations, not only in contemporary times, but for the coming generations.

This study is based on the image of the star quilt, an art form common among Indigenous women during the last century. Each point of the star illustrates the path that Indigenous women have taken in their quest to confront male dominance and promote healing for present communities and the generations to come.

## CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

*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 management of women's bodies, and sexual violence (Suzack, et. al. 1).*

*In spite of being one of the most marginalized groups in North American society, Native women continue to hold onto a sense of their power to make change. They can appreciate the outcomes of their actions of the past and continue to look for ways to nurture the future (Anderson 239).*

The purpose of this study is to explore the distinctive character of American Indian women as strong leaders, effecting compelling change within their respective communities, despite the adverse impact of an historical systemic ideology of male dominance imposed on Indigenous societies since European contact. This research will utilize a multidisciplinary approach based in Indigenous methodology to explore the various avenues that women have pursued in confronting this dominance and addressing the impacts to traditional gender roles and positions. It is proposed that this journey has led them to a greater sense of autonomy and self-esteem. It has additionally engendered compelling contributions in the struggle for life, community, and tradition for the next seven generations. This study will involve an exploration of the history of colonization as it has impacted women of the American Indian nations of the United States, with emphasis on but not limited to the Plains tribes, particularly of South Dakota.

This research will also explore the status of American Indian women and gender issues in contemporary times, to discern whether Indigenous women are repudiating the

notion of male dominance and are gradually reclaiming their rightful and traditional place in their respective societies – one of esteem, respect, and positions of prominence.

Additionally, it is necessary to analyze the journey these women have undertaken in their effort to overcome the historical impacts of colonization. Further research will delve into specific current endeavors for which Indigenous women in leadership positions are taking responsibility, being informed by spiritual and cultural traditions. Areas to be explored include activism and advocacy to confront injustice from within as well as varying negative outside influences on the community, attitudes toward the concept of feminism, education, ceremony, the arts, spirituality, and psychological and emotional healing - each leading to increasing self-awareness, self-esteem, self-respect and autonomy.

Are the issues and challenges surrounding Indigenous women's organizing and leadership, as well as their response to "feminism," effectively illustrated through creative works of literature, poetry, and art? What role do the arts play in elucidating and defining the particular position of women in tribal societies and histories? Is it possible for the non-Indian reader or observer to completely absorb and understand the messages and themes of Indigenous women's creative responses to their situations and conditions? Has Indigenous women's autonomy and strength heightened because of revolution (for example, the American Indian Movement) or in spite of it? Do activist and political roles provide an impetus to change? Do women find each of these avenues to be healing as well as an aid in the development of self-esteem and autonomy? Given that Indigenous women embrace the viewpoint that they must strive for communal healing for the next



Seven Generations, do their efforts simultaneously create a greater sense of self-determination and lead to advancement of their roles as leaders?

The experience of repression on colonized nations is pervasive in the history of the Americas. European nations have imposed distinct and diverse methods of intimidation, subjugation and marginalization throughout the continent, resulting in what Dr. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart describes as multigenerational historical trauma that has actualized a “cumulative emotional and psychological wounding across generations, including one’s own lifespan...” (Brave Heart, “From Intergenerational Trauma” 4).

Women have been particularly vulnerable in this systematic attempt to eliminate not only the spirit, but also the very being of the Indigenous of this continent. Modes of objectification have been creative and insidious, and have pervaded generations of Indigenous peoples, leaving once healthy societal systems vulnerable and weakened. With the onslaught of colonialism, Indigenous women have experienced a critical transformation in their traditional roles within their respective tribal nations.

However, Indian women throughout the continent have planted their coup sticks and are taking a stand—for themselves, their communities and most importantly, for their children and the generations to come. These include such role models as Wilma Mankiller, first female chief of the Cherokee Nation; Winona LaDuke, Anishinaabe environmentalist and economist; Joy Harjo, Muscogee writer, musician and activist; and the countless women who are working tirelessly day after day in their communities without acclaim.

Indigenous women in leadership roles exemplify a spirit of resilience, or as Rebecca Tsosie notes, a “profound capacity of the human spirit.” This spirit she contends “is an ethics of survival, of connection to past generations, of responsiveness to the needs of this and future generations... That spirit is what sustains Native peoples, what inspires us and gives us hope for the future” (Suzack, et. al., 29). This is evident in the work of women participants for this study. The issues impacting the reservations of South Dakota are often confronted by women who are aware of the needs of their families and the community. Blue Dawn Little, Oglala Lakota from Pine Ridge, South Dakota noted that historically, “Women were the ones that addressed the issues and came up with the solutions and then men carried that out” (Pine Ridge 2015). Women were empowered and respected.

Anthropologist Eleanor Burke Leacock termed the colonialist attitudes toward Indigenous communities in the United States with regard to the role of women as the “myths of male dominance” (McClintock, et. al. 301). The stereotypical image of the submissive, subservient and subjugated American Indian female has been advanced since contact, reflecting European perspectives on gender. This has led to the disruption of societal norms, increasing violence as well as disrespect and disregard for women. Edward Said’s discourse on the “Other” is one that embodies a concept that has had far-reaching impacts on Indigenous peoples around the world. Said spoke of the destruction of once-healthy Indigenous societies, noting that, “For reasons that are partly embedded in the imperial experience, the old divisions between colonizer and colonized have re-emerged... which has entailed defensiveness, various kinds of rhetorical and ideological

combat, and a simmering hostility...” (Said 17). One could say that in the North and South American experience, these results have not “re-emerged” but have been pervasive in the history of this continent. Additionally, this takes on particular significance when the subjects are not only outside of the purview of mainstream society, but are also marginalized by reasoning like that of Levi-Strauss who, while acknowledging women as having value, reduces them to commodity: “...the dominance of the social over the biological” requires that “women, like words, should be things that were exchanged” (Levi-Strauss 25).

Conversely, Lita Fontaine, Lakota/Ojibwa artist notes that most Indigenous societies were traditionally matriarchal. While women were not heads of families, they were “the root.” She believes that this made the woman “...the true leader of the nation. The basis for this comes from the certainty that the Earth is our original mother. All life comes from the Earth. She feeds us, clothes us and shelters us and, in turn we give her the highest respect” (Anderson and Lawrence 100-101).

Developing a deeper understanding of the Lakota and Dakota of South Dakota through firsthand experience and interviews with women themselves, affords a greater cognizance of the compelling position of women in leadership roles as an impetus to effecting change within their communities. They occupy a fundamental and critical space in the struggle for political, economic, and social change, as well as in addressing issues such as health care, and emotional and spiritual wellbeing. Feminist leadership roles and movements within Indigenous societies, even those societies historically and traditionally considered to be male-dominated, are vital and compelling forces for transformative

action. In Steve Wall's *Wisdom's Daughters: Conversations with Women Elders of Native America*, one woman elder shared: "We as Indian people have never forgotten the status of women. Those who have gotten away from the traditions may act as if they don't remember, but all of us know inside." She went on to discuss the need to engage in traditional ceremonies. "To participate in them is to participate in the circle of life... the whole circle – seen and unseen. They remind us to maintain balance, to live in peace with each other, to honor the Creator, the earth, and to acknowledge and show respect for those forces..." She then added, "No need for my name. This has come from the elders, and I can't accept any of the credit" (Wall x-xi).

It is critically important to explore the circumstances and life experiences of Indigenous women leaders in the context of their very particular cultures and traditions. The practice of integrating all Indigenous nations under the heading of "Indian" is a construct of dominant society to diminish the vitality and rich individuality of the many tribes that were original inhabitants of this continent. Nancy Shoemaker discusses the comparative status of the Iroquois, specifically the Seneca in relation to southern tribes, like the Cherokee, regarding the political status of women, and offers the following: "Seneca women traditionally had great influence within the tribe, offering their choices of men for political leadership roles, serving as advisors to the political headmen, controlling much of the economic production and distribution." In contrast, Shoemaker notes that the Cherokees disenfranchised women, who lost further political influence with contact (Mihsuah 51).

The question is thus raised as to the inconsistencies among responses toward women after European influence among tribal nations. What gave women greater influence in some tribes despite male dominance imposed by Europeans, while others suffered further subjugation within their own traditional communities? How have women fared since, and are they finding a greater voice within their respective tribes in contemporary times?

The study of women activists and leaders among American Indian nations in North America holds special significance when confronted with stories like that of Ramona Bennett, Puyallup, a tireless activist for treaty fishing-rights in Washington State. In attempting to protect the rights of her people, she and her companions were beaten and intimidated by law enforcement and white “vigilantes” (Mihesuah 299). The courage and determination of women such as this are critical to the very existence of their respective communities and the continuation of their traditional cultures for coming generations. They serve as archetypes for future women activists and their sacrifices integrate and empower communities, affirming their right to justice as well as their ascendancy in confronting repression and domination.

Ultimately, this research will involve an exploration of historical and contemporary issues impacting gender roles within Plains communities. It is imperative to critically assess written material that has framed the historical context of Indigenous women, and to ask the questions that will help to support or refute what has been documented about the roles of women in Indigenous societies. This will aid in clarifying what is posited as the present status of women, and those forces influencing a sense of

autonomy and self-esteem. However, of equal or greater importance is the input of Indigenous women themselves. Their stories were sought to guide, instruct and deepen understanding of the findings of this research. Therefore, an interview process was employed among willing participants. As these women shared their personal stories, concomitant subjects arose that added form to this research. It is always important when conducting interviews, to listen with honor and respect and to be adaptable to the form that the study may take through the voices of participants.

It is my hope that this study will do justice to the Indigenous women who have worked and continue to do so to overcome the imposition of male dominance not only for their own well-being, but for their communities and for the coming generations.

...We have the capacity to re-create ourselves, as contemporary Native women, by acknowledging the beauty of those things that give content to our existence and learning to heal the things that have caused us to feel pain and loss. Land, culture, and community are enduring components of who we are; they are vital to our self-determination, as individuals and as peoples—Rebecca Tsosie (Suzack, et. al. 30).

## CHAPTER TWO

PREFACE:  
THE INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH AS REPRESENTED  
BY THE STAR QUILT

*There is an urgency to relate the physical details, the spiritual labor, the ritual, the gathering, the making. Because in the unraveling, the threads become more apparent, each one with its distinct color and texture. And as I unravel, I also weave. I am the storyteller and the story.*

(Brant 8).

This particular project is a journey, navigating through a number of areas. It is one that involves an interdisciplinary approach, with special emphasis on Indigenous research methodologies. The hope is that when this work is complete, all of the particular roads will converge to create a comprehensive aggregate that does justice to the subject matter. My guiding metaphor for this study is the star quilt. Each point of the star follows a course to the center. When all of the points converge, the pattern is exhaustive and compelling. Each of the points is necessary, and the star would be incomplete without them.

So it is with this project. With its basis in the American Studies area of pluralism, and its focus on Native American Studies, it examines issues affecting American Indian women, who often find themselves marginalized not only as women, but as Indigenous women. It also explores their traditional roles, which have been transformed by the historical imposition of male dominance on their respective tribal nations.

In exploring the role of Indigenous women in leadership positions, the question that arises is how these women have survived – physically, emotionally, morally and

spiritually – despite disruption to their traditional societies, with special attention to the critical factor of male dominance. Each one has taken a different path – from a point of the star, working her way toward the center, where all Indigenous women find their strength. There is no other way to approach this particular study. If only one or two paths were chosen, the star would be incomplete.

The advantage of this particular approach is that it encompasses the complexity of Indigenous women's lives as well as the distinctive paths they have chosen to address the consequences of their history and that of their communities, their relationships and all that has made them who they are. Their respective chosen paths require this interdisciplinary methodology in order to more justly accommodate the expression of their varied and particular stories. The value of approaching this research through individual, yet disparate voices is that it lends to a more complete study, and therefore to the completion of the star. The discipline of American Studies supports this approach in that it acknowledges and accedes the need for diverse avenues in research in order to do justice to certain subject matter. Henry Nash Smith, co-founder of the academic discipline of American Studies, stated that, "The defining characteristic of American Studies is not the size of its problems but the effort to view any given subject of investigation from new perspectives, to take into account as many aspects as possible" (Maddox 1).

Likewise, Donald L. Fixico cites one Native scholar as saying: "In circular thought...if a circle is envisioned and items are placed within it, we realize that each item or element has a relationship with each other in a fixed order within the system.' Such



entities or particles should be respected and treated equally since they belong to the same universe” (Fixico 45). So it is with this study; each part of this research has a relationship to the others and must be treated in a respectful and equal manner.

A foundational premise of this study of Indigenous women who have taken strong roles within their communities, notwithstanding men who have embraced the characteristics of male dominance imposed by European influence, is the consideration of feminism. Given that traditional cultures upheld the roles of men and women as equal and important to the health of the whole, feminism is often seen as a white, European construct and is rejected by some. However, Joyce Green argues that “...emerging Aboriginal feminist literature and politic, while the terrain of a minority of activists and scholars, must be taken seriously as a critique of colonialism, decolonization and gendered and raced power relations in both settler and Indigenous communities” (Green 21). This creates the needed space for an exploration of Indigenous women’s views on feminism. Is it something they see as having value? Or do they view it as another assault on traditional gender roles?

The exploration of perspectives of American Indian women on feminism is critical to this study. It affords the reader an opportunity to understand the cultural and historical implications of European influence and how Indigenous women are responding. Coupled with this examination of feminism, but not necessarily separate from it, is the study of gender. American Indians, and for the purpose of this study, women in particular, carry their history in their heart and being. The roles of men and women in Indigenous societies continue to impact women today, as is seen by the

reaction of AIM women to the question of their roles as activists who remained in the background – taking care of the needs of the community and the men. “While the Native women performed most of the physical labor, most of them did not regard their roles as less important than those of the men. They justified their ‘invisible’ work by pointing out that men and women had specific tasks that were equally essential to tribal survival” (Purdue 208).

Gender analysis is critical to understanding the place of American Indian women today. Gunlög Fur writes on why gender analysis is important to American Indian historical perspectives. She states that, “Ideas and practices related to gender and sex have structured and influenced interactions between Indian peoples and Euro-Americans from the first moment of contact...” Women are invisible in the discourse because of Euro-American historians who are informed by a patriarchal perspective. “The theoretical question must be... What did women do when men made history? Women were somewhere and they were decidedly active; they did not exist suspended in a timeless vacuum awaiting the return of the men with the meat and the treaty...” (Shoemaker 76). Women were the center of homes and communities and made decisions that affected all – economically, morally, politically and spiritually. Therefore, it could be said that the question of gender roles and feminism walk hand in hand – interdependent in nature and informing each other. How is this impacting the American Indian women leaders of today? Have they forfeited traditional gender roles to become feminists? Or have they been able to integrate their traditional roles with tribal feminist ideologies?

It would be difficult to study the role of contemporary Indigenous women who have assumed positions of leadership without addressing their active resistance to dominant culture. Joy Harjo speaks of the Western Shoshone Dann sisters in her piece “The Art of Resistance.” “[They] continue the charge to take care of their lands in Nevada, though the United States wants the land for a bombing range. They have been harassed and threatened by federal agents, have had police convoys and livestock trucks impound their tribe’s cattle tended to by the Dannels, and once a six-day raid ended with 269 horses captured and killed” (Harjo and Winder 123-124). Although Mary Dann made her journey in 2005, through her activist efforts along with those of her sister, their land has yet to be formally relinquished to the federal government. Despite this fact, the efforts of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) have allowed for the Barrick Gold Corporation to mine their land. Much like the Black Hills case in South Dakota, where the tribal nations have refused to acknowledge the sale of, or relinquish ownership of lands to the federal government, Indigenous peoples in this country believe the land to be sacred and not to be abused. It belongs to the tribal nations that have roamed it since before European contact (“American Outrage”).

Employing stories such as these contributes in critical ways to the theories being posited on gender and Indigenous women’s confrontation of male dominance, as well as to the overall Indigenous methodological approach. “A postcolonial indigenous feminist perspective moves out of the cage of universalized Western gender theory and employs postcolonial and indigenous perspectives to reveal local standpoints that express girls’ and women’s agency and resistance to oppression” (Chilisa 261).

Anticipated challenges to this type of research lie in the construction of the quilt. Once each point of the star is created, work is required to bring all of the pieces together into one unified and coherent whole. Each piece can be viewed as interdependent. However, there is a need to ensure that others are able to see the same interdependency. The challenge is to make certain that all of the pieces are connected in an intelligible and productive manner. The vital thread holding all of this together is the oral interview. It is through the words of the participants who are living the realities examined that all of the pieces will begin to converge in a cohesive way.

Margaret Kovach has stated that, “Stories remind us of who we are and of our belonging. Stories hold within them knowledges while simultaneously signifying relationships.” She contends that oral stories are never “decontextualized” from the storyteller. “They are active agents within a relational world, pivotal in gaining insight into a phenomenon. Oral stories are born of connections within the world, and are thus recounted relationally” (Kovach 94).

It is imperative to include the voices of those whose stories highlight the areas of concentration being researched in this study. The value of oral histories shared cannot be overstated in lending clarity, wisdom and purpose to the questions being explored. Additionally, it is a privilege and an honor to be able to include the contributions of those who offer their time, experience and wisdom in order to create a more accurate and complete response to the study being conducted.

Having spent most of my life working and living on the reservations of South Dakota, I have been honored to learn from elders, community members, friends and those

who have become family. Through work on my master's thesis, which focused on the persistence of hope on the reservations of South Dakota, it became clear that women hold significant roles of leadership in spite of the effects of imposed male dominance. That journey led to the desire to explore further what Indigenous women see as their particular challenges, and how they are confronting them. This study focuses on interviews with the women of South Dakota—Lakota and Dakota—as that is where my experience lies. The concept of “relationality” will be discussed further, but it should be noted that because of my years among the Lakota and Dakota, relationality was already established, facilitating my research in a more effective way.

It should also be noted that one must be open to the determination of those being interviewed as to what is to be included, what is of importance, and what is privileged information. I sat one afternoon with an elder who offered a long narrative on the relationships between women. She drew diagrams and explained every area that she highlighted. After two hours of discussion, she said to me that now this knowledge was for me alone and was not to be shared with anyone else.

In some instances, this could be viewed as a researcher's nightmare. However, it was an honor to be given the gift of this knowledge, which helped me to find a deeper space within the community. Women have stories to tell. Whether they are written or oral, and these stories contribute to the heart of the knowledge imparted. The oral narrative is being given more credence than in the past. It has “begun to assume the character of a discipline...because of its sound interview practices and also because it has developed some distinctive practices and conventions in the realm of interpretation.”

However, it remains a practice that is subject to change, seen as having “undisciplined tendencies” and therefore, “profoundly interdisciplinary” (Abrams 32).

For the purposes of this study, the oral interview and narrative are critical. The star quilt that is this research is constructed by the women whose voices come together – each a point of the star – each lending an essential and fundamental avenue toward the completed design. I am forever grateful for, and humbled by the participation and contributions of each one.

## CHAPTER THREE

THE INDIGENOUS RESEARCH PARADIGM:  
THE CREATION OF THE STAR QUILT—WOMEN SHARING THEIR VOICES

*The Elders say that if it comes from the heart and it is done in a good way, our work will count. My hope is that this work will count for Indigenous people in a way that is useful – that's all.*  
(Kovach 8).

It is important to understand the process and parameters of the particular research methodology utilized in this study. Although it is a multidisciplinary approach, the foundation is the Indigenous research paradigm. This chapter is written to offer greater understanding of this particular methodology, and why it was chosen. It might be considered the pattern for the star quilt that is to be created. It is the hope that it will illuminate the work to come for a deeper understanding of the particular circumstances of the lives of Indigenous women included in this study, as well as those they represent. Likewise, it was determined that the need to do justice to the voices of these women required a unique and responsible approach. This pattern is the foundation of the work to come; a commitment to Indigenous women and the hope that this study will count for something more than simply another research project among Indigenous people. These women have shared their voices and experiences in order to support the cause of all Indigenous women who suffer the impacts of imposed male dominance and are embracing a path of resistance. While this chapter focuses on this particular methodology, it is written to offer a deeper understanding of what is to come. This

pattern for the quilt lies in the background, guiding the work as it progresses and bringing each piece of the star together.

There is a striking and staunchly intractable character to the manner in which research is conducted in higher education, as well as what is regarded as acceptable. Dominant structures have defined and guided the principles and methodologies of the practice of research leaving little space for cultural differences, or completely marginalizing those who may view research in a distinctive manner.

Conducting research within and among Indigenous communities can leave one struggling with the disparity between what is characterized as normative and acceptable methodology, and the obligation to honor and be truthful to the spirit and cultural distinctions of Indigenous communities. Whether the researcher is Indigenous or not, taking on the responsibility of research among these communities makes one a voice – a voice with a commitment and a great responsibility. Margaret Kovach, Cree/Salteaux, shares: “We know what we know from where we stand. We need to be honest about that. I situate myself not as a knowledge-keeper—this has not been my path—rather my role is facilitator. I have a responsibility to help create entry points for Indigenous knowledges to come through” (Kovach 7).

One can feel lost – caught between the standard and thus tolerable methods of research, and the needs of the community in which studies are being conducted. However, distinctive Indigenous methodologies are being explored, studied, constructed and encouraged by such leaders as Margaret Kovach and Shawn Wilson, Bagele Chilisa and Donald L. Fixico. Avenues are being forged that allow for the extraordinary nature of



Indigenous research. Often based upon the foundations of ancient knowledge and traditional methods of sharing that knowledge, Indigenous research honors and respects the cultural differences of tribal nations. It is not rigid or uncompromising. It affords dignity to the multitude of Indigenous societies on this earth—honoring particular knowledge systems, histories, and cultural and spiritual traditions.

Interaction is key—suggesting that a critical researcher moves within the community, influencing research in order to improve realistic conditions. This interaction allows for the researcher to establish credibility as well as “relationality”—a key component to effective Indigenous methodological practices, based in cultural traditions. This is a practice that is vital to any research work being conducted in Indigenous communities, and is often not commonplace within conventional research practices. Within this research, relationality allowed for Lakota and Dakota women and participants to feel that their word was respected and honored. They felt free to be open and often sat for long periods talking, prompted by a single question, and knowing that their voices were of great significance in this study.

The theory of “Constructivism” involves a mutual relationship between researcher and researched to create a “common ground” or “mutual reality” that allows for a deeper understanding of the world. Interaction is fundamental and the goal, like critical theory, which seeks to improve understanding of societies, is to create a better reality. “In both critical theory and constructivism, knowledge in itself is not seen as the ultimate goal, rather the goal is the change that this knowledge may help to bring about. Both paradigms

share the axiology that research is not seen as worthy or ethical if it does not help to improve the reality of the research participants” (Wilson 37).

This researcher’s master’s thesis on the persistence of hope on the reservations of South Dakota, which are often portrayed as desolate places characterized by violence, substance abuse, suicide, and poverty, became the seed planted to help this study flourish. The goal of that work was to aid in creating a greater knowledge of the realities for the Lakota and Dakota as something significantly more positive. So it is with this study. It became clear that women are a compelling force of support to their communities and resistance to the imposition of Euro-Western thinking and societal mores. It is not research solely for the sake of gathering and sharing information. It is an effort at creating a deeper understanding of that which Indigenous women have been and continue to be confronted on a daily basis, as well as allowing for a deeper understanding of their struggle to create a better world for their children and the generations to come. It is the hope that by sharing these stories, other women will be inspired by the courage, strength and grace with which these participants face their struggles and challenges.

It is essential to understand the significance of employing Indigenous methodologies as they pertain to and support research conducted within Indigenous communities. This methodological approach, as opposed to that of Euro-Western methodologies, lends to a deeper understanding of cultural implications when conducting studies with Indigenous subjects and subject areas. Simultaneously, this method of research offers an avenue to “denaturalize power within settler societies and ground knowledge production in decolonization” (Morgensen 805).

Linda Tuhiwai Smith addresses the imperialistic connotations of “research” as experienced by the colonized.

The word itself, ‘research,’ is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary. When mentioned in many indigenous contexts, it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful. The ways in which scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world’s colonized peoples. It is a history that offends the deepest sense of our humanity” (1).

The practices of dominant methods of research continue to impact Indigenous communities which has led to the creation of Internal Review Boards (IRB’s) as a way of managing the influx of researchers, protecting the rights to privacy of tribal members and ensuring a more respectful approach. However, the methodology of conducting research according to the constructs of the Western academy continues to “...deny the validity of indigenous peoples’ claim to existence, to land and territories, to the right of self-determination, to the survival of our languages and forms of cultural knowledge, to our natural resources and systems for living within our environments” (Smith 1). Therefore, for those whose studies center on Indigenous communities, whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous academics, it is imperative to examine alternative methodologies that are characterized by respect and honor. “In Native communities, the research must move the community forward past historical trauma and into self-determination” (Lambert 60).

### Indigenous Methodologies: Mechanisms

*Much of contemporary research and theorizing about American Indian nations is absorbed into many disciplinary fields and are considered variations on more general theories. In the worst case, American Indian communities and their issues are seen as marginal because some contemporary theories do not easily conceptualize American*

*Indian communities, cultures, and historical experiences and are therefore regarded as outside the main focus of theoretical and empirical interest and focus (Champagne, “In Search of Theory” 354).*

It is critical that researchers of Indigenous subjects and subject areas explore and understand the theoretical framework of the methodology that speaks to the particular needs of these distinctive communities. The dominant structural framework of qualitative and quantitative research in itself does not hold relevance to Indigenous research. While Native American Studies as a discipline has opened avenues to better understanding of Indigenous peoples, the particular needs of these communities where research is involved, has been lacking. Without an understanding of the paradigms and protocols of work among Indian communities, research will lack relevancy and meaning, not only to those conducting and reviewing the research, but more importantly, to the Indigenous communities being studied.

The methods utilized to gather data or information, and then to generate theories, speak only to the Western Academy because “...knowledge is generally understood within Western world views or epistemological understandings.” Research customarily focuses on Universities, and academic disciplines are oriented toward examining the issues, problems, and conceptualizations that confront American or Western civilization,” including those universities that espouse the value of Native American Studies programs (Champagne “In Search of Theory” 356). This is not unusual, as universities will respond to the needs of the population they serve – local, state, and federal. Additionally, they analyze the American Indian experience according to race, class, ethnicity, nation, culture and a postmodern approach – none of which “are effective for offering a holistic

approach that centers American Indian communities and interpretations” (Champagne “In Search of Theory” 357).

The power of story cannot be underestimated as an avenue toward historical perspective and a deeper understanding of oral cultures. Henry and Barney Old Coyote, along with Phenocia Bauerle (Crow), researcher of oral histories of her tribal nation, proffer the importance of the collective memory in gathering an accurate picture of an event. Each witness sees the event from her or his viewpoint and contributes to the whole. If the event has no witnesses, stories are collected from various sources to reach a consensus about the truth. “The Western worldview, which involves a tendency to overanalyze, to see events as black and white, interferes with the Native worldview of interconnectedness and the understanding of how and why things are done” (Old Coyote, et. al. xix). Donald L. Fixico (Shawnee, Sac and Fox, Muscogee Creek, and Seminole), professor of American Indian history states, “In the linear world of academia, only things written down in the past are taken seriously. Mainstream academia calls them facts, although they are subjective observations of biased minds filled with many influences. The printed document is accredited with more relevance than a verbal account retold” (Fixico 22).

The women’s voices included in this study, as well as those who offered their knowledge and wisdom but chose not to be formal participants, are the vital threads that create deeper awareness and invaluable understanding to the research question. They are critical to a deeper understanding of the “interconnectedness” of Indigenous lives, communities and worldviews. Without the stories of these women, emanating from

personal and communal experience, historical knowledge, and steeped in tradition and culture, the rest would be simply analysis supported by written material.

Oral cultures embodied within the historical scope of the Americas, have much to contribute to the field of American Studies, as well as having the facility to inform other areas of study. The oral traditions of Indigenous cultures provide an avenue of knowledge and research practices that, while often questioned by researchers of history or the sciences, are not unique to qualitative methods. “Story is practiced within methodologies valuing contextualized knowledge, such as feminism, autoethnography, phenomenology, and narrative inquiry” (Kovach 96). Linda Miller Cleary and Thomas D. Peacock state that, “A person’s worldview is a particular construct of perceptions of the world through what they see, hear, smell, and touch” (Cleary and Peacock, 45). However, Western historians like James Gilbert would contend that individual memory is “... *anticipation* joined to *retrospection* by means of an experience or an imagined experience. Initially, experience may be dominant, but over time and space, memory comes to depend more and more upon imagination” (Gilbert 78).

The senses play a great role in the memory for Indigenous peoples. One elder shared the concept of “*skan*”—the vibrations of life. He said that if we are quiet and are in tune with the world, we will feel “*skan*.” This involves being aware with all the one’s senses. Indigenous people carry this within themselves and so when a story is told, it involves seeing, hearing, feeling, and touching. It is not just the statement of facts carried in the mind, it is the knowledge of the heart.

Margaret Kovach identifies qualitative research as “an inclusive place. For example, the use of a self-reflective narrative research process, in conjunction with a research approach that seeks *nisitohtamowin* (a Cree word for understanding), or ‘self-in-relation’ (Kovach 27). This self-in-relation is well understood when a researcher approaches work on a reservation. Without establishing oneself, and developing a deeper awareness of what it means to work with Indigenous communities; without placing oneself within the context of where you are, being open to learning and finding a voice within that context, it is difficult to do the study justice. Kovach cites Denzin and Lincoln who “suggest that there are ‘seven moments of qualitative research’ and that we are entering the seventh moment, where inclusivity of voices in research practice is possible.” She notes that this “seventh moment” resonates because of the significance of the number seven to American Indians: the seventh generation, the seven council fires, and “all the hope implied in those terms.” However, she goes further to note that the “traditional period” to which Denzin and Lincoln refer, is in need of attention...moments one to six (Kovach 27).

Shawn Wilson explores the difference between dominant and Indigenous research paradigms, noting that dominant research divides the whole into individual components, while an Indigenous paradigm looks at the total “complexity and relationships that allow that individual to function.” To Indigenous peoples, all of creation is connected and integrated. The Lakota concept of “*Mitakuye Oyasin*” tells of this connection. It means “All my relatives,” illustrating that we are all related: the two-leggeds, the four-leggeds, the birds of the air, the fish of the waters, the heavens and the earth, and all upon it. Even

inanimate objects like stones are considered relatives. Wilson notes that in the Western paradigm, “knowledge may be owned by an individual.” Whereas, in Indigenous methodologies, “Knowledge is shared with all creation...It is in relationship with all of creation.” This reaches beyond the individual and knowledge owned by the individual “to the concept of relational knowledge... you are answerable to *all* your relations when you are doing research” (Wilson 56-57).

The Lakota and Dakota women who offered their voices to this study, exemplified this concept by the openness with which they shared their stories. They exhibited a sense of care and concern for the younger generation of women, for children, for their communities—an understanding that their voices contribute to a larger purpose. This aids the researcher in understanding that the work being done is more than just “knowledge owned by the individual.”

Blue Dawn Little, Lakota, shared about a gathering that was organized by women in response to the suicide crisis on Pine Ridge.

We see a lot of that in the traditional sense where women take up their roles and help in society. But I haven’t seen a lot of individual women do, or I guess, take up issues or activism on their own. But they will come together in groups and do that. In comparison, when I was a little bit younger—maybe like, well, I’m not very old now, but at 14, 15—I didn’t see a lot of that. But within these past 10 to 15 years, I’ve seen women become more empowered in terms of overcoming that dominance, and domestic violence and that type of stuff and a lot of it is that camaraderie... You know, you come together and you help each other because we need each other (Little, Blue Dawn. Personal Interview. July 2015).



### This Study: The Approach

Given the aforementioned concerns, the intention of this study is to work within an Indigenous research paradigm that reflects an understanding of the communities being explored as well as a respect for the knowledge systems on which they find their foundations. It is critical to honor those with whom this work is taking place by respecting and making advances toward a deeper understanding of cultural and spiritual traditions of the tribal nations involved, not in relation to dominant society and history, but in their own right. In order to do this study justice, the focus must be on individuals and communities—the women who offer their wisdom and experience, and the communities from which they come. It is important to study the decisions, choices and approaches they employ “to realize their culture, values, and political and economic interests within the constraints and opportunities presented by changing colonial contexts and, increasingly, contemporary global political, economic, and cultural contexts” (Champagne “In Search of Theory” 360).

Interviews and the information offered in the context of relationships formed over time, guide this process. It is through the input of the participants involved, that this research finds its meaning and relevancy, and are ultimately the threads utilized to complete the star quilt.

### Indigenous Methodologies: The Genesis

*The development of an Indigenous research paradigm is of great importance to Indigenous people because it allows the development of Indigenous methods of practice... A strong Indigenous research paradigm can provide ways to celebrate the*

*uniqueness and glory of Indigenous cultures, while allowing for the critical examination of shortcomings. It will encourage a greater appreciation of Indigenous history and worldviews, thus allowing Indigenous peoples to look towards the future while neither demonizing nor romanticizing the past (Wilson 19).*

With the proliferation of Native American Studies programs being established in this country, changes are beginning to take place that allow for a deeper understanding of the First Peoples of this continent, as well as an increasing respect for traditions and cultures. There are also a number of courses focused on Native America incorporated into mainstream programs. These are valuable steps toward respect and understanding of tribal nations as “distinct political and cultural groups that are informed by creation and cultural teachings.” These communities have held on to traditions, self-governance and, like in the case of the Black Hills, a commitment to their land and the environment, despite “surrounding nation-states that prefer assimilation and political inclusion to recognition of indigenous goals and values” (Champagne “In Search of Theory 353).

Native American studies programs aid in alleviating the misunderstanding and marginalization that tribal nations experience. However, research avenues have generally continued to embrace Euro-Western methodologies to serve the needs of the advancement of Western civilization, creating a breach in the development of Native American studies as viable in its own right.

Duane Champagne faults the “multidisciplinary character of most contemporary college and university Indian studies programs,” diminishing any attempts to develop an Indigenous approach to research methodology. Critical race theory, which Max Horkheimer characterized as seeking “to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them” (Horkheimer 244), is likewise promoted by Bagele Chilisa as a

“transformative approach, asserting that through knowledge and critique of how race operates...researchers can reconsider the practices, methods, approaches, tools of data collection, and modes of analysis and dissemination of results so that research promotes justice and is respectful and beneficial to racial minorities” (Chilisa 65). This theory contends to improve understanding of society through deeper insights into historical, social, political, economic, psychological and anthropological aspects. However, Champagne would contend that, “race and critical race theories do not conceptualize or center collective American Indian goals such as preservation of land, self-government, and reclaiming culture” (Champagne “In Search of Theory” 357). Brayboy agrees with this assessment stating that, “While CRT serves as a framework in and of itself, it does not address the specific need of tribal peoples because it does not address the American Indians’ liminality as both legal/political and racialized beings or the experience of colonization.” Furthermore, Brayboy contends that “...TribalCrit or Tribal Critical Race Theory has the potential to enhance self-determination and provides a theoretical lens for addressing many of the issues facing American Indian communities today.” These include, “...issues of language shift and language loss, natural resources management, the lack of students graduating from colleges and universities, the overrepresentation of American Indians in special education, and power struggles between federal, state, and tribal governments,” a tenet lacking in Critical Race Theory (Brayboy 429-430).

Additionally, Champagne points out the variances between an understanding of race and nation according to dominant society and American Indian communities, for

which “nation” signifies “...a specific combination of kinship, government, world view, and cosmic community (Champagne “In Search of Theory” 358).

The methodological approach of Euro-Western research has dominated the social science fields. While there may be value in the methodologies employed and practiced, there is a growing need for movement away from this singular view. Indigenous researchers are offering an alternative that not only allows for a process of “decolonization” of methodologies, but also creates a space for studies based on the ways of knowing of Indigenous peoples. Scott Lauria Morgensen shares that, “Indigenous methodologies do not merely model Indigenous research. By exposing normative knowledge production as being not only non-Indigenous but colonial, they denaturalize power within settler societies and ground knowledge production in decolonization” (Morgensen 805).

Western methodologies embrace the concept that there is only one way of knowing, while in contrast, the Indigenous worldview understands that there are many ways of knowing—the intellectual being only one. While Western methodologies seek “an answer” to a specific question, Indigenous researchers understand that there may be more than one answer and that understanding may not be complete. It encompasses many aspects of life, including experiential, intellectual, spiritual, as well as that which cannot be explained – what dominant society would address as “the mystical.”

So it is with this research. The approach with interview participants and community members was one that was open and allowed for the direction of the discourse to be guided by the participants themselves. Lakota and Dakota worldviews

require an understanding that some things may not be explained in the conventional or Western way of thinking. It requires an openness to a spiritual realm that may not be clearly understood by those on the outside. It is therefore, the task of the researcher to incorporate what is being said, without modification, but through the creation of an avenue of understanding for the reader.

### Competing Worldviews: Relationality

*Leanne Simpson (2000) outlined seven principles of Indigenous worldviews. First knowledge is holistic, cyclic, and dependent upon relationships and connections to living and non-living beings and entities. Second, there are many truths, and these truths are dependent upon individual experiences. Third, everything is alive. Fourth, all things are equal. Fifth, the land is sacred. Sixth, the relationship between people and the spiritual is important. Seventh, human beings are least important in the world (Hart 3).*

This is perhaps, the most critical need in working with Indigenous communities. It is the reason that this work focuses on the Lakota and Dakota of South Dakota. The development of relationships happens over time, and may mean that research does not begin until this relationality is established. It is something that cannot be pressed, but must happen as the community and individuals see fit. The researcher must be keenly aware of their responsibility in this process.

The work being done in developing and advocating for Indigenous research methodologies not only creates an instrument through which knowledge is shared respectfully and with intent, but also addresses the injustices that have, and continue to occur through Euro-Western methodologies used in Indian Country and espoused by the academy. Linda Tuhiwai Smith shares that research that has been conducted in Indigenous communities has done little to improve the lives of those being studied, and

that endeavors to develop research methodologies that speak to these conditions embrace a “framework of self-determination, decolonization and social justice” (Smith 4). It is often heard on reservations that people come to study and do their research, and then leave when they have accomplished their personal needs and goals. The establishment of the IRB protocol on reservations such as Pine Ridge in South Dakota requires that researchers are accountable to those they are studying and from whom they often ask cooperation. There arises the question of honor—one of the Lakota values—requiring that the researcher make a concerted effort to understand and respect those with whom she or he is working. A responsible research methodology is “grounded politically in specific indigenous contexts and histories, struggles and ideals” (Smith 4).

In this specific study, it has been important to understand the context of the struggles Indigenous women face with regard to the imposition of Euro-Western value systems. Indigenous methodologies allow for a particular worldview. It is important to recognize that the worldview of each Indigenous community involved is probably very different from those of dominant cultures, and distinct from tribal nation to tribal nation. Euro-Western research recognizes that bias is an element that cannot be avoided, as researchers frame their particular study through their own lenses and interpret results based on their own perceptions. “Research ‘through imperial eyes’ describes an approach which assumes that Western ideas about the most fundamental things are the only ideas possible to hold, certainly the only rational ideas, and the only ideas which can make sense of the world, of reality, of social life, and of human beings” (Smith 58). Therefore, bias and a cultural detachment in worldviews creates problems in research conducted, as

well as interpretation of findings. For that reason, it was critically important to include the voices of the women living the realities being explored, along with their responses to them, and being true to what they share, utilizing this information in a responsible way.

Kovach also addresses the question of culturally imbued languages. "...From this perspective alone Western research and Indigenous inquiry can walk together only so far. This is a significant difficulty for all those, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, who do not speak a tribal language yet are inquiring into the nature of tribal knowledges" (Kovach 30). Lakota elders and community members will frequently use terms whose significance holds greater meaning in their own language. For example, the Lakota term "*tiospaye*," which can be translated to mean community, holds greater meaning than this. Its significance is that it is much more than neighbors or those living in the same community. It is an "extended family" that provides material assistance as well as social support to its members. Also, the term "*maske*," holds a deeper connotation than simply friendship among women. It signifies the connection of sisters. For the purposes of this study, understanding terms such as these is crucial to gaining deeper insights into what is being shared by participants. For a researcher in Indigenous communities, taking time to sit with elders and community members to inquire about terminology and the significance attached to certain words and phrases, holds great value and allows for a deeper relationship of respect and understanding.

As a researcher studying issues impacting Indigenous cultures, it is of critical importance to understand that relationship is the basis of this methodology. Researchers who approach an individual or a community and endeavor to situate themselves within

that space, expecting that they will be received openly and without reservation, will find that relationship building in advance of, during, and upon completion of the study, is imperative. This is true whether the researcher is Indigenous or non-Indigenous.

Wilson shares that relationship in Indigenous communities is a very different concept than what dominant society views it to be. He notes that the interrelationships of those working on issues within Indian Country can seem to reflect what dominant society sees as nepotism. However, he adds, “I think that in the dominant system, nepotism generally involves the use of friends and relations in a concerted effort to keep others out. In healthy Indigenous communities though, the strength of already established bonds between people can be used to help uplift others to bring them into the circle” (Wilson 81). This “circle” is the avenue to a deeper understanding of those being studied, as well as toward gaining knowledge and cultural sensitivity. Without being invited into the circle, a researcher is diminished by past conceptions – feared and averted. “Research within late-modern and late-colonial conditions continues relentlessly and brings with it a new wave of exploration, discovery, exploitation and appropriation. Researchers enter communities armed with goodwill in their front pockets and patents in their back pockets...” (Smith 25).

Establishing relationships eases the sense of cynicism and distrust that has shrouded research efforts in Indigenous communities. The bonds formed through healthy relationships benefit the researcher and allow for a greater sense of accountability. Wilson notes that this lends to the development of healthy researchers (Wilson 86). Additionally, it is essential that the relationship is not abandoned once the work is done.



To Indigenous people, these are meaningful and personal connections that go beyond the scope of study, and encompass the responsibilities of family. “Rather than viewing ourselves as being *in* relationship with other people or things, we *are* the relationships that we hold and are part of” (Wilson 80). Respect and honor, two key values to the Lakota and Dakota, are forever at the heart of relationship building leading to viable and truthful research and work with those kind enough to lend their voices to the researcher.

### Relationality as Space and Time

*All things exist according to the principle of survival; the act of survival pulses with the natural energy and cycles of the earth; this energy is part of some grand design; all things have a role to perform to ensure balance and harmony and the overall well-being of life; all things are an extension of the grand design, and as such, contain the same essence as the source from which it flows (Gitchi-Manitou); and this essence is understood as “spirit,” which links all things to each other and to Creation (Hart 3).*

Relationality, which is key to Indigenous communities, also rests with the critical importance of the concept of place or space. While Euro-Western historical events are viewed in a linear fashion, Indigenous peoples view events in terms of where they occurred. Smith notes that time and space are “concepts [that] are particularly significant for some Indigenous languages because the language makes no clear or absolute distinction between the two: for example, the Maori word for time or space is the same” (Smith 52). A researcher may be invited to travel to various sites to better understand the premises and foundations of the answers to their questions. One participant in Shawn Wilson’s examination of Indigenous methodologies shared: “I started with the tribal, and it’s relational, but it’s more than human relationships... We can take people to those

places, and they can experience them for themselves... The environment is knowledge” (Wilson 86).

The relevance of place is fundamental to understanding tribal nations and Indigenous thought. One need only consider the significance of sacred sites like Bear Butte, Devil’s Tower and the Black Hills to understand how the environment plays a role in the life of the community being studied. The spiritual connection to place cannot be overstated, and those given the opportunity to understand more deeply that connection are privileged with knowledge crucial to the community. This will be illustrated further in the input provided by one interview participant, Veronica Valandra, and the struggle in which she and other women have been engaged to preserve sacred burial grounds from destruction by the Catholic church.

It is important to understand that in an Indigenous research methodological approach, the connection between people and their environment is as basic as the connection between people themselves. Wilson refers to this as the “pedagogy of place,” where “knowledge, theories and ideas are only knots in the strands of relationality that are not physically visible but are nonetheless real” (Wilson 87). This raises the notion of reciprocity as a worldview, and the understanding that as we receive, we must also give. It is critically important to honor our relationships with other lives and places. Wilson reminds us that our environment is sacred, quoting a colleague who states that, “The only difference between human beings and four leggeds and plants is the shadow they cast” (Wilson 87).

Euro-Western researchers may find the Indigenous concept of time challenging to understand and with which to conform. Historically, Western thought embodied the notion that time for Indigenous peoples was not organized or utilized in an effective way. “Representations of ‘native life’ as being devoid of work habits, and of native people being lazy, indolent, with low attention spans, is part of a colonial discourse that continues to this day” (Smith 56). This Eurocentric view of the Indigenous concept of time advances “the need for a modern Indigenous peoples’ research project that resists the oppression found within research” (Hart 6).

Thus, place or ground, space and time are sacred, and are vital to Indigenous life and culture and therefore must be a part of any research being conducted within Indigenous communities in order to gain deeper insights into the life and traditions of the tribal community being studied. “Research ‘through imperial eyes’ describes an approach which assumes that Western ideas about the most fundamental things are the only ideas possible to hold, certainly the only rational ideas, and the only ideas which can make sense of the world, of reality, of social life and of human beings” (Smith 58). It is only with time and through respect and relationship building, that one can begin to develop a deeper understanding of the knowledge and wisdom shared by community members. The connection to the women in this study, through understanding of the greater cultural implications, affords the possibility of deeper meaning and validity.

### Relationality and Indigenous Knowledge Systems

*One of the most difficult academic arguments for indigenous scholars to make has been the very existence of indigenous knowledge as a unique body of world knowledge that has*

*a contribution to make in contemporary disciplines and institutions, let alone for indigenous peoples themselves (Smith 223).*

Indigenous knowledge systems are guided by traditions and customs, worldviews and histories. They are distinctive from tribe to tribe and include perspectives that come together from different points throughout history. To many Euro-Western researchers who are focused on their work, their studies, and their needs in the process, exploration to gain an understanding of Indigenous knowledge systems, including relationality, may be secondary to the imperative to collect the information and data needed. This is not intended to be a critique of dominant research processes, but rather, to offer an alternative view – one that is necessary to envision before research is begun with Indigenous subject areas. Hart shares that “...If the spiritual and sacred elements are surrendered, then there is little left of our philosophies that will make any sense” (Hart 6).

This represents a circular worldview – the “circle of life”—in which all things are intertwined and all of creation is of equal value. Along with human beings (two-leggeds), it includes animals (four-leggeds), birds, fish, vegetation, rocks. Harmony and unity are imperative to the well-being and healthy existence of Indigenous communities. Hart shares Joey De La Torre’s contention that, a “relational worldview” allows for “respectful individualism,” as well as “a strong focus on people and entities coming together to help and support one another in their relationship” (Hart 3). This emphasizes the relational in a way that supports research being conducted in a respectful manner. It also emphasizes the need to adjust the research process to allow for differing views and embracing the practice of inclusion, even if it means acclimatizing existing research findings.

Advancing an ethical relationship with an Indigenous community requires respect, honor and often quiet observation. The researcher should consider that involvement by the community is critically important. A Western paradigm would have the researcher design questions and formulate conclusions. An Indigenous research model finds space for inclusion of the community in the development of questions, and requires the researcher to disseminate findings in a manner that the community understands and can accept as valid. Tribal protocols must be respected and inclusion of community empowerment and a model of self-determination by collaboration are critical. As was noted by Said, through the act of imperial domination Indigenous peoples were reduced to the “Other.” As such, any “viable” contributions made by them to research became the property of the researcher. “The objects of research do not have a voice and do not contribute to research or science... An object has no life force, no humanity, no spirit of its own, so therefore ‘it’ cannot make an active contribution” (Smith 64). Consequently, a responsible Indigenous research methodology requires an understanding of Indigenous knowledge systems, which are defined as the “established knowledge of Indigenous nations, their worldviews, and the customs and traditions that direct them” (Hart 3).

Through quiet observation, asking respectful questions, and listening with intent, the research for this study became a means of connecting with those involved. It offered an avenue toward a more responsible understanding of the questions being posed. In conducting interviews, it became clear that while similar viewpoints were thematic throughout, each individual had her own story impacted by her particular circumstances.

For that reason, it was important to pose a question, and then allow the participant to express their feelings and viewpoints in a way that was effective for them.

Studying the impacts of “lateral oppression,” which will be discussed further, and the resulting impacts of violence as experienced by women, is a sensitive area to be explored.

The women involved needed assurance that information each contributed would be shared with respect for their particular stories and life circumstances. Additionally, a deeper understanding of Lakota and Dakota traditions and histories, protocols and viewpoints, is an important avenue toward the development of relationality and the creation of a more responsible study.

### Oral Histories

*Indigenous epistemology is a fluid way of knowing derived from teachings transmitted from generation to generation of storytelling, where each story is alive with the nuances of the storyteller. It emerges from traditional languages emphasizing verbs, is garnered through dreams and visions, and is intuitive and introspective. Indigenous epistemology arises from the interconnections between the human world, the spirit, and inanimate entities (Hart 8).*

Along with specific protocols, an Indigenous approach to research requires inclusion of other influences in the community, such as songs, art, ceremonies, and oral histories. For that reason, oral traditions must be understood and respected. The power of story cannot be underestimated as an avenue toward historical perspectives and a deeper understanding of oral cultures. However, story as history has been undervalued and often discounted by traditional historians, cultural anthropologists, archeologists, and other researchers engulfed in dominant methodologies. Often considered to be legend, myth, or

folktales and minimized as a link to history or the historical perspectives of Indigenous communities, the oral tradition is received with skepticism among those in the academy.

Ritual or traditional ceremony is another area where the oral narrative plays a significant role. Unlike religious traditions such as Christianity or Judaism, where the written word is key to understanding the historical significance of rituals, Indigenous spiritual traditions are learned by experience and listening. An elder in Pine Ridge, who espouses both Native spirituality and Christianity, shared that in Lakota traditions, the youth learn by example and by listening to the stories associated with rituals. One does not learn about the *Inipi* (sweatlodge), or the *Wiwanke Wacipi* (Sundance) from books. It is through the teachings of elders and medicine men that ceremony is learned and practiced, with respect and honor. And prayer is not words recited taken from the written. Prayer is in everything we do and is felt in “*skan*”—the vibrations of life.

Smith notes that, “Under colonialism indigenous peoples have struggled against a Western view of history and yet been complicit within that view. We have allowed our ‘histories’ to be told and have then become outsiders as we heard them being retold” (Smith 34).

Wilson suggests that there are three levels of storytelling. “At a higher level are sacred stories, which are specific in form, content, context and structure. These stories...must be told at different levels according to the initiation level of the listener. Only those trained, tested and given permission to do so are allowed to tell these stories...” These are stories that are often kept within the community, or on the chance that they are shared with someone from without, they may be asked not to share them in

their research. This is not an easy compromise for researchers to make, however, it is critical that this be honored, as this is an aspect of relationship building and the development of trust. “The second level stories are like the Indigenous legends that you may have heard or read in books. There are certain morals, lessons or events that take place, but different storytellers shape them according to their own experience and that of the listener. The intent or underlying message of these stories remains the same.” These stories offer life lessons that are told through individual life experiences and memories. They are critical in that they allow the listener to develop their own understanding and conclusion, as they are viewed from their own experiences and perceptions. In the third level, “...Elders often use experiences from their own and others’ lives to help counsel or teach” (Wilson 98).

Peter Nabokov cites William Bascom’s examination of the forms of storytelling, giving signature to these levels. Legends or legendary narratives “are generally regarded as secular or sacred, transpiring in today’s world and featuring human characters, and are considered factual and often historical...” In contrast, myths “are usually sacred narratives that involve nonhuman characters, take place in a different or earlier world, and are treasured by the societies that hold them as absolute truth...” Finally, folktales “are considered secular narratives, commonly occurring outside of any specific time or place, involving human and nonhuman characters, and are regarded as fictional stories with high entertainment (and educational) value” (Nabokov 66).

Although the dominant thought is that over time, these narratives take on different life forms, Nabokov notes instances of “fixed genres or enduring themes” that exemplify



the “persistence of historicity” (Nabokov 69). Stories on the same subject area are often consistent from one community to the next, indicating that aspects of the narrative, notwithstanding slight variances, had been handed from generation to generation unbroken. Nabokov cites Jerry D. Blanche’s passage of the words of Four Guns, “Oglalla Sioux,” who states: “The Indian needs no writing... Words that are true sink deep into his heart where they remain. He never forgets them. On the other hand, if the white man loses his paper, he is helpless” (197).

These modes of sharing histories and traditions are critically important, despite the fact that oral histories are often dismissed by the academy as less than reliable or part of a pre-literate past. The printed word is afforded more credibility than the oral. However, this verbal account is critical when approaching elders within a given community and asking questions about aspects of tribal life and history. The story that follows a question is deep and rich and if given freely and without reservation, is an honor to receive. The knowledge that is expressed is steeped in tradition and handed down from generation to generation. While written resources cannot be discounted as viable supports to the oral word, within Indigenous traditions, they do not negate, but rather are directed by what is shared through story.

Summarily, there is a disparate relationship between dominant research paradigms, which reflect a sense of individualism, and Indigenous research “...seen as belonging to the cosmos of which we are a part and where researchers are only the interpreters of this knowledge” (Wilson 38). To be effective, research conducted among Indigenous communities requires a sensitivity and insight into certain protocols. It is

critical that a researcher establish relationship or, in Linda Tuhiwai Smith's assessment, "In First Nations and Native American communities there are protocols of being respectful, of showing or accepting respect and reciprocating respectful behaviours, which also develop membership, credibility and reputation" (Smith 15). Respect is one of the Lakota Seven Values, given to the people by the White Buffalo Calf Woman, and therefore, is an imperative in establishing relationship when conducting research.

Experience has shown on reservations such as Pine Ridge in South Dakota, that many academics arrive with an individual purpose in mind. They expect to be received openly and without reserve, because their constructivist approach is seen as simply an attempt to improve life and offer something of value to the community. However, the question arises as to whether each particular study holds meaning to those being researched. Without ethical protocols that seek to establish relationship first—learning of traditions, beliefs, and values of the community being studied—one becomes only a disseminator of information, rather than a receiver of and contributor to knowledge.

Indigenous methodologies tend to approach cultural protocols, values, and behaviours as an integral part of methodology. They are 'factors' to be built in to research explicitly, to be thought about reflexively, to be declared openly as part of the research design, to be discussed as part of the final results of a study and to be disseminated back to the people in culturally appropriate ways and in a language that can be understood (Smith 15).

Western research paradigms tend to reflect the notion that these are the most legitimate methods of gaining and disseminating knowledge. They are practiced through Western eyes and reject, or at the very least, neglect to acknowledge that there are other ways of knowing. It is critical, when taking on the responsibility of research with Indigenous subjects that one exhibit deference to the ways of others. Bagele Chilisa notes

that Indigenous research should be “guided by the four R’s: accountable responsibility, respect, reciprocity, and rights and regulations of the researched” (Chilisa 7).

Frantz Fanon, French Creole psychiatrist and philosopher, supported decolonization—not simply within the confines of human-to-human interaction, but more explicitly, his philosophy holds an ethical commitment to the recognition of the dignity of every human person. This paradigm suggests that the knowledge and lifeways of the “other” deserve respect and recognition as holding relevancy. Therefore, Indigenous research paradigms should stand on equal footing with Western methodologies, which should, in turn, not be viewed as universal. Indigenous knowledge and concerns should inform and frame the methodologies utilized in conducting research in Indigenous communities.

### Conclusion

*Indigenous methodologies are often a mix of existing methodological approaches and Indigenous practices. The mix reflects the training of indigenous researchers, which continues to be within the academy, and the parameters and common sense understandings of research which governs how indigenous communities and researchers identify their activities (Smith 44).*

The efforts at decolonization of methodologies have made strides toward giving greater representation to those historically marginalized in the research process. However, this falls short of true Indigenous research paradigms, which “deal with beliefs and assumptions about reality,” and “are based upon theory” making them “intrinsically value laden” (Wilson 33). Given that the value systems and thought processes of

Indigenous peoples are unique, can a non-Indigenous research paradigm provide a satisfactory framework for Indigenous studies?

Additionally, given that ontology reflects what reality means in each of our worlds, it would be difficult to try and find a common ground between a Euro-Western reality and an Indigenous reality. The same can be said for the concept of epistemology and the notion that what we know to be, may or may not speak to the knowledge that others hold. This knowledge impacts how one deals with the world and provokes the discussion of axiology. Axiology is the critical and moral compass of the gathering of knowledge, which is characterized by a specific ontology, and the determination of what is important in research. Axiology addresses what should be asked and how the answer will benefit those asking, and the community from which the information is taken. Shawn Wilson encapsulates this as:

Indigenous methodologies are a paradigmatic approach based upon an Indigenous philosophical positioning or epistemology. Thus it is not the method, per se that is the determining characteristic of Indigenous methodologies, but rather the interplay (the relationship) between the method and paradigm and the extent to which the method, itself, is congruent with an Indigenous worldview” (Kovach 40).

If we examine each of these facets of the research framework, and consider the difference in understanding of knowledge, reality, ethics, and morals of one culture to another, we can begin to conceptualize the need for a research paradigm that addresses the specific cultural nuances of Indigenous communities, and for the purposes of this study, Indigenous women in particular. To Indigenous researchers, epistemology is Indigenous knowledge—a product of the Indigenous worldview or philosophy.

Smith reinforces the need for research paradigms that advance the relevance of Indigenous constructs of culturally specific studies in order to best represent their epistemologies. “Having been immersed in the Western academy which claims theory as thoroughly Western, which has constructed all the rules by which the indigenous world has been theorized, indigenous voices have been overwhelming silenced” (Smith 29-30).

The following sums up the experience of the researcher having one foot planted within the world of the Western academy and the other in the cultural realm of Indigenous studies. For the purposes of this research, it is important to understand “Two-eyed Seeing,” and the significance of addressing both worlds. Carrying out research in a respectful manner, honoring what is shared, doing justice to the voices of willing and generous participants, seeking to understand cultural nuances and traditions, has been paramount in relationship-building, or “relationality” in this study.

In our global world, university graduates need an understanding of both Western and Indigenous research methodologies. The Mi’kmaq call this dual perspective “Two-eyed Seeing.” Two-eyed seeing reflects how two cultures view the world and understand the benefits of both lifeways. Indigenous components view the world in a holistic way, encompassing culture, spirituality, Native knowledge, ceremonies, language, and how cultures are passed down and strengthened through oral traditions (Lambert 8).

It is the aspiration of this research that Indigenous women, not only Lakota and Dakota, will be represented with honor, and a sense of relationality that allows for responsible and respectful sharing of their voices—their personal and communal stories, and the hopes they embrace for themselves and the next seven generations.

## CHAPTER FOUR

THE HISTORICAL DETERMINANTS OF THE  
CHARACTER OF INDIGENOUS WOMEN

*Though we once held the most revered and protected statuses in traditional tribal societies, Indian women have suffered tragically at the hands of colonization. Without question, we did not suffer in this manner in our communities before. Today, Indian women are among the most relegated women in America. Today, Indian women struggle to overcome staggering rates of abuse, domestic violence, sexual assault, and single-parenthood. (Manning).*

The history of American Indians since European contact is characterized by, among other things, repression, servitude, and marginalization. The consistent loss of land through precedents set in the courts, broken treaties, and appropriation, left once healthy tribal nations devastated physically, emotionally, economically, politically and culturally. Boarding schools forcibly removed children from their homes in order to “assimilate” them into white, Christian mainstream society. Indian tribal nations in the United States have been marginalized, suffering removal to reservations or complete termination as sovereign nations. For the Lakota and Dakota, and virtually every other tribal nation in this country, this is a history replete with genocidal practices, from the Wounded Knee and Sand Creek Massacres, to the extermination of the *tatanka wakan*, the buffalo—the lifeblood of these societies, to boarding schools, reservations and allotment, and removals. It is, however, difficult to construct a total picture of the historical roles of Indigenous women as leaders in their respective tribal nations through written accounts because, as Townsend and Nicholas note in referencing James P. Ronda’s article, “The Truth about Sacagawea,” “Many Indian women, no matter how

important they were to Indian-white relations were, like Sacagawea, receiving little attention in the written record because whites kept most written accounts, and most white men, coming from a male-dominant culture, did not elevate women into important positions” (Townsend and Nicholas 256). Despite the ubiquitous silence surrounding American Indian women in this historical context, they suffered a significant transformation in their traditional roles within tribal society due to the impacts of colonialism.

Heid E. Erdrich states that, “Too often Native Americans in general are portrayed as tragic victims or, equally harmful, as emblems of the New Age or pseudo-spiritual ideal. You might imagine here the warrior of the “End of the Trail,” or the mystical shaman selling sweats to tourists. No matter what you picture, it is unlikely that even those stereotypes evoke an image of a woman” (Erdrich and Tohe, eds. 107). The Indigenous woman is nothing short of imperceptible in the historic landscape of tribal nations as depicted by dominant society. Erdrich goes on to explain how students responded when asked to discuss what they perceive as images of Indian women. They included such figures as Pocahontas, Sacajawea, or the ever present “Indian Princess.” “Sometimes, still, the degraded ‘squaw’ is the thing that comes to mind... In reality, we have a long way to go before any image matches up with the truth of who Native American women are today” (Erdrich and Tohe 107-108).

Cultural disruption through structural violence has occurred for tribal nations throughout North America in very systematic ways, framed and characterized by policies such as assimilation and termination. The United States government established the

Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), formerly the Office of Indian Affairs, which was under the jurisdiction of the War Department. It is presently an agency within the Department of the Interior and provides services to the approximately 567 federally recognized tribal nations in this country. One area of controversy surrounding the BIA was its establishment of boarding schools, which were designed to educate the Indian child, with a greater goal of assimilation.

Indigenous children were raised in healthy homes, learning of cultural and spiritual tradition from elders. Betty Cooper, Blackfeet, shares the importance of this kind of learning for Native children. “A lot of it, for the child, is to watch. That’s how you learn sacred things they’re doing. You watch and ask questions, and they’ll fill you in. But they never tell you the whole story. Each time you learn more. By the time you’re an adult, you know what it’s about. It doesn’t come from books, it is oral tradition that comes from actively listening and participating” (Crozier-Hogle and Wilson 115)

Carlisle Indian Industrial School exemplified the strict adherence to the philosophy of Captain Richard Henry Pratt: “Kill the Indian, to save the man.” “The physical separation of children from their Indian heritage along with intense indoctrination of ‘the white way’ immediately challenged the preservation of their traditional identity.” Luther Standing Bear notes: “The change in clothing, housing, food, and confinement combined with lonesomeness was too much...and in three years nearly one half of the children from the Plains were dead. ...In the graveyard at Carlisle most of the graves are of little ones” (Townsend and Nicholas 376).



Upon visiting Carlisle, one notices that the original site of the graveyard has been moved in order to create a soccer field. Many graves are unmarked in the new site, which sits alongside a busy street, as the remains were not able to be identified. It is uncertain whether all of the remains were secured, indicating that the soccer field likely sits on those of some of the children of Carlisle.

A little known but critical example of structural violence and oppression resulted from a bill passed by Congress in 1898 establishing the only insane asylum for Indian people, the Hiawatha Asylum, which was located in Canton, South Dakota. Its doors were opened in 1903 and throughout its history, it housed more than 350 Indigenous people from throughout the United States. Shrouded in a history of abuse and death, it has been determined that this institution was nothing more than a prison for any Indians who might be considered to be troublemakers, traditional spiritual leaders, or youth who might not share the favor of the Indian agent assigned to the reservation by the federal government. Additionally, a woman who refused the sexual advances of an Indian agent, could be sent to the Asylum under the guise of being mentally unstable. When an investigation was conducted in 1933, it became evident that not one “patient” showed any signs of mental illness. In 1929, Dr. Samuel Silk filed a report after conducting an inspection of the asylum, which included the following:

Three patients were found padlocked in rooms. One was sick in bed, supposed to be suffering from a brain tumor, being bedridden and helpless... A boy about 10 years of age was in a strait jacket lying in his bed... One patient who had been in the hospital six years was padlocked in a room and, according to the attendant, had been secluded in this room for nearly three years.

Would not the United States, if it could be held liable at all, be liable in these cases for enormous damages? The records of the asylum itself show them to be

perfectly sane. They are known to be perfectly sane, to the director of the asylum Dr. Hummer. But he assumed the position that these people were below normal—mentally deficient—and they should only be discharged after they were sterilized, and as he did not have any means of doing this, there was nothing left but to keep them there (Stawicki).

Although the Asylum has since been torn down, approximately one hundred and twenty-one people are buried on the grounds in unmarked graves. To add insult to injury, and illustrating the continuing atmosphere of marginalization and disrespect afforded Indigenous peoples, there is only a marker at the site where the dead are buried – between the fourth and fifth fairways of the Canton golf course (Stawicki).

These examples illustrate the degradation that Indigenous people experienced under white European domination. Many believe that this contributes to what Dr. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart terms as “historical multigenerational trauma.” Dr. Brave Heart “became aware that she was carrying ‘grief that was bigger than herself.’ Over time she became increasingly aware of the powerful impact that historical trauma, such as the boarding school experience and federal assimilation policies have had, not only on the direct victims of these traumas but also on the children and grandchildren of these Native people” (Brave Heart, “American Indian and Alaska Natives in Health Careers”). Dr. Brave Heart’s theory will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter.

A poem by Autumn White Eyes, a former student of Red Cloud Indian School in Pine Ridge, illustrates the struggles and dreams of contemporary Lakota peoples who continue to struggle with a grief that is bigger than themselves... especially the youth.

Mothers’ weapons and fathers’ blood  
Some would stay and some would run  
Fighting over discrepancies  
Lives were born and lives were freed.

The youth is dismayed easily.  
 Hiding...  
 Dreams to hold their own  
 Frightened by future aspirations  
 And never wanting to leave their nations.  
 Working up courage to make decisions  
 And in our mind we form humble opinions  
 It is hard for us out here.  
 Struggles, suffering, challenges and adversities  
 Where is all the positivity?  
 Fighting over discrepancies  
 Lives were born and lives were freed.  
 They will rise – as will we  
 (Young and Wagner).

### The Imposition of Male Dominance: The Impact

*A people is not conquered until the hearts of its women are on the ground. Then it is done, no matter how brave its warriors nor how strong their weapons.*

Traditional Cheyenne Proverb

Colonialism exacted destruction of traditional life ways upon Indigenous people that has had a lasting effect through subsequent generations, conferring upon Indigenous women in particular, a specific characterization whose impetus was founded in the needs of dominant society. Women were forced into roles of subservience and domesticity, purging their dignity and transforming them into an image that typified the European model of womanhood. Kay Givens McGowan, Cherokee, Choctaw, Irish, notes that Europeans “assumed that Native people lived as Europeans did, in patriarchal systems, in which elite men defined the ‘appropriate way’ for women to behave. They failed to understand the equality of the sexes in Native American societies, where women enjoyed high economic, social, and political status” (Mann 53). Additionally, as Shoemaker notes, those women who made significant contributions to Indigenous history on this continent

“have disappeared from the historical landscape because of the work of generations of non-Native historians.”

Women...did not exist in a timeless vacuum awaiting the return of the men with the meat and the treaty, or in anticipation of their singular, anomalous appearances in a few sources. A great many studies have shown that women were fully occupied growing maize and other food products, preparing skins, mining lead, healing sicknesses and injuries, leading ceremonies and so on (Shoemaker 76).

Indigenous women were autonomous and enjoyed a level of independence, which included equality in marriage or partnerships. Anderson cites this as “the principle of non-interference.” She states that, “...Native women typically had power, respect and recognition within their families. As part of a family unit, a Native woman was interdependent, yet in many nations her autonomy as an individual in this unit was also respected.” She notes that the principle of non-interference was a characteristic of marriage—that of equality between women and their partners (Anderson 79).

Katsi Cook, a Mohawk activist and speaker, shared the following in a panel presentation at the State of Indian America Conference held at Cornell University in 1992, about traditional Mohawk women. She describes them as,

...having relationships, not roles, within the universe and within society. Within these relationships, there were responsibilities that were met as mothers, grandmothers, aunties, and daughters. From the bodies of women flow the relationship of the generations both to society and to the natural world. In this way is the earth, our mother, the old people said. In this way, we as women, are earth... The men have their council fire and the women have their council fire. This is a reflection of the balance and harmony between the genders (Cook 17).

Many Native societies, such as those of the Southeast (Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Muscogee, and Seminole) were matrilineal, a “descent pattern... [where] children were born into the clan of their mother where they remained their entire lives.”

The family also resided with the woman's family, making it "matrilocal" as well.

McGowan states: "The descent pattern, along with the residence patterns, gave power to the women of the nation. When a woman married, she worked and bore children for her own lineage, not her husband's. Her role as mother was more important than her role as wife. Men might come and go, but children remained a woman's children for life" (Mann 55).

Pauline Wilson, Oglala Lakota from Pine Ridge, and a teacher at Red Cloud Indian School, reinforced this notion and that this remains relevant today. When asked about the role of Lakota women as leaders, she shared:

I believe in the Lakota woman being everything in her home. All the kids learn everything from their home. Everything is taught from home. From the time of birthing—even carrying the child—that child listens to different voices and I believe that once that child is born into the family, the child puts the voices into perspective—into who is who. And the way that the mother takes care of her child in pregnancy is very, very important (Wilson, Pauline. Personal Interview. Pine Ridge, August, 2015)

She stressed the importance of mothers teaching their daughters of traditional ways, and of the roles that women take in order to support the family. When needed, a young girl will take the responsibilities of a male. Pauline continued:

There were five of us girls and I was the second oldest. And so the older one—she was a juvenile diabetic in that timeframe. And so she was excluded from doing housework or outside work, so I took the role of the male. I hauled water. I did the trees. I did the outside work with my father. And so that gave me a sense of [powerfulness] in myself. I did everything and anything. And yet, when I got married, I used to do a lot of things because I was already taught to do a lot of things at home (Wilson, Pauline. Personal Interview. Pine Ridge, August, 2015).

Pauline's experience reinforces not only the strength of Lakota women, but also the balance of gender roles.

One attribute of matrilineal societies was that they created an avenue for women to hold and exert political power. Unlike the European model of colonization where women were relegated to domestic roles, Native women were afforded the rights and influence of contributing to political decisions for their tribal nations.

Generally speaking, matrilineal clans within societies determined one's political alignment; furthermore, one received his or her social and political rights from clan membership. Because a person's clan was determined by his or her mother, women possessed much political power, in addition to a guaranteed network of female relatives who lent support and companionship (Mihesuah 43).

Europeans were shocked to learn of the practices and gender roles of Native societies. Women were afforded the right to own property, an aspect of life that was completely foreign to the colonialist mores where it was "believed that men had the sole right to own and control all property. Even their women and children were considered their property" (Mann 54).

Blue Dawn Little shared the following about the role of women in traditional Lakota societies:

...I wanted to talk about a teaching that I was taught of how the societies were. So every family had their male. And the female of that specific family—maybe it was just three kids and then the mother and the father. But that mother would always make the decision of what was going to happen. Whether it was when they went to hunt or when was a good time for them to do certain ceremonies for their children or anything in that aspect, she made the decision. The male was just the communicator and so he would take that decision, and then everybody, say there were 4 or 5 or 6 different people in the bigger family or the different families inside that *tiyospaye*, they would come together. All the females would make that decision and give it to the head man in each family. They would come together. They would communicate that decision. They would never change anything. Never change a word. Never debate it. And then they would give that to the one male that represents their entire *tiyospaye*, and he would go to the council and give that decision of what the woman said. And it was frowned upon if they went and said something, and they were actually reprimanded in certain ways, if they changed anything that the woman said. And in this council, they would take all

these recommendations of the women and they would talk about them. And they would decide which was the best. But, they would never change the recommendations. They would just decide which woman's recommendation was best. And then they would have, I think it was 3 or 4 grandmothers in the back, and if they couldn't decide on something, those grandmothers would say, "Oh, this is the way it is." And that was the decision. There was no changing it whatsoever. And it was because it was entrusted in the women, you know (Little, Blue Dawn. Personal Interview. Pine Ridge, July 2015).

This reinforces the notion that while women were seemingly behind the scenes, their voices held great importance in the political life of the community.

Another area that came under attack with European contact was sexuality. Native women were often "sexually self-directed," meaning that they could determine with whom they had sex, without stigma being attached. Sexuality was considered a normal part of life, and did not embody the puritanical constraints of European society, which "had two notions about women. Either they were 'decent,' meaning chaste until marriage, or they were 'indecent,' that is prostitutes... The idea of sexually self-directed women was unheard of in Europe" (Mann 56). Barbara-Helen Hill, Mohawk, wrote that "Native women... were told that sex is 'a man's thing; men enjoy it; it's a woman's duty; it's dirty; save yourself for your husband.' Traditional teachings which encouraged a healthy sexuality were erased" (Anderson 92).

Boarding schools contributed to the devastating impact of colonialism on sexuality for both Native women and men. J. R. Miller notes: "...Native children suffered the consequences by being chastised and even beaten for even attempting to communicate with members of the opposite sex, who were often their siblings and relations." Shirley Williams, Ojibway and Odawa, shared of her experience in a Canadian boarding school: "...Girls were accused of improper behaviour when they tried to make

contact with boys. ‘We were called boy crazy.’ These attempts at contact were usually not sexually driven but the attempts of lonely little girls who wished to speak to their brothers or cousins. Their excitement at catching a periodic glimpse of family members was often met with anger from the nuns, who accused them of sexual behaviour” (Anderson 92).

The degradation and diminishment of cultural traditions and Indigenous values has carried through generations, evident in contemporary issues such as the appropriation of sacred sites. In speaking about the role of the Christian church as it has impacted Indigenous peoples, Veronica Valandra, Oglala Lakota, and Pastoral Coordinator at Red Cloud Indian School, spoke about her role on the Bishop’s Conference for the Catholic church.

...There were two other Natives on the committee with about 60 people. And on this committee there were bishops, there were deacons, there were priests, there were religious and laity. And all in the background, different cultures and...those three Indigenous people. Yet, most of the time, we had to educate. Yet anything that we as Native people brought up, had ideas, we were always double checked. Like we presented a resolution on sacred rights for Native people because in California it was really bad. The Catholic schools are building over Native burial grounds. They built a football field over Native burial grounds. They just bulldozed some burial spots and boxed up the bones. And it continues today. They have all these boxes of bones all numbered and boxed up at UCLA. And so we were trying to present—two Native women were trying to present a resolution that the Catholic church protect and preserve, respect the burial sites of Indigenous people. And they just wouldn’t even go for it. At that level. And some of them still think that Native people—I guess we’re quiet, dumb and ignorant. They just have that mentality (Valandra, Veronica. Personal Interview. Pine Ridge, July 2015).

Dagmar Thorpe, Sauk and Fox, states: “Native people have been double-hit by the oppression of modern society: First, by the destruction of traditional values and belief systems within, and second, by the oppression that comes from the outside—economic



oppression, theft of land and resources, and the destruction of a ‘way of life.’ This has created a sense of powerlessness about the future” (Crozier-Hogle and Wilson 5).

The history of oppression of Indigenous peoples in North America has been punctuated by the treatment of women, which has pervaded their lives and communities. Andrea Smith notes Paula Gunn Allen who proposes the argument that “...colonizers realized that in order to subjugate indigenous nations they would have to subjugate women within these nations. Native peoples needed to learn the value of hierarchy, the role of physical abuse in maintaining that hierarchy, and the importance of women remaining submissive to their men” (Smith *Conquest* 23). Instituting a patriarchal system of societal mores and roles became a manner of colonizing Indigenous peoples, and along with that patriarchy was the understanding that only white men knew what was best for Indigenous women...and men. Coupled with this was the practice of sexual and physical abuse of Indigenous women, one that continues to this day.

Blue Dawn Little shared:

I think a lot of us women have that intuition to make the best decisions possible for our people, for our children and I believe that we are all starting to realize that we have that inner intuition to be that head person, that strong person for our families and ultimately for everybody as a whole. And that’s why you see that emergence of women. They’re just recognizing that power. It’s always been there but they’re recognizing it because the tribal men or the Indigenous men have been oppressed by the US government and in turn, they feel like they need to do that to somebody so they do it to women (Little, Blue Dawn. Personal Interview. Pine Ridge, July 2015).

The image of Indigenous women was a construct of the colonizing powers and conformed to the changing needs of those powers. Anderson writes that, “In both western and Indigenous frameworks, Native women have historically been equated with the land.

The Euro-constructed image of Native women, therefore, mirrors western attitudes towards the earth.” She notes that when Europeans first arrived, they created the “Indian Queen,” the “great mother.” “America” as she was called, was personified as being “full-bodied, powerful, nurturing but dangerous—embodying the wealth and danger of the New World.” This image was altered when the Indian Queen was transformed into the “Indian Princess”—suddenly erotic and appealing to the avarice of the European appetite for land. “This equation of the Indigenous woman with virgin land, open for consumption, created a Native female archetype which, as Elizabeth Cook Lynn has pointed out, could then be ‘used for the colonizer’s pleasure and profit’” (Anderson 100-101).

Sexism is a condition of Indigenous communities that has resulted from the imposition of Euro-Western thinking on gender roles in society. In each interview conducted, the issue of sexism and gender inequality in contemporary societies was pervasive. Men often are uncomfortable with women who are strong and speak out. Blue Dawn Little shared:

There are a lot of men who just can’t handle their spouse or even mothers or sisters or female relatives being outspoken and saying what they have to say. They get embarrassed by it. And it’s a shock to their masculinity. I see a lot so I do think that men still very much so have an issue with women speaking (Little, Blue Dawn. Personal Interview. Pine Ridge, July 2015).

Andrea Smith cites this as a deterrent to decolonization. Any efforts to decolonize are thwarted if sexism is not addressed. It “ignores the fact that it has been precisely through gender violence that we have lost our lands in the first place” (Smith “Native American Feminism” 121).

Indigenous women are considered to be less impacted by colonialist attitudes than men through what Andrea Smith terms the “primacy of the male experience.” However, when women discuss issues such as sexism and gender inequality, it is often noted that it is the women who continue to hold families together. They have however, been diminished by the effects of imposed male dominance. Smith shares that, “While women still play the traditional role of housekeeper, childbearer, and nurturer, they no longer enjoy the unquestioned positions of power, respect, and decision making on local and international levels that were not so long ago their accustomed functions” (Smith “Native American Feminism” 132).

Statistics show that the level of violence against American Indian women has increased inordinately compared to that of non-Indians. While much of the violence has been perpetrated by non-Indians who have enjoyed immunity from prosecution by a system of acts and laws prohibiting prosecution of non-Indians in Indian Country—a system that is beginning to change with provisions added by the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act—traditional life has been so altered that abuse is prevalent from within communities as well (Department of Justice: VAWA Reauthorization). Indigenous women have responded to such violence by creation of support groups within their communities. Understanding that they were not protected by state, federal, or even tribal law, they began to confront injustice with action. While such violent behavior is not traditional within these communities, Andrea Smith states that it is an apparatus of “patriarchal control,” as well as serving “as a tool of racism and colonialism.” Smith continues: “Far from being traditional, sexual violence is an attack on Native sovereignty

itself.” As one elder stated in a gathering she attended, “...as long as we destroy ourselves from inside, we don’t have to worry about anyone on the outside” (Smith, *Conquest*).

Janet Routzen, Minneconjou Lakota, attorney and executive director of the White Buffalo Calf Woman’s Society, spoke about the violence among girls on Rosebud Reservation:

Yes, a lot of assaults...You know what I mean? But they’re low reporting numbers. That age group...you know anything with young adults from middle school on up to the 20’s including sexual assault, you know—dating violence—they do not report. It is one of our most unreported groups. Because they don’t want their parents to know if they’re with a violent guy. They certainly don’t report the sexual assault especially when it’s gang-related sex and you know, those kinds of things. (Routzen, Janet. Personal Interview, Rosebud Reservation, July, 2014).

This is far from what would have been considered traditional. Consequently, recovery of the old ways—the traditional cultural and spiritual practices of tribal nations—is of critical importance to Indigenous people. When asked what would restore health and hope to the Lakota, especially the youth, an elder in Pine Ridge responded that restoration of language and spirituality were essential to bringing health to young people. Pine Ridge has seen a frightening increase in suicide rates in the last year. In a February 2015 report in Indian Country Today Media Network, Alysa Landry reported that, “Since mid-December, five Oglala Sioux youths between the ages of 12 and 15 have committed suicide on this 3,500-square-mile reservation in South Dakota. That includes three deaths since January 31, and officials are reporting additional suicide attempts” (Landry). The aforementioned elder expressed the need for young people to find themselves as young

Lakotas, and through recovering traditional ways, believes they will then find emotional health and a sense of self-worth.

Rose Johnson Tsosie, Navajo, shares that women were the teachers of traditional practices and culture and reinforces the belief that traditional culture, including language is essential to the development of a strong identity in Navajo youth.

The *Saani* (a respected grandmother or elder) were the ones who would teach us the old ways. They gave us the real insight to being Navajo. They would say, “I want to show you something,” and we would make bread their way. They taught us not just about life, but about how they lived. They shared as much as they could—a lot of them didn’t speak English and believed their children should speak Navajo (Crozier-Hogle and Wilson 94).

### The Confrontation of Violence

American Indian women are informed by their past and their role in the protection of the next generations and the community. This leads to the theoretical question of resistance. M. Annette Jaimes and Theresa Halsey write:

Women have always formed the backbone of indigenous nations on the North American continent. It is we, contrary to those images of meekness, docility and subordination to males with which we have been typically portrayed by the dominant culture’s books and movies, by anthropology, and by political ideologues of both rightist and leftist persuasions – who have formed the very core of indigenous resistance to genocide and colonization since the first moment of conflict between Indians and invaders. In contemporary terms, this heritage has informed and guided generations of native women... (McClintock, et. al. 298).

The subservience of Indigenous women in the history of this country was often framed by violence. California’s gold rush exemplified this phenomenon. For American Indian women, this era was characterized by violent repression. Non-Indian men who migrated to California to find their fortune, far outnumbered the Anglo women, who

more often stayed behind. Consequently, American Indian women became the focus of attention, which most often meant lives of prostitution, rape, and abuse. “For American men, there were plenty of opportunities to rape Indian women. With Indian men forced into labor on ranches and in mines, Indian women were left vulnerable to an American male majority” (Townsend and Nicholas 276).

Women’s lives began to change with the introduction of colonial European and Christian dynamics undermining traditional culture and politics of their respective communities. “Indian women’s lives grew ever more complex during the removal and reservation years...” (Child xv). Boarding school policies contributed to the further erosion of Native family life and traditional social structures, and left women in subservient positions. “Most observations of Indian women in traditional societies were written by Euro-American men, who judged them by the standards that they judged women of their own societies” (Mihsuah 45).

This was a common occurrence across the continent, irreparably impacting the lives of Indigenous communities and the women who had held critical roles in the culture and traditions of their people. The observations of Europeans encountering Indigenous tribes were similar in context and tone throughout the United States. Among the Plains tribes, travelers and traders wrote of the lot of Indian women in terms of the “savage.” There was deep misunderstanding of Indigenous women and they were given little respect with regard to their position in their communities. They were assigned positions of subservience to the men, and “were frequently referred to as ‘beasts of burden,’ ‘slaves,’ and ‘sexually lax’...” (Albers and Medicine 29).

These observations were consistently shared and became common knowledge. They were however often misguided and inaccurate in their assessments of Indigenous women's lives and illustrated the notion of the emblematic Indian woman – either the noble princess or the savage squaw. Her traditional standing was adversely impacted as she was forced into submissive roles in order to remove her sense of Indigenous womanhood. She was to become a model of the domestic Euro-Western woman.

What was lacking in the accounts of non-Indian observers was an understanding that, while women's roles may have appeared to be more menial than men's, women were respected and their work was considered of equal value to their male counterparts. In regard to Lakota society, "...The work of men was considered to be more glorious and highly honored than the work of women. But it is equally clear...that Lakota women were accorded a full measure of respect for the performance of the work appropriate to their sex" (Albers and Medicine 238).

Rape was not an uncommon occurrence for Indigenous women across the nation. With white men in positions of power and domination, Indian women were exceptionally vulnerable. The consequences of rape and abuse had a lasting and adverse effect on once healthy Native societies, with the deaths of many women. "In census records from 1860, Indian men far outnumbered Indian women due to sexual assault, disease, and death. Birth rates among Indian communities dropped, and families broke apart" (Townsend and Nicholas 276-277).

Brenda J. Child writes of her Ojibwe history: "When Europeans settled in the Great Lakes, and with the beginning of the fur trade economy in the eighteenth century,

Indian women were often positioned as political, social, and economic intermediaries between their people and the newcomers.” She further notes that these women negotiated disputes and worked to bridge cultures in order to ensure the survival of their communities during an era of “Western intrusion” (Child xv).

The twentieth century saw a shift in power as domination by a political system that favored Indigenous men as leaders was imposed. This led to a disruption of traditional societal structures. as “Native American men, even the men in the American Indian Movement (AIM), began to push women to the margins of reservation political life” (Townsend, et. al., 598).

Today, many Indian reservations struggle with issues of poverty, substance abuse, and poor health, due to disruption of traditional food systems and diets, and increased levels of violence and suicide. The complexity of the societal impact of genocidal acts imposed by colonizing efforts, have eroded once healthy communities. These same communities were forced to relinquish language and traditional spirituality, exacerbating their unresolved grief. Communal grief left unexpressed or addressed in a traditional way, impacts the spirit of the community through generations. This trauma was not one single horrible event for the American Indian; it has been a series of traumas precipitated by policies of dominance, and despite the fact that “...they have survived, Indian people continue to exhibit the aftereffects, as evidenced by high rates of alcohol and substance abuse, suicide, broken families, poverty, and mental health issues” (Deschenie 8-11). Of great importance to this study is the resulting increase in abuse of women, as well as elevated suicide rates among women.



According to Amnesty International:

...Violence against women is one of the most pervasive human rights abuses. It is also one of the most hidden. It takes place in intimate relationships, within the family and at the hands of strangers and it affects women in every country in the world...Indigenous peoples in the USA face deeply entrenched marginalization—the result of a long history of systemic and pervasive abuse and persecution. Sexual violence against Indigenous women today is informed and conditioned by this legacy of widespread and egregious human rights abuses” (Department of Justice).

Statistics indicate that Indigenous women suffer abuse in numbers higher than any other population in North America. One need only examine the numbers of Aboriginal women missing and murdered in Canada to understand the scope of this colonizing influence. A 2013 report by the Commissioner of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police disclosed the following:

Police-recorded incidents of Aboriginal female homicides or murdered unresolved missing Aboriginal females in this review total 1,181 – 164 missing and 1,017 homicide victims.

There are 225 unsolved cases of either missing or murdered Aboriginal females: 105 missing for more than 30 days as of November 4, 2013, whose cause of disappearance was categorized at the time as “unknown” or “foul play suspected” and 120 unsolved homicides between 1980 and 2012.

The total indicates that Aboriginal women are over-represented among Canada’s murdered and missing women (Royal Canadian Mounted Police 1).

Kim Anderson writes that Indigenous women “have become accustomed to male dominance, and this provides the soil for social ills like family violence, incest, sexual abuse and child neglect” (Anderson, *A Recognition* 13-14). Colonizing efforts altered the lives and roles of Indigenous women, seemingly irreparably, and the aftereffects on Indigenous societies are pervasive. The male dominance that characterized Euro-Western societies has now become characteristic of many tribal nations. Indigenous men have

assumed the positions of dominance and continue a legacy of disrespect often accorded women. However, these women understand the dire need to confront this legacy.

Anderson suggests that sovereignty and related issues are unreachable unless issues impacting Indigenous women are first addressed. She proposes a process involving the following steps: “Resisting negative definitions of being; reclaiming Aboriginal tradition; constructing a positive identity by translating tradition into the contemporary context; and acting on that identity in a way that nourishes the overall well-being of our communities” (Anderson 15).

Tribal nations remain hopeful and vital, through strong leadership and organizing efforts, often by women. Many American Indian women exhibit strength of character and being that sustains and upholds them and their children. They experience sadness, but they respond, rather than falling prey to the stressors and influences of dominant society. They do this for the generations to come. The difficulties are tangible as children and youth struggle with the impacts of being caught between two worlds. As the elder in Pine Ridge stated, it is by creating a strong and healthy identity as young Native people, through cultural and traditional teachings, that the young will find their way. “The best we can do is instill in the children the pride of who they are and what they have and where they came from...” (Wall 19).

Indigenous teachers play a significant role in the development of the children in their charge. Pauline Wilson not only teaches her students about Lakota culture, she instructs them in traditional lifeways, just as a mother or grandmother would.

One day, you’re going to be married, you’re going to have children and from there your generation is going to go on.

When you're on your moon—your period—you don't go in the kitchen. You don't do anything. You stay away from your brothers and your father and you let them know that you're powerful at that time because women are powerful when that time comes once a month. So my grandmother used to tell us, "You tell them I'm on my moon now." So that excluded us from cooking. However, we did other things; sew—they taught us to sew, beadwork and all that stuff...I took the role of a male (Wilson, Pauline. Personal Interview. Pine Ridge, August 2014).

Indigenous women have taken a proactive and critical role in the life and vitality of their communities during times of peace as well as during conflict. They have been at the very core of Indigenous resistance to genocide and colonization since first contact with Europeans (Jaimes and Halsey 298).

American Indian Women in Crisis:  
The Lakota/Dakota of South Dakota

I've seen a toughness I guess, the hard part of life here. Like down at the park you even see it—the people who are just tough. I've seen that but then I've also seen things around the reservation that are good—like ceremonies and language and learning and stuff like that. I think that's made me strong. Like I'm just...I feel like I'm a person who has a lot of courage and who...I can handle a lot more. I get afraid at times, especially because I'm about to go to college. I'm afraid, but at the same time, I just know I can handle it. And like the good thing is I think they inspire me to want to do good--to want to come back—to know what it's worth. And I do love it here. So, I think people should know about Pine Ridge. It's a...it's like a whole other atmosphere here. And growing up here is hard and it's challenging but then there's also all these positive and beautiful things—that you can still live here and have a good life. I just want people to know that there's a community of Native people...it's here. Amber White Eyes (Young and Wagner).

More than one in three Native American or Alaska Native women will be raped at some point in their lives. Most do not seek justice because they know they will be met with inaction or indifference. None of this is inevitable or irreversible. The voices of

Indigenous women who have come forward to speak about these issues send a message of courage and hope that change can and will happen (Amnesty International 2).

It has been noted that American Indian women have undergone a significant transformation in their traditional roles within tribal society due to colonial influences. However, in many instances, women have emerged intact and with an optimism that is formidable in the face of the obstacles of dominance and subjugation. Feminist models such as Wilma Mankiller, Paula Gunn Allen, and Winona LaDuke have provided hope to a generation of women who often face significant crises resulting from the disruption and fragmentation of traditional societies. Despite this spirit of hope and courage however, many Indigenous women suffer trauma precipitated by subjugation and dominance.

Ruppert Ross has addressed the fracturing of the natural order of Indigenous societies and writes:

I only wish to indicate my present view that the plague of sexual (and other) abuse that afflicts so many Aboriginal communities is not a “natural” event within what the settler nations called a “pagan” society. On the contrary, I see it as an almost inevitable consequence of historically labelling *everything* Aboriginal as pagan, of declaring at every step and in every way that every aspect of traditional life was either worth less than its European equivalent—or just worthless (Ross 44).

It is interesting to note that Ross qualifies this abuse as not necessarily physical abuse inflicted by colonizing forces such as boarding schools and missionaries, although this was not uncommon, but rather the abuse precipitated by the abrogation of “language, spirituality, culture and worldviews,” an abuse of “Indianness” (Ross 44).

A National Violence Against Women Survey complies with an earlier study by the Department of Justice in stating that Native American women are more than two

times as likely to be violently victimized as other minorities (Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report). While there is abundant information on family violence among dominant society in the United States, research among American Indians is scant, and has resulted in limited resources for Indian women suffering abuse (Bachman 90).

In Lakota and Dakota societies, women traditionally held esteemed roles, making abuse seemingly a contemporary phenomenon, advanced by colonialist attitudes and policies that have altered the landscape of the feminist position within the tribal society.

Victoria Ybanez states:

...Most experts agree that since the arrival of colonizers, violence against Native women has become a common occurrence across Indian Country. Violence against Native women is not considered natural in Indigenous societies and is a fairly new phenomenon. The most commonly held belief is that, while many Native nations had some experience with women being mistreated or battered by intimate partners, the practice was not common nor was it tolerated prior to colonization (Deer, et. al. 50).

The impacts of colonization and historical trauma have so fractured many traditional societies that American Indian women often find themselves in a state of desperation, exhibited by substance abuse, violence, increased health issues and often, suicide. Ella Deloria writes of Dakota society:

All peoples who live communally must first find some way to get along together harmoniously and with a measure of decency and order. This is a universal problem. Each people, even the most primitive, has solved it in its own way. And that way, by whatever rules and controls it is achieved, is, for any people, the scheme of life that works. The Dakota people of the past found a way: it was through kinship (Deloria, *Speaking of Indians* 24).

This kinship organization, or *tiyospaye*, encompassed certain mores defining the roles of those in the community. Women were expected to develop self-control, both physically and emotionally as a foundation to the inner strength of the community. Men

were to achieve maturity and strength in order to provide for the physical and spiritual needs of the people. The testing of a young man occurred in various physical ordeals from the hunt to the Sun Dance. The testing of a young woman required her to protect herself from emotional turmoil and to preserve her strength of mind and body for the next generation of children (Deloria, *Speaking of Indians* 47).

It was customary among the Lakota and Dakota that young men respected young women and adhered to ritual courting. Those young men who strayed from these tenets of society and kinship were considered less than trustworthy and young women understood their vulnerability and were taught to make “self-preserving choices” (Deloria, *Speaking of Indians* 48).

Many versions are told of the story of the notorious “tipi crawler,” who would claim a woman if he saw her naked. This resulted in the practice of young women being tied from the hips down in a *tahasaka ojuha*, a rawhide container to protect her from seduction (Powers 71). “A young woman also had to be careful of a man who asked her one question with his lips but had another question in his mind” (Deloria, *Speaking of Indians* 48). More commonly however, young men adhered to the rituals that honor and respect not only the young woman he courted, but her family as well. He was required to prove himself mature and prepared for the responsibilities of being a husband and father. It is important to emphasize that no one, not even a father or brother, could force a woman to stay in a marriage where, for whatever reason, she was unhappy. Lakota and Dakota women could, of their own accord, leave their spouse. This was not uncommon and is an important indication of the autonomy they enjoyed (Albers and Medicine 191).

With the honor with which women in traditional Lakota and Dakota societies were treated, domestic violence was not tolerated. Interviews conducted among Lakota and Dakota participants afforded a clearer understanding of the fact that abrogation of a way of life, as well as subjugation of Lakota and Dakota people led to the disintegration of values and social mores. One female participant stated, “There are not anymore male or female roles in Indian Country. We follow the white way of always trying to be better than others and obtaining more material stuff to make ourselves feel better” (Personal Interview. Lower Brule, 2008).

Without a traditional or spiritual base, the society becomes fragmented and in many cases, hopeless. The complexity of the societal impact is demonstrated by the fact that genocidal acts resulting from colonization have impacted what were once vital and healthy structures.

[Imagine] a non-Aboriginal worker whose job was taken away by all-powerful outsiders. Imagine that he knew he had no realistic chances of ever qualifying for another one. Imagine that he was unable to go for comfort and help to his own churches and his own psychiatrists and hospitals, because those same outsiders had made them illegal. Imagine that, whenever he went to their versions of such helping places, the professionals who staffed them could not speak his language, but demanded that he learn theirs. Imagine, as well, that all those powerful outsiders held him, his language and his culture in such low esteem that they forcibly removed his children, to raise them to be just like them. Imagine...waking up to silence throughout your entire community where only the week before there had been the raucous voices of new generations (Ross 47).

Institutional abuse such as this, emanating from boarding school experiences has been implicated not only in sexual violence, but also physical and psychological abuse perpetrated on young women, as well as young men. Andrea Smith states that despite the fact that not all Indigenous people viewed their boarding school experiences in a negative

light, with the establishment of these institutions in Indigenous communities, “abuse seemed to become endemic within Indian families” (Smith 43).

The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) has also historically played a role in the institutionalization of abusive practices. Former Secretary of Indian Affairs of the United States Department of the Interior offered the following statement in 200 at the Ceremony Acknowledging the 175<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Establishment of the Bureau of Indian Affairs:

This agency forbade the speaking of Indian languages, prohibited the conduct of traditional religious activities, outlawed traditional government, and made Indian people ashamed of who they were. Worst of all, the Bureau of Indian Affairs committed these acts against the children entrusted to its boarding schools, brutalizing them emotionally, psychologically, physically, and spiritually... (Amnesty International 15).

Abuse of this sort has the capability of violating the individual not only on the physical level, but its insidiousness lies in its ability to also do damage on a spiritual and psychic level. According to Smith, sexual violence is structure of “power relations,” where the ultimate goal is to control the life of another (Smith 119-120). Putting Native women at the center of analysis compels us to look at the role of the state in perpetrating both race-based and gender-based violence. Our conception of sexual violence should not be limited to an individual act of rape. It can be viewed as a system of strategies that are designed to not only “destroy peoples, but to destroy their sense of being a people” (Smith 3). The responses of men and women to this trauma has been explored by Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, whose study of historical trauma response of Lakota participants revealed the following: “Degree of traditional presentation-of-self, including phenotype, appeared to interact with gender to place male participants at greater risk for



being traumatized over the lifespan and perhaps subsequently utilizing more rigid defenses against the conscious experience of the trauma..." (Brave Heart, "Gender Differences" 1-2). This has resulted in communities struggling with health issues, high mortality rates, poverty, substance abuse and suicide.

At some point people brought to this position stand up and demand to be noticed, to be recognized as being alive, as having influence and *power*. And the easiest way to assert power, to prove that you exist, is to demonstrate power over people who are weaker still, primarily by making them do things they don't want to do. The more those things shame and diminish that weaker person, the more the abuser feels, within the twisted logic of victimization, that they have been empowered and restored themselves. Further, nothing is more attractive to those who need to feed off the denigration of others than the road of sexual abuse, and the safest and easiest abuse is of children (Ross 48).

The Native American Women's Health Education Resource Center addresses this as evidence of internalized oppression, which originates in subjugated peoples living among a dominant society that views men as superior to women and children, with the right to exhibit violent behavior. "Violence against women and children in Native communities is a result of this internalized oppression" (Asetoyer, et. al. 219).

It should be noted that approximately seventy percent of violent assaults on Indian women are perpetrated by those of a different race (NCAI 1). Lee Maracle writes, "We have been the objects of sexual desire for white males whose appetites are too gross for their own delicate women" (Maracle 16). The indication is however, that accurate data is difficult to obtain due to underreporting to tribal officials as well as federal authorities. According to the National Institute of Justice, in many instances, underreporting of criminal activity is associated with a lack of trust in police, shame or humiliation

associated with crimes such as domestic violence, and fear of retaliation (Wakeling, et. al. 22).

Historically, federal policies have weakened the protections that should be afforded American Indian women in their respective tribal nations. Assimilationist policies such as those established by boarding schools, forced adoptions and forced sterilization, all genocidal in nature, set the stage for the diminished status of Indian women as well as their continued victimization. As Victoria Ybanez has stated, an institutional response to domestic violence among Indigenous women is often steeped in the oppression that has characterized the historical treatment of American Indians. While these institutions are designed to support and aid women in abusive situations, they often exacerbate the emotional effects on Indigenous women. “Native women who are victims of domestic violence often find themselves being revictimized by the child protection system and the civil or criminal legal systems. While these mainstream institutions may appear supportive, historically they have minimized or ignored issues battered Native women face” (Deer, et. al.).

Additionally, owing to the jurisdictional issues resulting from Supreme Court decisions such as *ex Parte Crow Dog* 109 U.S. 557 (1883), which resulted in Congress passing the Major Crimes Act (18 U.S.C. § 1153) granting federal jurisdiction over crimes committed in Indian Country, these crimes are often committed with impunity. Public Law 280 (PL. 280) transferred jurisdiction over certain crimes committed on Indian land from federal to state authority, and then only with tribal approval (Tribal Court Clearinghouse <http://www.tribal-institute.org/lists/reveiew.htm>). This has further

diminished Native sovereignty, often creating a jurisdictional nightmare between federal, state, and tribal courts, and leaving tribal nations stripped of the ability to prosecute certain crimes in Indian Country. In more recent years and as a result of the period of self-determination, some jurisdictional power was returned to tribal governments, however rape is designated as a “Major Crime” and so remains under federal and tribal jurisdiction.

*Oliphant v. Suquamish Indian Tribe* 435 U.S. 191 (1978) established that Indian tribal nations have jurisdiction over non-Natives in civil matters committed on trust land. However, they do not have criminal jurisdiction over crimes committed by non-Natives within the reservation. Complicating matters further, tribal police cannot pursue and arrest non-Natives committing crimes on reservations, and state law enforcement holds no jurisdiction on reservation lands, leaving many crimes unresolved and perpetrators unpunished. That said, the Tribal Law and Order Act (TLOA) and the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) have restored some of the jurisdiction to tribes.

Where tribal agencies do have jurisdiction, they are usually underfunded resulting in delays in response to sexual violence against women. In 2006, Standing Rock Reservation Police Department information indicated that that they had six or seven officers and two investigators with responsibility for 2.3 million acres to patrol. Often, two officers were on duty during the day, and three at night. However, at times, there was one officer for the entire reservation area (Amnesty International 43).

The Indian Civil Rights Act (ICRA) (1968), as amended in 1986, placed limitations on the sentence that can be imposed by tribal courts for any offense—

including murder or rape—to a maximum of one year’s imprisonment and a fine of \$5000. This was an increase from the original Act which allowed for no greater than six month’s imprisonment and a fine of \$500 or both. The message sent by this law is that, in practice, tribal justice systems are only equipped to handle less serious crimes. While this limitation on the custodial sentencing powers of tribes (and resource limitations) substantially limits the ability of tribal justice systems to hold offenders accountable, an increasing number of tribal courts are prosecuting sexual assault cases due to the inadequate rate of federal and state prosecutions of sexual assault cases (Amnesty International 29). Further amendments to ICRA were instituted in both 2010 with TOLA, providing for “enhanced sentencing” options that expanded maximum prison terms from one to three years, and fines from \$5000 to \$15000. However, included are the stipulations that effective counsel must be provided along with a licensed judge trained in law, tribal laws must be made public, and a record of the criminal proceeding must be maintained. In 2013, VAWA added additional amendments, including a “special domestic violence criminal jurisdiction,” granting tribal courts jurisdiction over non-Indian offenders who commit domestic or dating violence, or who violate orders of protection. This is on the condition that the tribal courts provide due process protections such as those included in TLOA, and other due process protections such as the right to an impartial jury (Tribal Court Clearinghouse [www.tribal-institute.org/lists/icra.htm](http://www.tribal-institute.org/lists/icra.htm)).

*Gray v. United States* 394 F.2d 96 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1968) upheld a prior statute of the Major Crimes Act, *United States Code*, 18 U.S.C.A. Sec. 1153 (Supp. 1968) which essentially stated that capital punishment is authorized when an Indian rapes a non-Indian

woman in Indian country. However, in the case of an Indian who rapes an Indian woman, the perpetrator will be imprisoned at the discretion of the court (MacMeekin 1243).

Tribal Courts can impose a maximum prison sentence of one year for crimes including rape. In cases where state or federal courts have jurisdiction, the average prison sentence for Indian on Indian rape ranges from eight months to twelve years and ten months (Amnesty International 8).

It has been noted that violence against Indian women is not solely perpetrated by non-Indians. Ronet Bachman's statistics show in *Death and Violence on the Reservation: Homicide, Family Violence, and Suicide in American Indian Populations*, of ninety-two women who responded to a questionnaire at two battered women's shelters, seventy-nine percent indicated that they were abused by a husband or boyfriend, and seventy-seven percent reported that it was not the first incident (Bachman 92). When violent abuse emanates from within one's own community, it is especially demoralizing.

We are a conquered people. Spiritually dead people, warmed up and forced to behave as though we are alive. I am certain it is because we have been raped. Our men know that we have been raped. They watched it happen. Some of the rape we have been subjected to was inflicted by them. Some of them were our fathers and our brothers. We are like a bunch of soft knots in dead trees, chopped down by white men, the refuse left for our own men-folk (Maracle 56).

What would transform those from a community that had in the past been healthy and cohesive into one in which abusive practices, maltreatment and violence are perpetrated toward their own? Indigenous women are picking up their coup sticks and responding to these issues, with grace and courage, with determination and will—for themselves and their children and the generations to come. Their lives are the thread that creates their portion of the star that is to become the whole of the quilt.

## CHAPTER FIVE

INTERGENERATIONAL HISTORICAL TRAUMA:  
THE THEORETICAL APPROACH OF  
DR. MARIA YELLOW HORSE BRAVE HEART

*But the war goes on. And for many years to come we shall be bandaging the countless and sometimes indelible wounds inflicted upon our people by the colonialist onslaught. Imperialism, which today is waging war against a genuine struggle for human liberation, sows seeds of decay here and there that must be mercilessly rooted out from our land and from our minds (Fanon 181).*

There comes a moment when an historically oppressed people can either choose to allow a tragic past to dictate their future or to confront those memories in order to change the course for coming generations. The confrontation is a painful one, remembering events that altered a civilization and the lives of its people. However, Dr. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, Hunkpapa/Oglala Lakota, professor, clinical social worker, and President of the Takini Institute, would contend that this is a necessary process in order to become what the Lakota call a “takini.” The ritual ceremony of recounting this past and moving through the grief toward the healing is reminiscent of counting coup. With great courage, the confrontation begins, and the coup stick is planted.

Brave Heart promulgates the theory that unless Indigenous people face the past with all of its destruction and oppression, and grieve over those memories, healing will not occur and this intergenerational historical trauma, which has been handed down from prior generations, will continue to impact their descendants. This is a “collective emotional and psychological injury,” which spans generations (Chavez). The

“cataclysmic history of genocide” includes “one’s own lifespan, because everything up to a minute ago is history” (Brave Heart, “From Intergenerational Trauma”).

Indigenous people, including the women whose lives have been so inextricably altered by European contact, have begun to embrace the trauma of their particular history. For the Lakota and Dakota, this is a history replete with trauma from Wounded Knee to the establishment of reservations, the disappearance of the buffalo to boarding schools. The psychological and emotional wounds have impacted the lives of individuals as well as whole communities. Interview participants spoke with a sense of hope in the future, seeing a return to traditional ways, including language and spirituality as an avenue to becoming strong and vital nations once again. Others see despair as a pervasive factor of life on the reservations and have encouraged their children to go and make their lives elsewhere. The sadness and sense of loss that results can only be imagined. A young woman from Pine Ridge shared:

Around here, people don’t want to admit it but just about—I’d say 90% of the population suffers from PTSD. I think hopelessness is probably a major factor in PTSD. I said that to somebody once and...they thought differently but when you really think about it, PTSD is like fight or flight, and the majority of people will fight around here. (Personal Interview. Pine Ridge, July 2010).

The impacts of historical trauma have resulted in communities that are often fractured. In reflecting on the myriad issues Lakota communities face, one participant commented: “Seems to be a lot of things that have started way back when we were first put on the rez. Historical violence seems to be the cause of a lot of problems.” (Rapid City, March 2010).

As was noted in the methodology for this study, Indigenous historical accounts have been transmitted through the oral tradition. Traditional and spiritual teachings are the substance of the individual and the community. Clifford E. Trafzer has written in “Marrow Memory”:

Since the time of creation, American Indian people have known that memory is stored in the blood and bones of the people. For thousands of years before the arrival of the non-Natives, elders passed on traditions in the language of the people, recording bone memories through oral traditions and on material objects made of wood, skins, rocks, textiles, basketry, and ivory. These items reminded people of their memories, brought them to light again. The source of this knowledge is found in the bones of this people...” (Gainsworth 149).

Just as wonderfully rich elements and teachings of Indigenous traditions have been handed down through oral storytelling, so too, have the crises of historical trauma. Trafzer continues: “Through the oral tradition, my mother taught me about the great epidemics that killed so many people. She told me about the small pox, measles, influenza, and other plagues Europeans brought to Native America” (Gainsworth 152).

Oral accounts of traumatic events such as these are handed down from generation to generation and become “stored in the blood and bones of the people.” Brave Heart contends that this generational trauma is cumulative, severe and chronic, and “contributes to the current social pathology of high rates of suicide, homicide, domestic violence, child abuse, alcoholism, and other social problems among American Indians” (Brave Heart and De Bruyn).

The trauma of expropriation of land, disruption of culture, and of loved ones without sufficient time to mourn the devastation, has created an unresolved grief that is interminable. The assimilationist policies inflicted upon Indigenous nations have resulted



in the continued fracturing of traditional societies, leaving many without a solid base of support and often living in abject poverty.

American Indian people are victims of a history that has been viewed by many as genocidal in nature, and one which continues to plague once healthy tribal nations with physical, social, and psychological wounds. Article 2 of the United Nations General Assembly's Conventions on Genocide (1948) states:

Genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group, and includes five types of criminal actions: killing members of the group; causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; and forcibly transferring children of the group to another group (United Nations).

Brave Heart addresses the specifics of cultural genocide of Native peoples, which among other things includes the abolition of ceremonial practice and spirituality, an element so vital to and pervasive in American Indian cultures that its destruction is especially insidious. One female interview participant, when asked if a return to cultural and spiritual traditions would begin to heal wounds, responded:

Culture and traditional spirituality are not practiced in a good way on my reservation. You just don't know who to trust. When the people holding the ceremonies aren't "good people" in their everyday lives, why would you trust them, especially for cultural/spiritual reasons? (Personal Interview. South Dakota, October 2009).

Genocide fractures once healthy societies. It is an element of history that has affected many nations. However, the American Indian apocalypse has not received the attention that others have. Eduardo Duran, an adherent to Brave Heart's theoretical approach, states that, "The Native idea of historical trauma involves the understanding

that the trauma occurred in the soul or spirit...” supporting Brave Heart’s notion of a “soul wound” (Duran 7).

The attack on the World Trade Center could be likened to this communal wound, although the losses of Indigenous nations of the United States essentially encompass a depth and breadth that involves a comparatively massive loss of life and security, as well as an attempt to destroy the very soul of the people. However, as the American people view the events of September 11, 2001 over and over, the trauma replayed again and again, there is an empathetic understanding of communal grief. Some would contend that this is contemporary history and what occurred for Indigenous people was so long ago as to hold lesser significance. However, as Tina Deschenie points out, the pain has not diminished among descendants of the American Indian genocide. “There were no Red Cross or crisis response teams to deal with the aftermath.” This history was not one horrible event; it has been a long one filled with injustice that continues to be precipitated by policies of a dominant ruling power. Deschenie continues: “While they have survived, Indian people continue to exhibit the aftereffects, as evidenced by high rates of alcohol and substance abuse, suicide, broken families, poverty, and mental health issues” (Deschenie).

Lawrence Gross supports this premise but goes further in his contention that the postapocalyptic period is more profound than even Brave Heart notes. He has termed the resulting manifestation among American Indian people, “who have seen the end of their worlds,” as Post Apocalyptic Stress Syndrome or PASS.” Dr. Gross further states, “...a postapocalyptic period will see an abandonment of productive employment; an increase

in substance abuse; an increase in violence, especially domestic violence; an abandonment of established religious practices; the adoption of fanatical forms of religion; a loss of hope; and a sense of despair on the part of the survivors” (Gross 29).

Studies by researchers including Brave Heart reference the additional manifestation of “identification with ancestral pain and deceased ancestors, psychic numbing and poor affect tolerance, leading to elevated suicide rates” (Day 4). The incidence of suicide among the Lakota and Dakota on the reservations of South Dakota, especially involving young girls and women, is at a critical level. One interview participant from a small community of about 1000 on the Pine Ridge Reservation shared that in one year, they suffered thirty-nine suicide attempts, thirty-seven of which were females. The youngest was twelve years old (Personal Interview. Pine Ridge. July 2010).

When asked about the critical rate of suicide on Pine Ridge and the efforts to respond, Blue Dawn Little shared:

What I’ve seen when I was explaining to you the little event that they had, they brought in a moderator who helped put together this plan and it was specifically based on what children said that they needed. The adults had an input but it was way at the end of the time. So it was four days. Children came from different reservation schools. They sat down and they spoke about what they see the problem of suicide is and what they expect from the tribe to be able to fix it. And then the tribal council members, adults, community members, spiritual leaders—they all got to come in at the end and see what the children put up. They didn’t have permission to change it—they could not change one aspect of it—but they could add to it what they thought was also the issue. And surprisingly, what they thought was the issue was far from what the children were expressing. And so we saw a huge difference in there—you know, the way people interpret at different ages what’s going on. And so they took this and they made a report and they’re going to use it as a way of implementation as a way to combat suicide. And part of that in there was their need for spiritual practice. And a lot of them said that they grew up in Catholic homes and they felt that they needed to be connected. They had no sense of identity. That was the big thing. “We don’t know who we are.” “I don’t know who I am.” We had people from age 10 to 18 saying, “I don’t

even know where I come from. I mean, I know who my family is, but I know nothing about who I am.” And so, when one of the spiritual leaders stood up and said, “This is what I’ve always been told. And ceremony—that’s what they need. They need a connection. They need to know who they are, what their story is—even you know, family trees, ancestors. Just to be able to have a connection to something because they feel so disconnected from this world that they don’t want to be here anymore (Little, Blue Dawn. Personal Interview. Pine Ridge, July 2015).

Eduardo Duran refers to this “spirit of suicide” as “a misinterpretation of the soul’s desire to transform,” in which “power and control are lost” (Duran 99). Suicide becomes an outlet for the need to transform the wounded soul. Brave Heart cites a connection to a high incidence of loss over the span of a lifetime as an indicator of suicidal tendencies (Day and Weaver 5).

### The Question of Lateral Oppression

Brave Heart cites Paolo Freire’s concept of “internalized oppression,” as contributing to “lateral violence” or “lateral oppression,”— aggression acted out upon each other within the community (Brave Heart, “Healing from Historical Trauma”). Friere notes that as the downtrodden struggle for liberation, they “tend themselves to become oppressors, or “sub-oppressors” (Freire *Pedagogy* 45). Brave Heart states:

We talk about Paolo Freire’s concept of “internalized oppression” and how people start identifying with the oppressor, which results in self-hatred and hatred of others like oneself. In our communities we have a lot of lateral oppression, lateral violence—people hurting other community members and placing aggression on to one another. Freire’s theory is that it’s dangerous to direct aggression at the oppressor. Since the aggression has to go somewhere, it goes out toward others like you (*American Indians and Alaska Natives in Health Careers*).

Brave Heart addresses the abuse of women and children and other aggressive behaviors as indicative of this “internalized oppression.”

Violence is an ever-present factor of life on the reservations of South Dakota.

While domestic violence is customarily perpetrated against women, it should be noted that men suffer abuse as well. Blue Dawn Little shared:

I don't know why people think it's not possible for a man to be abused by a woman. I've seen it up close and personal. I've seen it, but men being the way they are, don't want to admit to that. I mean it's hard enough for a woman to admit that she's been abused and to acknowledge that and be ok in that, and try to pull herself out of being a victim. If a man says that, he gets made fun of. And I've seen them get made fun of. If he says, "She abused me. She hit me. She yells at me,"—a lot of emotional and verbal abuse from women sometimes towards men. And they get called weak for saying that.

This indicates that Brave Heart's theory of lateral oppression impacts women as well as men. However, it is more often the women and children that suffer the consequences, often acted out upon the weaker members, sometimes by those in authority positions. Janet Routzen spoke of the domestic violence on her reservation, noting an incident involving a tribal council member.

One of our councilmen right now has a warrant out for his arrest for domestic. I just got a phone call from a guy saying, "Why in the hell haven't they arrested him? Why is one of our tribal leaders allowed to get away with this and what is anyone doing about it?" this is how he said it to me: "You girls need to all go up to the tribal building with your signs and demand that he be suspended, you know...turn himself in and all the rest of it" (Routzen, Janet. Personal Interview. Rosebud Reservation, July 2014).

This not only illustrates the lateral violence that often impacts Indigenous communities but also that women are often the ones expected to respond. Blue Dawn Little shares a similar story from her reservation.

We actually tried a "Women Against Violence." It was supposed to be a walk in every community. We tried to gather people for support. It was ok for a while...for maybe the first few walks. But it was in response to one of our council members who threatened the life and the well-being of a female referee because she was calling fouls on his daughter. And his daughter was probably about

twelve years old and in a middle school game. So we put together... and it took us a little bit because we wanted to make sure we weren't doing it right off just to make it look that was the only reason why. But it was also an idea that we had far before this happened and it seemed like this very event just helped it to come to fruition. But there are so many people afraid of this man that hardly anybody would show up. And it was because he's a bully in the community—in this community and other communities. And not only that, but he was...and I think he still does, sell drugs. It was hard but we had the walks anyway and we expected some support from people and people didn't show up. We had a good turnout either way. It was just that nobody wanted to back it because they felt that it was specifically related to him since that was the last event that came about before we started the walks, and the protests, and the marches (Little, Blue Dawn. Personal Interview. Pine Ridge, August 2015).

Devon Mihesuah cites a report by the *Arizona Daily Sun* entitled, “Special Report: The Lost Generation, Conflict, Culture and Family Change on the Rez” (*Arizona Daily Sun*, 11 and 13 October 1998, AI, p. 55), which makes it apparent that this is not uncommon on other reservations as well. The report addresses similar concerns on the Navajo Reservation where violence has led to, among other things, “the breakup of multigenerational families, the loss of elders and elders’ inability to communicate with youngsters, the ‘code of silence’ among family members that keeps guilty parties from being punished” (Mihesuah 57).

Speaking with elders and community members, it becomes clear that this is not traditional and that lateral oppression has become a symptom of an imposition of male dominance and abuse among once healthy communities. Rupert Ross, in documenting the testimony of an Ojibway woman given in the presence of her community, who had returned from boarding school only to be exposed to abuse from her own community, noted that: “I could almost feel everyone being jolted into sharing her realization: her

abusers, Aboriginal people all, did not abuse because they were Aboriginal people, but because they were changed Aboriginal people (Ross 45-46).

The question is thus raised regarding a path to the return of traditional respect and the way to resistance. While programs are being developed within some tribal nations to address these issues of violence against women, reservations in South Dakota are struggling. Amnesty International cites the Institute for Women's Policy Research statistics, stating that South Dakota has the highest poverty rate for Native American women in the United States at 45.3 percent (Amnesty International 32). A 2012 report in the Rapid City Journal stated that three counties with the highest poverty rate in the nation lie in western South Dakota: Zeibach County, home to Cheyenne River Reservation; Todd County in which Rosebud Reservation lies; and Oglala County (formerly Shannon County), which encompasses Pine Ridge Reservation (Lengerich). Additionally, a 2014 CNN report on the frequency of rapes in each state, lists South Dakota as second in the nation (Sutter).

Information obtained from interviews among participants on various reservations indicates that some efforts are being made among tribal communities to address these issues, but there is still much lacking. "The legacy of historic abuse persists. The fact that Native American and Alaska Native women have been dehumanized throughout US history informs present-day attitudes. It helps fuel the high rates of sexual violence perpetrated against them and the high levels of impunity enjoyed by their attackers" (Amnesty International 17). Further findings by Amnesty International indicate that Indigenous women face not only discrimination as women, but with the added element of

being Indigenous. “It is therefore extremely important that freedom from violence as defined by Indigenous women themselves informs, and where necessary transforms, the human rights discourse” (Amnesty International 25).

Through Brave Heart’s process of healing, past events that have actuated the present situation are confronted, encouraging dialogue, sharing, and personal and communal reflection. An interview question was posed to Lakota participants pertaining to the growing incidence of rape and violence among young people and the availability and effectiveness of services. The following responses were shared:

The people who come to “save us” don’t know anything about us or how we live, think, relate or handle problems. So the services always fail and we get blamed for it—labeled untouchable or stubborn. The white clinical model doesn’t work for Lakota people, so we fail in the white man’s eyes again (Personal Interview. Pine Ridge, October 2010).

When you go to HIS (Indian Health Service), you have to sit and wait. When someone want or is ready to talk, they want to talk NOW, not when time is convenient for the professional (Personal Interview. Lower Brule Reservation, October 2010).

In contrast, Brave Heart’s Takini Institute offers an intervention model based on specific principles including education to increase awareness of trauma, sharing effects of trauma, and grief resolution through communal mourning and traditional healing practices. In conducting her four day workshops, Brave Heart concludes with the Lakota Purification and Wiping of the Tears ceremony (*Wasigila*). This rite follows a period of mourning the loss of a loved one, and signifies the release of the spirit after which the mourning ends (King). Through various interviews, elders have shared their belief that a return and adherence to sacred teachings and practices is of critical importance for overcoming unresolved grief, and that hope lies in the renewal of traditional spirituality.



Gross expressed support for this theory when he stated that, “Unless a people’s religion can be maintained, it is not likely the rest of the culture can survive intact” (Gross 127).

### Theoretical Critique

It should be noted that Brave Heart is not without her critics. Charles Trimble, Oglala Lakota, was the principal founder of the American Indian Press Association in 1970, served as executive director of the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) from 1972-1978, and is a columnist for *Indian Country Today Media Network*. Trimble contends that in order for tribal communities to move from “victims to victors,” they must “shed the ‘chains of victimhood.’” “The chains of victimhood keep many of our tibal people imprisoned in the depths of dependency, complaining about the wrongs that were done to our ancestors, and using the wrongs as excuses for our inability or unwillingness to progress” (Trimble).

While Brave Heart promulgates the need to embrace the wounds of the past so as to heal them, Philip “Sam” Deloria concurs with Trimble, urging professors to stop perpetrating the theory that Indians are victims of multigenerational suffering. Deloria contends that Indian people must get over the trauma, and referred to theories espousing multigenerational trauma as self-fulfilling. He stated that those who adhere to these theories are “people in think tanks, policy centers and universities, people with degrees, good education, tenure or secure jobs...” He takes exception to those who encourage “Indian leaders and Indian young people to feel sorry for themselves and to feel hopeless rather than strong, confident and self-sufficient” (Deloria, “Sam Deloria Responds”).

Likewise, Devon Abbott Mihesuah calls Brave Heart's analysis of "historical trauma" and "unresolved intergenerational grief" into question, addressing the abuse of Indian women by Indian men who may have "absorbed the particular mindset that colonialism brought to the New World" (Mihesuah 170). However, rather than focusing on the abrogation of societal norms of Native tribal nations and the resulting wounds that have led to internalized oppression, she refers to this as the "colonialism excuse," seemingly supporting Deloria's contentions (Mihesuah, *Indigenous American Women* 169). This sentiment was shared by several people who chose not to be formal interview participants, but who offered their thoughts on the situation on the reservations. They often voiced concern that the notion of historical trauma becomes an excuse for abusive behavior.

Joseph Gone, Gros Ventre, Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Michigan, also raises questions regarding the theoretical approach of American Indian Historical Trauma—or as he refers to it—AI HT. Using the case of a Gros Ventre woman, Watches All, and her captivity among the Piegan in the early 1900's, Gone questions whether the events surrounding Watches All's experience, "when viewed from the perspective of contemporary mental health professionals—were perhaps much less traumatizing than present-day theorists might imagine relative to what may have been considered the range of usual human experience in that time and place." Gone proposes that AI HT proponents may commit a "transhistorical error" when projecting the implications of these events on future generations (Gone 396). He considers this

“myopic view” of traumatic experiences to be less than valid in determining the impacts of historical trauma (Gone 397).

Another question raised by Gone is whether colonialism can be considered an effective argument for AI HT. He cites proponents as emphasizing the trauma inflicted due to domination by Europeans and Euro-Americans, while there was significant trauma caused from tribal nation to tribal nation. In sum, Gone states, “In the end, no matter how useful historical context might be for properly explicating AI mental health problems today, the construct of AI HT appears to caricature and distort more than it illuminates and explains, and at probable cost to future AI promise and potential” (Gone 403).

That said, others like Russell Thornton, Cherokee and professor of anthropology, has stated: “Memories of trauma do not have to be kept alive through conscious awareness.” They remain despite attempts to let them go. Even if left undisturbed, evidence shows that they are passed from generation to generation (Thornton 62). This supports Brave Heart’s contention that the intergenerational wound remains in the blood and the bones.

### Brave Heart’s Theory in Action

In spite of her critics, Brave Heart’s theories are espoused and utilized in a number of venues. Her verbiage has been absorbed into the consciousness and language of Native people and those working to heal the soul wounds. Therapists like Eduardo Duran, Tewa/Apache, PhD in Clinical Psychology and co-director of 7<sup>th</sup> Direction Psychotherapy, Assessment & Consulting, demonstrate Brave Heart’s principles in what

is termed “a hybrid or community clinic model, [that] uses staff that are trained in both western and Native American treatment and epistemological systems.” This allows for a psychological approach that addresses historical implications as well. Duran’s process offers suggested appropriate behaviors on “internalized oppression and adoption of negative stereotypes, thereby creating space for reimagining the self” (Thornton 71).

A second model, based on communal healing rituals, involves in-group treatment. This process is typified by, “sharing experiences, providing hope, collective mourning, and social support” (Thornton 73). Brave Heart’s communal model of grief resolution is one that has the potential to offer relief to other communities characterized by a history of oppression and historical trauma. Relying on collective memories and mutual identification has similarly been used in the treatment of Nazi holocaust survivors, which would seem to indicate that this model is effective despite cultural differences.

An online publication entitled *MinorityNurse.com* features commentary by health practitioners from around the country supporting and utilizing Brave Heart’s interventions in their healing practices. John Lowe, RN, PhD, Cherokee, states, “if you are Native and born into a Native family, your community’s past is part of who you are” (Kaegi). A study by Kathleen Brown-Rice for *The Professional Counselor*, supports Brave Heart’s theory and offers a foundation for counselor’s to better understand the contention that trauma that occurred in the past continues to impact Native Americans today. She cites sources that support the “conceptualization of a relationship between experiencing trauma and the brain remembering the trauma when confronted by an emotional meaning stimulus” (Brown-Rice). Additionally, Brave Heart’s work was

selected as a Tribal Best Practice by First Nations Behavioral Health Association and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. She continues her work in order to develop evidence-based research and also is developing a pilot program for tribal colleges (Chavez).

Indigenous people themselves are embracing Brave Heart's theoretical healing process and are planting coup sticks in their own manner. Winona LaDuke writes of a program coordinated by a group of women on the Yankton Reservation in South Dakota, the Braveheart Project Learning Circle (*Inhanktunawan Winyan*). Working with traditional societies, this program was designed to restore culture by mentoring women in their roles as "buffalo callers." Coordinator Faith Spotted Eagle shared these observations:

In traditional buffalo society...the primary role that women had was dividing up the buffalo, once the buffalo was killed. There were some women who were buffalo callers... The third role was to be the ultimate environmentalist, to be able to use everything in the buffalo. Finally, there was the role of mentoring younger women to realize the primacy of our relationship to the buffalo (LaDuke 162).

This approach allows for healing through communal resolution of the past by restoring traditional practices. Blue Dawn Little offered support to this approach in furthering the response to suicide and violence.

And I think that the cultural aspects, the way of life, the way we were connected to the earth in the first place, and the way that we practiced our spirituality is the key to combating the issues. And it's a matter of how do we do that? How do we touch everybody with that? I see a lot of...I see organizations trying that. They hold buffalo hunts, they hold young women's camps, young men's camps, children's camps, healing camps, things like that. And I've been to a few of the, and seeing the energetic change from a child who's come in there with these issues, family issues, or some type of abuse issue to when they leave five days later, they don't want to leave. They want to stay there and it's sad, it's very sad, because you know you have to send them back to reality and you don't know if

you're ever going to see them again. So they're always invited back for the next year or any other time there's a camp there and I think that that's how you know it is the key. It is the answer. It is what every child needs and every person needs. Even if they're not going to sweat or ceremony every single day, just knowing that you're accepted in that circle and that you have a family outside of your family—it makes you feel like you have some value. I think that's the issue with a lot of our people is that they feel that they're nothing, that they're nobody (Little, Blue Dawn. Personal Interview. Pine Ridge, July 2015).

These approaches allow for healing through ancestral communal resolution of the past by restoring traditional practices.

Don Coyhis, Mohican, followed his vision through his organization White Bison Inc., which sponsored a bicycle ride from Alaska to Washington, D.C. for the purpose of bringing the Sacred Hoop and Forgiveness Staff to each of twenty active and closed boarding schools throughout the country. The ultimate objective was to allow Indigenous people to forgive the trauma associated with boarding school experiences and begin the healing of unresolved grief. The ride is the subject of the documentary film, *Way Home Tour* (Farmer).

Birgil Kills Straight, Oglala Lakota and traditional leader, helped initiate the memorial ride to Wounded Knee to commemorate the 1890 massacre, which is called the *Tatanka Iyotake* (Sitting Bull) and *Wokiksuye* (Big Foot) Ride, or more commonly, The Big Foot Ride. Their first journey by horseback was in 1986 and occurs every December. It follows the December 1890 route across South Dakota taken by Minneconjou leader Big Foot and his followers. They arrive at Wounded Knee to commemorate the December 26<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

The Sacred Sites Run was begun as a national effort to petition Congress to allow American Indians the right to access and perform ceremonies on ancient sacred sites, and

focuses on different areas of the country. It simultaneously encourages education about cultural heritage and the importance of healthy, traditional diets. Speaking about the Great Plains Run, Ben Yahola, *Kotchv Humoti*, Muskogee, leader and initiator of the run commented, “There is a need for truth telling [on the genocide of the Dakota] before reconciliation can take place” (Whaley).

In the same manner, an annual ride from South Dakota to Minnesota commemorates the 1862 execution of the Dakota 38, hung in the largest mass execution in the history of the United States by order of President Abraham Lincoln. From September 28<sup>th</sup> to November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1862, approximately four hundred Dakota men were subjected to criminal proceedings by a United States Military Commission for the murder, rape, and robbery of white settlers in southwestern Minnesota. All of the trials were hastily prepared and executed, and only sketchy records were kept. Three hundred and three prisoners were sentenced to death. President Lincoln, recognizing the irregularities of the proceedings, pardoned all but thirty-eight. On December 26<sup>th</sup>, at ten o’clock in the morning, thirty-eight prisoners were led to the gallows in Mankato, Minnesota, heads covered and singing Dakota death songs. They stood on the platform in their assigned places and all were hung at the same moment. One, whose rope broke, had to be restrung. At the moment of the executions, thousands of spectators cheered loudly. The bodies were buried in a mass grave until area doctors, one of whom was Dr. Mayo, came to collect cadavers for research (Heard).

Questions abound as to the justice of these cases. The evidence demonstrates that the trials of the Dakota prisoners were objectionable in a number of respects. The speed of the proceedings, the nature of the evidence, and the identity of the judges

all combined to preclude judicious decision making and to guarantee an unjust outcome.

Based on the historical and legal views prevailing in 1862 and the years that followed, the Dakota were a sovereign nation at war with the United States, and the men who fought the war...should have been tried only on charges that they violated customary roles of warfare, not for the civilian crimes of murder, rape and robbery. Judged by those standards, few of the convictions were supportable (Chomsky 13).

Given that only four months after the executions, Congress enacted a law providing for the forcible removal from Minnesota of all Sioux, the ultimate objective of the trials is called into question. The Sioux Wars that began in Minnesota, resulting in the execution of the Dakota 38, culminated twenty-eight years later on the same date in 1890 with the massacre at Wounded Knee.

In December of 1986, Governor Rudy Perpich, D-MN, declared 1987, the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Dakota Conflict, to be the Year of Reconciliation, an effort at healing the past wounds of the Dakota Nation (Chomsky 14). However, the events leading up to and including the executions persist as a historical wound for the Dakota.

In the spring of 2005, Jim Miller, Dakota and member of the Cheyenne River Tribe, had a dream of a series of horseback rides that would unite the Dakota people in a communal effort. In establishing this event, his objective also involved creating awareness of the residual wound from the Dakota 38 mass executions and the surrounding events. The ultimate goal was "...to bring reconciliation among all people of the region so that we may move forward and live in a good way." In addition, Miller states that the ride also memorializes the Dakota people who were forced on foot across the frozen prairies either to witness the executions, or to be placed in the concentration



camp at Fort Snelling, Minnesota (Chomsky 14). Jim Miller's wife, Alberta Iron Cloud, Oglala Lakota, shared the significance of this event to young people. "Every part of this experience was guided by the spirits because we did it for the young people. Before children come here, they are stars. It don't matter how they get here, they came to do something. This is a hard time for these little ones to live in and they are strong. Our people will stand again because of them" (Nenemay).

Physically making the journey encourages the process of confronting the trauma of the past in order to promote healing. It is, as Eduardo Duran suggests, liberation.

One challenge for healing the Lakota historical trauma response is the subjugation and distortion of historical facts about our genocide and the lack of awareness and sensitivity in the general population. As validation of the trauma and giving testimony are germane to the healing process, the lack of acknowledgement of our trauma is a barrier to our liberation from the effects of our historical legacy and the trauma response (Day and Weaver 16).

The ride begins at Lower Brule Reservation and covers the 330 miles to the site of the hangings in Mankato, completing the journey at Reconciliation Park on December 26<sup>th</sup>, the anniversary of the executions. December 2015 marked the eleventh year that the ride has taken place.

These culturally-based reconciliatory efforts, arising from within Indigenous communities themselves, illustrate Paolo Freire's notion of the need for "conscientization" in order that the oppressed may free themselves from their wounded past (Freire, *Cultural Action* 39). Eduardo Duran further contends that this liberation requires a transformative process.

Through a gradual transformation of consciousness via ongoing deconstruction of the life experiences of oppressed persons, the entire community that is adversely affected by systemic forms of oppression and injustice can begin to liberate itself

and, in that process, liberate the oppressor (Duran, Firehammer and Gonzalez 289).

Brave Heart's theoretical model reinforces these concepts through a culturally and spiritually based process by which American Indians liberate themselves from the traumatic consequences of their particular holocaust. "The connectedness of past to present to future remains a circle of lessons and insights that can give us both the consciousness and the conscience to heal ourselves: (Brave Heart and DeBruyn 75-76). Individuals and communities can then face the realities of radically new circumstances and find meaning in their world. Having the psychological resources to not only survive, but to retain cultural traditions in spite of centuries of traumatic events indicates a formidable strength of spirit. Indigenous people across the continent are in the process of counting coup on a long history of destruction. They not only have survived, but also remain as distinct and vital nations. Brave Heart states:

The crux of our argument has far reaching implications for other colonized, oppressed peoples throughout history and those being oppressed, as we write... Wherever peoples are being decimated and destroyed, subsequent generations will suffer. We need only heed the traditional American Indian wisdom that, in decisions made today, we must consider the impact upon the next seven generations. *Hecel lena oyate kin nipi kte*—that the people may live! (Brave Heart and DeBruyn 75).

The work of Dr. Brave Heart in the confrontation of historical trauma represents the binding of the star quilt. It reinforces the raw edges and gives strength to the unity of the separate pieces. Work such as hers is an effort at healing the wounds of the past and helping once healthy Indigenous people and communities to recover from a history of domination and marginalization. Dr. Brave Heart espouses the thinking that without healing the soul wounds that have carried from the past, the cycle of violence and

disruption so prevalent on many reservations, will continue to impact future generations. This is viewed as the binding of the quilt, which will reinforce the efforts of Indigenous women taking on the challenge of confronting male dominance, strengthening their conviction and fortitude.

## CHAPTER SIX

THE PATH TO RESISTANCE: AMERICAN INDIAN WOMEN RESPOND  
TO CRISES IN INDIAN COUNTRY

A young girl, not yet thirteen years old, had been raped and killed and left in the gravel pit not far from our home. Mama wanted us girls to know that there were some terrible men in this world. She wanted to spare us the agony of rape. Over the years, I watched my mama struggle hard against her revulsion for men who would violate women. I watched her venomous attacks turn to long discourses on rape and how to deal with it. She was preparing us for the inevitable.

She wanted us to loathe and detest rape and the men who would commit such acts, yet not be cynical about men in general. “Most men are not like that,” I can still hear her say. “Men who rape women, hate women. They are a minority—a sizeable minority, but a minority nonetheless.” Her beautiful face tilted upward toward the light as she purred softly, “Don’t let anyone try and kid you, rape has nothing to do with lust. It is all about hate. Fight back. Resist. No woman has to accept violence in any form” (Maracle 55).

Indigenous women exhibit strength of character and being that sustains and upholds themselves, their children, their families and communities. They experience sadness and hardships, but they respond, rather than falling prey to the stressors and influences of dominant society. They do this for the generations to come. The difficulties are tangible. “It’s difficult to help our children. It’s...like two cultures clashing and there’s no connections between the two. The best we can do is instill in the children the pride of who they are and what they have and where they came from... We continue legends, through love, and through food, and just being an example by the way we live” (Wall 19).

Indigenous women most often understand the imperative to teach their children in a culturally based manner. Tradition taught through such cultural elements as language,

spirituality, crafts, and music, is critical to raising the child with a deeper perception of who they are, and in turn, to create self-esteem and pride. Pauline Wilson supports Wall's contention that exemplary behavior is fundamental to raising physically and emotionally healthy children, not only as mothers and grandmothers, but as any person significant in the child's life.

I think as educators, mothers and grandmothers and Lakota leaders, and women...with my job I consider myself a leader. I yet have to model who I am before I can model to them who they should be. That's the thing you know, and as a Lakota woman in educational leadership, I consider myself a professional so I act professional—the things I do—and I try to watch myself too, because the kids' eyes are on us. The community too... (Wilson, Pauline. Personal Interview. Pine Ridge, July 2015).

This has, consequently, situated women within the sphere of great responsibility—not only historically, but also in contemporary times where the traditional honor and respect they once received have been supplanted by relegation to positions of subservience by dominant society. Paula Gunn Allen contends that this is not a mistake—that these “violent and often virulent racist...attitudes and behaviors directed at [women] by an entertainment and education system...wants only one thing from Indians: our silence, our invisibility, and our collective death” (McClintock 312).

One question that must be addressed in this discourse is how women have responded to this disruption in their traditional lives and what catalysts have helped them to effectively maintain and nourish autonomy and self-esteem. As has been illustrated by Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart's theoretical approach, confrontation of a destructive and oppressive past aids in the course of resistance needed to advance a healthier and more positive future. Indigenous women feel this responsibility deeply and are working

to transcend the encroachment of European dominance, healing the soul wounds that they have carried for generations. Many Indigenous women live vital and healthy lives, contributing in significant ways to their own societies as well as to the larger dominant society. They represent the many who work in fields such as science and technology, social sciences, as well as universities, and countless other professions. They are mothers and grandmothers who understand the needs and imperatives of their families and communities. That said, for some, this entails confrontation of the trauma that has pervaded their lives. "...It is painful for us to examine our old societies. Too often, modern Native women are 'strong' only in comparison to their disempowered brothers. What has been lost is everything. If, however, there is any hope of restoring Native society, of saving our children, our brothers—ourselves—knowing how we once lived may give us some guidance" (Mann 54).

Blue Dawn Little shared:

From what I have seen from a lot of men is they have this mentality, that paternalism that is what you referred to is what they have been taught—in that white society, that European society—is that the man should rule everything. But what is really humbling outside of that is when you go into the traditional circles or the prayer circles. And where I go is out to Porcupine, and they honor the women in those circles. They teach the kids, they teach the newcomers that are older, that this is where you come from and you see a lot of gratefulness. You see a lot of respect. You see a lot of attentiveness to women in those circles. But it's the communities and families where they haven't grown up with that, I think, have a lot to do with that resentment, is where they don't understand. But it's that generational aspect of the fathers passing down the trauma and then the behavior and then the way of thinking, the train of thought toward women. And what I've seen in these prayer circles is people trying to advocate for people to come in and be a part. But it's unfortunate that a lot of our males have that attitude. You know, they tend to be narcissistic and you see a lot of sociopathic behavior too (Little, Blue Dawn. Personal Interview. Pine Ridge, July 2015).

Indigenous women find solace and strength in each other by coming together and addressing concerns of the community, while developing connections of support and responsibility. They share pleasure in their daily tasks, as well as a sense of humor that uplifts their families and communities. They have achieved positions of recognition, but have had to work inordinately harder than their non-Indian counterparts. “The struggle for American Indian intellectuals has been great, and even more for native women” (Bataille and Sands 19). How have American Indian women overcome the struggles to achieve success in professional fields where women often meet with resistance, when they face the same struggles with the added burden of being the “Other”? One consideration is the case of Cecilia Fire Thunder, Oglala Lakota, who not only took on the struggle for women’s rights from her home community against mainstream opposition, but with the added impact of sometimes hostile resistance from her own community. She and her work hold significance for other Indigenous women who champion her as an inspiration.

Fire Thunder took on a significant challenge when in 2006, the South Dakota legislature passed the most restrictive abortion law in the country, HB 1215, the “Women’s Health and Human Life Protection” bill, banning abortions even in the cases of incest and rape. The bill states that life begins at conception and that any doctor performing abortions faced a felony conviction with a sentence of five years in prison along with fines. It also brought into question the legality of abortions in life-threatening medical instances (Greenlee).

At this time, Fire Thunder, as the first female chief of the Oglala Lakota Nation, became embroiled in the battle that ensued within the state. Confronted with a predominantly male tribal government, Fire Thunder called upon the traditions of Lakota women in positions of leadership as well as those surrounding the White Buffalo Calf Woman. She offered her own property on Pine Ridge Reservation to be used to house a Planned Parenthood clinic, which would serve all of Pine Ridge and surrounding areas. As a nurse who had a history of managing community health programs with a particular emphasis on reproductive health, Fire Thunder was passionate about the needs on her reservation, a place where teen pregnancy soars, and infant mortality rates are 300% higher than the national average (Bentley).

Fire Thunder was eventually impeached from office for her stand, after facing not only a male-dominated tribal government, but also South Dakota state officials, and the plethora of pro-life groups around the country. South Dakota, along with the Catholic church and the National Right to Life Campaign, gave millions of dollars toward swaying a vote in the state. However, it should be noted that this is not the only issue that brought Fire Thunder into conflict with her male counterparts in the tribal government. Blue Dawn Little holds Cecilia Fire Thunder in high regard and shares:

Oh, she is amazing. She is an amazing woman. Advocates very, very strongly for women's rights and just their ability to take care of themselves. And just interacting with her one on one for five minutes, you feel very empowered.

When asked about the issue of Planned Parenthood and the struggle with men on the reservation, she continued:

Yeah, and it was some women too, surprisingly (Little, Blue Dawn. Personal Interview. Pine Ridge, July 2015).



Fire Thunder continues to speak to Native women's groups and to inspire younger women to take activist stances in defense of the rights of Indigenous women. The film, "Young Lakota," a PBS production, offers insights into Fire Thunder's fight as well as exploring the journey of a young woman she mentored, Sunny Clifford.

It is interesting to note however, that women sometimes align themselves with their male counterparts and betrayal and resentment toward each other can be an issue.

Blue Dawn Little responded to this question with regard to her own experience.

I get it a lot. Yeah. Resentment, jealousy, you know, bad-mouthing, and I try not to respond. Instead I get more of a... "Well, I know you just don't understand," and things like that. "You're young." "When you're a little older..." Because I could say that I was that type of person until I was about 22—maybe right after I had my first child, and I realized that this isn't getting me anywhere. This fighting each other. Hating each other. Clawing and scratching at each other. It does nothing but make women as a whole look that way. So now my approach is to, I like to say, love them back, even though they're being really mean. I like to love them in that process and they probably think I'm being sarcastic.

She shared about the infidelities of her ex-husband and the responses of the women involved.

But when I found out about these women, they expected me to call them names... to harass them... to be in their face and that type of stuff. But I would say, "I hope you know that by contributing to that kind of behavior it makes all of us look bad, and even though I'm home taking care of my kids, that's still going to reflect badly on me because there are women like you who choose to do this. And I know you wouldn't if you just loved yourself... if you just wanted yourself the way you were and you were okay with yourself the way you were. But you might find that eventually. Just know that you're going to constantly be with men like this who treat you like this. Who don't see you in a good light. Who don't love you. Who don't care about you but just use you. As long as you treat yourself that way..."

And when I started to talk like that was when I started to realize that I needed to love myself, to take care of myself. And when I felt comfortable in that, I was able to push my husband away. "I'm done because you don't treat me the way I treat myself." And so, that's what I try to do with other women and I'm a big advocate of that—of helping people see their own worth. But it's hard because it's

completely...wherever you go. It's filled with jealousy and that, you know. Sometimes they don't even have a reason to dislike you, or anybody else, or the other females. It's hard and you even see it with the older women, you know, the older women talk about other older women when they're in those leadership roles—positions. Sometimes you just want to stand in front of them and stare at them and shake your head and be like, "What are you doing?" (Little, Blue Dawn. Personal Interview. Pine Ridge, July 2015).

Blue Dawn Little exemplifies the growth in understanding of how Indigenous women's lives have been adversely impacted by imposed Euro-Western values and societal mores. Many women are taking up their coup sticks in defiance, stating their intention to resist, to help one another to change the behavioral impacts that plague their communities and threaten the well-being of their lives and the lives of their children.

Janet Routzen, shared her own experience from her reservation—that of women needing to find peace among themselves before they can effectively address other concerns.

A lot of times when you see tribal programs, people have a hard time accepting other strengths and to me a vocal female is a strength. You know what I mean? That is a strength. But we just don't accept that too. We do it to ourselves. "Don't speak out too much." "Don't rock the boat." You know, and I see it in groups all the time—where women just don't get along and are out to put each other down. We have to empower each other (Routzen, Janet. Personal Interview. Rosebud Reservation, July 2014).

Many Indigenous women understand the imperative to support one another—to work together, and that it may take healing from within their own circle before they can begin to address the wounds that surround them.

That said, Lakota women, like the women of many Indigenous nations, have historically been held in esteem; respected and honored for their particular position in their societies. Yet, due to the imposition of male dominance and the resulting

repercussions in Indigenous communities, women are facing crises of significant consequence. Their responses are often nothing short of courageous and resolute.

Pauline Wilson shared some of what she teaches the students in her care.

I don't judge them. I just listen to them. And then I tell them, "The best thing for you to do is pray." I say, "Go to sweat—find yourself traditionally and ground yourself in that. You'll be such a better person if you pray every day because he sees everything and he hears everything, and he puts his arms around you. You never have to worry because you'll never go to the left or the right. You're going to go right down the middle road and it's going to take you to beautiful places—things you're going to have that you didn't have today (Wilson, Pauline. Personal Interview. Pine Ridge, July 2014).

*Maske- "Sister": The Strength of Alliances*

*I am the one who fought for you  
And I know I'd do it all again.  
I would never blame any one of you  
If there was nothing you could do.  
But I remember what went into my name when I died for you.  
And I'd do it again in a heartbeat.  
I'm Anna Mae Pictou (Purdue 204).*

An elder in Pine Ridge shared her knowledge about the Lakota concept of "maske," which is what a woman calls another woman who is more than just a friend. She is a sister as well—a relative. This is felt in the heart and connects the two with sincerity and care, compassion and love. This particular elder has spent her life working for the good of her community. She and the women who stand with her in solidarity share this understanding of "maske."

Sixty-four years they trade kindnesses, gossip, jealousies. We watch them play saint and sinner, switching roles in silent cues. They are sisters. As different as one snowflake is from the other; as much the same. Somewhere in that space between likeness and dissimilarity, eternity burns. Somewhere a feuding

protective devotion. Two sisters, unmindful of the mark of history. *Laugh carelessly daughters. Rock wildly upon the lap of story* (Erdrich and Tohe 10).

Most Indigenous women understand the need for peace and solace in their relationships with their communal sisters, each finding strength in their common bonds of place, family and community. Marie Randall and Debra White Plume, both Oglala Lakota from Pine Ridge, share a common bond in their struggle to protect their “*Oyate*”—their people, their nation. They have taken a stand in protest of the proposed Keystone XL Pipeline. On March 5, 2012, Marie, already in her 90’s, and Debra took part in a standoff blocking trucks carrying materials for the pipeline through Pine Ridge Reservation. White Plume shared: “There were about 75 people on the blockade, people brought pots of soup, fry bread, cases of water, doughnuts and soda, and parked their cars to join the blockade. The oldest woman there was Marie Randall. Another elder was Ione Bad Cob, who came in her wheelchair and participated in the blockade.” The commitment to “*Unci Maka*”—Grandmother Earth—is strong among Indigenous peoples as is demonstrated by the “sentiment on Pine Ridge and in most native communities...that the XL Pipeline will threaten sacred lands and continue to harm the land” (Ward 1). Since this writing, construction of the proposed Pipeline has been halted by President Obama, not without the efforts of strong Indigenous women.

This same spirit of “*maske*” and the alliance of Indigenous women in a shared struggle was exhibited in the siege at Wounded Knee in 1973. American Indian women from around the country and Canada saw their role in the American Indian Movement as an avenue toward empowerment of all Indian people, especially women. They shared a special bond of camaraderie that went beyond whatever the men may have understood as

“friendship”—they were the bonds of “*maske*.” These women stood together to confront the injustices that AIM was addressing in Pine Ridge, but also to support one another.

The 1960’s and 1970’s in the United States were tumultuous years of American Indian protest and rebellion characterized by a politically charged reawakening and dissension, leading to acts of political resistance. These included the occupation of Alcatraz, the Trail of Broken Treaties, the takeover of the BIA offices in Washington, D.C., and culminating in the siege at Wounded Knee. The rise of the American Indian Movement (AIM), led by such male activists as Russell Means and Dennis Banks, gave hope to generations of Native people from tribal nations across the country.

Women were not absent from this landscape of resistance. Wilma Mankiller, Cherokee, held a prominent role in the occupation of Alcatraz. In her words, “The name of the island is Alcatraz... it changed my life forever” (Langston 3). This occupation began in November of 1969 after a shorter occupation led by Belva Cottier, Lakota. Ellen Moves Camp and Gladys Bissonette, both Oglala Lakota, established the Oglala Sioux Civil Rights Organization (OSCRO) on Pine Ridge Reservation (McClintok 300). Mary Jane Wilson, Anishinaabe, was a co-founder of AIM. Women also took center stage on such issues as forced sterilization, and forced removal of Indian children from their tribe for adoption into non-Indian homes. Ramona Bennett, Puyallup, played a key role in the protests for treaty fishing rights in Washington and was co-founder of the Survival of American Indians Association in 1964. She was a participant in the takeover of the BIA offices in 1972 (Seattle Civil Rights).

That said, with the character of male dominance, which has pervaded many Indigenous communities, creating lateral oppression, women have taken leadership positions in activism, only to be obscured by the public celebrity of men. During the takeover of the BIA offices, only a small group of women shared the popular image of the protest, despite the fact that there were many women involved. Additionally, women like Lanada Boyer, Shoshone-Bannock, held an essential role in the occupation of Alcatraz, but as AIM grew, these women were more and more obscured by men like Russell Means and Dennis Banks. “Many women charged that the AIM leaders were caught up in the image of themselves as ‘warriors’ and therefore resisted recognizing the work of their female colleagues” (Edmunds, Hoxie and Salisbury 434).

However, within Indigenous communities today, while men continue to dominate tribal councils, and to be the face of resistance, women are often the force behind these movements. Tradition holds that women are the strength of their communities. However, this is often overlooked or discounted. Women maintain traditional roles of “housekeeper, childbearer, and nurturer,” but they are marginalized from what were also traditional roles of “unquestioned positions of power, respect, and decision making on local and international levels” (Smith, “Native American Feminism” 122). Maria Chona, Papago, succinctly emphasizes the importance of the power of women, a power that men cannot share. She states: “You see, we *have* power. Men have to dream to get power from the spirits and they think of everything they can—song and speeches and marching around, hoping that the spirits will notice them and give them some power. But we *have*

power...Children. Can any warrior make a child, not matter how brave and wonderful he is?" (Bataille and Sands 48).

This power of childbearing as seen by Maria Chona, is echoed among Indigenous women of all reservation communities. The issues impacting young people create a sense of urgency within the community, but it is often the spirit of the women that creates a response. Blue Dawn Little, when asked if women have a deeper sense of communal needs in Pine Ridge, shared the following:

Women are easier with connecting to...I like to say soul, soul energy, and their power deep down there—intuitive power in pushing the ego aside. It's easier for them to feel "heart things." Where men always feel like they're strong and broad and don't have to listen to anybody.

I feel it goes back to that same being able to connect with people, to understand people. With men, I see a lot of outside, I guess, surface touching, maybe understanding. Ok—we have a suicide epidemic over here. Obviously, they get that because they see it and then they think it's some kind of quick fix where it's, um, "Oh, let's shove some money over there and let them do some walks and everything. Get the kids out. Give the kids some money—a check. And women—I have never seen a woman advocate for that kind of intervention. It's always on a deeper level of, "Well, let's get people over there to talk to them." "Let's set up circles." "Let set up support groups." "Let's get these kids to open up." "Let's get them away from their families for a little bit." And that's where the camps started to come from. "Let's get other people in here that they don't interact with every day to be able to get them to sit down and see if they can get them to open up, to get them to talk about what's going on.

From my own experience, women kind of take a little longer to respond. I think it's because they sit back and look at it for a bit. It does come from the heart with a lot of women. Most women, or the activists that I've seen, they come forward strong. But they're only able to be that strong because they sit back and they make sure what they're doing is right. They consider, you know. And I think that's where the power comes from (Little, Blue Dawn. Personal Interview. Pine Ridge, July 2015).

It is interesting to note that tribal governments, with positions traditionally held by men, saw an increase in participation by women during the 1970's and 1980's. As

tribes worked to establish themselves as viable forms of government, working alongside state and federal authorities, they gained new responsibilities. The 1975 Indian Self-Determination and Educational Assistance Act gave tribes authority over services such as education, healthcare and social services, areas where women traditionally dominated. “As the tribal governments grew during the 1970’s and 1980’s, Indian women entered the tribal workforce in unprecedented numbers. At the same time, these women became involved in public issues related to their new jobs” (Edmunds, et. al. 448). This was the case for Wilma Mankiller, whose policy work for her tribe led to her acclaim, and the eventual rise to being elected Chief of the Cherokee nation. Likewise, Ada Deer, Menominee, took a leading role in the restoration of the status of the Menominee nation. She made an unsuccessful bid for Congress, however, in 1993, she was appointed to head the Bureau of Indian Affairs by President Clinton, the first woman to ever hold that office (Edmunds, et. al., 449).

While these women are recognized for their individual tenacity and their accomplishments, Devon Mihesuah would contend that American Indian women more often work collaboratively in order to advance the greater goal of establishing the rights of all. Confronting struggles in a united way is necessary for Indigenous nations to remain strong (Purdue 218).

Indigenous women continue to organize in tribal nations throughout the country, just as they are on Pine Ridge and Rosebud Reservations in South Dakota. There they have addressed issues such as the abuse of women through organizations like the White Buffalo Calf Woman Society and the Sacred Shawl Society. They have been instrumental



in helping young people who are dealing with substance abuse and the threat of suicide. This raises questions about the manner in which women have confronted the gender dysfunction within their own communities.

When asked about the role of men in addressing gender violence on Rosebud Reservation, Janet Routzen discussed how they have engaged men in the fight against violence and sexual assault.

So they did a lot with younger people... You know, preventative, educational stuff about dating violence, domestic sexual assault. We have a men's re-education class—for the courts.

However, while this utilization of male roles in addressing this pressing issue has had a positive impact, there is a flip side. Routzen continues:

Unfortunately, there's always that message, "Oh, they're just lesbians at White Buffalo Calf," or "They're feminists," or "They just hate men." And you know...come on! That can't be further from the truth" (Routzen, Janet. Personal Interview. Rosebud Reservation, July 2014).

As has been noted, Indigenous women have managed to take up the roles of activism while simultaneously caring for and nurturing children. They have been an inspiration to their communal sisters as well. In discussion of her role in averting the failed coup in Tonawanda in 1992, Janice Sundown Hallett, Seneca, shared that, despite her appointed role as "Faithkeeper," instilling hope and understanding about the Haudenosaunee way of life, "Ceremonies had to be put through, food had to be prepared, and the Longhouse had to be maintained..." She purposefully carried out the duties of Faithkeeper during the crisis. "The long hours neither slowed her usual quick pace nor dulled her ready laughter... She is one of the notorious Tonawanda "music makers" and dearly loved for helping to lift everyone's spirits in spite of trying times" (Wall 141).

In spite of critical levels of violence and poverty impacting the lives of Lakota and Dakota women, there is hope, in their own ability to organize. “While men have traditionally held the sanctioned offices of power in Lakota politics, women have often guided the development of various policies and spurred men to action” (Amnesty International 25). Even before the establishment of VAWA, Lakota and Dakota women, like Janet Routzen and the White Buffalo Calf Woman Society, were organizing themselves to address the issues of violence against women on their reservations. When Bernice Ione “Unci” (Swallow) Stone, *TaCanku Iyoyumpe Win* (Her Path is Shining Woman), Lakota/Northern Cheyenne, passed away at the age of 84, her obituary read:

In the late ‘70’s, she founded the first domestic violence shelter for women on the Pine Ridge Reservation—Sacred Shawl Women’s Society, Inc. In the mid-90’s, the Grey Eagle Society honored her for her work with women and families. She wrote legislation for the Oglala Sioux Tribe for family violence (*Rapid City Journal*, obituaries).

These women form invaluable points of the star quilt, and the path to the center—the heart of their people. It is their strength, persistence and commitment to themselves, their children and their tribal nations, that is the hope for future generations. They offer inspiration in countless ways, not only to women in their home communities, but to women everywhere, who struggle for justice, truth and dignity.

*It is the time of the feminine. With a woman it is what we feel. When I look around at different women, I see sadness and a heaviness in themselves. What they’re experiencing is what the earth is experiencing—her sadness and her heaviness because of the way her children are living today. Women, they have that; the feeling is there in their hearts more so than the male people, ‘cause the male is always doing things. The male has to realize that he has a female part to him, and he has to start feeling that same feeling.*

*Women have to be recognized. The words of women have to be recognized. The women will come out. It might be prophesied or doesn’t have to be prophesied, but the feeling is*

*so strong that the women will come out and voice their feelings. Whether people want to hear it or not, it's going to come because it's meant to be. It's that time.*

*Vicki Downey, Tewa v Tesuque Pueblo (Wall 12).*

## CHAPTER SEVEN

## THE QUESTION OF FEMINISM

*My female relatives lived their lives within the Dine matrilineal culture that valued, honored, and respected them. These women passed on to their daughters not only their strength, but the expectation to assume responsibility for the family, and therefore were expected to act as leaders for the family and the tribe. Despite five hundred years of Western patriarchal intrusion, this practice continues.*

(Tohe)

This chapter will explore whether the distinctive parameters of the feminist movement apply to Indigenous women. As Linda Tohe states, “The Dine women continue to possess the qualities of leadership and strength and continue to endure and ultimately to pass on those qualities to their daughters, even though there is no word for feminism in the Dine language” (Tohe). Do the qualities that define the contemporary feminist movement apply to Indigenous women given their particular histories? Or are Indigenous women taking the elements of this movement and adapting it to their own experiences, creating a space for themselves in the discourse on the imposition of patriarchal systems, as well as a movement that is distinctive in its purpose? Paula Gunn Allen shares that “Modern American Indian women, like their non-Indian sisters, are deeply engaged in the struggle to redefine themselves. In their struggle they must reconcile tribal definitions of women with industrial and postindustrial non-Indian definitions” (Gunn Allen 43).

Indigenous women are rejecting the imposed Euro-Western parameters of their gender—of what it means to be American Indian women emerging from an oppressive and demeaning history. These are women survivors, who are thriving and creating space

for healthier communities of women—women who will take up the torch of activism and resistance in order to address the issues confronting their nations.

Andrea Smith writes, “Feminism, according to [Annette] Jaimes, is an imperial project that assumes the givenness of a U.S. colonial stranglehold on Indigenous nations. Thus, to support sovereignty, Native women activists reject feminist politics...” (Green 93). There are opposing views on this notion of feminism and sovereignty, and in order to clearly understand where each woman finds her voice, this must be explored. Beatrice Medicine has taken exception to the idea that feminism is characteristic of colonial powers and therefore, stands in contrast to sovereignty. Devon Mihesuah notes that, “White feminists tend to focus on gender oppression and to overlook racial issues thus alienating many Indian females” (Mihesuah, *Natives and Academics* 40).

Ultimately, Indigenous women take disparate positions on the issue of feminism. Many see colonization and the efforts at addressing its negative impacts of greater import than a feminist agenda, viewing the feminist movement as a construct of dominant society. Indigenous women do not want to be hindered by dominant theories that interfere with their ability to effectively address issues in their own communities, and through traditional value systems. Linda Tohe shares that feminism is not germane to Dine society as it is a matrilineal culture. She makes the implication that traditional Indigenous societies had no need for feminism (Kenny and Frasier 11).

Andrea Smith conducted a study among Indigenous women leaders who expressed their sentiment that they are “feminists without apology.” They contend that feminism is, in reality, an Indigenous notion that has been “co-opted by white women”

(Smith “Indigenous Feminism”) There are many Indigenous women who adhere to the tenets of what is seen as characteristic of a feminist—a strong woman; a woman who stands her ground for what she believes; a woman who is able to confront a male-dominated society and the impositions of that construct within her own community. Indigenous women who are working on the frontlines of struggles that their communities face, are often harassed, and attempts are made to marginalize them. However, many have planted their coup sticks and are standing strong.

Janet Routzen shares:

“Well, I am definitely a feminist and you know, it’s because of my mother. I mean, she raised us in the 60’s by herself—four girls. And you know, she embraced all of that and she’s a leader herself. She was our first Attorney General for the tribe. She’s a lawyer. And so her growing up here on the reservation—she was always smarter and that was difficult for her because she was ostracized for it... Looking at what she’s had to deal with—unequal pay, and you know, things being unfair. When she was first an attorney, there were only a couple hundred Native attorneys in the United States and they’re still a good old boys network. As an attorney, you still deal with those issues with men. And at the tribal level, they would rather talk to a white male than they would a Native woman. You know what I mean? They don’t see you as smart. But I don’t have as much of a problem with that because I just don’t allow it to be. I speak for myself. My work speaks for itself—my standing in the community... because I’m a smart individual, and I’m honest and I have integrity, and people know that about me (Routzen, Janet. Personal Interview. Rosebud Reservation, July 2014).

A study by Bonita Lawrence and Kim Anderson speaks to the sentiment of many Indigenous or Aboriginal women. “Ultimately, we have found the arguments by Aboriginal women, which either attach or support feminism, to be less useful than the importance of Native women finding their own strengths from within their own heritage” (Lawrence and Anderson 5). Women like Janet Routzen, illustrate this strength of character in the face of sometimes inordinate circumstances. These are women who, for

all intents and purposes, do not feel the need to discuss the issue of feminism or to assign that moniker to their lives and work. Veronica Valandra, when asked about feminist movements in the Catholic church and her feelings about the fact that many Indigenous women feel that the term “feminism” does not hold meaning for them, shared the following:

I’ve never really had the opportunity to talk about it, but from my experience, yeah, like you say, most Lakota women don’t talk about it. The ones that I’ve heard it from were religious sisters. You know, where they think they could do more—be ordained. So at that level, that’s about the only exposure I’ve had with it.

Veronica continues with her thoughts on male dominance in the church:

Oh yeah. It’s still there and always will be you know, because the Catholic church is male-dominated (Valandra, Veronica. Personal Interview. Pine Ridge, July 2015).

Veronica reflects the thinking of many Indigenous women, that feminism is not a purposeful cause for them. They are caught up in the struggle of the influences of colonialism impacting every aspect of daily life. When she speaks of the sisters who are engaged in the struggles of women in the church, she is referring to non-Indian nuns who do not share the Indigenous experience of oppression that has historically characterized the Catholic church on this continent. This illustrates the dichotomy between being a woman in the church and being an Indigenous woman in the church.

Feminism as a theoretical construct “takes gender seriously as a social organizing process,” and “seeks to identify the ways in which women are subordinated to men and how women can be emancipated from this subordination” (Green 21). Indigenous women characteristically did not view their societies as male-dominated, but rather communities

where women and men actively engaged in the good of the whole, taking on particular roles and making their respective contributions, each in their own significant ways to effective communal management. It is not surprising, therefore, that the feminist movement has not garnered whole-hearted support among them. Joyce Green continues that, “Some First Nations historically placed a high value on women’s roles in society; indeed, women in most Aboriginal cultures historically enjoyed far more respect, power and autonomy than did their European settler counterparts” (Green 23).

Blue Dawn Little supports this contention.

My understanding of feminism—maybe it’s not as hardcore or radical as some of the ones that are out there, who are like full blown. But my understanding of it is just being able to speak for ourselves, to be able to make decisions for ourselves, to be seen in an equal light as a man, and in a sense, that would be a concept or a construct of European societies. But to be fair, or to speak I guess, in truth, a woman was seen greater than a man in our societies. And so, I guess we’ve had our own form of feminism but we’ve never called it that. It was just out of respect for the people who gave you life and took care of you and helped your tribe to survive. And we’ve obviously lost that in the assimilation and colonization eras... (Little, Blue Dawn. Personal Interview. Pine Ridge, July 2015).

Treatment of Indigenous women is linked to the overall dispossession of land and culture at the hands of European invaders. “Coupled with overt acts of violence was the development of a new hegemonic ideology born out of a patriarchal society whose imperative was the establishment of a capitalist mode of production. Indigenous people who suffered rapid dispossession of their land underwent cultural changes in response to their new position...” (Moreton-Robinson 5). Despite the fact that this passage refers to Aboriginal women in Australia, it speaks to the shared experience of Indigenous peoples throughout the world, including North America, who were also impacted by European invasion. The disruption of traditional societies has had adverse consequences for



Indigenous women across continents. The removal of young girls from their homes and traditional communities was widespread and had a lasting impact on Indigenous societies as a whole. “In attempting to assimilate Indigenous women as domestic servants, the government was constructing and defining who they were and how they should behave” (Green 11).

These hegemonic practices were couched in repudiation of traditional cultural mores. There were significant differences in the European gender model as compared to that of Indigenous nations. One example was in the negotiations over trade agreements between the Cherokee Nation and the state of South Carolina. The European perspective of Cherokee women was that they were viewed as equivalent to men, not only politically and economically, but in spiritual matters as well, meaning that they shared the same level of importance, each in their own way. Carolyn Johnston notes:

Women had autonomy and sexual freedom, could obtain divorce easily, rarely experienced rape or domestic violence, worked as producers/farmers, owned their own homes and fields, possessed a cosmology that contains female supernatural figures, and had significant political and economic power... Cherokee women’s close association with nature, as mothers and producers, served as a basis of their power within the tribe, not as a basis of oppression. Their position as ‘the other’ led to gender equivalence, not hierarchy (Indian Country Today Media Network).

Additionally, Johnston points out that in traditional Cherokee society, “men and women had different roles, different ritual spaces and different ceremonies,” each contributing in a significant way to the livelihood of the family and community. These compelling roles afforded women a voice in governmental affairs (Indian Country Today Media Network).

The contrast between feminists in dominant society and Indigenous women struggling against imposed male dominance is that the former reject male-imposed oppression by distancing themselves from what was considered “classic” Euro-Western values. Conversely, Indigenous women seek to reestablish themselves in traditional roles, in a “negotiated renewal of ‘traditional’ Native cultural values and systems” (Gray 10).

### The Historic Parameters of Feminism

In this discourse, it is important to assess the three “waves of feminism,” which have addressed issues with which women have been confronted throughout the history of this nation. The first wave, spurred by the suffragist movement, was predicated on the realization by women that they must gain political power, in this case, through the vote. Additionally, economics and reproductive issues became part of the dialogue. Charlotte Perkins Gilman argued that, “The human female’s social and economic environment is unnatural and artificial—that of economic dependence on the male. This has warped her development and threatens to drag down the whole race” (Donovan 43). However, this generally addressed the issues confronting women of dominant society.

The second wave, born out of World War II and the new position women had taken in the workplace, saw the advent of the sexual revolution, the reemergence of women as in control of their bodies, and the redefinition of “beauty” as subjects vs. objects. Additionally, women were seeking equal rights in the workplace. It was during the second wave, that women of dominant society offered their support to women of color, as exemplified by the Black, Chicano, and Asian Civil Rights Movements, as well

as the gay and lesbian movement, viewing this advocacy as critical to aiding the overall struggle for gender equality. While women of color did not necessarily take leadership roles in this wave of the feminist movement, it opened the dialogue to thoughts about issues that women of color face. “The intellectual activity of women of color, African-American women and lesbian women facilitated the development of new theories about multiple and interlocking oppressions” (Moreton-Robinson 24).

The third wave is where women are positioned at this moment, and while many of the issues being confronted continue, such as equal pay and reproductive rights, women of color have taken a stronger position in the movement. However, Indigenous women remain conspicuously on the fringes. While there are attempts by white feminists to create inclusion in the dialogue, some Indigenous women take exception to this.

Moreton-Robinson notes that both Rayna Green, Cherokee, and Haunani-Kay Trask, Hawaiian, each view the discrepancies between white feminists and women of color as being based in a power struggle. Green takes exception to white feminists writing about Indigenous women and the problems with which they are confronted, without their consent. Trask notes that there are vast differences between whites and Hawaiians—differences with which Hawaiian women struggle on a daily basis given that white institutions dominate so much of Hawaiian life (Moreton-Robinson 66-77).

Smith argues that despite the waves of feminism appearing to be founded and dominated by white, middle-class women to which women of color have affixed themselves, Indigenous women, who fought the onslaught of colonialism since first contact, were actually the first feminists. “...If we were to recognize the agency of

indigenous women in an account of feminist history, we might begin with 1492 when Native women collectively resisted colonization. This would allow us to see that there are multiple feminist histories emerging from multiple communities of colour which intersect at points and diverge at others” (Smith “Indigenous Feminism”)

“Indigenous” or “Tribal” Feminism: A Question of Terms

Indigenous women are in a particular position that is “socially empowered because it has a structural location as part of white hegemonic ideology and is embodied in various forms of white feminist agency” (Moreton-Robinson 24). However, does this do justice to the needs of women living in a different social structure with very specific histories and traditions? Despite the inclusion of women of color, albeit marginally in many instances, especially in the second and third waves of feminism, can this white-dominated and controlled movement speak to the hearts of Indigenous women? Would the term “activism” encompass the cultural nuances that define Indigenous women seeking to break free of imposed male dominance, or would “tribal feminism” or “Indigenous feminism” be a more acceptable and appropriate terms?

It is important to analyze the perspective of Indigenous women on their own histories since European contact.

Decades of stereotypical patriarchy-driven (and validated) images of Native women must be revealed as such so that a fresh, new, insider perspective will emerge... We need historians who will delve into the archives to give us portraits of politically astute, active, culturally essential Native women. Without histories of these women, the past remains a story of victors, and our true past will remain forever beyond our reach (Suzack, et. al. 74).

As has been discussed, male dominance was not generally an issue for Indigenous women until the arrival of Europeans. Sexual victimization and other overt acts of oppression, subjugation, and violence began the process of altering Indigenous societies and the standing of women in them. These measures carried with them the intent to limit women's roles as the process of colonization moved forward. Rayna Green shares that, "matriarchal, matrifocal, and matrilineal societies were neither acceptable nor comprehensible to members of European patriarchies." The suppression of the role of women in Indigenous societies allowed for the disruption of traditional societal mores regarding gender issues, and ultimately the subversion of communal tribal structures. "...Because of this history, Native cultural authenticity and political resistance have been gendered male" (Suzack, et. al. 183).

Consequently, the confrontation of patriarchal values as a movement by European women in the form of feminism, comes into question for Indigenous women. In many Indigenous societies, patriarchy was not viewed as oppressive, but rather, within the patriarchal construct, women were considered to possess power, dignity and agency. Therefore, issues relevant to women in mainstream feminist movements, may appear less so to Indigenous women, given their particular circumstances. Sam Grey notes:

A continued insistence on the ubiquity of male domination, despite dissenting views, has two significant implications: it creates an atmosphere un conducive to dialogue between feminists and Native women, based on the lack of a pivotal shared experience and the subsequent muting of other potential commonalities; and it denigrates Native voices who continue to assert that their societies were not oppressively patriarchal prior to the experience of colonialism (Grey 11).

It may be that certain key issues of the feminist movements affect women as a whole—that there are shared experiences that impact all women. However, given the

historical framework of the disruption of once healthy Indigenous societies that continues to have far-reaching consequences and that are not experienced by dominant society, it is still unlikely that mainstream feminism can respond to the issues Indigenous women face. Kate Shanley has shared "...equity per se, may have a different meaning for Indian women and Indian people. The difference begins with personal and tribal sovereignty—the right to be legally recognized as peoples empowered to determine our own destinies" (Suzack, et. al. 185).

Annette Jaimes argues that Indigenous women activists who consider themselves to be feminists tend to be those who are more assimilated than others, and are more accepting of the "colonialist ideology that indigenous nations are now legitimate sub-parts of the U.S. geopolitical corpus rather than separate nations..." In contrast, she notes that those Indigenous women with a more "sovereigntist" outlook, are often skeptical about the potential benefits of alliances with feminist politics (Jaimes and Halsey 330-331).

During the 1970's, with the events surrounding the AIM movement, women did not face the level of persecution that the men involved did. With the incarceration of many male AIM members, the women found greater empowerment, some even taking prominent positions in the political life of American Indians during the 1970's. The formation of Women of All Red Nations (WARN) in 1974 by Phyllis Young, a Lakota AIM supporter, along with other women of the movement, was only the first step in this new political activism (Edmunds, et. al. 434). Nevertheless, tension exists between various Indigenous women leaders, even within the same organizations. Lorelei DeCora

Means, co-founder of WARN shares that American Indian women are “oppressed first and foremost as peoples colonized by the United States of America, *not* as women... Decolonization is the agenda, the whole agenda, and until it is accomplished, it is the *only* agenda that counts for American Indians” (Smith, *Native Americans and the Christian Right* 118-119).

Conversely, Madonna Thunder Hawk, who was also one of the founders of WARN, shares her view that feminism can indeed, speak to the issues American Indian women face. “Feminism means to me, putting a word on the women’s world. It has to be done because of the modern day... I related to it right away. But I’m not the average Indian woman; I’m not the average Indian activist woman because I refuse to limit my world... How could we limit ourselves? Why limit yourself?” (Smith, *Native Americans and the Christian Right* 119). This illustrates the dichotomy in thinking and the struggle that remains for Indigenous women in confronting the tenets of feminism and its relevancy to their particular situation. It does not reflect, however, a lack of cohesion among Indigenous women regarding the importance of anti-colonialism and sovereigntist issues in the struggle for healthy communities.

Indigenous women are seeking ways to qualify their struggle. Rayna Green shares that racism and sexism are constructs of colonialism, and their impositions on Indigenous peoples has caused an internalization process that has been onerous to Indigenous women. This is reflective of the notion of lateral oppression, making a distinction in the issues faced by Indigenous women as opposed to those of dominant society. Green states that some have suggested that liberation might be a better term. This brings to mind that

the feminist movement was at one time known as the women's liberation movement, suggesting a "freeing" of women from the strangleholds of the past. Perhaps this might speak more clearly to the issues confronting Indigenous women. Green suggests that liberation might be a more effective precept in the process of decolonization. "Liberation is framed by some as a decolonization discourse, which draws on traditional cultural and political mechanisms. It is conceptualized as thoroughly Indigenous in character while also honouring women in the gendered and acculturated contexts" (Green 23).

Sam Grey contends that feminism, despite its claims to a universal "sisterhood," does not effectively encompass differences, which marginalizes Indigenous women. These differences have a foundational premise in historical events that have shaped contemporary Indigenous womanhood (Grey 9). This intentional process to eradicate the traditional standing of women in Indigenous cultures has left them with issues that women of dominant society cannot fully comprehend. Anderson states:

In order to break down and destroy a culture, you have to get to the root of it. The heart of Aboriginal cultures is the women. So it makes sense to start making policies that would banish the women, the givers of the language and the culture and the life. The ones who brought in the Native children and made them Native (Anderson, "The Powerful History" 26).

It should be noted that while mainstream feminism espouses the goals of lifting women up, often setting them in opposition with men, Indigenous women seek the restoration of balance of traditional gender roles. This does not exclude men from the struggle, but seeks to restore their healthy roles as well. "Native women require the participation of men in the social, political and spiritual life of the community." This then requires that men are part of the process of confronting colonialist impositions, and



allows for Indigenous women to view “themselves as having a key function in the restoration of traditional male roles” along with that of females (Grey 14).

An interview participant in a study conducted by Andrea Smith on the concept of “feminism” states that, “It’s not a term that fits within my culture. I’m an Indian woman, first and foremost. I’m a strong Indian woman, very directed, and I believe in feminism as I understand society... The word doesn’t equate with any Indian word that I would know. That’s what I mean, there isn’t a word” (Smith, *Native Americans and the Christian Right* 125).

### Women’s Rights to Sovereignty

While sovereignty is a critical need and demand of tribal nations, this issue takes on greater complexity when viewed from the standpoint of women. Andrea Smith refers to several projects that address both the issues of “colonialism and sexism through an intersectional framework” (Smith, “Native American Feminism” 124). One such project, developed in South Dakota is the Sacred Circle: National Resource Center to End Violence Against Native Women, which is “Dedicated to Actions that Promote the Sovereignty and Safety of Women.” It supports tribal nations and organizations in addressing violence against Native women “in the context of the unique historical, jurisdictional, and cultural issues that American Indian/Alaska Native Nations face” (Sacred Circle).

The South Dakota Coalition Ending Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault is another example of Indigenous women and organizations joining forces in order to

address the critical issues of violence, with a “parallel development that allows for diversity and ensures equity and equal opportunity for its members.” It embodies a commitment to “affirm and support indigenous women in their struggle for self-determination” (South Dakota Coalition). This illustrates the need that Indigenous women see to not only address historical issues that continue to impact their communities, but also the question of their own sovereign status.

Additionally, several Indigenous women’s groups have come together to confront the historical impacts of the boarding school era. Incite! Women of Color Against Violence, the Indigenous Women’s Network, and Native Women of Sovereign Nations of the South Dakota Coalition Ending Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault, to name a few, have contributed to the formation of the Boarding School Healing Project. The work being done includes the documentation of abuses in order to call for those responsible to be held accountable. However, this is not simply to seek reparations for individuals to develop “links with other reparations struggles that fundamentally challenge the colonial and capitalist status quo” (Smith, “Native American Feminism” 125).

Sam Grey contends:

Aboriginal women articulate priorities informed by their own culture and sense of place and traditions; in which gender is found alongside issues of socio-economic inequality, racism, assimilation, cultural renewal and self-determination. For Aboriginal women, gender is one aspect of a larger struggle whose ultimate goal lies in the achievement of healing, balance and the reclamation of what was stolen, altered or co-opted through colonialism. Rather than *feminism* then, Aboriginal women’s movements can more accurately be described as *decolonization* (Grey 19).

Decolonization lends to the right of Indigenous women to sovereignty—the aspect that many see as foundational to the restoration of the traditional gender roles. Sacred

Circle has authored a comparison of Tribal Sovereignty and Native Women's Sovereignty, which offers a critical overview of the needs of Indigenous women, especially given that thirty-nine percent of Indigenous women surveyed for a 2008 Center for Disease Control study identified themselves as victims of intimate partner violence (Futures Without Violence). This comparison illustrates the divergence in purpose from mainstream feminism and that of Indigenous women, where sovereign status plays a key role. Mainstream feminists, although engaged in a similar struggle against the oppression they have experienced from male dominance, cannot identify with the added particulars of the historical implications of the disruption of societal mores, principles, and traditions—cultural lifeways.

### **Tribal Sovereignty**

All Tribal Nations Have an Inherent Right to:

- 1) A land base: possession and control is unquestioned and honored by other nations. To exist without fear, but with freedom.
- 2) Self-governance: the ability and authority to make decisions regarding all matters concerning the Tribe without the approval or agreement of others. This includes the ways and methods of decision-making in social, political and other areas of life.
- 3) An economic base and resources: the control, use and development of resources, businesses or industries the Tribe chooses. This includes resources that support the Tribal life way, including the practice of

### **Native Women's Sovereignty**

All Native Women Have an Inherent Right to:

- 1) Their body and path in life: the Possession and control is Unquestioned and honored by others. To exist without fear, but with freedom.
- 2) Self-governance: the ability and authority to make decisions regarding all matters concerning themselves, without others' approval or agreement. This includes the ways and methods of decision-making in social, political and other areas of life.
- 3) An economic base and resources: the control, use and development of resources, businesses or industries that Native women choose. This includes resources that support

spiritual ways.

4) A distinct language and historical and cultural identity. Each tribe defines and describes its history, including the impact of colonization and racism, tribal culture, worldview and traditions.

*Colonization and violence against Native people means that power and control over Native people's life way and land have been stolen. As Native people, we have the right and responsibility to advocate for ourselves and our relatives in supporting our right to power and control over our tribal life way and land—tribal sovereignty.*

Individual Native women's chosen life ways, including the practice of spiritual ways.

4) A distinct identity, history and culture: Each Native woman defines her history, including the impact of colonization, racism and sexism, Tribal women's culture, worldview and traditions.

*Violence against women, and victimization in general, means that power and control over an individual's life and body have been victimized. It is our right and responsibility to be advocates supporting every woman's right to power and control over her body and life—personal sovereignty.*

While each area refers to the conditions necessary for sovereignty to exist, there are notable differences for women. One striking note is that women work together and are advocates for other women. While Tribal nations work in accordance to advocate for the inherent rights of tribal sovereignty, women work for the distinctive dignity and empowerment that is characteristic of their struggle.

Sharon Venne, Cree attorney who has worked on the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, states:

Our spirituality and our responsibilities define our duties. We understand the concept of sovereignty as woven through a fabric that encompasses our spirituality and responsibility. This is a cyclical view of sovereignty, incorporating it into our traditional philosophy and view of our responsibilities. It differs greatly from the concept of Western sovereignty which is based upon absolute power. For us absolute power is in the Creator and the natural order of all living things; not only in human beings... Our sovereignty is related to our connections to the earth and is inherent (Smith "Indigenous Feminism").

The sovereignty of Indigenous peoples is one of interrelatedness, and Native feminism is more than a struggle for identity. It is part of a larger movement for liberation impacting all Indigenous peoples (Smith, “Indigenous Feminism”).

Blue Dawn Little expressed her sense of the manner in which empowerment of Lakota women will advance the cause of sovereignty for themselves and their communities.

So I feel like at some point, the women’s revolt against that oppression by men is going to cause our Lakota men, Dakota and Nakota, you know—all these other tribes, Chippewa—whatever it is, to push back. And I feel like it’s going to be a wave of...where eventually we...where our own people have that say so over ourselves because of the women’s power and strength to pick themselves up (Little, Blue Dawn. Personal Interview. Pine Ridge, July 2015).

Although this point of the star appears in parity with the others, contributing to the whole, this may be viewed as the strongest point of the star. The question of feminism, while embraced by some and rejected by others, has helped Indigenous women to formulate and articulate what their needs, and subsequently, the needs of their communities are. The terms seem to be of little consequence—“tribal feminism” or “Indigenous feminism.” What is of greater consequence is that Indigenous women are courageously taking a stand for their own sovereignty, while struggling for that of their communities. They are dedicated to the good of all, men included, despite recognizing the need for their own liberation and healing from a history shrouded in violence.

*It is we—contrary to those images of meekness, docility, and subordination to males with which we have been typically portrayed by the dominant culture’s books and movies, by anthropology, and by political ideologues of both rightest and leftist persuasions—who have formed the very core of indigenous resistance to genocide and colonization since the first moment of conflict between Indians and invaders (McClintok 298).*

## CHAPTER EIGHT

AMERICAN INDIAN WOMEN IN HIGHER EDUCATION:  
CHALLENGES, PROGRESS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

*Perhaps our activism and persistence within the academy might also redefine the institution from an agent of colonialism to a center of decolonization... If these visions are realized they are the consequences of a conscious desire we have as Indigenous people to transform the world around us because we are dissatisfied with the status quo, because we are tired of the tremendous injustices occurring around us, and because we are hungry for a change that will bring respect to our rights as Indigenous peoples.*  
(Mihesuah and Wilson 5).

This chapter will focus on the circumstances and issues of Indigenous women in higher education institutional settings, whether as students, faculty or staff. It will offer insights into the importance of education not only as a tool in the development of greater understanding of academic knowledge, but as an historical aspect of traditional life within Indigenous communities.

Henrietta Mann shares that the teachings passed from generation to generation “...constituted diverse bodies of traditional knowledge and thinking that each individual had to study and master in order to become a skillful and educated tribal member” (Benham and Stein xvii). Participants taking part in this study who work in the field of education share that Indigenous knowledge—including cultural traditions, language and spirituality—is critical to the formation of self-esteem and self-worth. It has been discussed that too many young people, some girls as young as twelve years old, have attempted or succeeded in committing suicide on Pine Ridge Reservation and elders contend that a return to traditional life ways would aid in alleviating this disturbing trend. It is believed that the spirits of those who commit suicide roam the Badlands for all

eternity. Food and water are even placed there to feed these restless spirits. Pauline

Wilson shared what she teaches her students about suicide.

When a Lakota person takes their own life, you're acting as if you're God. And every breath that we take is a blessing that God gives us. We don't know in the next hour if we're going to be here. We don't know if tonight we go home and eat and if we rise in the morning. We don't know those things. So I tell them even God's angels don't know when a person is going to die. Only he knows and so I said, "Why would you die? Why would you put a noose around your neck and try to hang yourself?" (Wilson, Pauline. Personal Interview. Pine Ridge, July 2014).

One would be hard-pressed to find this kind of education in a non-Indian school or institution. These life lessons—these exchanges are culturally based. The understanding of what Indigenous students face in their everyday lives is often lost on non-Indian teachers, instructors, professors and faculty. Students struggling with issues like alcoholism, absentee parents, violence or abuse in the home, can often be viewed as being disruptive and disrespectful by teachers who have little experience with or interest in what their students' home lives are like. Just as was noted in the study of Indigenous methodologies, these teachers should be working on relationality—attempting to situate themselves as part of the community in order to develop a deeper understanding of what often characterizes the lives of their students and the issues they face.

Indigenous parents often express concern for their children who go away to college, for varied reasons. One parent in Pine Ridge shared that his daughter was a Gates Scholar and was attending Stanford University. He explained that he told her not to return to the reservation because there were no opportunities for her at home. This is a difficult decision for a parent to make, not only because of having their child so far from their home and community, but also because of the concern that young people may lose their

sense of themselves—their distinct identity. Offering another perspective, Betty Cooper, Blackfeet, shares: “Three of my daughters went to college at Berkeley. I know our young Indian people need education to live in this society, but I worry about how they may get brainwashed.” White mainstream society advances a world that is often much different from the community in which young Indian people are raised. Cooper continues: “I tell them that we need to hang on to our culture and we need to know the songs. We need to know all the ceremonies, we need to know legends. We need to understand what our ancestors did and how today it’s our turn. How do we fit into this world and yet keep our connection with Mother Earth and all living things?” (Crozier-Hogle and Wilson 119).

Additionally, there is a duality in responses from the community when the student does return home. Some in the community will see the student’s education as a positive addition to all—encouraging them to return and contribute to bettering the life of their tribe. Other students have felt ostracized for having left—sometimes referred to as “apples,” red on the outside, white on the inside. One such student from a reservation in South Dakota felt this marginalization more and more deeply each time he returned home on breaks. It eventually became so overbearing that he finally took his own life.

More often however, students want to return to their home communities to contribute to improving life in whatever way is most beneficial. They understand the struggles, and with clarity of purpose, want to assist in uplifting their beloved communities—their homes—in any way they can.

Therefore, at times, education can become a double-edged sword. K. Tsianina Lomawaima cites the blame for a checkered history in American Indian education as a



“battle for power.” American Indian and Alaska Native parents and communities have not been part of the dialogue about the needs of their children where education is concerned. “For many generations, they have not been allowed to influence, let alone to determine educational goals, policies, and practices within the schools that their children have been required to attend.” It has been the various mainstream, historical institutions such as mission schools, the BIA, and state-overseen public schools “...that have held the power to determine curricula, pedagogical practices, teacher training and hiring practices, language instruction policies, disciplinary procedures...” (Villegas, et. al. 184).

Leona Okakok, Inupiaq, and former deputy director of the North Slope Borough School District in Alaska, expresses the need for children to be educated in ways that provide them with the skills to be able to succeed in the world in which they will live (Hirschfelder 122). She notes that survival in the Arctic includes learning healthy social cooperation, making an education in social behavior a critical part of educating the whole child. This not only prepares the child for the means to make a living, but involves the whole community in the education of the child (Hirschfelder 124).

This is supported by the sentiments of Pauline Wilson, who states:

I tell the kids, “When you come into my classroom, you’re going to learn more. I’m not going to change your lifestyle. I’m not going to change who you are. But I’m going to teach you. I’m going to teach you the things that I have learned as an educator. I’m going to pass my wisdom and knowledge on to you...” Whenever they come in I tell them, “You know I’m a grandmother and I act like a grandmother so if you come into my classroom and you feel like you’re involved or you feel like you want to be loved, then I’ll do that for you.”

So, in Lakota leadership, mothers and grandparents... we have to really be on our P’s and Q’s with these children because there’s so much technology that they’ve been attached to and when they see those different things that influence the way they talk and how disrespectful they are, they’re getting it actually from the TV.

And so I think that as educators, mothers and grandmothers and Lakota leaders, and women—with my job I consider myself a leader—I yet have to model who I am before I can model to them who they should be (Wilson, Pauline. Personal Interview. Pine Ridge, July 2014).

Indigenous educational leadership is crucial to the success of the children of the particular tribal communities. However, preparation for the student to go out into the world of mainstream academia is also essential to their success in higher education. Understanding what is necessary to succeed when a student arrives in a college or university is a much needed component of their education beforehand. Pauline Wilson shared about the students she mentored during her own college experience:

One of the students, Charlene, she came to me one day and she gave me the biggest hug and she said, “Oh, I am so glad to see you because I’ve been wanting to tell you something forever and now I can tell you.” And I said, “What is it? Don’t tell me you had a baby.” And she said, “No, no, no...I just want to tell you that you have been my mentor. When I didn’t feel like coming to school, I would envision your face, and you saying, ‘You have to be here everyday, because when you miss a day of college, you miss a week of college.’” And so, I would tell them all the time, “You guys, be here.” And when they were absent, I would help them. I would mentor them. We would mentor each other (Wilson, Pauline. Personal Interview. Pine Ridge, July 2104).

For Indigenous women in America, school can be a difficult environment to navigate and in which to find success. Ardy Bowker notes that of the American Indian women she interviewed for her study, twenty-one percent said they had failed at least one class in their school career. However, only one percent said that they had been retained because of poor academic performance, indicating that, in spite of the challenges they faced, they managed to complete their education. Women often express frustration at a lack of understanding by non-Indian teachers, of who they are and where they come from, while imposing rules that seem inappropriate. One of Bowker’s respondents stated:

“By the time I reached the sixth grade, I had experienced it all—alcohol, abuse, housecleaning, cooking, taking care of babies. I probably had more responsibilities than the teachers. I know I had faced and survived more problems than they had. Raising my hand for permission to sharpen a pencil seemed stupid... I rebelled” (Bowker 245-246).

Teachers in reservation schools often come from border towns or other places off-reservation, and possess little understanding of the students they are teaching. One of Bowker’s participants expressed what is often heard among Native students.

A lot of teachers are totally out of contact with our lives. They drive onto the reservation in the morning, and they drive off in the afternoon. They don’t realize that some of us go hungry, that some of us have spent the night fighting off a drunken relative, that some of us have to take care of our younger brothers and sisters. They don’t care. I began defying them and their rules during the fifth grade. During high school, I used to get up and walk out of classes and roam the halls. No one ever did anything. Somehow, I managed to pass (Bowker 246).

While this is not indicative of all reservation schools, and given that there are many dedicated teachers working on reservations, there is a divergence in understanding from Native to non-Native experiences. It is imperative for a non-Native teacher working on a reservation to develop relationships with community members, in an effort to deepen their own understanding of life for their students. However, discounting the tribal college experience, higher education proffers a more complicated and problematic situation, where there is little to no contact with elders or community members. Students are removed from what is familiar and placed among peers, as well as faculty and staff, who often do not understand who they are and what shapes them as human beings.

Bowker’s study indicates that almost one-fourth of the women she interviewed who graduated from high school or college, had at least one teacher or professor who had

a positive impact on their schooling experience, as well as their decision to complete their education and graduate. According to Bowker, research indicates that teachers who are attentive and caring, and who believe in their students, are critical to student success (Bowker 262). When a student enters a mainstream schooling experience from a minority culture, this support and understanding becomes even more crucial.

### Statistical Analysis

Statistics indicate that Indigenous students are graduating from high school and attending postsecondary education in higher numbers than ever before. “The number of American Indian/Alaska Native students enrolled in colleges and universities has more than doubled in the past 30 years.” However, despite this encouraging increase, American Indian students remain among the lowest percentage attending institutions of higher education. In 2011-2012, American Indian/Alaska Native students accounted for only 0.9 percent of total enrollment in colleges and universities. As of 2010, of those who attended college, 12 percent earned a 4-year degree. Of that 12 percent, 84 percent were employed in 2010 (National Indian Education Association). One area of special consideration is the dramatic rise in the enrollment of American Indian women in institutions of higher education, especially tribal colleges (TCU’s). Tribal colleges afford opportunities for women who are determined to provide a better life for their children, while allowing them to remain within their home communities. The disparity in tribal colleges vs. public institutions is reflected in statistics such as the following. “In fall 1996, 56 percent of the undergraduates at all public institutions were women, as compared to 64 percent in tribal

colleges. In fact, from the beginning of the tribal college movement in 1968, most tribal college students have been older and most have been women.” The American College Fund (ACF), notes that, “The typical tribal college student is often described as a single mother in her early 30’s. Tribal college officials explain that this population is the least served by higher education, yet it is the most eager to receive a degree” (Benham and Stein 218).

Statistics also indicate that Native American women attend institutions of higher learning in greater numbers than Native American men. “Women constituted the basis for the significant increase in enrollment levels for Native American students overall. Particularly notable is the four-fold increase in Native American women earning master’s, doctoral, and professional degrees” (Waterman and Lindley 140). What is the impetus for American Indian women, often single mothers with responsibilities to family and community, that inspires them to get an education, and to persist in spite of the myriad obstacles they encounter? Blue Dawn Little shared the following.

I attended Creighton University for three years. I finished up there and then came back to finish... my bachelor’s degree in Social Sciences at Oglala Lakota College. And then I waited about a year and a half before I enrolled in a master’s program and I am currently in a master’s program at the University of South Dakota. It is a specialization in American Politics and Political Institutions.

My current aspiration with it is to be able to navigate the political system. I’ve had people ask me if I want to be a politician or eventually go to law school, which law school had been a goal of mine until I realized that I really didn’t want to do something like that. But I don’t have an interest in being in the U.S. political system as a politician, or a senator or any of that type of thing. What I really wanted to use it for was to know the information and know the system as much as possible to be able to create some kind of actual sovereignty here or help create that with the different groups of people that are here trying to do that. And I know that it’s hard for tribes to try and create some kind of economy without having some roadblock with the political system—you know, the government, whether

it's state or federal. And that's part of what I wanted to use it for too—to be able to create our own economy and have some sort of sustainability, just to survive on our own.

When asked if she wanted to return to Pine Ridge to work, she replied:

Yeah. That has always been my goal. I have never seen myself living somewhere else for a long period of time unless it's to benefit eventually coming back here (Little, Blue Dawn. Personal Interview. Pine Ridge, July 2015).

### Challenges for American Indians as a Minority

Given the previously stated statistics, the imperative becomes to explore the academy's role in the inequities of the higher education experiences for minority groups, most importantly for this study, those of American Indians, with an emphasis on American Indian women. Do these institutions, in fact, find their foundations in colonizing efforts, and what must be done to counter this and address the inequities that characterize them? Are they willing to make the necessary changes to assure a heightened and successful experience for American Indian students? Are there greater needs to be addressed where women are concerned? Is there a fear of making needed changes in order to address diversity in colleges and universities? Are American Indian women taking leadership roles and finding a voice in effecting the needed changes for institutions of higher learning in order that they might better understand and respond to their obligation to minority students—in this case, American Indians?

Mihesuah and Wilson note that this is no easy undertaking. “The academy has much invested in maintaining control over who defines knowledge, who has access to knowledge, and who produces knowledge” (Mihesuah and Wilson 5). Rosemary White

Shield, Anishinaabe and Choctaw, notes that Native women's voices are often absent in the discourse of higher educational experiences. This is not unusual given that these women have historically been given little validity within the non-Indigenous world. One example offered by White Shield is that her participants cited spirituality as a critical element to their completion of their higher education degree (White Shield 51).

Additionally, the women she interviewed expressed their approach to higher education as being steeped in their cultural traditions, such as stories that offer strength and inspiration (White Shield 53). These are indicators that define a particular cultural approach that is far from the norm in mainstream institutions.

Janine Pease, Crow educator and former president of Little Big Horn College, has shared that language and culture play an important role in the education of the whole child, and are critically important in the tribal college on the Crow Reservation.

The choices we make in curriculum and administration reflect who we are. The things we study are important to Crow people, and probably not to anyone else—our migrations, history, and oral literature, which is taught by elders who come in the winter time. The combination of disciplines, the perspectives we take, the comparative studies we make, are important to us. It's a unique place, one of the only places in the world Crow people can say this is *our* institution (Crozier-Hogle and Wilson 105).

The assertion, in a country that is ideally based in pluralistic values and structures, touting diversity as a moral imperative, is that the academy postures in public—giving voice to the support of Indigenous students, faculty and staff, while privately ignoring or even working against the very issues that impact them. “Many scholars continue to document atrocities of the past, and a growing number discuss problems in the present. Despite all this writing, however, many professors, administrators, publishing houses,

authors, and committees comprised of scholars are still contributing to the oppression of Natives” (Miheuah and Wilson 31).

American Indian students face the challenges of classrooms staffed by professors who are ignorant of pertinent history and issues impacting their tribes and communities—those who are arrogant and staunch supporters of colonialism as a means of “civilizing” Indigenous peoples, and/or those who simply do not understand or do not care. Paolo Freire writes on the “banking” concept of education, where the teacher is the depositor, while the student receives, files, and stores the deposits.

But in the last analysis, it is the people themselves who are filed away through the lack of creativity, transformation, and knowledge in this (at best) misguided system. For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other (Freire *Pedagogy* 72).

Huffman and Ferguson, in their article entitled, “Evaluation of the College Experience Among American Indian Upperclassmen,” cite the variables that most impact American Indian students as being, “. . .cultural conflict, academic difficulties, financial difficulties, reservation vs. nonreservation background, disposition toward education, and cultural traditionalism” (61).

Cultural conflict is one of the greatest challenges impacting retention rates among American Indian students. Dealing with adjustment to college life is difficult for any new student. However, when that student is confronted with the additional challenges of being marginalized by their cultural identity, life becomes especially arduous. They face the challenges of “. . .cultural differences and misunderstanding [that] the Native student must



negotiate as he/she proceeds through the predominantly non-Indian institution” (Huffman and Ferguson 62). Marie Batiste states:

Beginning with the early efforts to educate Indigenous people at Harvard College and Dartmouth College, assimilation strategies cultivated in governmental policy, educational systems, and teacher-training institutions around the world have had a long and devastating history of forcing Eurocentric values, beliefs, and knowledge on Indigenous peoples, and of displacing Indigenous knowledge, languages, and cultures (Villegas, et. al. 86).

This has resulted in poor retention rates as well as what Villegas terms “multigenerational educational failures” and “educational outcomes well below the national average.”

Additionally, the contention is that Indigenous people in the United States and Canada have the lowest achievement rates and records of successful employment (Villegas 86).

### Communal and Cultural Reliance

Indigenous women espouse a communal sense of being, in contrast to the ultimate significance of the individual, as is more commonplace in dominant society. Paula Gunn Allen contends that, “An American Indian woman is defined by her tribal identity. In her eyes, her destiny is necessarily that of her people, and her sense of herself as a woman is first and foremost prescribed by tribe.” Indigenous women embrace family and community, as well as each other, which aids them in maintaining cultural traditions while working to receive higher education degrees with the ultimate goal of creating a better life for themselves, their children and families, and their home communities (Waterman and Lindley 141-142).

Pauline Wilson supports this assertion.

So, this is my second year, going on my third year teaching. And so, as a Lakota leader, a woman, I believe you have to stand on your own thoughts. You have to be consistent in yourself. You have to carry your Lakota morals and values as a Lakota lady... You have to show exactly what you're worth—what you do. And even in the community...people knew my family and so they would say, “Oh, I didn't know that was your sister that was teaching.” Because my last name is Wilson. That's my married name. My maiden name is Lone Elk. So I have a lot of relatives. So they're like, “Oh, we're so glad you're teaching.” “Oh, my grandson came back and said his teacher is Pauline Wilson and he wished he had her for the whole...until he finished high school.” And so I said, “That's me.” And I see the change in the kids.

Words cannot describe the feeling that you carry when you have a former student coming to you and telling you, “Thank you for being my teacher and for everything you've taught me. Now, I'm going to continue on and I want to go to college.” Because I tell them my story. I was 55 years old when I became a widow. I was retired—already had a career in front of me and I let that go. When I was 55, my best friend, my lover, my husband, my everything left me. I had a void in my life and I didn't know what to do so I threw 110 percent of myself into my studies. And I came out with a 4.0 and maybe even better and I got scholarships and at this age. There were children that came to college—children 17, 18 years old and here I was...I was their mentor. (Wilson, Pauline. Personal Interview. Pine Ridge, July 2014).

Pauline's experience and support of younger Indigenous students during her college career, as well as while she is teaching them cultural traditions and language, promotes the theory that those students have a better chance of success because of a foundational support system emanating from their own background and understanding.

Studies indicate that Indigenous women attending institutions of higher learning, like Pauline, have achieved success through “cultural reliance,” citing the importance of a support system that includes family and community, along with a supportive faculty and staff. “Reliance on traditions and spirituality acts as strength to continue and complete their education,” along with “personal resiliency and motivation” (Waterman and Lindley 142). Additionally, Indigenous women rely on their sense of identity, or their “Native

sense of womanhood,” and their traditional roles within their respective tribal societies as a source of strength (White Shield 56). One of White Shield’s participants, a Lakota elder, shared that her goal was to be an example for her children and grandchildren, but if her education took her away from them, she would not pursue it. “In white society, they say number one is you. Your family should be number one” (White Shield 58).

Blue Dawn Little shared that she hopes her degree will be of benefit to her home community and speaks of the need to do this for her children.

My children are going to have to grow up here. Their children are going to have to grow up here. Everything that goes on here is my business. It doesn’t matter if I lead the protest or am just a supporter of the protest, it’s my business if something needs to be changed (Little, Blue Dawn. Personal Interview. Pine Ridge, July 2015).

Indigenous students in general, allege that certain factors contribute to their ability to remain in college. These include precollege academic preparation, support of family, as well as staff and faculty that is cognizant of their particular needs, a responsible and committed institution, and maintaining contact with home communities (Guillory and Wolverton 59). However, despite their tenacity and strength, Indigenous women are often confronted with particular struggles that many other students are not. Single parenthood plays a critical role for Indigenous students, especially women, attending institutions of higher learning. Having to carry the responsibilities of a family, especially as a single mother, has a crucial impact on retention rates. There are particular and complex realities for a single parent with young children. The burden of having to arrange for adequate childcare and the related costs, along with finding the time to study while giving children the time they need, and running a household, create myriad difficulties for the single

parent. Combined with the burden of being away from a familiar support system, this struggle becomes even more acute. Sarah Sunshine Manning shares:

Reveling in my own mother's strength, I often recall a time when I was struggling in my second run at college as a single mother. In some of my weakest moments, the only thing that kept me from quitting was remembering the strength of my mom. While I was facing the challenge of raising just *one* child alone in school, I often wondered, "How in the world did my mom finish college on her own with *four* kids?" If my mom persevered given those circumstances, I knew I could, too. Her strength was my strength (Manning).

For women like Manning and her mother, strength is drawn from other women in their lives—mothers, grandmothers, aunties—matriarchs all. Janet Routzen spoke of her own mother's journey as an Indigenous women attorney and how that impacted her own life—now being an attorney herself. These are women who have persevered in getting their college degrees in spite of copious obstacles.

Academic struggles are not uncommon among any students beginning their college careers, however another aspect that impacts Indigenous students is that fact that these struggles are exacerbated for those coming from indigent circumstances. "For many students from working-class or impoverished backgrounds, whether they are students of color or not, college is a mystifying—even hostile—place, full of opaque cultural codes and academic challenges for which they are poorly prepared" (Gutierrez y Muhs, et. al. 2). However, when there is the additional burden of cultural disparities and learning styles that conflict, this is intensified. A White House report on the circumstances of youth in Native American communities recognizes the prevalence of poverty and notes that Native students struggle with issues stemming from poverty that the schools they

attend are not equipped to handle—mental health issues, poor nutrition, substance abuse, violence, lack of housing, to name just a few (Executive Office of the President 20).

Coming from a reservation high school, where learning involves cultural and traditional components, as well as family and community support and input, many Indigenous students experience a deeper sense of anxiety where academics are concerned. This contributes to greater attrition rates. Statistics indicate that 39 percent of Native students enrolled in a four-year college completed their degree as opposed to 62 percent of white students (Executive Office of the President 19).

Lori Alvord, a Navajo doctor, shared that she chose to leave her home and get an education. However, she shared that, "...leaving Dinétah was a frightening prospect. Navajo people believe we are safe within the four sacred mountains that bound the Navajo reservation." Leaving her home was to "invite imbalance, to break our precious link with the tribe, to leave the Walk of Beauty, and to court danger. It was a dangerous leap into the unknown, unguarded world" (Alvord and Van Pelt 25). Once at Stanford University, she experienced a feeling of being "out of balance." She had to struggle to regain her balance despite the sense of being an outsider. "...It was often lonely and unsettling." She found herself marginalized by the very nature of her traditional upbringing. "I lacked the 'right stuff' that every med student needs: a competitive edge. Yet it was hard for me to behave any other way. Silence is a normal part of Navajo communication; words are used sparingly and weighed carefully. It took me a long time to be comfortable with the non-Navajo style of learning" (Fixico 68). This added

encumbrance heightens the particular needs of Indigenous women in the arena of academia, as well as in the workplace.

A program at the University of Utah—the American Indian Teacher Training Program (AITFP), helps to prepare Indigenous students for careers in teaching with the stipulation that they will teach in schools serving Indigenous students upon graduation. “The program is rooted in the idea that American Indians can engage in the process of educating themselves, and can do so through both Indigenous wisdom and knowledges often found in dominant society” (Brayboy 425). Students who have completed the program understand the need for both the written word and oral stories.

#### Addressing Cultural Differences

Angela Wilson expounds on the critical relevance of developing respect for Indigenous knowledge—a knowledge that has, for the most part, been dismissed by the academy. The advancement of Indigenous research models and the resistance that characterizes the academy’s response might be seen as an indication of a need that must be addressed. There is often a lack of diverse awareness and tolerance to new concepts, such as that of Indigenous knowledge systems and life ways. Wilson contends that Native academics possess the capacity to utilize their own academic research, writing skills, and resources as a means of recovering Indigenous knowledge. This has challenged the status quo, which has a penchant for the dismissal of anything Indigenous as valid. Wilson continues: “As Indigenous scholars we simply cannot reject that which is unacceptable to the academy (because we value all Indigenous knowledge), so our task is to challenge the

academy as an agent of colonialism and carve a place for our own traditions as legitimate subjects of scholarly study, but on our own terms” (Mihesuah and Wilson 73).

Tribal colleges and institutions of higher learning that serve Indigenous populations have a responsibility to address the cultural differences and particular needs of Indigenous students, and to make connections to the communities from which these students come. In this way, they will support and encourage greater participation, and the development of leadership skills that will benefit home communities. In a 2000 report by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, it was stated:

The Native American Higher Education Initiative (NAHEI) took a departure from these approaches (top down, assimilating, and exclusive programming) by supporting the Native American educational leaders’ efforts to articulate their vision of higher education, strengthen their planning process, and identify major initiatives that facilitate strategic development... The goal [of catalyzing significant, positive changes in higher education in the United States was to increase the access and success of greater numbers of Native American students who will provide leadership in their communities, the nation, and the world by strengthening Native American communities and the higher education institutions that serve them (as quoted in Benham and Stein 5).

For Indigenous women, this is especially arduous. Indigenous women who occupy significant positions in the academy, are characterized by their support of Native students and the defense and protection of traditional ways. Whether they are students themselves, faculty or support staff, they provide a critical space for young people who are away from home, family, tradition and ceremony. This struggle is particularly demanding for Indigenous women, as they navigate between two worlds, preserving their cultural traditions, while simultaneously “...surviving in a white institution that often pushes them into a dichotomous reality of being viewed as a ‘friendly squaw’ or a ‘hostile Injun.’” Despite experiencing racism and marginalization, and even exclusion,

they maintain their cultural traditions while working "...to indigenize the academy [as] part of a larger social and critical critique of racism, classism, and sexism" (Gutierrez y Muhs, et. al. 242-243).

Tribal college settings afford a greater connection to community and cultural traditions and allow for a process of self-discovery for many students. One area noted by White Shield was the "solidification of accessing one's inner resources as a 'stronghold' for endurance and security," as well as the knowledge that assimilating was not necessary to complete a degree. "Elements in the tribal college setting inherently supported the attachment to Native identity and values as sources of inner strength and security for Native women..." (White Shield 59-60). This makes for greater retention rates and successful completion of degrees for Indigenous women and other Indigenous students.

Henrietta Mann defines Tribal Colleges in the following manner:

TCU's are places of hope. They also symbolize the enduring spirit of the first peoples/nations of this sacred homeland. They are places that honor and celebrate the dignity and cultural integrity of first nations, which are balanced with contemporary and innovative academic programs of educational excellence rooted in the archetypal teachings of Great Mysterious Spirit (Mann xviii).

Conversely, Indigenous students attending public institutions sometimes experience racism, isolation and marginalization, and sometimes even violence, making adjustment to college life difficult and impacting retention rates. It is often the female Indigenous staff and faculty that support these students through understanding and acceptance; this, in spite of an ongoing sense of marginalization on the part of Indigenous staff and faculty. One woman states: "I think I continued out of a sense of obligation, a belief in the value of what we do, and a commitment to the exchange of ideas among



ourselves and with students. I was motivated by a belief that ideas matter not only symbolically but also materially” (Gutierrez y Muhs, et. al. 259). There is an imperative to create for themselves and the students with whom they work, a sense of community, which is vital to success and decreasing attrition.

This can tend to be criticized by non-Indigenous staff, faculty and supervisors as taking time away from promotion and tenure-building. However, this is an individualistic approach, which disavows Indigenous thinking that one is responsible to the general good of the community. Another interview participant stated: “It took a great deal of energy, and being involved in my community was actually the lifeblood that sustained me in my professional life. To suggest that I give that up felt even more isolating, but even this was difficult to explain to my colleagues” (Gutierrez y Muhs, et. al. 279).

White Shield’s participants addressed the concept of love as it holds meaning for them and their communities. As a cultural concept, they view it as “giving of oneself to others, connecting with others, and being part of a larger whole.” For these Indigenous women, this was seen as an imperative that is culturally based in spiritual traditions. “...In loving, one became more of oneself in the purpose of serving others,” Their education is an avenue toward serving other Native people (White Shield 61). Therefore, the notion of individualism comes into question, and communal support is of critical importance in the academic setting.

Angela Wilson notes the responsibility of Indigenous educators in public institutions to make every attempt to decolonize the educational practices, which is key to a deeper understanding of traditional knowledge and ways of knowing.

As Native academics, we are in the position to use our academic research and writing skills (as well as the available academic resources) to assist in the recovery of Indigenous knowledge. However, this presents its own particular challenge, as the academy has not historically valued or respected our knowledge... This means defying the disciplinary boundaries that dissect and categorize our traditions, as these boundaries simply do not exist in Indigenous ways in which the physical, spiritual, emotional, and intellectual are inseparable (Mihesuah and Wilson 73).

In this sense, Indigenous professors and faculty in institutions of higher learning have an added responsibility to not only educate in the academic sense, but also in the traditional manner of Indigenous peoples—particularly their own tribal nations. This is not always acceptable in institutions where Western ways of knowing dominate and dismiss anything that challenges the status quo. There is little room for an understanding of traditional Indigenous cultural learning.

How do Indigenous women academics then cope with this phenomenon? How are they affecting change within these institutions in order to better serve the Indigenous student population and further Indigenous knowledge systems? Angela Wilson continues:

Recovery of Indigenous knowledge is survivalist in nature, not only because of its potential to restore health and dignity to our people, but also because of how it will assist us in advancing our political aims against our oppressors... This flagrant dedication to Indigenous goals is openly political because it defies those who have been defining our existence for us and who have attempted to make us believe we are incapable of self-determination (Mihesuah and Wilson 74).

Waterman and Lindley cite resiliency as the characteristic that most succinctly defines Indigenous women in higher education—whether they are students or faculty. Resiliency rests in the foundations of spirituality and cultural traditions. According to White Shield, there are four data clusters that determine the parameters for successful degree completion for Indigenous women. The first focuses on spirituality, which is seen

as ““an entire way of being,”” providing the strength needed to complete their degree. The second finds its basis in culture and how it permeates the educational experience. The third cluster determines that traditional roles offer strength, and underscoring the critical relevance of culture and community. The fourth cluster is cited as “Family Loyalty,” emphasizing the centrality of family in the lives of Indigenous women (Waterman and Lindley 143).

A central theme to this chapter has been that Indigenous women find their strength in family and community, spirituality, culture and tradition, as well as in each other. Whether she is a student, or teacher, professor or staff, success in college is dependent on the Indigenous woman’s ability to navigate the world of academia through the lens of her own traditions, with a dedication to the greater good of her community, and with and to the support of her sisters—her *maskes*. This point of the star is critically important to the strength of the rest of the quilt. As was indicated by interview participants, education is seen as central to creating a better world for their children and grandchildren and the generations to come, as well as in strengthening communities to be better equipped to address policies and needs that have adverse impacts.

*Without question, if my strength is from my mother’s strength, and her strength from her mother’s and her grandmother’s, we must all possess the spirit of our ancestral matriarchs. The indigenous women who we all descend from were so firmly grounded in traditional teachings, and a tenacity to be remembered forever. Their strength lives within all of us. In my most challenging moments, I remember them all (Manning).*

## CHAPTER NINE

WOMEN IN THE ARTS: LEADERSHIP AND AUTONOMY  
THROUGH EXPRESSION

*I think all artists worth their salt can spark revolution and I hope that I contribute a little bit to social change in my writing. I think that's what writing is all about, it's about conflict, transformation and redemption so it has to have that edge. Lee Maracle (Sonneborn 147).*

Indigenous women have found strength and inspiration that speaks to generations through the arts. This chapter will explore how Indigenous women have found a voice through creative expression. Joy Harjo has shared: “I believe that if you do not answer the noise and urgency of your gifts, they will turn on you. Or drag you down with their immense sadness at being abandoned” (Harjo, *Crazy Brave* 136). The arts have afforded Indigenous women the opportunity to overcome adversity and marginalization by giving them a voice of expression that goes beyond words or actions. Creative expression offers a channel through which struggles, joys and accomplishments can be shared, as well as to animate others on the same journey.

Literature as an Expression of Autonomy

Many Indigenous women have found expression through literature. Story and testimony through the written word are critical components to this research, and are the foundations of and the thread tying together the various elements that make up this study. Kathleen Donovan contends that “Numerous parallels exist between Native American literature and feminist literature and cultural theories. Native American literature

illuminates feminisms, and feminisms help us to understand many of the issues raised by Native writers, especially Native women writers” (Donovan 7).

Ananda Cobb addresses the notion of “continuance,” a concept that speaks to the sharing of personal experiences and topics that have shaped the lives of Indigenous women.

As I look back over the past few years, I see books, thoughts, even lines of poetry that intrigued me to such an extent that they became part of my consciousness... If I had to discuss the ideas and name them, I would call them *continuance*—the remembrance of times, places and people; the knowing of those times, places, and people through imaginative acts; and finally, the going on, the telling of the stories (Cobb xv).

Indigenous women authors such as Leslie Marmon Silko, Luci Tapahonso, Louise Erdrich and Joy Harjo have addressed the issues that have shaped and impacted their lives, and in the process have become voices for all Indigenous women. The stories become part of the life of a community and are carried in the heart, handed down from one generation to the next, giving each a foundation for understanding history, tradition, and in the process, offering awareness and hope for the future. Kimberly Blaser shares that, “The work of Native women writers especially carries a new vision as it refuses to separate the literary and academic from the sacred and the daily, as it brings to the text the unpaginated experiences of contemporary tribal reality” (Stanley 266).

The literary sources of Indigenous women are foundational premise to a greater comprehension of the realities of life, in that these works are often written through the lens of personal experience and the ideals that are embraced. The stories of writers like Louise Erdrich most often focus on women, placing them at the heart of their communities, and generally focus on women’s issues and exploitation (Suzack, et. al).

It would be difficult to imagine the writing of American Indians, especially that of women who have suffered and struggled through the impacts of imposed male dominance and all that has signified for them, as not including the particular voice of the author. Not only is the author's writing influenced by her personal life, but also by her past and the history of her community. This may be intentional or unintentional. Indigenous women writers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have found expression for altered gender roles and the imposition of male dominance within Indigenous nations, causing them to advance feminist agendas in their work (Townsend and Nicholas 603).

As opposed to New Criticism, which looks at the construction of the work itself, discounting the author's history and personal life, Native writers could be considered to come under the purview of biographical criticism, which makes the assumption that every work includes the voice of the author, breathing life into their writing through their own lived experiences. Harjo shares that, "Native women in the Americas share similar concerns based on community. We also share the questions of any artist doing her work within any culture. That work demands truth-telling, for any poet, writer, or artist in any tribal community must certainly measure herself against the truth" (Harjo and Bird 23).

Given that much of Indigenous methodological work is grounded in the oral tradition, it is clear that in the area of Native American studies, one would be hard-pressed to dismiss the biographical indicators that function to make the story whole. There is an imperative then, to understand the facts of the author's life in order to increase understanding of the particular text being reviewed. Autobiographical work by Indigenous women speaks not only to a deeper understanding of the lives and traditions

of these women, but also to the communities from which they come, in contrast to “the celebration of individuality and originality” of the Euro-American tradition (Bataille and Sands 4).

American Indian women’s autobiography has not evolved directly from the recognized genres of oral native literature, but it is not an indigenous oral form. However, it shares with oral forms some basic characteristics: emphasis on event, attention to the sacredness of language, concern with landscape, affirmation of cultural values and tribal solidarity. These properties of the oral tradition derive from a concern for communal welfare, the subordination of the individual to the collective needs of the tribe (Bataille and Sands 3-4).

The writing of Indigenous women advances a creative outlet for and a deeper understanding of the lives and conditions of their home communities. Like oral storytelling, these literary works afford an avenue of imparting knowledge, history, cultural traditions and contemporary struggles through the written word. Joy Harjo reflects in her poem, “The Book of Myths,” that these women, by speaking to the issues impacting their lives and communities, are able to “unglue the talking spirit from the pages” (Harjo, *In Mad Love* 56). Sociologist Liz Stanley notes that, “...it is the reading, writing and speaking practices that provide women with the tools to resist silencing; identity can thus be constituted through the text” (Abrams 45). This supports the notion that it is difficult to isolate the writer from the writing. Indigenous women writers have sought to suffuse their work, which is often focused on recovering cultural traditions, with the feminine voice, illustrating that women held strong roles. “In bringing the female voice to the center, they have helped forge a distinct Native American feminist literary tradition.” These works are empowering not only to the authors themselves, but to those who read their work (Townsend and Nicholas 603).

Taking the example of Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*, Mishuana Goeman points out that the foundation of the novel is based in Silko's own Pueblo traditions, as illustrated by "her perceptions of land and history..." (Goeman 206). The connection to place, an aspect of not only Indigenous methodology, but also a critical condition of life and tradition to Indigenous peoples, cannot be denied. Additionally, Indigenous women give voice to the world around them and the "contradictions of dominant social formations..." They give creative voice to a history of dominance and its impacts, and make them relevant to contemporary Indigenous issues (Goeman 207-208). Margaret Kovach addresses the issue of "prologue," which allows for the writer to self-integrate into the history and issues being addressed. The utilization of autobiography and personal story enhances the work, and allows for a space "...where the writing can shape-shift from an 'objective accounting' to holistic narrative, revealing how the self influences research choices and interpretations" (Wilson 112). This has been foundational to this particular study as personal story underscores what has been shared as historical and traditional knowledge.

It is therefore, comprehensible that any work undertaken by Native scholars, writers, novelists, poets, etc. is conditioned by the self, the community from which they come, the connection to land, and the past that shapes who they are and how their writing is inspired. "These scholars demonstrate the strong connection between self, community, memory, reciprocity, and research" (Kovach 115).

Story for the Indigenous woman is a lifeline—a critical avenue for expression of circumstances impacting community and personal lives, with which other Indigenous



women can identify. They are stories emanating from the heart and soul—deeply felt and understood. Leslie Marmon Silko writes in *Ceremony*: “I will tell you something about stories... They aren’t entertainment. Don’t be fooled. They are all we have, you see, all we have to fight off illness and death. You don’t have anything if you don’t have stories” (Silko 2). Interview participants for this research support Silko’s premise by sharing their own stories to underscore what they know to be the historical dimensions and foundations of their present conditions. These stories are the veins that carry the lifeblood of Indigenous communities and give breath and meaning to everyday circumstances—joys and sorrows, struggles and triumphs. Stories are vital to the storyteller as well as those receiving their message. “Stories remind us of who we are and of our belonging. Stories hold within them knowledges while simultaneously signifying relationships... They are active agents within a relational world, pivotal in gaining deeper insight into a phenomenon. Oral stories are born of connections within the world, and are recounted relationally” (Kovach 94). Women have stories to tell, whether they are oral or written. They are stories of life and community, of tradition and spirituality, of history and its impacts, and they contribute to the heart of the knowledge imparted.

Indigenous women’s stories are also an avenue of expression that defies colonialist thinking, as well as the parameters of dominant culture’s underpinnings to history. Goeman refers to this as “(re)mapping.”

Colonialism relied on sets of gendered spatial metaphors, such as the dichotomies between home/nation, public/private, frontier/cosmopolitan, women’s space/men’s space, and many more that inform our daily lives and form those discursive constraints that affect entire communities. Implementing Native feminist critiques and conceptions of space will help in several ways to mend the divisions that maps of “difference” have produced. It also will uproot colonial

discourses. Effective Native feminist practices call into question and disorient colonial narrations of “authentic” Native communities, families, and individuals. Native scholarship will put into practice cultural spatial narrations that mend rifts rather than exacerbate its own positions and moves us toward destroying Western schemas that hold patriarchy in place (Goeman 296).

Literature offers an avenue of expression that is vital to the lifeblood of Indigenous cultures, as well as to issues of dominance that have impacted women in critical ways. Exploring the “erotic” has given creative expression to what many Indigenous women believe to be essential to articulating the sexual identity of Indigenous women. Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm, “...eschews the long-standing stereotypical depictions of Indigenous women as passive objects of male exploitation and violence, especially as inflicted by white Western man as part of the ongoing project of colonization.” The erotic can be viewed as a powerful tool in confronting the injustices inflicted upon Indigenous women, as well as a “bridge between the spiritual and the political.” This bridge creates a deep connection between “an embodied self and the world in which that self exists” (Andrews 134). Joy Harjo supports this premise.

Without poetry, without song, without dance I would not be alive. Nor would any of us. We come from root cultures in which song, poetry, stories, art was something that belonged to all of us. They were not “spectator sports,” as they are mostly in this over-culture. Everyone sand, everyone danced, made art. It was/is integral to being human. Now it seems reserved for the elite, for those who can afford the time. We need expression to feel connected, not just to our communities but to who we are down deep, past the eyes and the gullet, to the heart and the incredible depth past it (Harjo and Winder 29).

The prodigious expression of the life of a community through the arts allows women a voice they might not otherwise have. It is also a cultural foundation for future generations. It is a critical instrument in the expression and defense of the Indigenous woman’s rightful place within her own tribal nation, as well as in the context of the larger

non-Indian society. It has been utilized as an engine to stimulate greater understanding as well as to create the impetus to the activist spirit of the Indigenous woman. “Native women’s literature...has at its roots a counter to colonial imaginings—particularly in its ability to not only opposes colonial narrations that naturalize space through power and language, but (re)invent new stories and branch into the past, present, and future” (Goeman, “(Re)Mapping Indigenous Presence” 296).

The imposition of male dominance that has pervaded once healthy tribal gender systems and caused the lateral oppression that continues to impact Indigenous women, has been addressed by women like Susan Deer Cloud, Mohawk/Blackfeet. She has written the following, which poignantly addresses the views of men toward women. It is taken from a piece entitled, “Doe Season.”

She dreamed of the last hunting season she endured with her ex-husband, the night he ribbed a barroom buddy about a doe he’d shot. “How could you shoot any *thing* as pretty her through the heart?” her ex asked. “Me, I only kill the ugly ones”—speaking of doe as if they were women, laughing, spilling beer on his blood-red jacket, doe permit pinned to its back. She parted from him before the next day’s sun shot across the mountain tops.

Unexpected snow this morning—gun blasts in the forest, men hunting doe, other men hunting women, threatening them with guns, some shooting the ones they decide are ugly, some murdering even the pretty ones (Erdrich and Tohe 69).

### Traditional and Creative Arts

Creative expression is often therapeutic as it offers an outlet for emotions that may otherwise remain deep within the heart and soul. It allows for a voice that sometimes needs a manner of crying out into the world, articulating all the wounds that have been

inflicted upon the spirit. It is also an expression of culture as is illustrated by traditional arts.

When sitting with an interview participant from Pine Ridge Reservation, it became clear that there was a certain level of inhibition, uncertainty or insecurity pervading the interview, making her responses hesitant and halting. She spoke softly, almost inaudibly, answering questions about hope as it was manifested in her community. Her discomfort seemed to have its foundation in her surroundings—a very poor, run-down trailer that showed all the signs of poverty so prevalent in her community. When the subject was broached about where she felt hope existed not only in her community, but also for her personally as an Indigenous woman, she began to talk about her beadwork and the regalia she made for her children and grandchildren. Her demeanor immediately changed. She became animated and self-assured, her voice stronger and more certain. She brought out a suitcase and as she pulled out piece after piece of beautiful crafted beadwork, she told the history of each, as well as the connection to family and tradition. All of the external melted away, holding little meaning or value anymore. The sense of autonomy and pride, so conspicuous in the work of this humble woman—a sense of herself as important, capable, and a person from a strong Lakota background—was critically vital and gave her life deeper meaning and purpose. Her artistic work offered an outlet for expression of traditional tribal symbolism and ceremony, while simultaneously strengthening her family, and one would subsequently assume, the community as well.

This work is not only utilitarian and artistic in its nature, but is critically important in a spiritual nature as well. Joseph Epes Brown shared his observation of the quillworker's guild with which he became acquainted.

Because of the formal and initiatory nature of the quillworker's guild, the woman will probably be aware of the identity between the porcupine and the sun, and that the sun is a manifestation of the Creative Principle. The quills she lays on in geometrical patterns established by tradition are really rays of the sun and thus eminently sacred. The quillworker has, as it were, trapped the sun, understood as a spiritual principle, upon a garment of now utilitarian, aesthetic, and spiritual value. These values are real and functional both to the maker and to the wearer of the garment. Neither art nor what we call religion are divorced from each other or from life (Brown, Joseph 59).

Through the visual arts, Indigenous women find expression for their particular histories and cultural traditions; of lives altered by a foreign power; of contemporary issues that impact their lives; of an Indigenous relation and contribution to the world. *Stands with a Fist* is a multi-disciplinary exhibition of Indigenous women's art work. Drawing upon the unique circumstances of Indigenous women, it illustrates their "relationship to the land, contemporary worldview, and sense of obligation to their cultures" (IAIA). Additionally, Teri Greeves, Kiowa, is working with the Minnesota Arts Institute to develop an exhibit focused on the work of Indigenous women, which is due to open in December of 2018. Her own beadwork comes from her grandmothers' tradition and teachings. She states:

I am a beadworker. I've been beading since I was about 8 years old. I am compelled to do it. I have no choice in the matter. I must express myself and my experience as a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Kiowa and I do it, like those unknown artists before me, through beadwork. And though my medium may be considered 'craft' or 'traditional,' my stories are from the same source as the voice running through that first Kiowa beadworker's needles. It is the voice of my grandmothers (Greeves, "Artist Statement").

This transmission of craft as well as culture is a vital thread through the lives of Indigenous women, carrying on the work of the past and offering it to future generations, ensuring that traditions continue. Whether that work takes the form of what is considered “traditional” crafts or whether it is interpreted through further creative expression, it is critical to the women artists.

Lita Fontaine, Anishinaabe, portrays the place of traditional women within their respective societies through her work. One particular piece focuses on the drum— “Or, rather, a drumbeat. Not with a drumstick, but with a woman’s heartbeat. It is a heartbeat that lies beneath her breast. The sound is really a question that has been asked for millennia: ‘Who am I?’” (Anderson and Lawrence 98).

Indigenous women have found expression for their histories and circumstances for centuries into contemporary times, including venues such as rap and folk music, film and photography, along with traditional arts. Valerie Red Horse, a Cherokee/Sioux filmmaker likes the need for expression through the arts to a means of survival. “We’ve used art as our way of defining ourselves and expressing ourselves, religiously, spiritually, our language base, everything has gone into expression. So our art is really an identity.” This is a voice that must be given serious consideration in order to better understand each distinct culture from which it emanates. It represents survival (DeVries 1).

This point of the star is the creative expression or the particular design that the quilt has been given. It is critical to the whole as it speaks to the past, present and future and gives voice to women in ways that they might not otherwise have it. It is resistance in

it's own right, and offers a deeper understanding and sense of history and tradition. It is survival, as these crafts and the creative expression stemming from them, have been a thread throughout the history of not only Indigenous families, but of tribal nations.

For decades, Native women artists have been historians and auditors of their past and future. They are symbols of Indigenous America's perseverance. These female artists are a constant visual and audible reminder of cultural survival and existence. Their crafts survived the Battle of Little Big Horn, Wounded Knee one and two. Their spirits survived the Trail of Tears, the Relocation and Termination program and continued struggles against cultural annihilation (DeVries 1).

## CHAPTER TEN

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SPIRITUALITY AS AN IMPETUS TO CHANGE

*The spirits are all around you, and  
if you know how to listen, you can hear them  
singing, sometimes  
Visiting with each other, sometimes  
Crying; mourning; hurting your heart, sometimes*

*There is life all around on this star light night  
It is moving  
slowly  
in all directions  
not energized as when  
under full moon shadows*

*It is peaceful  
There is peace  
here  
on our Mother  
the Earth*

Debra Lynn White Plume, "Memories of a Wonder Full Night with Alex"  
(Reyer 75-76).

As has been discussed in previous chapters, spirituality pervades every aspect of the lives of Indigenous women, as well as their communities. It is felt in the heart, in the land, in children and family, in community, in tradition. There is no separation of spiritual life and everyday life. "Spirituality has always played a significant role in our cultures. Even now, many Native peoples do not divorce spirituality from politics, business, education, health or social organization" (Anderson 71). This is a common thread for Indigenous peoples—those who maintain their spiritual traditions as well as those who integrate them with Christian, or other teachings and practices, that have become a part of their lives.



Women have held central roles in creation stories and in bringing spiritual traditions to their tribal nations. Paula Gunn Allen shares: “Certainly there is reason to believe that many American Indian tribes thought that the primary potency in the universe was female, and that understanding authorizes all tribal activities, religious and social” (Gunn Allen 26). Additionally, women have held prominent roles in teaching the young about their Native spiritual traditions. An elder in Pine Ridge shared that his *Unci* (Grandmother) was his teacher of Lakota spiritual traditions and she taught him that from the moment we open our eyes, our life is prayer. He shared that along with this, he is a Catholic and goes to church every day. That said, he adheres to the spiritual traditions and ceremonies that are part of Lakota life, and advocates these teachings to the youth. He asserts that there is no need to be in a building or part of a particular ceremony—we pray every moment of every day. *Tunkasila*, Grandfather, the Creator, hears all that we feel, and all for which we give thanks and ask. His *Unci* was the impetus for his spiritual growth and what he continues to pass on to others (Personal Interview. Pine Ridge, July 2015).

Veronica Valandra spoke of the merging of traditional practices and her Catholic faith, and what she shares with those in her community who question whether it is correct to do so.

I think it’s wonderful because I combine too. It makes me stronger. I always tell people, even elders that. Some of the elders think that they can’t go to *Inipi* [Sweat Lodge] ceremony because you’re a Catholic, and I say, “Why? You were a Lakota before you were a Catholic.” I always try to make them see it in that way because I say, “That’s who you are. The Catholic church is more European.” I said, “You’re a Lakota. You should be proud to practice your tradition” (Valandra, Veronica. Personal Interview, July 2015).

These spiritual traditions give life to the communities and the people, and are seen as an avenue toward health—emotionally, physically and spiritually. Women play a critical role in ensuring that knowledge and practice of spiritual traditions continues. Just as the elder shared about his *Unci* teaching him of the spiritual ways, Indigenous women have traditionally been spiritual teachers. This finds its foundations in the belief that the role of life-givers is revered among Indigenous peoples and signifies a spiritual power that only women can hold. Giving birth is seen as a “woman’s role as intermediary”—the entryway through which all enter this life. It can be life-threatening to both mother and child, as the mother risks her own return to the spirit world. However, it is incredibly significant that mothers can bring life from the spirit world into this world. Childbirth is seen as the vehicle through which women find the greatest prominence. “As both birth and death are passages between the spirit and the material world, childbirth is a time when women are intermediaries between spirit and life on earth” (Anderson 73).

Blue Dawn Little shared what she has been taught about the role of women in spirituality.

My understanding with traditional practices is that they’re given to people by dreams. If it’s a man who receives that dream, he’s the one who practices. If it’s a woman who receives that dream—and I’ve seen women receive those dreams—they’re the ones who do it. And so they have no say so because it’s the ancestors, the grandfathers who give them this task at hand, this duty or responsibility to their people. I’ve also seen people have a bad energetic effect or karmic effect if they don’t follow through with that. But as far as, I guess, advocating for them, I’ve seen women do so more than men have and I feel like it’s because there’s more of a compassionate aspect there. Women are able to show compassion and understanding, you know, feeling empathy with people. So they feel more comfortable in getting to know those traditional practices and the cultural way—and the different ways of life of the different tribes because the women make them feel comfortable (Little, Blue Dawn. Personal Interview. Pine Ridge, July 2015).

For Indigenous women, spirituality is critical to life. Additionally, “Native women’s roles in traditional spiritual practices, ceremonies and beliefs demonstrate that Native women held positions of esteem in their societies” (Anderson 71). Spiritual teachings for the Lakota are profound and it is especially significant that the values instilled in Lakota culture were “rationalized through the prophetization and mystification of a woman” (Powers 52). The respect and regard accorded women as powerful beings is evident in the fact that the *Canunpa* (Sacred Pipe), as well as the spiritual teachings, was presented to the people by the White Buffalo Calf Woman. She came to them in ceremony and showed them how to use the pipe. She taught them how to pray and about the seven sacred rites they were to practice. She taught that they must live in peace and be generous of spirit, and that the needs and rights of the community came before those of the individual. She further addressed the particular needs of the women.

My dear sisters, the women: You have a hard life to live in this world, yet without you this life would not be what it is. Wakantanka intends that you shall bear much sorrow—comfort others in time of sorrow. By your hands the family moves. You have been given the knowledge of making clothing and of feeding the family. Wakantanka is with you in your sorrows and joins you in your griefs. He has given you the great gift of kindness toward every living creature on earth. You he has chosen to have a feeling for the dead who are gone. He knows that you remember the dead longer than do the men. He knows that you love your children dearly (Powers 47).

It is significant to note that, according to accounts of the appearance of the White Buffalo Calf Woman, one of the young scouts to whom she first spoke had evil thoughts and attempted to violate her. He was subsequently turned to bones and dust, destroyed by his own lustful behavior, while the good scout was spared, and returned to the people to

tell them of this encounter. “Here as throughout the oral translation, sexuality becomes negative when it represents selfish exploitation” (Deloria, *Speaking of Indians* 87).

The significance of a woman bringing the *Canunpa* as well as the spiritual teachings to the Lakota people cannot be overstated and illustrates the traditional role of esteem that women held in Indigenous spirituality, and in many cases, continue to hold. Christianity then, has been a double-edged sword. It came at the expense of cultural and spiritual traditions, and resulted in scores of deaths among Indigenous nations who rebelled against repressive, often violent evangelization. However, it should be noted that there is a strong connection to Christianity in many Indigenous communities. Janine Pease shares more about this impact on her own Crow nation.

We have a lot of fundamentalist Christians on our reservation and I think they’re very anxious to cast any sort of Native spiritual life as works of the devil. It’s really based on fear, which propels people away from the ability to be one with traditional concepts. They lose touch with the lodges and the whole creation. It creates a real separation, which tends to make life so much more shallow. We get students whose parents have died or who have gone into fundamentalist religion and whose connection to Indian spirituality is very minimal. They’re more than curious about it, but they may be afraid they’ll be studying the devil (Crozier-Hogle and Wilson 105).

As has previously been noted, Indigenous women have suffered a history of subjugation by Christian churches through, among other things, boarding schools. Coercion by Christian institutions to remove any vestige of “Indianness,” to transform women into the Euro-Western image, particularly removing traditional spiritual roles, has had lasting consequences. Dagmar Thorpe, Sac and Fox, shared that women were held in esteem in traditional societies and that they often acted as “shamans and medicine people, which made them doctors, teachers, leaders and workers for the people. If not acting as

shamans, Indigenous women supported or sponsored ceremonies” (Anderson 72). Some elders have shared that the complexity of the societal impact owing to the loss of traditional or spiritual foundations, is evidenced by the level of violence and substance abuse on reservations. It is commonly heard among the Lakota and Dakota that if the youth were to return to their spiritual roots, hope would return and their communities would then begin to heal. Blue Dawn Little shared:

...If you have that connection and knowing what you’re doing with your culture, knowing that if you ever have a child you can pass that on and be proud of yourself, that you taught your child this thing and not somebody else. And I think that the cultural aspects, the way of life, the way we were connected to the earth in the first place, and the way we practiced our spirituality is key to combatting the issues. And it’s a matter of how do we do that? How do we touch everybody with that? (Little, Blue Dawn. Personal Interview. Pine Ridge, July 2015).

Healing the effects of the disruption of healthy communal living is seen as connected to the teaching and practice of traditional spirituality and culture: “Balancing the spiritual and the physical.” The return to the practice of spiritual traditions throughout daily life is critical in places where ceremonies are not practiced anymore, or where only a few elders carry on the traditions. “That wisdom and knowledge and the ability to emerge with that level of consciousness is lost” in some instances (Crozier-Hogle and Wilson 6). Veronica Valandra shared her role in attempting to make the Catholic church more cognizant and deferential to the concerns of Indigenous people.

The church really doesn’t know Native protocol, and there is such a thing as Native protocol. Native protocol is like, I know Lakota and I go out to, say the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. I was invited by the Chumash Nation to their ceremony and I would go, but I have to respect their culture, and as a Lakota person, I bring a gift because she invited me. This actually is a Chumash woman—a spiritual leader that I became associated with. She came to a ceremony that I did, and she said, “Oh, you have to come to one of my ceremonies. Thanks for sharing yours here in Lakota culture and you come to mine.” And so I do that,

and you go and you take them a gift. You always take them a gift. That's Native—cause that's what we do. And when you talk, you know, you acknowledge the people of that land first. But you know the church doesn't even do that. So it's just things like that. Even if I went to a Powwow out in California—whatever tribe—you should always get permission to participate in the Powwow. So there's Native protocol.

So with the Pope and this deal this summer [his visit to Philadelphia in 2015], I'm not really excited about it because I'm kind of upset with him because while he's here he's going to canonize that Fr. Junipero Sera. And you know, he has been so misinformed. You think as a Jesuit he would have read up on Fr. Sera and known. And I know, for the California Natives all along the coast, it's just opening up another wound, which has never changed. I'm friends with a lot of California Natives through the church and one of the tribal leaders...said, "There's nothing sacred about him." You know he doesn't deserve to be a saint. So it's very sad. He's going to canonize him in Washington, DC. He's going to the Basilica and doing it there. ...Is he scared to go to California and do it? The stories that continue... I thought as a Lakota people, that they had it worse than any of us. I signed a petition to the First People out in California. They got a petition started and somehow I got a copy of it to sign. So I signed it. After that, I keep getting all these emails updating me. And so he's already got a feast day—July 1<sup>st</sup>. I come to daily mass here now, but for Sera, I can't go out of good conscience. I just—I couldn't come with a good heart so I just stayed away (Valandra, Veronica. Personal Interview. Pine Ridge, July 2015).

This illustrates the continued abuse of and indifference toward the concerns of Indigenous people by the church. These are communities—tribal nations—that are invariably confronted with a horrifying history that continues to impact their members today, and the church that shows this lack of responsibility and concern constantly reopens old wounds and leaves Indigenous nations struggling to overcome the past. Women like Veronica, who understand, respect and practice traditional spirituality along with her own Christian faith, exhibit a strength that is nothing short of inspirational, and that offers other women in her community and other communities, like her Chumash friend, the opportunity to understand that accepting Christianity does not suggest that giving up traditional spiritual ways is obligatory. Additionally, it is clear that women like

Veronica and those petitioning the church, are setting an example to others that it is not only acceptable, but critical to stand up when injustice continues.

### Women and Ceremony

To all appearances, historically, men conducted the ceremonies. This would seem to be the case today as well, as *Wicasa Wakan* or Medicine Men lead the *Wiwanke Wacipi* (Sundance) and other ceremonies. However, this is not done without the aid of women, who are seen as more intermediaries between men and the spiritual realm. “Many Native spiritual traditions emphasize balance between men and women and structure ceremonies in ways that require equal input from men and women,” teaching the foundational premise of equality (Anderson 72).

Joseph Epes Brown, while living with Black Elk, Lakota chief and spiritual leader, spoke of the significance of the spiritual in the lives of Plains women—particularly the Lakota. Ceremony belonged not only to men but to women as well. The *Hanbleceya* or Vision Quest, was a crucial element in the life of each person and was an expectation of every young man as well as young women. Each participated in the *Hanbleceya* many times throughout their lives. “No one in these societies...could have success in any of the activities of the culture without the unique spiritual power received through the quest” (Brown, Joseph 60).

Lakota women were often given spiritual influence as *Pejuta Winyela* or Medicine Women. These women specialized in such healing practices as massage and herbal medicines, as well as a practice that involved sucking the illness out of someone

through a type of bone tube. They were adept at locating various plants and minerals, which they then boiled into broths and teas and administered as remedies for various illnesses. "...It was believed that they were guided by spirits who had control over each of the medicines." These women had reached menopause, and as such, had earned the right to hold the important position of *Pejuta Winyela*. They were also "midwives and prophets," and they participated in the *Wiwanke Wacipi* and other ceremonies (Powers 96-97).

Today, the face of ceremony is often represented by the *Wicasa Wakan*—the Holy Man or Medicine Man. However, women remain in important roles in the spiritual life of the community. Lakota and Dakota women continue to make the *Hanbleceya*, and rituals like the or *Wanagi Yuska Wicohan*, or Releasing of the Soul Ceremony, which is conducted one year after the death of a loved one. It is believed "that the spirit of the deceased lingers near the place of death for about one year," while women engage in the mourning process. Once the year is over, the women prepare a Memorial Feast and a *Wacantognaka* or giveaway is held, at which gifts are given to loved ones and friends who held significance in the life of the deceased or their family. The women fashion the gifts—making star quilts, beadwork and quillwork—as well as purchasing gifts to be given. This signifies that the period of mourning has ended (Powers 197-198).

Lakota and Dakota women also support men going through the *Yuwipi* ceremony, a healing ceremony, as well as those participating in the *Wiwanke Wacipi*. While a woman is not pierced as men are, she "may offer one or several pieces of flesh from her



arms during the course of the ceremony. She may also dance beside her husband or brother who has pierced himself until he breaks through” (Powers 202).

The critical relevance of the White Buffalo Calf Woman, and the resulting place of prominence that Lakota and Dakota women hold in the spiritual life of their communities, is pervasive in traditional life and female counterparts are found in other Native traditions. Spider Woman and Changing Woman of the Navajo and Hopi, and Corn Mother of the Penobscot, all represent the importance of the feminine spirit in traditional Indigenous spirituality.

Given the significance that Indigenous women place on spirituality as being central to their lives and the lives of their families and communities, as well as the emphasis they place on their spiritual lives as contributing to their work, this could be seen as the center of the star quilt. It is where all converge and from which all radiate outward. The significance of this portion of the star cannot be overstated as this is the point at which everything else is held together. As has been demonstrated throughout this study, spirituality and its eminent place in the lives of Indigenous women—in their history, their traditions, their personal lives, their families and communities, and in the work that they undertake as leaders, is of utmost importance. Therefore, this central place in the quilt holds the greatest significance and is essential and pervasive in all Indigenous cultures.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

## CONCLUSION

This study has been a long journey of growth in understanding of the true spirit and strength that Indigenous women possess in order to confront a long and arduous history since first contact with Europeans. This particular star quilt is still in process as Indigenous women continue to be impacted by the effects of imposed male dominance. It is being beautifully stitched and crafted with love and care, not only for themselves, but for their children and communities, and for the generations to come. Each section of the star holds critical significance, and all are interdependent, making the process and the journey toward completion exhaustive.

The struggle for sovereignty is seen in a unique light and takes on new meaning when examined from the stance of Indigenous women. It is an ascendancy not only of tribal nations, but that of spirit as well. For these women, it is a recovery of their sovereign status and rightful places in their traditional societies—places of respect, esteem and power.

Despite the fact that the effects of male dominance remain, not only as exhibited by Indigenous men, but even among women, in the form of lateral violence or lateral oppression, the greater good is at the heart of why Indigenous women struggle for leadership roles. Janet Routzen shared her feelings about Cecilia Fire Thunder:

I was flying out of Rapid one time and I was just sitting there. I didn't recognize her. I knew about her. I mean I knew kind of—I mean we were really proud of her when she got elected in Oglala. But I was just sitting there and our plane was late so me and her just started chatting and we chatted on the plane and we got to

Denver and I think I said, “You’re my hero! A strong Lakota leader!” And ever since then, we kind of talked... We’ve had conversations about child sexual assault and how to address those needs. She was usually busy getting flown here and there doing lots of political actions and things like that. She’s so funny and she’s such a good speaker and she cares about the people. She’s passionate about what she does (Routzen, Janet. Personal Interview. Rosebud Reservation, July 2014).

This spirit of sisterhood, or *maske*, keeps Indigenous women inspired and motivated. Their mutual support is invaluable and as Blue Dawn Little shared, is imperative to young girls and women. For each woman, it is critical to find an avenue for her own voice, whether that be through activism, education, the arts, or spirituality. Every path chosen is a path of resistance to what has been a history of repression, marginalization, and domination. Despite struggling against seemingly insurmountable odds, historically and in contemporary times, they exhibit a strength of character and determination that is formidable. The construction of this quilt is a journey that was begun long ago and will continue into the future. It is a work of deep love and commitment that is offered to the coming generations.

*As the time-honored saying goes, all indigenous women together form the backbone of our nations. We need look no further than our own mothers and grandmothers for that timeless indigenous strength and gentle wisdom to reinvigorate us in our most difficult life circumstances.*

*The strength of the indigenous woman endures. Embedded in the history of each Indian woman lies the means to bringing back the ways of honoring ourselves first, so that our nations can become strong again. If we truly wish to reclaim our rightful place as honored matriarchs within our tribal societies once more, let us start by connecting and reconnecting with our mothers and grandmothers. In honor of all Native women, we remember them (Manning).*

## AFTERWORD

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*Wopila tanka. Mitakuye oyasin.*

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