



Fall 2014

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Yowan, Rebecca J.M., "The Impact of Empire on Native American Women and Mothers" (2014). *Student Publications*. 255.
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Abstract

No one doubts that the colonizing forces of the dominant, Euro-American culture have had an extreme and enduring impact on Native American cultures. However, the specific impact that empire has had on Native American women is a salient topic for research. Drawing on examples of environmental degradation, stolen agency, and psychological suffering, this essay illustrates the numerous and distressing effects that the philosophy and practice of empire have had and continue to have on Native American women.

Keywords

Native American, women, empire, colonize, globalization

Disciplines

Indigenous Studies | Social History | Women's History | Women's Studies

Comments

This paper was written for Professor Stephanie Sellers' course, *IDS 206: Foundations of Native American Studies*, Fall 2014.

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IDS 206: Foundations of Native American Studies

November 19th 2014

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In Winona LaDuke's *Indigenous Environmental Perspectives: A North American Primer*, a Mohawk woman named Katsi Cook Barreiro is noted to have stated, "The analysis of Mohawk mother's milk shows that our bodies are, in fact, a part of the landfill" (385). Here, she is referencing a literal landfill from which quantifiable poisons like PCBs flow, but, disturbing as this imagery becomes, Native American women's bodies are forced to serve as landfills for more than just chemicals; they become the dumping grounds of an empire, and the effects of that abuse are relevant today, as this is a current issue. In her lecture "Thinking Beyond Empire," Winona LaDuke defines empire as a predator/prey relationship, as an unsustainable system of unrestrained consumption at the expense of the non-dominant member, as a constant violation of others' human rights, and as a "diminishment of those you are seeking to conquer" (LaDuke). Every poisoned idea that the dominant society has thrust upon Native American women about their bodies, their sexualities, and their intergenerational roles can be seen as a result of the ideas espoused in the settler philosophy of empire as LaDuke defines it here and put into practice for their commercial or imperial benefit to that empire.

It is salient to note that the material poisons of industrial expansion have harrowing and unique effects on Native American women and Native American mothers (in the biological sense), and that this is the direct result of empire. Drawing from LaDuke's lecture and essay, the reason for the continued creation of such an abundance of mining operations is because the

empire is a fundamentally dominating institution based on a model of continuous consumption. In other words, the philosophy of empire, i.e. that Native Americans must be conquered, and the practice of empire, i.e. that coal and uranium energy must continually be consumed, are both fundamental causes of the placement of industrial mining operations and waste dumps on or near reservations, which, in turn, negatively impacts the Native Americans in that area. However, Native American women, particularly mothers, are impacted by these affronts to the environment in different, some might argue worse, ways than is the general Native population.

For example, the toxic chemicals caused by these mines, which, as if their creation were not bad enough, were not disposed of in a sustainable way, led to awful health complications for pregnant Native American women. According to LaDuke, the rate of birth defects amongst Navajo women is “two to eight times higher than the national average,” and birth defects are commonly associated with exposure to the chemicals produced during uranium mining (378). LaDuke also informs the reader that the Kerr McGee Corporation only received permission to mine uranium on Navajo property because “of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and promises of jobs and royalties” (377). Furthermore, Kerr McGee ran their facility in complete contempt of safety procedures, and “...abandoned approximately seventy-one acres worth of uranium mill tailings on the banks of the San Juan River, the only major waterway in the arid region” (378). Not only does this behavior illustrate the practice of empire insofar as the corporations are constantly churning through more and more land because they are unsustainable, but it also illustrates the philosophy of empire in that, through their negligence of safety and of properly disposing of their waste (if such a thing is possible), they are treating Native Americans as less than themselves. So, now that the incidence of uranium mines has been established as a product of empire, it is

easy to see how the philosophy and practice of that institution negatively impact Native American mothers, as the harm here is intergenerational.

Sadly, that harm is not restricted to just the Navajo Nation. In fact, “fourteen women, or thirty-eight percent of the pregnant women on the Pine Ridge reservation, miscarried....Between 1971 and 1979, 314 babies had been born with birth defects, in a total Indian population of under 20,000” (LaDuke 379). Clearly, this exhibits the disregard for Native American lives that underpins the philosophy of empire; coupling their negligence with their choice of location, one simply has to assume that these corporations do not care about their negative impact on the health and livelihood of Native Americans. What is missing, however, in these statistics, is the untold story of women’s suffering. One cannot even begin to discuss the grief that a mother who has lost her child suffers, but it is clear that that kind of untold trauma is the direct result of empire for Native American women, since the dominant society is an empire responsible for uranium mining on or near the land of the people they are trying to conquer, to use LaDuke’s apt, though distressing, term, and that mining is responsible for the miscarriages that Native women on Pine Ridge suffered.

In addition to birth defects and miscarriages, the presence of toxic chemicals and hazardous waste from these mining operations has also negatively affected another aspect of motherhood for Native American women: breastfeeding. The situation alluded to above that the Akwesasne Mothers Milk Project is attempting to study is a direct result of the dumping of PCBs by the General Motors company, a company that, LaDuke points out, should have known better, since the harmful side effects of PCB exposure are well known and were well known at the time of their dumping (384). Apart from the commercial aspect of empire, wherein General Motors is seeking more profits by cheap dumping ground and reservations simply happen to fulfil that

requirement, that last statement leads one to a more disturbing view. If the effects of PCBs were well known at the time of the dumping and, as Winona LaDuke points out in her lecture, one function of empire is a diminishment of the “conquered,” then it may not be too far outside the realm of possibility to suggest that General Motors, the other industrial companies and, by extension, the state or federal government that gave its permission, are operating from a paradigm of viewing Native Americans as less than Euro-Americans or non-Natives. Operating under this assumption, it becomes apparent that the impact of empire here is a corporeal manifestation of continued colonization, with the dominant society taking Native American lives, in addition to disrupting their environment and way of life. Frankly, the circumstances of a portion of the dominant society placing hazardous chemicals onto the property of Native Americans from whose disappearance they would financially benefit seems eerily similar to the infamous smallpox-infected blankets incident, bolstering the assertion that this is evidence of continued colonization.

Returning to the material impact of the contamination, LaDuke notes that “Inuit women have levels of PCB contamination higher than those recorded anywhere else in the world” (385). Of course, this in and of itself is a frightening effect of empire, but LaDuke goes on to note that the level of PCBs in Inuit women’s breastmilk is between seven and twenty-eight times higher than the level in women from Quebec (385-386). Furthermore, this has caused “fear and great sadness” amongst Inuit women, who are concerned about the possible “toxic contamination of infants,” but find that baby formula is beyond their financial means (386). Most obviously, poverty is a reflection of continued colonization and the dominating aspect of the philosophy of empire and contamination is a result of the commercial practice of empire. However, parsing things out further, there is deep psychological impact here. Not to suggest that all groups of

Native Americans are the same, but, if what Granny says to Suzy in *Daughters of Copper Woman*, about playing Frog instead of taking pills to relieve menstrual cramps (Cameron 128), and her later insinuation that she uses “bug-weed tea” as a natural birth control (Cameron 159), can be coupled with Winona LaDuke’s assertion that Native Americans’ pharmacology has not been respected, then one might assert that Indigenous women have their own methods of childcare and could reason that they might prefer a more natural approach than commercialized formula with synthetic ingredients (“Big Pharma,” to use a colloquialism). Essentially, in this instance, empire has robbed Inuit women of their agency concerning feeding their infants: the poverty that has resulted from colonization restricts them to what their own bodies can provide, yet the contamination that has resulted from the commercial practice of empire restricts them from breastfeeding without worry. As such, the impact of empire here seems to be the demoralizing erasure of choice in the lives of Native American women. If anything is more devastating than having one’s choices taken away, it might perhaps be the emotional anguish of feeling as if one is poisoning one’s own child. Of course, there is no doubt whatsoever that the presence of PCBs is wholly the fault of empire and mining companies, one cannot place the blame anywhere else. However, through internalized oppression and the fact, as Adam Huey stated in the TED Talk the class watched as part of the Black Hills Land Claim presentation, that the last stage of genocide is blaming the victim (which, frankly, women of all races seem to have to deal with more than men of any race), it might be possible that, under the great stress of her situation because of the reasons above outlined, an Inuit woman may *feel* like she is putting poisons into her child’s body, disrupting the natural course of the bond between mother and child, the emotional impact of which is incalculable and can be directly linked to empire. As such, because of the disrespect of Native American personhood and the continuous unsustainable

consumption inherent in the philosophy and practice of empire, respectively, that empire has had a cruel and demoralizing impact on Native American women and mothers through its intergenerational effects.

However, the impacts resulting from the material circumstances of empire manifested by mining companies and their pollutants are not the only impacts that empire has on Native American women. Native American women's bodies have also been the metaphorical dumping ground for some of the more pernicious beliefs that the dominant, Euro-American cultures posits about women, and this is not restricted to Native Nations out West or in the Arctic. In Granny's story in *Daughters of Copper Woman*, she writes that young girls "were taught that their bodies would become filthy" during menstruation and that "their bodies were sinful and must never be indulged or enjoyed" (Cameron 58). Granny goes on to say that "their minds were so poisoned, their spirits so damaged, their souls so contaminated that they were not eligible to join the Society of Women" (58). The linguistic link is obvious; just as mining operations spew poisons that contaminate the body, the priests' teachings result in a figurative poisoning of the mind and soul. By juxtaposing these two forms of making Native American women's bodies a "dumping ground," so to speak, it is clear that both result from empire, since the concept of "If we get the girls, we get the race," illustrates how important women are in the Indigenous paradigm. Thus, teaching Native American women to be ashamed of their bodies is evidence of the philosophy of empire because it is a "diminishment of those [the dominant society] is seeking to conquer" and it is evidence of the practice of empire because, as illustrated by their not being eligible for the Society of Women, it is an act of power and domination.

The impact is perhaps best viewed in the words of Mary Crow Dog, who describes her mission school as "a curse for our family for generations," since her mother, sisters, and

grandmother also went there (Crow Dog 31). Thus, analogous to the birth defects from PCB contamination, this curse has intergenerational impact on Native American women. She goes on to recount the nuns' "exaggerated fear of anything having even the faintest connection to sex," citing examples in which Sister Bernard said Mary Crow Dog was "too free with [her] body," wore "unchaste dresses, skirts which were too short, too suggestive," and was committing "unchastity" (Crow Dog 38-39). The implication here is obvious: Mary Crow Dog is being viewed as dirty and licentious by the nuns of this establishment, which would seem to illustrate the kind of thinking that Granny pointed out, that women's bodies were sinful, and the fallacious idea in empire that Native Americans have less value than Euro-Americans. It has been discussed at length how boarding schools are agents of empire, but so too are the specific teachings they promulgate. There is no doubt that Mary Crow Dog did not bow to this abuse, her tone alone indicates her strength and resistance; however, it is obvious that the nuns' actions seem geared towards emotionally breaking down these women and girls into more pliable, docile pupils. Thus, the dominating aspect of the philosophy of empire emerges: the worse the institution can make their charges feel about themselves, the less likely they would be to offer resistance. Despite the fact that their strategy clearly failed with Mary Crow Dog, it is not a stretch of the imagination to posit that some girls from mission schools did internalize these teachings, like the ones Granny said were poisoned, contaminated, or damaged. Thus, the shattering effect that that kind of internalized inferiority complex might have on self-esteem, self-worth, and, even, the self becomes the somber impact of empire on Native American women.

In short, Native American women's bodies become the dump site for all the toxic practice and philosophy of the dominant society's empire, which causes untold emotional and physical suffering. When speaking of literal poisons, the continuous, unsustainable consumption

aspect of the practice of empire causes mining operations to be constantly in search of more land, more profits, more ways to expand and consume. The stations are built and the toxic waste is dumped on or near Native American reservations despite known health concerns, a choice that is underpinned by the philosophy of empire that indicates that the dominant society seeks to diminish and conquer the oppressed group. From these circumstances, Native American mothers feel one of the more tragic effects of empire; their bodies become part of the landfill, as one woman put it, and their intergenerational role as a mother is interrupted when these poisons result in miscarriages, birth defects, or contaminated milk, which in turn robs them of their choice about natal care. The impact here cannot be summarized in PCB parts per million or any other statistic; the impact is the grief of mothers whose children are suffering because the empire, by its very nature, must always seek to profit, consume, and conquer. Figurative poisons, too, flow from the empire: ideas of women's bodies being sinful and dirty disseminated, in these instances at least, by the Catholic Church represent both the philosophy and practice of empire, in that they seek to devalue Native American women in order to better dominate their societies for commercial and imperial gain. Here, again, the impact is qualitative, not quantitative; one cannot help but assume that this kind of treatment results in emotional suffering, damaged self-esteem, and may even be one of the factors in the high suicide rate among Native peoples. When one hears of the United States as an empire in this day and age, one hears of the nation's foreign exploits, of wars fought far afield (usually over an oil field), but Winona LaDuke's lecture makes clear that empire operates right here in North America and that it is still operating today — a distressing prospect, but one that is necessary to face if society is ever to “think beyond empire”.

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