

Longing for Home During COVID-19

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Abstract

I want to go home but I do not know where home is anymore. Due to the Coronavirus pandemic, I have been isolated from both the academic and reservation community, and (dis)placed with family that questions everything I do. With them, I experience self-doubt. They add to the imposter syndrome that I already experience in academia. Growing up on a reservation with my grandparents, I did not imagine graduate degrees were in my future. Now I find myself in a doctoral program while dealing with a global pandemic. I keep thinking “I want to go home” but I have not had one since I graduated from high school eleven years ago. I have no home I can return to, no refuge in this pandemic. This paper addresses the challenges of remote learning while living with family, and how this adds to the stress and vulnerability that I experience in the academy. This includes the experiences of being queer and Indigenous, enduring the pandemic, and navigating family relationships in the context of colonialism and conformity as a means of survival.

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Indigenous people on Turtle Island have been (dis)placed and forcibly removed from their homelands through colonization. As has been argued by Patrick Wolfe, “settler colonialism destroys to replace” (Wolfe, 2006, p. 388). When destroying was not possible, the next goal was to remove and contain within particular boundaries. Use of stereotypical images and false information about Indigenous people has allowed for an acceptance of the (dis)possession and (dis)placement of Indigenous peoples. Glen Coulthard argues that the experiences of and history of dispossession “has been the background structure in shaping the character of the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the Canadian state.”(Coulthard, 2014, p. 62) This is also true for Indigenous peoples and the United States nation state. My relationship with my family and my kinship networks has been shaped through dispossession and the loss of cultural understandings and knowledges. Due to displacement and being physically located away from the Tribe, many members of my family have been deprived of their connections to cultural practices and beliefs.

In September of 2019, I began my first year of a doctoral programme at Oregon State University. I entered orientation excited, nervous, and doubtful of my place at the university. Why was I here? How did I get here? Why was I here while my childhood friends were dying? My first year never gave me a break or moment to breathe. Midway through fall quarter, my best friend’s grandpa passed away. He was like a grandpa to me, as I have been around their family since the start of 6th grade when we were 11 years old. During winter quarter, my old roller derby coach passed away suddenly from a stroke. It was difficult being away from home and my old teammates at the time. All I could hope for was a better Spring Quarter with less stress. Then COVID-19 hit.

It was the last week of Winter Quarter and I was headed to Portland to present at the *Lewis and Clark Gender Studies Symposium* with colleagues. At the time, we were still joking and not fully accepting the seriousness of the pandemic. I was travelling to Los Angeles to go to Universal Studios with my friends to celebrate my birthday after presenting. These plans changed multiple times over a 24-hour period. In the end, I hopped on a plane out of Seattle and headed to Las Vegas to stay with family. A few weeks became a few months as I completed the end of my first year of my doctoral programme. I have always been quite connected to the part my family in Vegas. My grandparents had 8 children, 14 grandchildren, and 19 great-grandchildren (some of whom have been born since their passing). As a Two-Spirit Suquamish person, kinship networks stretch beyond the settler states heteropatriarchal model of family. Since my grandparents passing, my Las Vegas family has been supportive but there are things that they cannot understand due to the loss of traditional teachings.

I had a unique upbringing compared to most of my family. My grandparents had raised their children outside of Suquamish, away from the reservation. When they took custody of me, we moved back to Suquamish where I was immersed and raised with culture and tribal values. This created some divide amongst myself and the rest of my generation, as they simply do not understand why I relate with and identify with being Indigenous so strongly. This became even more apparent during COVID-19, where instead of venting with my friends and community after courses, I would vent to family. Within my family, I am what Sara Ahmed calls the ‘feminist killjoy.’ Ahmed describes conversations she had at the dinner table with her family and how after a conversation with her father she “left the table, too infuriated for words, and the event was recalled by him and my stepmother as me ‘losing it.’ The choices were always limited: be silent

or lose it”(Ahmed, 2017, p. 194). In my own family, I am the one who highlights and criticises racism in passing comments and ignorant humour. This article was inspired by a conversation that occurred when I expressed my intent to write *on* the theme ‘Indigenous innovation in Higher Education during the Corona-Virus pandemic.’ My family members immediately challenged the topic. They did not understand why this was a theme and why Indigenous students would be facing different challenges to other people. It was very difficult to explain to them that although institutions produce narratives of equality, many also ignore the histories of settler colonialism and displacement that are embedded into our daily lives. These conversations often left me enraged in ways I could not adequately express. I wanted to leave. I wanted to go home. But where was that?

In the introduction to *Queer Indigenous Studies*, the editors argued that “we Indigenous GLBTQ2 people continue to imagine and dream how Indigenous home-stories and home-practices can help articulate and theorize specifically Indigenous GLBTQ2 critiques”(Driskill et al., 2011, p. 19). My grandparents were my primary caregivers growing up and I have lost home since their passing in the last several years. When COVID-19 hit I gave up my housing in Corvallis, Oregon, so I did not have to pay the fees of living on campus when I did not need to be there. After that, I was not sure where to go. I spent my senior year of high school living with my best friends’ family, but her mom had since moved out of that house. I sometimes stayed with my uncle on the Port Madison Indian Reservation in Poulsbo/Suquamish, Washington. He had since rented out the house on his property and lived in a small building he converted into an apartment. It would not have been enough space for both of us in the long run. I was left feeling disoriented. Where was home? Where could I go?

While attending remote classes from Vegas, my family became my closest community. I would rant about “the white person” in class that displayed problematic behaviours. Remote courses are delivered via Zoom video conferencing, and unlike regular online courses they are held at scheduled times. I was used to having a network of people to vent to about how whiteness and systems of oppression were showing up in our everyday classes. In Vegas, I would leave Zoom classes and reiterate ‘ugh white people,’ and my family would say I was being racist and that was wrong; not understanding the complexity and presence of whiteness in higher education. An example of whiteness showing up in class was when I presented on how our Tribe uses gender within Lushootseed. Lushootseed is the language of my Tribe. A white student interrogated asking questions such as, how long have you known the language? How did you learn the language? While seemingly harmless to some, this indirectly questions and casts doubt on how Native I am, a question that I have confronted my entire life. When I vented about white students in class after this incident, I faced critique of my language and a reminder that I am also white. My Indigeneity is a part of my identity that is commonly brought into question by non-Indigenous and Indigenous people alike.

My family holds many values and beliefs that align with the white Western patriarchal system, rather than our own Indigenous systems and beliefs. They think, for instance, that Trump is a great president. Our differences make it difficult for me to vent to them about the influence of whiteness within the classroom. I am the only person in my generation to be raised on the reservation and within the tribal community. Due to policies of termination, assimilation and genocide by the United States of America, my mom’s generation and therefore most of my generation were raised within white America and were taught Western beliefs and understandings of the world around

them. For some people in my family, the pandemic is not an issue—it has been ‘exaggerated’. Some members believe that Black Lives Matter is a hate group. The colonial system of cultural erasure has impacted my family greatly.

My grandmother grew up with her grandmother taking her in a canoe from Indianola to Suquamish to attend the mission church. This church still stands next to the cemetery in Suquamish. Before her generation, our ancestors were sent to boarding schools where they were prohibited from learning their language or their culture. In *Boarding School Seasons*, Brenda Child argues that ‘at the time the schools were first designed, reformers and politicians agreed that Indian men, women, and children, *but particularly* [sic] children, must adopt values of individualism, become citizens, and pursue agricultural or industrial labor’(Child, 2000, p. v). The impact of these schools continues from generation to generation as children are educated within a Western education system. I don’t know when my family stopped speaking language, but I do know that my great-great grandma spoke language and went to boarding schools despite being born on a ship to slaves and adopted by the Tribe. Stories told in our community share the important role that she played in recording the language. These stories also help me understand the impacts of settler colonialism. It was difficult to go through courses feeling like I did not have a support system or place to vent. My grandparents had always been my most stable support system so without them where was home?

During this time, I wanted my grandparents back more than anything. My grandmother passed in 2017 at the age of 93 and my grandpa in 2014 at the age of 90. I was relieved that they did not have to live through the pandemic or the racial tensions that were heightened due to the Trump

presidency. Racial issues significantly impacted their lives. My grandma denied her own grandmother's African American ancestry and my grandpa's family did not approve of him marrying a Native American woman. I wished my grandmother was here to curl up with and watch a movie, or rant and vent about school, friends, and life. I wished my grandpa would randomly show up with a Dairy Queen ice cream cake because he knew they were my favourite. I wish he was annoyingly proofreading every paper I left at the table. I wanted to hear my grandmother yell about useless things at my grandpa while he sat with his left arm resting across the dining room table, grumbling under his breath. I wished for my grandma's macaroni and cheese, and oatmeal with apples, raisins and brown sugar - staples in my childhood. But, if they had lived to be here for me, would they be able to enjoy these things as well? The pandemic would have them restricted under quarantine. My grandpa couldn't work at the casino as a greeter. My grandma couldn't sit outside and watch the children play. These were their most enjoyable moments and times. My grandparents were my rocks, my foundation. Without them where is home?

After spending three months in Las Vegas during the pandemic, I picked up and moved again to my uncle's in Poulsbo - in Washington near where my grandparents raised me. We squeezed my stuff and I into his 500 square feet (approximately 46.45 metres squared) apartment with him, his energetic dog and a loveable, old cat. We constantly bumped heads. I was taking Lushootseed classes for the first time since childhood. Classes were now offered on Zoom, making them accessible for those of us who have not been able to physically attend. For two weeks I was on Zoom for four hours a day. There was no space. I was constantly in the way or constantly moving around the house. Under regular circumstances, my uncle would have been working for many of the days I was attending class. However, on my first day in Washington we experienced a family

emergency. My cousin lost his cousin (more like a brother to him) in a skateboarding accident. This completely shifted everyone's schedules. This was meant to be a short trip. I meant to visit before returning to Las Vegas. Instead, it became a long-term arrangement while school was remote. Despite multiple moves since I was a child, Washington has always been the place I return to. School had kept me away for several years. It was time to spend some much-needed time around friends and community.

Suquamish is home but there is no longer a home for me in Suquamish. Attending Lushootseed courses made me feel more connected to and more in touch with the community than I have been since leaving for school. I am constantly missing memorial services, language classes, and cultural events back home. As everything changes and shifts, this has too. I was finally able to create a language nest within my home and learn to have basic conversations. I reconnected with community members and cousins. Suquamish has always *been* home but was not always an easy place to navigate and *call* home. Reconnecting with community also meant reconnecting with people who never believed I was Suquamish enough because of blood quantum. It is hard to have the place that feels right and feels like home that is also be the place that has these painful experiences connected to it. My grandma always pushed me and encouraged me to be more involved in the community. I am grateful to her for connecting me to this place and my people.

My uncle and I spent two months bumping elbows in his small apartment. There was barely enough space for both of us and our stuff, let alone workstations to do schoolwork. When I decided that I was not returning to Las Vegas, I reached out to my best friend's grandmother. I had lived with Allie's family before. Her grandmother has a property with a mobile home located within my family's tribal community in Suquamish. My friend's family lived here once but since then it was

empty. We moved my stuff into it. I finally have space to myself. I can stay up doing homework or relaxing as late as I want. I can vent and say, “ugh white people,” to my friends and the dogs as often as I want. I don’t have to explain what I’m doing, or what I think or feel. Is this home?

When I moved to Las Vegas, I moved to one of two states in the United States that had not lifted their cross-state counselling services laws. I lost access to counselling. Prior to the pandemic, I had settled in with a counsellor I really liked, which has always been a struggle, and was regularly attending counselling for depression and anxiety. Through her, I was also going to acupuncture and naturopathic doctor to help in healing and doing what was best for my body. This ceased abruptly when I moved to Las Vegas. When maintaining these relationships was most important, I was unable to access these resources. My insurance did not have any in-network doctors in Las Vegas and I was left on my own. While in Corvallis, I was beginning to develop a routine that allowed me to keep a more consistent schedule and feel better overall. Away from my support network, feelings of inadequacy and imposter syndrome overwhelmed me as I taught remotely and attended my own classes. Being constantly overwhelmed with school and family obligations, I often moved through as if there was nothing wrong. I felt less stressed about individual tasks and more stressed overall.

Coping with depression and anxiety was not new for me. I began harming myself when I was eleven. I have been in and out of counselling over the years, while simultaneously struggling with avoidance and fear of being like my mother who had her own experiences with mental health. Being her youngest but most responsible child, I have also taken on a lot of the burden around her care when my aunts are unable to step in—more so than either of my older brothers who struggle with their own mental well-being. She has been in a nursing facility for several years. At the

beginning of September, a COVID-19 outbreak hit her facility including her. She has a history of respiratory issues and was hospitalised. It was difficult to distinguish those symptoms from COVID-19 symptoms. Returning to Washington has allowed me to resume seeing my counsellor but with another adjustment period to go through. Oregon State University health centre is still not seeing students out of state. I have been unable to access adequate prescriptions for depression and anxiety. I was scheduled to make medication adjustments in early Spring before the pandemic hit, even without the added stress.

Due to the additional stress of moving, and managing my own studies amidst a global pandemic, in Spring Quarter I felt like I was failing my students. I was worried that I was not teaching enough or was teaching too little. Many of my students were struggling to get through class with the pandemic but when I lightened readings loads and assignments other students would become frustrated with me. It was difficult to find a balance that considered the diverse impacts of the effects of the pandemic. I felt like I wasn't enough as an instructor and that I could not adequately teach. All I wanted to do was give up and go home, but where is home exactly? I could not go back to my grandparents or back to Allie's family. In high school, Allie's family took me in when I needed a place to go and I have always been accepted as a member of the family but still never fully felt like I could just impose on them again. So, home is where?

Since being back, I have been living in the mobile home on Allie's grandmas' property which is turning out to be more of a home than I would have thought. While all this pandemic has brought up for me was a yearning to go home when I don't have one, I may have found a place to finally feel like home, at least temporarily. Grandma was happy to have me living in the mobile home

across from her own house because since the passing of grandpa last November she has been on her own. She appreciates the company and someone to help out around the place when there are tasks that she cannot easily complete on her own.

This was not the first time that I have come to the conclusion that Allie's family is home and where I need to be. Since the start of the pandemic, I moved three times before finding a place that seems just right. Since childhood, I have always come to my own understandings of home and kinship that do not align with the state's idea of family. Rather, these fall more in line with Suquamish ways of forming kinship and community. Although it was hard to see due to the pandemic, Suquamish as a place has always been home and where I have the largest community of support and family that goes well beyond the boundaries of my immediate family.

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