

Investigating the Colonial Project of Domestic and Intragroup Violence in the Queer Indigenous Community

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Within Indigenous communities, there is often a lack of discussion of the ongoing harmful effects of the practice of colonial gender, sex, and sexuality. Within my paper are three poems I wrote tying together my personal relationships with the politics of settler colonialism. These poems intend to illustrate this violence within Indigenous Queer relationships as a colonial legacy that is sustained by homophobia, heterosexism, transphobia, and misogyny. In my first poem, titled “A Letter to My Brother,” I draw on settler scholar Sam McKegney’s (2011) concept that there are three harmful stereotypes available to Indigenous men: bloodthirsty savage, noble warrior, and drunken absentee (p. 258). The un/intentional undertaking of these colonial masculinities by Indigenous men perpetuates misogynistic settler colonial violence. In “Do Better for Our Daughters”, I draw on Diné scholar Jennifer Nez Denetdale’s idea that ‘tradition’ informed by hegemonic understandings of gender, sex, and sexuality perpetuates settler colonial violence against Indigenous peoples who do not abide by settler gender norms (2006; 2009). “Do Better for Our Daughters” displays this through the exploration of myself and other Indigenous Queer women’s marginalised experience of discrimination, devaluation and abuse in our relationships. In “Dating as a Native Girl”, I draw on Cree scholar Robyn Bourgeois’ (2018) discernment that the ongoing patriarchal gendered racist violence against Indigenous women has historical roots. This collection of poems illustrates that in our nonconsensual relationship with settler colonialism, imposed notions of gender, sex, and sexuality actively perpetuate the physical, mental, and spiritual violence against all Indigenous peoples because it constructs interpersonal relationships as sites to carry out settler colonial violence.

Introduction

Yá’át’ééh shik’éeí dóó shidine’é, shí éí Aaliyah Ángel González yinishyé. Bit’ahnii nishłı́, Naakai dine’é bashishchiin, Tł’izí daalchí’í dashicheii, Naakai dine’é dashinalí. Ákót’éego diné nádleeh nishłı́. Naat’aanii Nééz shi’dizhchı́ ndi Tóta’ kééhashtı́. Hello, my friends, family, and people. My name is Aaliyah

a I am of the Within His Cover clan, born for the Mexican People, my maternal grandfather is of the Red Goat clan, and my paternal grandfather's clan is the Mexican People. In this way, I am a Navajo person.

Angel Gonzalez. I am of the Within His Cover clan, born for the Mexican People, my maternal grandfather is of the Red Goat clan, and my paternal grandfather's clan is the Mexican People. In this way, I am a Navajo person. I currently reside in Farmington, NM, but I was born in Shiprock, NM.

Within communal spaces I have been told by elders, leaders, and "traditional" people that there are some things we cannot change and the best thing we can do is do what we are told. I have been told to expect anti-Indigeneity because it is something that 'cannot be changed' in society. However, this mindset further marginalises and oppresses our 2SLGBTQIA+ relatives. Through my poems, I aim to challenge the idea that ongoing violence is something to be accepted by us. To bring about actual sovereignty one must first verbalise the ongoing violence within our families and communities for generational healing to begin (Million, 2009).

"A Letter to My Brother" is a poem with themes about the violence inflicted by Indigenous men on our families, which is followed by an analysis of how this is due to the uptake of colonial masculinities that perpetuate hierarchal settler colonial violence (Sneider, 2015).

A Letter to my Brother

They said you were a gentle child
Clean, organized, quiet, and lovely
Where is that little boy now?
Because your hatred and anger
is disgusting
That with which you direct
at women and those
you are supposed to protect
Never saying sorry
You only get mean
At your worst
violent
You preach healing
And breaking generational trauma
Yet, you inflict your own
The trauma double fold

As you work your way up
Through the mothers
You don't understand
The harm you inflict on others
The absolute cognitive dissonance
How the fuck
Is violence and physical harm
Not the same thing to you?
How do you not know
To say sorry to those you have hurt?
You want children
You want a legacy
You say you're never
Going to be like them
You're right
You're going to be worse
Your legacy will be that of brutality
You are no longer a safe space
I will leave you to the desert
Try to learn warmth from its sands
And then, please,
Just go
Your origin stories be damned

This poem addresses “the moose in our living room”, which refers to the violence Indigenous men commit against community and family members (Jack, 2014). Sam McKegney (2011) argues that there are three imposed models of masculinity available to Indigenous men, which are the bloodthirsty savage, noble warrior, and drunken absentee (p. 258).

However, these models come with limitations and perpetuate violent sentiments as to the roles that Indigenous men can uptake in our society. The works of Diné scholar Jennifer Nez Denetdale (2006, p. 13) and Leah Sneider (2015, pp. 70–71) both support the idea that when Indigenous men practice forms of masculinities informed by settler colonialism, they continue to perpetuate harm against members of their own community by upholding these systems of power. According to Robyn Bourgeois (2018), the violence experienced within boarding schools by Indigenous peoples is learned and it is redirection towards interpersonal relationships ensures a continuum of violence needed for the functioning of settler colonialism. Therefore, violence against Indigenous people is sustained under the imposed settler colonial gender system, western-modelled Tribal governments, and other events like pageants that impose gender roles (Denetdale, 2006, p. 17). These settler colonial systems have resulted in violence against Indigenous peoples, both from within their communities and families.

“A Letter to My Brother” links family violence as a legacy of colonial violence, particularly in how this person has taken up settler systems of power to erect a hierarchy within the family institution (Sneider, 2015, p. 70). Furthermore, the rejection of the perpetrator’s origin stories of being a gentle child illustrates how the uptake of violent colonial masculinities goes against Indigenous traditional thought that support the sovereignty to Indigenous communities and families. According to Denetdale, a hierarchy does not bring sovereignty because “both their roles [of man and woman] are important for the survival and perpetuation of the People” (2006, p. 16).

Adding that violence undertaken by Indigenous communities can be due to the assumption of colonial masculinities, violence is also the result of the internalisation of Western notions of gender, sex, and sexuality that reject Indigenous traditional gender systems that acknowledge diverse genders, sexes, and sexualities (Keovorabouth, 2021, p. 6). Therefore, according to Keovorabouth (2021) and Denetdale (2009), discrimination and homophobic violence (including words) occurs against Indigenous people who do not conform to cisheteronormativity. This includes Indigenous people whose desires, sex, and gender expression are not within the confines of settler colonial notions of gender, sex, and sexuality. “Do Better for Our Daughters” is a poem recounting the discrimination, devaluation and abuse experienced by myself and other Indigenous Queer women by romantic partners, family members, and community members. Through this poem I aim to challenge the way tradition has been reinterpreted to silence conversations about violence, especially the violence against Indigenous peoples who do not fulfill gender roles or norms (Denetdale, 2006, 2009).

Do Better for Our Daughters

I was raised knowing my cousins

Are my sisters
And my aunt
Is another parent of mine
Shimá yazhí
She raised me with her partner
While both my parents worked
The relationship ended with bitterness
And an attempt of throwing my aunt's dog
To a pack of rez dogs
Her new partner was unbalanced and unwell
Abusive and chronically ill (Disharmony existed within her soul)
My aunt raised her children
When her partner passed
Her partner's family banned my aunt
From coming to the funeral
Violence from her relationships
Violence from her community
Violence from herself
I have another aunt
Who has a child with her wife
With a gambling, cheating, mean woman
Who controls her
With violent words
“Nobody loves you except me”
Why is this the norm for people like us
What does this mean for us native lesbians
Us native queers
When brutality and colonial violence

Comes into
What does this mean for me and you
What does this mean for me and you
When all these relationships
Mean control, violence, abuse
Heartbreak
Is it always meant to end this way
Who am I
Who am I meant to be
My grandmother won't tell me
Storytelling and only teaching, never loving
But when I try to show her that I am not just a woman
Not just feminine
She thinks that it's just me being untraditional, colonized
When I ask her questions to learn more
She gets mad and tells me what a shame that I did not learn
Like I was supposed to
When I try to learn more she laughs at my questions
And reduces me down to a little girl
"My poor naive granddaughter who doesn't know anything"
She used her traditional teachings
To protect the violent men in our family
"We must protect everyone"
But not the women and children family members
Who were raped, beaten, pulled a gun on
Who had to physically fight men back
But she brings the ones who have restraining orders against them
Back into her home

“We must protect them”

Despite them pulling a gun on her next

“People don’t know that what they consider traditional is actually the white mans way”

But she only uses this argument when discussing religion and spirituality

Navajo Traditional spirituality and Christianity

Christianity, something she denounces so much now

But utilized to tell her own daughter (*Shimá yazhi*)

“Its a sin to be a homosexual”

The scientific term

The dm-5 terminology

“I love science so much; I am a science person”

Who do I ask these questions to

When elders forget their teachings

And protect the very ideologies

That harm

its own people

Its own daughters

“Do Better for Our Daughters” explores the Indigenous Queer women’s experience of queerphobic violence, including homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia, by their partners and family members. Additionally, it examines how hegemonic understandings of gender, sex, and sexuality are used to perpetuate settler colonial violence against Indigenous people who do not abide by hegemonic gender norms. I also want to bring attention to much of the scholarship on intimate partner violence is often contextualised within cis-heterosexual relationships. However, the homophobia, transphobia, and biphobia against women who experience Queer erotic desire have taught “self-hatred” (Ross, 2009, p. 41) and contribute to the continuum of settler violence against Indigenous peoples. However, these hegemonic understandings have located Queer relationships as a site to carry out this violence, often framing it as justifiable because of the transgressions against hegemonic gender norms. Indigenous women whose lives are not defined by their relationships to cismen, who are either white, non-Indigenous, or

Indigenous, go against the colonial gender structure and prescribed roles for Indigenous women. Therefore, the violence experienced by Indigenous women who are not in cis-heterosexual relationships, or relationships not recognised as legitimate by settler conceptualisations of gender, are often ignored because not only are Indigenous women devalued, but the abuse inflicted on them is seen as deserved for going against the status quo of cis-heteropatriarchy (Wilson, 2018).

“Do Better for Our Daughters” links intimate partner violence within Queer Indigenous relationships to colonial violence, the internalisation of settler ideologies by Indigenous peoples, and the misuse of tradition to uphold systems of harm. The poem emphasises the loss of creation, origin, and traditional stories which have the potential to reaffirm the existence of Queer identities within Indigenous communities (Keovorabouth, 2018). Furthermore, the poem illustrates the infiltration of settler values on tradition has impacted Indigenous traditional understandings and acceptance of gender and sexual variance (Wilson, 2018). When the grandmother tries to confine the author to what she thinks are traditional Diné gender roles, she denies other ways of being that were previously valued in Indigenous societies (Denetdale, 2009, pp. 144–5). The poem also shows how tradition has been utilised to protect violent men who practice colonial masculinities and inflict harm on others, including gun violence. Thus, tradition informed by settler colonialism has been used to excuse colonial violence.

This colonial violence can extend to other areas in life, such as romance. In “Dating as a Native Girl”, I describe my experience with varying forms of violence when dating, and how settler colonialism is the root of this violence (Bourgeois, 2018).

Dating As a Native Girl

I thought I would always be fine
 Dating as a native girl
 Never seeing a problem in attracting white guys
 Who just lovedddd
 native girls
 He was an athlete
 Who typically only dated white girls
 Opened the passenger door for me
 It could only be opened from the outside he told me
 Cruising around

He told me how many times he talked his way out of traffic tickets
“I get away with a lot of things”
I had a crush on him for so long
“I know that as a white man I could probably get away with a lot of stuff”
He turned to look into my eyes
“I could probably molest a girl and get away with it”
I was sitting in his big blue truck
Which he liked to do illegal activities in
Where the passenger door could only be opened from the outside
“Because people would believe anything I say”
He then got out
And opened my door for me
I would have seen him as a gentleman for doing so
If it didn’t feel like a predator
Playing with its food
he decided to be merciful
But it checks out
Turns out his ancestor
Founded the oil and gas industry in our county
“A staple for the area to this day!”
An industry that I heard whispers about
About how some of the employed
Engage in a trafficking ring
Of native girls
Years later
Another white boy
Curly hair, green eyes, same height as me (LOL)
On the date we were in a limbo

Planted between a graveyard
And some stairs leading to a multilevel parking garage
I blurted out
“This is the scariest place”
[for a woman like me]
This joke awoke something in him
He made towards me as if he was going to attack
...
even a guy my height was able to overpower me
Oh don’t worry
He only picked me up without my consent to scare me
He decided to be merciful!
And at the end of our first and only date
he hugged me goodbye again
One of those sickly hugs where they hug you tight
Hands on your lower back
To better push your body tight against theirs
So they can feel everything
Every hill, every asset
Later he ended up physically stalking my location
From dates with white boys
I learned that they like to joke
About attacking you
Pushing the limits
Teasing
But also showing you
That you only live safely
Because of their mercy

However
People think it's only a problem
Faced when dating heterosexual cismen
Or white people
But it turns out
Everyone thinks you're violable
I thought he would be different
He was native
He was from the same tribe
"Ha-ha I know where you live now"
He joked after giving me a ride home
I caught him driving by my house once
How many times had he driven by before?
And I thought she would be different
Because she was neither
A boy nor white
Never thought that I
would be stalked online
We had a class together two years later
She did not recognize nor remember me

The third poem, "Dating as a Native Girl," demonstrates how all colonial subjects have been socialised to devalue and perpetuate violence against Indigenous women, and how interpersonal violence is reinforced by colonial institutions. Furthermore, it illustrates how settler colonialism has organised the 'white-Indian' relationships and all relations for Indigenous women, especially romantic ones. Rayna Green (1975) argues that Indigenous women were constructed to either fulfill the noble Princess image or the savage squaw (p. 703). These two symbols are two sides of the same colonial coin and represent a constricting binary that Indigenous women are confined to. Rayna Green describes the positive image of an Indigenous woman is

the noble, civilised, pure, and virginal Princess (pp. 699-710). This is in contrast to the symbol of the Squaw, which is an Indigenous woman who is savage, primitive, crude, and sexually excessive (pp. 703-711). This narrow definition has limited the way Indigenous women can participate in society: their sexuality and relationships with men are scrutinised to determine if she is a good Indian or a bad Indian. Both are objects of lust for white men, but Princesses are framed as untouchable beauties and Squaws are seen as a “sexual convenience” (711). Neither pole of this binary is safely occupiable as both are subject for elimination (Green, 1975, p. 714). According to Green (1975), Indigenous women cannot fulfill the impossible virginal role of the Princess (p. 710); therefore, they must always become Squaws. The construction of Indigenous women as squaws socially conceptualised an image of Indigenous women as inferior, sexually available, and inherently violable (Bourgeois, 2018). The squaw image succeeds in making vulnerable Indigenous women to “physical, verbal, and sexual violence” (Bourgeois, 2018). According to Bourgeois (2018), our society is constructed in a way to not provide legal protections for Indigenous women because of the negative representations that exist within settler imaginations.

“Dating as a Native Girl” first touches on the topic of white boys as potential romantic partners, which illustrates white-Indian relations underpinned by power. The ability of the first white boy to escape numerous traffic tickets shows how society structured by settler colonialism succeeds in providing unearned advantages and benefits to descendants of settlers and protecting them from serious legal repercussions. The linkage between a lucrative oil and gas industry near a reservation shows how settler colonialism begets the disappearing of Indigenous populations for resources and how that can be accomplished through violence against Indigenous women and girls. Robyn Bourgeois (2018) argues the notion that the legal system was structured to disempower Indigenous people and benefit settlers, which is reflected in the flexibility of the law for the white cisman’s ability to dodge traffic tickets and his suggestion that he could get away with inflicting gender-based violence against an Indigenous girl.

The potential for violence displayed by both white and male characters within the poem conveys that settlers un/consciously understand that they are beneficiaries of settler colonial genocide and will reap those benefits (Gilio-Whitaker, 2018). This highlights Rebecca Tsosie’s (2010) argument that settler colonial narratives of neocolonialism and dispossession inform our daily lives (p. 30). Indigenous women are always navigating settler colonial violence in every aspect of their lives, including their dating lives. Therefore, settler colonialism not only organises our interactions with larger institutions but also influences our interpersonal interactions (Bourgeois, 2018).

The numerous accounts of stalking in the later stanzas of the poem provide insight into the disproportionate amount of violence that Indigenous women experience in the quotidian. This is due to the social construction of Indigenous women as inherently violable (Bourgeois, 2018). This idea has been internalised by all colonial subjects living within settler colonial states, even those who are not settlers (Sneider, 2015, p. 70). “Dating as a Native Girl” shows that Indigenous women experience a disproportionate amount of violence because of a lack of legal protections and anti-Indigenous internalisations, a result of being socialised within a settler colonialist society. The Indigenous male displaying violent behavior further supports aforementioned concepts of violence and historical trauma within Indigenous communities (Sneider, 2015, pp. 70–1). The woman of colour engaging in violent behavior also supports the idea that Indigenous women who engage in queer relationships are subject to more intersections of oppression because of settler colonial ideologies of homophobia, heterosexism, transphobia, and queerphobia. The ability of the woman of colour stalker to forget the person they stalked shows that this violence is normalised, and the violence experienced by Indigenous women is dictated by society to be something to ignore, dismiss, and forget because it is seen as normal.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the violence seen within Indigenous communities and romantic relationships are a part of a larger project belonging to settler colonialism. Settler colonialism requires violence against Indigenous peoples and an inconspicuous site is the personal, a location that society can easily dismiss and not see as a pattern of society (Bourgeois, 2018). It is easy to detach from recognising this pattern of violence when it is obscured by efforts to protect the community, family, and tradition. However, we must acknowledge that this violence is not coincidental and is a function and legacy of settler colonial violence. It is learned, internalised, and reproduced in our romantic, platonic, familial, and communal relationships. Yet, all are forms of colonial violence set into motion by the imposition of western gender, sex, and sexuality. This social construction of gender seeks to subjugate Indigenous peoples, especially those who do not abide by gender norms. Therefore, gender is a colonial project with the role of reproducing violence within our communities. The purpose of the colonial project of gender (O’Sullivan, 2021) functions to serve the settler colonial agenda, one which relies on the dispossession of Indigenous people’s abilities to love, live, be in community, and exist.

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