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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6x06c2x6>

Journal

Global Societies Journal, 2(0)

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Publication Date

2014

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Indigenous Visions of Self-Determination: Healing and Historical Trauma in Native America

By: Natalie Avalos Cisneros

ABSTRACT

Indigenous people in the U.S. and Canada define self-determination as the right to be recognized as an autonomous nation with international status free from paternalistic intervention by settler-state governments. The discourse on Native self-governance suggests that self-determination can be best realized through Native centered practices and logics. Mohawk scholar, Taiaiake Alfred, argues that chief among them is the regeneration of Native lifeways and spiritual practices. The work of Andrea Smith cautions us to recognize how the self-determining subject is in itself a racial project wherein the Native subject is always aspiring to be “fully human.” In contrast, Smith argues that true liberation could be realized by negotiating an alternate definition of personhood that is constituted in and through our beings. Alfred theorizes a form of self-determination that is based on the regeneration of religious lifeways, which, I argue, express the ‘radical relationality’ that Smith describes. This article tethers the work of these two scholars to suggest that Native-centered negotiations of self-determination can only be understood through Indigenous ontological logics and religious lifeways.

Keywords: Native lifeways; healing; indigenous spirituality; subjectivity; self-determination

Indigenous peoples in the Americas continue to fight for self-determination from settler states. Self-determination has been defined as the right to be recognized as an autonomous nation with international status free from paternalistic intervention by a settler state. The discourse on Native autonomy suggests that self-determination is not fully realized through self-governance alone. If self-government replicates the colonial logics of settler states to perpetuate the continued exploitation of Indigenous peoples and lands, then self-government isn’t true liberation. Native scholars and community leaders argue that Native self-determination will only

be realized through institutions grounded in Native centered logics.¹ In addition, self-determination as a project must facilitate a larger process of decolonization, which necessitates both the undoing of colonization as a structure and the removal of colonization's effects.

Franz Fanon, a psychoanalyst of African descent who figured heavily in Algerian independence, theorized decolonization as a project with two dimensions: the structural/objective and the psychological/subjective.² In other words, self-determination must negotiate decolonization through persons, in their minds and bodies, as well as through institutions. Taiaiake Alfred, a Mohawk scholar and currently one of the leading theorists on Native self-governance, argues that the first step in attaining true autonomy for Indigenous peoples is their regeneration.³ For Alfred, regeneration means choosing to live a distinctly Native way of life. This way of life has often been described as a 'lifeway.' Native lifeways are the lived epistemologies of Native peoples, from their languages and ceremonies to their cosmologies and values. In this article, I argue that healing from historical trauma is a critical component of Native regeneration and successfully facilitates the subjective/psychological dimension of decolonization. While Native negotiations of healing are individual and local, a discussion of Native lifeways reveals how these healing pursuits can be understood as simultaneously transnational and hemispheric.

SELF-DETERMINATION IN NATIVE AMERICA

Self-determination is typically conceptualized in structural, legal and sociopolitical terms, such as, nationhood and sovereignty. Native American articulations of self-determination, theorize a more comprehensive conceptualization. Lakota scholar Vine Deloria, Jr., was of the first public intellectuals to outline Native self-determination for the greater public, arguing that it involves the protection and reinstitution of what he calls a Native 'way of life.' Deloria contextualized the discourse on self-determination that erupted in Native communities and social movements, such as the American Indian Movement (AIM), that began agitating for social change in the 1960's and 70's in his 1974 work *Behind the Trail of Broken Treaties*:

The pressing need today is that the United States not only recognize the international status of the Indian tribes... but that it also authorize the creation of a special court to settle treaty violations... The claim of American Indians against the United States is not simply a demand for compensation for lands lost, but also a demand that a way of life that was nearly lost be protected from further depredations. The movement to reclaim that life and the independence, which characterized it, lies at the heart of the current Indian unrest and demonstration.⁴

¹ See Vine Deloria, Jr. *God is Red*; Richard A. Grounds, George E. Tinker and David E. Wilkins, eds. *Native Voices: American Indian Identity and Resistance*; Gerald (Taiaiake) Alfred, *Peace, Power, and Righteousness* and *Wasáse: Indigenous Pathways of Action and Freedom*. "Native" in this context refers to the Indigenous peoples of the U.S. and Canada, however, several contemporary theorists on Native self-government, such as Alfred, use this term to include Indigenous peoples in the Americas more broadly, or even Indigenous peoples around the world.

² Coulthard, "Subjects of Empire," 439.

³ Taiaiake Alfred, *Wasáse*, 19-38.

⁴ Deloria, *Behind the Trail*, 228.

Due to this legal national status, Native American peoples did not perceive themselves as ethnic minorities within the U.S. or Canada but as separate nations that are autonomous, necessitating nation-to-nation recognition. They were not seeking ‘civil rights’ within their settler states, but freedom from the paternalistic interventions by federal governments. While this agitation led to the creation of the U.S. Indian Self-Determination Act of 1975, enabling tribes to be self-governing and facilitate their own institutions, such as, schools, clinics, and resource management, many tribes struggled to reconcile these forms of self-government with the ethics and lifeways of their peoples. Thus, the question of what constituted an appropriately Native form of governing remained.

A critical discourse on Indigenous self-government since this time interrogates the colonial ideologies embedded in claims for self-determination. Native academics have argued that the sovereignty theorized and practiced by the settler state does not reflect their own political logics. Alfred argues that the use of foreign constructs such as sovereignty perpetuate an authoritarian system; it is an “exclusionary concept rooted in an adversarial and coercive Western notion of power.”⁵ Shawnee political science scholar, Glenn Morris, contextualizes why some of these concepts may be problematic for Native use:

Sovereignty is a political construct that was first articulated by Jean Bodin, building on the parameters outlined earlier by Nicolo Machiavelli. Thomas Hobbes elaborated on the nature of sovereignty, based on a perception that humans are natural enemies to one another, leading brutish lives defined by selfishness and competition. Central to Bodin’s concept of the state... is that the state must be absolute and unitary by its very nature, possessing the ultimate power to command obedience through its monopoly on the “legitimate” use of violence.... If the worldview of Machiavelli, Bodin, and Hobbes is the foundation of sovereignty, why should indigenous peoples strive so tenaciously to accept an authoritarian system developed in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Renaissance Europe? Of what benefit could this political philosophy be to indigenous peoples today?⁶

‘Sovereignty’ is rooted in a conceptualization of peoples incapable of reconciling their selfish and violent natures, and thus in need of governing by a centralized power, in the form of the state. Native approaches to governing have historically been much more democratic, consulting an array of advisors and councils (including the spirit world). Thus, concepts like ‘sovereignty’ reflect a political discourse in the West that negotiates power and legitimates violence in a way that is ultimately antithetical to the real values and needs of Native peoples.⁷

Native American scholars and activists describe the sacred and interdependent relationship with the land, spirit world, and one another as fundamental to their worldviews. This framework of sacred and interdependent relationships to land and community shape discourses on sociopolitical life, such as the protection of sacred sites, sustainable ways of living and the

⁵ Alfred, *Peace, Power, and Righteousness*, 83.

⁶ Morris, “Development of a Decolonizing Critique,” 131.

⁷ Sovereignty is a contested term that has taken on new meanings over the years, particularly in its use by the efforts of Indigenous peoples to resist colonialism; however, Mohawk scholar Taiaiake Alfred has also criticized it for upholding an imperialist framework of power, wherein power is not evenly distributed in the society but instead rests in a ‘sovereign’ person or state, which rules through the threat of brute force, breeding mistrust, fear, exploitation and even more violence.

meaning of nationhood. Andrea Smith cautions us to recognize how the self-determining subject is in itself a racial project wherein the Native subject is always aspiring to be “fully human.”⁸ Self-determination implies an agentive act of ‘becoming self-determined,’ intimating that once colonized people assert their capacity for human agency they will be recognized as deserving of autonomy and respect by colonizers. In this framework, a binary is perpetuated wherein there are those who become ‘self-determined’ and those who remain “racialized/colonized others.”⁹

In contrast, Smith argues that true liberation could be realized by negotiating an alternate, Indigenous, definition of personhood “liberation would require different selves that understand themselves in radical relationality with all other peoples and things. The goal then becomes not the mastery of anti-racist/anti-colonialist lingo but a different self-understanding that sees one’s being as fundamentally constituted through other beings.” In other words, self-determination for Native peoples must cohere with Native logics of personhood, which are perceived to be contingent on land and community. The community itself is comprised of the spirit world, humans and other than human persons, all of whom are considered sacred and treated with respect. Thus, the notion that one can (and should) gain liberation at the expense of others is unacceptable and necessitates a careful reconsideration of self-determination.

REGENERATION

When Native leaders ascribe to authoritarian systems of power or a form of liberation that necessitate the subordination of ‘others,’ it only undermines Indigenous peoples’ struggle for decolonization. Taiaiake Alfred cites these imbalanced formulations of Native self-government, rooted in authoritarian ideology, as perpetuating injustice. Sociopolitical injustice engenders dysfunction, further compromising the power of persons and communities. Thus, self-determination for Native peoples, he argues, means reinstating justice, a justice that is naturally enabled through a renewed notion of relationship with all aspects of the universe. Indigenous justice means “respectful coexistence—restoration of harmony to the networks of relationships and renewed commitment to ensuring the integrity and physical, emotional, health of all individuals and communities.”¹⁰ In addition, when Native communities respond to the state’s abuse of power with coercive force and reactionary tactics, it only aggravates the asymmetrical dynamic of power between the state and Indigenous peoples.

An Indigenous approach to empowerment needn’t be “inherently conflictual... nor does it require a contractual surrender of power” as defined by ‘sovereignty.’¹¹ Instead, power in an Indigenous context is negotiated from the bottom up as opposed to being enforced from the top down. In essence, Native peoples can best empower themselves by renewing the relationships that give them strength: relationships to land, the spirit world and one another. When they do

⁸ Smith, “Queer Theory and Native Studies,” 42.

⁹ Smith, blog entry, “The Problem with Privilege.”

¹⁰ Alfred, *Peace, Power, and Righteousness*, 66.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 72.

this, they are making power through fortifying their communities, and ultimately, *regenerating* as peoples.

Regeneration can be understood as a form of conscious re-traditionalism where one looks to the past, the lifeways of their peoples, and chooses to embody it in a new way in the present. Because Native lifeways are contingent on land, the spirit world and all one's relations, nurturing and regenerating the sacred connection to them is vital. Colonization in the U.S. and Canada was facilitated by state policies of extermination and assimilation, resulting in the systematic dispossession of Native peoples over a period of hundreds of years. This dispossession separated Indigenous peoples from their lands and ways of life. For instance, Native American religious traditions, such as the Sun Dance, were banned at the end of the Indian Wars in the 1880's, when most Native tribes were confined to reservations while Bureau of Indian Affairs agents, along with missionaries, policed their activities.¹² BIA agents and missionaries targeted medicine men and other religious leaders, as a 'corrupting force' in the community. They were often jailed or even executed, leaving many tribes devoid of traditional leadership and spiritual guidance. These bans would not be lifted until 1934 and protection for Native American religious life would not be extended to Native peoples till the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978.

However, many tribes are still trying to not only understand the damage wrought by the myriad forms of dispossession but how to recover from them. For Alfred, one of the most critical losses was a sense of responsibility to "the land and one another," necessitating the re-deployment of this sense of responsibility and respect.¹³ The land, community and spirit world were respected and held sacred because they were understood to sustain your life and, as Smith explains above, to be an extension of oneself. Thus, in an interdependent world, one has the responsibility to care for oneself as well as for others (land and community) because they are all contingent upon one another.

Compounding this loss of connection to land and community are fragmented identities, forged through decades of missionization, compulsory education—such as boarding schools—living among societies that do not reflect your own values and beliefs, and loss of traditional knowledge. Alfred argues that the disconnection from traditional knowledge leaves urban and reservation communities without a roadmap for how to live life in a good way—in a way that accords with traditional values. This lack of cultural grounding had compromised the personal strength of Native peoples and communities. Alfred provides an example shared with him by a Kwa'kwa'ka'wakw woman from Vancouver who says, "[B]ecause no one has the real internal, individual knowledge no one is able to work together. So there are all kinds of fragments [of knowledge] floating around. When you talk about what's missing—it's some very basic, individual healthy sense of self."¹⁴ These losses are not only disempowering, they are contributing to social discord. This young woman goes in to say that common concepts, such as respect or self-respect, are often misunderstood to be what one *should* do to please others as

¹² Holler, "The Sun Dance Ban, 1883-1934/1952," 110.

¹³ Alfred, *Peace, Power, and Righteousness*, 5.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

opposed to what one must do for oneself to live well among others. Thus, many Native individuals are prevented from developing the confidence and sense of identity that comes from knowing who you are and what it means to live a good life in relation to others. In essence, the logics of colonialism that sought the eradication and assimilate of Native peoples have resulted in communities who are struggling to survive, emotionally and physically.

For Alfred, regeneration means becoming warriors again, confronting their own fear and regenerating their personal power. In a Native context, personal power is not necessarily about social capital or agency, but rather a connection to the spirit world. Colonization is characterized by asymmetrical power relations, wherein the colonized have little to no power and are dispossessed of their land for the settlers' economic gain and dispossessed of their lifeways as a means of subjugation. When one reconnects to the spirit world, one regains an authentic source of power, spiritual power, and regenerates as a powerful person, what Alfred calls a 'warrior.' It is these 'warriors' that will become true leaders because they are invested in traditional values and thus, serving the needs of the community. While he concedes that the diversity among Native peoples is great he believes that they share a common value, "a commitment to a profoundly respectful way of governing based on a world view that values autonomy but also recognizes a universal interdependency and promotes peaceful coexistence among all the elements of creation."¹⁵ He believes that Native peoples can attain a more authentic form of self-governance by regenerating as warriors, who have consciously re-constructed their traditional lifeways, and that peaceful co-existence can be achieved through an indigenous articulation of justice, which asks that relationships be honored, to the land and one another, by Native peoples and settler communities.¹⁶ In essence, Alfred calls for a radical transformation of persons and communities, a *regeneration* that will catalyze an autonomy rooted in Native lifeways. In the following section, I will provide a brief overview of Native American lifeways in order to further explore what healing as a form of decolonization may entail.

THE SPIRIT WORLD

The spirit world described by Native peoples can be defined as the spiritual dimension of the universe. The spirit world is characterized by spirit—the animating principle inherent in all natural phenomena. Spirit is referred to by various names, *wakan* among the Lakota, *usen* among the Apache, and in a more contemporary context 'Creator.' It is understood to be the source of intelligence in the universe, thus Native people beseech the spirit world for guidance on matters of healing, governance and one's spiritual destiny. Spiritual power is the active form of spirit; it can come to you in a dream, or while on a vision quest. Most often spiritual power is understood to be the guiding force that enables healers to heal, but it can be the source of other special abilities as well, such as the ability to see into the future or communicate with a particular animal.

¹⁵ Ibid., 14.

¹⁶ Alfred, *Wasáse*, 28.

Apache scholar Inés Talamantez explains that one is expected to conduct oneself appropriately within tribal community life, maintaining one's balance in relation to the multi-faceted world—other beings, corporeal and non-corporeal, and the landscape—in order to “assure the possibility of acquiring sacred powers—what Apaches call *diyii*.”¹⁷ These sacred powers are important to develop, as they are a source of sacred knowledge and when used wisely could benefit the entire community. They also served as a source of personal strength, nurturing one's “connectedness to life” and one's ability to “commune fully with nature, to feel its sensations, as well as the sensations of his own body.”¹⁸ It follows that spiritual power, as understood in the Apache context, is central to the formation of personhood, literally shaping individuals through their relationship with *spirit* into who they can and will be. While the nature of *spiritual power* varies among Native peoples, the unifying expression is that the entire community relied on the spirit world for protection, guidance and survival.

For Native peoples, knowledge acquisition and learning how to live in the world were facilitated experientially—in and through relationships. One's experiences of the world, particularly the spirit world, are not negotiated in isolated contemplation but in and through relating and communicating with other beings. Cherokee scholar Brian Yazzie Burkhart explains that in a contemporary context, Native peoples “must *maintain* our connectedness, we must maintain our relations, and never abandon them in search of understanding, but rather find understanding *through* them.”¹⁹ It is when we value our relationships to one another, the land and the spirit world and contemplate the experiences we have through them that we gain insight on what it means to live a good life. Lakota scholar, Vine Deloria, Jr., echoes these observations, emphasizing the moral dimension to these relationships:

The Indian world can be said to consist of two basic experiential dimensions that, taken together, provided a sufficient means of making sense of the world. These two concepts were place and power, the latter perhaps better defined as spiritual power or life force. Familiarity with the personality of objects and entities of the natural world enabled Indians to discern immediately where each living being had its proper place and what kinds of experiences that place allowed, encouraged, and suggested... knowing places enabled people to relate to the living entities inhabiting it.²⁰

It is through the mediation of spiritual power and places that humans come to know themselves in the world. These overlapping frameworks for living not only shape human development, they provide a context for morality, demarcating the boundaries between appropriate and inappropriate behavior. Deloria suggests that the intellectual journey of knowing the world is also a fundamentally spiritual one—one carried out in dialogue with others. Native peoples were expected to continually seek guidance from the spirit world in order to survive and thrive. One did so through prayer, contemplation or with the help of a medicine person. Answers may be received in dreams, visions or in ceremony. While the spirit world is a common framework

¹⁷ Talamantez, *Teaching Religion and Healing*, 118.

¹⁸ Talamantez, *Ethnopoetics Theory and Method*, 24.

¹⁹ Yazzie Burkhart, “What Coyote and Thales Can Teach Us,” 25.

²⁰ Deloria, *Power and Place*, 2.

shared among Native communities, it is the differences between them, such as place and relationships to the beings in that place, which make them unique.

Native subjectivity is shaped in relation to two frameworks, spiritual power and a shared heritage specific to place. These relationships can be better understood when you consider the interdependent nature of Native personhood. Apache scholar, Viola Cordova, explains that one's identity is always considered in relation to others, "In a Native American sense the individual is always part of something greater than himself, a family, a clan, a tribe, a place. He or she can be 'located' in a 'larger whole' offering him or her 'a sense of belonging.'"²¹ Due to this "enlarged sense of self," one is understood to be "involved in an *interrelationship* rather than a mere *relationship* with the 'other.'" In essence, there are no discrete divisions between oneself and others, while you may be an individual, you are deeply connected to others—made up of the same substance, communing with the same life force and affecting one another's environment. It is through the experience of living in an interdependent world that Native peoples understand other beings, mountains, rocks, animals and plants as not only relatives (hence the often heard phrase 'all my relations'), but also as co-constitutive of oneself. It is this interdependent relationship with the land, one's relations and the spirit world that constitutes the fundamental nature of Native American religious traditions, or what are often referred to as Native lifeways. It is the renegotiation of this kind of spiritual agency that Alfred argues will engender empowerment for Native peoples. Spiritual power must not only be regenerated on a personal, spiritual level, it must simultaneously be transformed on a relational level, enabling nations and communities to peacefully coexist.

HEALING

Self-determination requires the negotiation of decolonization, which not only dismantles colonization but also removes its effects. I argue that one of the critical means to remove the effects of colonization is by healing historical trauma—a form of trauma related to genocide. The legacies of colonialism: dispossession, disempowerment and fragmentation require forms of healing grounded in Native lifeways. Native American forms of healing are diverse yet they generally require navigating the spirit world. As noted above, Native lifeways consist of living in an appropriate relationship to other persons and phenomena, meaning to honor the reciprocal nature of relations. Although Indigenous communities may not explicitly refer to themselves as 'religious' we see that Western notions of religiosity coincide with Indigenous notions of 'living right' or in a balanced relationship with the cosmos.²² In her book, *Religion and Healing in Native America: Pathways for Renewal*, Susanne Crawford O'Brien notes that when we speak of illness we are speaking about what has compromised one's ability to be oneself.²³ Severed or compromised relationships to the land and others cause an imbalance that imperils one's wellbeing, resulting in illness. Thus, healing within Native communities must entail a restoration

²¹ Cordova, *How It Is*, 149.

²² Crawford O'Brien, *Religion and Healing in Native America*, 6.

²³ *Ibid.*, 4.

of a balanced self-identity, one that exists in proper relationship within spatial, human and ecological communities. In essence, Native healing is best facilitated by the restoration of appropriate inter-relationships that will sustain and nourish that person. A body of literature has developed within Native studies that relates the traumatic effects of colonization to the high rates of domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse and depression within Indigenous American communities.²⁴ Experts attribute these phenomena to ‘historical trauma,’ which is a form of prolonged or chronic grief resulting from forms of genocide, such as, settler state policies of extermination, removal, and forced assimilation. Historical trauma resembles post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), however, it results in a psychic and spiritual wounding that persists over generations. Historical trauma responses include: psychic numbing, fixation to trauma, somatic symptoms, low self-esteem, self-destructive behavior, hypervigilance, and dissociation.

These responses are compounded over generations since exposure to these responses contributes to the perpetuation of this form of trauma. Thus, children raised with one or more parents exhibiting trauma responses are more likely to develop historical trauma. Due to the close-knit nature of Native communities, survivor’s guilt is also a common trauma response, manifesting in an attitude that living life happily would somehow betray or dishonor ancestors who suffered.²⁵ While there is no one perfect treatment for historical trauma, clinicians, psychologists and social workers have found that utilizing Native oriented therapies has radically reduced its effects.

Although Native peoples negotiated their own forms of medicine and healing pre-contact, colonization made access to these forms of healing difficult. Federal bans on Native American religious ceremonies and the murder or imprisonment of medicine peoples prevented Native tribes from utilizing their own healing technologies to aid their peoples. While many of these ceremonies and practices continued in secret, they were no longer centralized. After the Indian Self-Determination Act of 1978, Native tribes gained control of their institutions, such as health and wellness facilities. Some forms of traditional medicine were integrated into Native health care at this time, particularly after more protections for religious freedom were extended. However, the process to recover centralized forms of healing and wellness, where all peoples have access to both traditional and Western medicine continues to be an issue for some tribes. While historical trauma has been with Native peoples for generations, research on it was only undertaken in the past few decades. Fortunately, a handful of mental health professionals had begun connecting the traumatic effects of colonization to an epidemic of inter-personal violence, drug and alcohol abuse and depression within Native American communities.

Bay Area psychologist, Eduardo Duran, began working with urban Native peoples and California tribes in the 1970’s. Due to federal relocation programs in the 1930’s-1970’s, more than half of Native peoples currently live in urban areas, making Duran’s work a critical contribution to urban Indian life. He argues that in order to understand the high rates of inter-

²⁴ Duran, *Healing the Soul Wound*, 13-28 and Brave Heart, “The Historical Trauma Response,” 7-13.

²⁵ Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, “Workshop on Historical Trauma,” Lecture, Value of Care Lecture Series, UC Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA, May 23, 2014.

personal violence, mental illness and substance abuse in Native communities, one must understand how Native peoples have been overpathologized as inherently faulty and inferior by settler society, “the history of native/white relations since colonization not only presents the context of the treatment of family violence but must also illuminates the knowledge/power construction of the native subject that has infiltrated native subjectivity and identity.”²⁶ One of the complicating factors of trauma among Native peoples was their continued dispossession by settler states and the continued violence and hatred they experienced in settler society.

This violence and hatred had been internalized by his patients resulting in what he described as a ‘soul wound.’ In his practice, Duran recognized that Native peoples and other people of color did not respond positively to traditional forms of Western therapy because it failed to consider the experience of peoples as inherently connected to “all creation.”²⁷ He found that framing recovery as a transformation of relationship to alcohol, anger, etc. (their spiritual dimension), his clients began making noticeable recoveries. Thus, he has advocated the use of Native-centered logics and practices, such as integrating the burning of sage and smoking sacred tobacco, in order to ameliorate the ‘soul wounds’ of Native peoples.

Another important theorist on Native health and wellness is Lakota social worker, Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart. Her work has explored the connection between historical trauma responses and historical unresolved grief, “For American Indians, historical unresolved grief involves the profound, unsettled bereavement that results from generations of devastating losses which have been disqualified by prohibiting indigenous ceremonies and by the larger society's denial of the magnitude of its genocidal policies.”²⁸ For Native peoples, their losses were so great and their attempts to address them so confounded that many became ensnared by unresolved grief. These losses are magnified by the continued dispossession of Native peoples as well as by settler society attempts to minimize or even dismiss these losses. Traumatic disruptions in Lakota life, such as forced removal to reservations and the banning of ceremonies prevented Lakota people from grieving other traumatic experiences, such as the Wounded Knee Massacre or forced removal to boarding schools. Brave Heart explains “traditional Lakota ceremonies effectively afforded grief management. The prohibition of indigenous spiritual practices, however... prevented the resolution of traumatic grief resulting from cataclysmic events.” As new traumatic experiences were encountered, traditional technologies to ameliorate them were foreclosed, leaving Lakota people with no resources in which to properly grieve. Thus, Lakota people developed a “pathological grief” wherein they over-identify with the dead, exhibit guilt and are self-destructive, culminating in a “collective, victimized ego identity.”²⁹

Brave Heart has developed a model for community-centered intervention called Historical Trauma and Unresolved Grief Intervention (HTUG), which is supported by The Takini Network, an organization established to address historical trauma and its effects in Native communities This model is based on a study she conducted with Lakota participants in the early

²⁶ Duran, *Healing the Soul Wound*, 26-27.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 8.

²⁸ Brave Heart, “The Return to the Sacred Path,” 288.

²⁹ Brave Heart, “The Return to the Sacred Path,” 290-292.

1990's. Over the course of four-day workshop, participants would review material on Lakota trauma; conduct small group exercises, sharing their experiences around historic unresolved grief; and participate in two traditional ceremonies: a *inipi*, a Lakota purification or sweat lodge ceremony, and a *oinikage*, a traditional wiping of the tears ceremony.³⁰ This workshop took place at Sylvan Lake in the Black Hills, a site considered sacred to Lakota people because they are understood to be the site of profound spiritual power that has assisted the Lakota people for centuries.

Positioning her participants in a sacred and 'healing' location provided a space in which participants would be able to recount their communal experience of trauma and express their grief in a culturally supportive and spiritually significant environment. The study sought to enable participants to shed their "victim identities," and reinforce "traditional Lakota philosophy and values" through "the incorporation of traditional Lakota culture, language, ritual, and memorialization."³¹ Like Duran, Brave Heart recognized that a critical component of ameliorating these psychic wounds involved transforming relationships—from a dysfunctional victim identity to a positively perceived Lakota personhood.

Brave Heart's original study resulted in significantly decreased feelings of grief, sadness, anger, shame, hopelessness, helplessness and guilt as well as significant increases in experiences of pride and joy.³² HTUG interventions have now taken place in Native communities all over the U.S. Brave Heart has worked with communities to adapt her model to fit tribe specific logics, places and traditions. These interventions enable individuals who suffer from the effects of historical trauma to mediate a sacred reconnection to their traditions and one another. As they participate in ceremony with fellow tribal members, they are revitalizing their relationship to the spirit world and a personal sense of spiritual power. By providing a space for Native people to discuss their collective trauma, they are enabled to honor the memories of their ancestors as well as acknowledge the way these events have shaped their lives.

In addition, they can collectively acknowledge the weight of this trauma even if settler societies will not. In a recent talk, Brave Heart explained that these forms of healing are ultimately very empowering not only for Native individuals but also for whole nations, including those who live transnationally, because healing works backward and forward in time.³³ Native perceptions of time are understood to be fluid, the past is always present and one's present births the future. As these individuals renew their relationship to spiritual power and one another they become empowered at a psychological/spiritual level and are able to live life more joyfully, free from debilitating levels of fear and grief. They also heal their ancestors and heal the future generations of their peoples. While there are a myriad of ways that Native peoples heal, the two described reflect a growing phenomena of health and wellness in Native America that recognizes the link between colonization and its effects and Native manifestations of illness.

³⁰ Ibid., 293.

³¹ Ibid., 294.

³² Brave Heart, "The Return to the Sacred Path," 295-298.

³³ Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, "Workshop on Historical Trauma," Lecture, Value of Care Lecture Series, UC Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA, May 23, 2014.

CONCLUSION

Healing historical trauma in Native America is not simply about treating an individual ‘subject’ but instead seeks to restore a sacred relationship to others: the spirit world, the community, the land and its phenomena and even one’s self. This article in no way intends to imply that all Native American peoples are pathologically affected by historical trauma. Instead, it acknowledges historical trauma as a social reality, existing in a variety of ways, that must be dealt with. The psychic/spiritual healing that is facilitated through Native healing modalities enables the restoration of sacred relationships. When these sacred relationships are honored, one gains insight and awareness through them, restoring one’s balance in relationship to the cosmos. These relationships must be continually renewed in order to maintain equilibrium, as the Native world is a dynamic place. I argue that this form of healing successfully negotiates what Fanon described as the psychological/subjective dimension of decolonization. One is not only liberated from oppression psychologically but transcends this oppression to restore one’s self spiritually.

This inner fortification and restoration of sacred relationships nurtures the regeneration of Native peoples, called for by Alfred. And thus, is a critical step in Native liberation. In addition, if we revisit the logics of interdependence described by Native peoples, we must understand that one is not only co-constitutive of others but one’s thoughts, words and actions are understood to be co-constitutive of the wellbeing of all persons, human and other-than-human. Thus, healing, and ultimately decolonization, when deployed ‘locally’ ripples out through time and space like ocean waves, simultaneously affecting and transforming the wellbeing of all persons: Native and non-Native, human and other-than-human, in a way that is hemispheric, transnational and global.

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