

Disenfranchised Grief: uranium Poisoning on Indigenous Lands in the United States

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HDP 47400 - Living With Loss: Studies of Grief and Transitions

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May 1, 2020

Many North American indigenous creation stories believe that their creator assigned humans to protect and guard the earth. Respect for the land, animals, and plants is told as part of their morals and ethics on how to be a good person. Indigenous people have many stories with many variations to uphold these teachings.

In creation stories, the Hopi people emerge from the water to make a covenant with Masaw--the caretaker, guardian, and protector of Earth--to carry on the stewardship role of their new home. "If they fail to honor the covenant, they will be punished" (Vernon Masayesva, Hopi shepherd, as cited in Snell, 2007, p. 16-17)

"Our people's belief is that we are part of the land. The land is not separate from us. The land sustains us. And if we don't take care of her, she won't be able to sustain us, and we as a generation of people will die" (Freda Huson, Unist'ot'en camp, Wet'suwet'en First Nation peoples in northern British Columbia, Canada, as cited in Simpson, 2020, para. 12).

Since the beginning of time, indigenous people have died at the hands of those who rape and destroyed the earth's resources. Greed has been the driving force of this destruction beginning with Spanish conquests, next European-settlers, then the government (under the guise of patriotism).

The Manhattan Project was a research and development initiative that resulted in the first nuclear (atomic) weapon that began in 1939 (Pasternak, 2010). uranium is the critical mineral¹ that was used to create one of the most devastating weapons of our time. The United States government mined uranium, predominantly, on Native American (indigenous) land in Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, and Utah (Hall, 2016) from 1944 to 1986 (Nez, & Lizer, 2019). The

¹ "Critical minerals are those that are essential to the economy and whose supply may be disrupted" (American Geosciences Institute, 2020)

mining industry created job “opportunities” for indigenous people with a bonus “patriotism” badge of honor for performing duty to Country.

Once World War II was over, the United States had an abundance of uranium. With uranium industries on the brink of bankruptcy, the industry repurposed the uranium for a new American necessity...energy (Voyles, 2015, p. 117-150). Thus, creating an industry that required an abundance of manual labor to mine the product. Again, creating financial opportunities for individuals and communities to support their own indigenous people as a path of sovereignty.

The land was mined with no regard to the waste material that resulted from the uranium extraction. Mounds of uranium dust were left for the people to repurpose, as the dust and rock were discovered (by the community) to make great home-building materials such as foundations, stucco walls, and bread ovens (Pasternack, 2010). Children played in dust piles until the 1990s (Richards, 2013). Farmers led their sheep to drink from the waters that were unknowingly tainted. Mining companies dissolved dust with pools of water that communities swam in for recreation (Morales, 2019). Wives washed their miners’ clothing and termed the hard-to-clean dust, “yellow cake” (Iturralde & Iturralde, 2015, p. 39).

For decades, the United States government assured their uranium workforce that the mineral was safe, even though they were aware of at least some of the health hazards during WWII. In 1969, the government issued regulations requiring mine ventilation to protect the miners (Richards 2013). The damage had already been done. Miners began getting sick with lung disease and cancer. The government quietly conducted medical exams but were ordered not to “scare away the workforce with the results” (Pasternack, 2010).

A miner’s wife, G. Iturralde, states in her memoir, “How could an element such as uranium that is used to make bombs, not be harmful to us?” (Iturralde & Iturralde, 2015, p. 32).

G. Iturralde's husband would become very angry with her and respond with, "We have government agencies that protect us from all those dangerous practices, and if you keep asking so many questions, my employers will not be too pleased with me! So shut up!" (Iturralde & Iturralde, 2015, p. 32). G. Iturralde shared how she felt unacknowledged, first by her husband, then by the government - something she still carries with her today.

By the early 1980s hundreds of miners had become sick and died and the government could no longer deny the effects of uranium. In addition, non-occupational illnesses from uranium were increasing rapidly (Richards, 2013). The indigenous people were becoming angry and began demanding answers. Gloria Iturralde's husband became ill with a lung disease in the 1980s and later died from complications of lung disease.

The indigenous communities banded together in the late 1970s to advocate for their beloved environment and health; but the process was painfully slow. The government was creating "red tape" by requiring multiple medical exams, research, etc. before taking action (Iturralde & Iturralde, 2015). "Unfortunately, there are countless testimonial stories in Navajo communities that reveal how past uranium activity has devastated Navajo families, traditions, and our mother earth" (Nez, & Lizer, 2019, para 8).

Over the years, nations across North America have gathered their guardians of the earth (activists) to fulfill their spiritual covenants by taking on environmental, health, and cultural issues that are oppressing the inhabitants of the earth (humans, plants, animals, etc). They are organizing blockades against pipelines (Simpson, 2020); they are running for government offices; and they are creating organizations and nonprofits. As cited in the Richards article, Perry Charley (a Diné (Navajo) activist, since learning of the "black lung" illness of his father who was a miner) co-founded the uranium Education Program in 1996. Slowly but surely, activists like

Charley have been instrumental in gathering the nations, non-profits, and other organizations to pursue action from the government (Richards, 2013).

In recent years, studies have proven the environmental and human effects of uranium and other related mineral poisoning. Dr. Loretta Christensen, Chief Medical Officer at the Indian Health Services (IHS) testified to the Committee on Indian Affairs that a four-year study proved that indigenous people are at higher risk of kidney disease, diabetes, cancer, autoimmune disease, and miscarriages, which are a direct effect of uranium poisoning. Research showed that children are born with high rates of neurodevelopmental delays and autism. Christensen's testimony was calling for additional research, as these early-stage findings were just the beginning (2019).

Environmentally, the guardians are demanding action for clean water, dust removal, abandoned mine assessment and closures, and home screenings and removal. The Navajo Nation testified for the House Committee in 2019 to have uranium removed from the critical minerals list.

The question remains, why is action taking so long? Why aren't citizens, politicians, and environmentalists, doing more as a collective nation to respond quickly? Unlike the government's emergency response to the Three Mile Island Plant nuclear disaster of 1979, the government did not declare such emergencies (such as evacuations and water restrictions) when uranium leaked into water sources that were three times the contamination of Three Mile Island disaster in the same year (Richards, 2013). One could argue that the government does not value the indigenous inhabitants as it does others (racism).

Indigenous people of North America have endured centuries of trauma from the direct effects of colonization. The compilation of trauma includes murder, rape, starvation,

homelessness, displacement, illness, theft...the list goes on. Millions paid the price with their lives. The uranium poisoning is just one example of disenfranchised grief² that the people are actively experiencing due to oppressive, harmful, white supremacist, social structures.

Exposure to uranium over the years has caused people to lose their health, financial security, loved ones, community members and engagement, traditions, agency, and the land they are meant to protect. They have been harmed mentally, physically, and spiritually. Only because the government's hand was forced to act, "compensation was belatedly provided, and it was given in a grudging fashion" (Nez, & Lizer, 2019). G. Iturralde writes,

I sought information through my lonely quest, lonely because no one wanted to talk about negative things. My fellow miners' wives were too busy spending the monies that uranium companies paid to care about compensation" (Iturralde & Iturralde, 2015, p. 61).

They meagerly compensate for death...the culprits of death, health hazards, cancers, pain, and stress-related illness are clearly the responsibility of our government. My husband should have retired after twenty years; he should not have been sick and in pain until he died (Iturralde & Iturralde, 2015, p. 59).

As cited in the Ansloos et al. 2019 study, published by The Canadian Psychological Association, there are severe inequities in treating mental health for indigenous populations; Another, "oversight" by the medical and psychological institutes of America.

According to the study, 50% of people living on reservations experience high levels of psychological distress, compared to 33% of the general population (Ansloos et al., 2019, p. 266).

² "Disenfranchised grief is a central idea in the field and helps us understand people's sense that they are not supported by others in their loss and mourning" (Harvey 2002).

The study acknowledges that these estimates could be much higher because of data accessibility.

Some of the issues highlighted were:

1. Mental health professionals (psychologists) lack training in indigenous history, context, and culture.
2. Cognitive imperialism systems are prevalent within the practice of mental health; the European-settler views indigenous people as a deficit and diseased.
3. Indigenous ontology is holistic that includes spirituality, versus the dominant dualistic (mind/body) ontology.
4. A spiritual dimension is not included in traditional psychology methods. Yet, spirituality is at the core of indigenous mindset.
5. A lack of equity in representation of indigenous mental health healers (Ansloos et al., 2019, p. 268-273)

The study did an excellent job outlining the issues and need for more research. However, this will not help those who are still suffering in the present day. Harvey (2002) provides many aspects of grief as well as theories, methods, and approaches to treating grief for populations within the scope of the dominant culture (white, CIS gender, hetero people). The *Body Keeps Score* text (van der Kolk, 2015), is another wonderful resource for treating trauma that is stored in the body; however, it is unrealistic to believe these methods can be practiced on indigenous people for the same reason cited above by the Ansloos et al., 2019 study.

In addition to the appropriate attitude of mistrust from the “outside”, there is no evidence to support that traditional psychological theories, methods, and approaches will be helpful in treating generational, disenfranchised grief with indigenous peoples without immediate restructuring of current psychological treatment methods.

Australian aboriginal mental health activists created The National Aboriginal Mental Health Association in 1969 to address the issues of inequity in mental health. This activism resulted in providing research and changes in health policy frameworks that documented progress in mental health access and aboriginal representation of mental health providers (Ansloos et al., 2019, p. 266-267).

Since the US is decades behind Australia in mental health equity, one of the helpful methods that can begin the process of healing is acknowledgement and reparations. Some of the ways in which this can be done are:

1. An acknowledgment from the United States government that includes a formal apology.
2. Historical documentation and mandatory inclusion in the academic literature provided within the public school system.
3. Media coverage to inform the citizens of the government's role in poisoning the earth and harming the people who occupy the land.
4. Providing quality healthcare that identifies and treats the ill quickly as well as provides preventative care for those who have been (or will be) exposed.
5. Providing mental health wellness professionals who are specially trained in indigenous culture as well as academic scholarships for indigenous people to become mental health providers in their community.
6. Environmental action plans to clean-up the land in a timely manner.
7. Financial and land reparations (Resource Generation)

In addition to acknowledgement and reparations, restructuring of mental health for indigenous people, there also needs to be advocacy in recruiting elders and community leaders to

receive mental health training so it can be incorporated with indigenous healing traditions (Ansloos, 2019). Due to the disparity in educational and financial resources, there are not as many opportunities for indigenous people to become mental health providers. Therefore, there needs to be equity initiatives and mentorships that will recruit potential healers as early as high school.

The topic of colonization and grief is complex and weaved with centuries-old structures of racism. I have argued that Harvey (2002) and van der Kolk's (2015) research are moot, due to the significant and undeniable cultural aspects of treatment. Hopefully, through advocacy with earth guardians and allies, more research and education can be done so indigenous people can be fully liberated.

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