

A decorative graphic in the top left corner consisting of several overlapping teal-colored geometric shapes, including triangles and parallelograms, creating a modern, abstract design.

Stephanie A. Sellers

INDIGENOUS WOMEN'S REPRODUCTIVE TRADITIONS

Reclaiming Sovereignty Through
500 Years of Colonization

Gender Studies

Collection Editors

JAN ETIENNE

&

REHAM ELMORALLY

LIVED PLACES
PUBLISHING



INDIGENOUS WOMEN'S REPRODUCTIVE TRADITIONS

Stephanie A. Sellers

INDIGENOUS WOMEN'S REPRODUCTIVE TRADITIONS

Reclaiming Sovereignty
Through 500 Years of
Colonization

Gender Studies

Collection Editors

Jan Etienne & Reham ElMorally



First published in 2025 by Lived Places Publishing

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without prior permission in writing from the publisher.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems. In accordance with Article 4(3) of the Digital Single Market Directive 2019/790, Lived Places Publishing expressly reserves this work from the text and data mining exception.

The author and editors have made every effort to ensure the accuracy of the information contained in this publication but assume no responsibility for any errors, inaccuracies, inconsistencies, or omissions. Likewise, every effort has been made to contact copyright holders. If any copyright material has been reproduced unwittingly and without permission, the publisher will gladly receive information enabling them to rectify any error or omission in subsequent editions.

Copyright © 2025 Lived Places Publishing

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 9781917503570 (pbk)
ISBN: 9781917503594 (ePDF)
ISBN: 9781917503587 (ePUB)

The right of Stephanie A. Sellers to be identified as the Author of this work has been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Design and Patents Act 1988.

Cover design by Fiachra McCarthy
Book design by Rachel Trolove of Twin Trail Design
Typeset by Newgen Publishing, UK

Lived Places Publishing
P.O. Box 1845
47 Echo Avenue
Miller Place, NY 11764

www.livedplacespublishing.com

As an Indian woman I was free. I owned my home, my person, the work of my own hands, and my children could never forget me. I was better as an Indian woman than under white law.¹

[W]omen are the base of the generations. Our reproductive power is sacred to us.²

—Katsi Cook, Mohawk Midwife, Environmentalist, and
Activist

We're not feminists. We're the law.³

—Louise Herne, Mohawk Bear Clan Mother

Abstract

The work argues that the systemic control of female reproduction impacting Native American women specifically and the nations broadly is rooted in colonial and patriarchal ideologies brought to the United States by the European settlers. The examination of traditional practices and culture stories among Native nations, which includes coming-of-age ceremonies for girls, highlights the central role of female sanctity in the traditional cultural structures. Control of female reproduction has been a central mechanism for sustaining social hierarchies in the United States today, and this especially impacts Native nations where women and girls had, and often still have, much more latitude in their personal agency than those in western culture. The colonial ideologies were devastating to Native American nations that generally function(ed) from a more Gender Complementary social structure.

Key words

coming-of-age ceremonies, divine creatrixes, European colonization, female reproduction, Gender Complementary social structures, Native American women

Contents

Foreword by Jana McKeag	x
Learning objectives	xv
Introduction	1
Chapter 1 Since the beginning of time: Indigenous divine creatrixes and Gender Complementary civilizations	19
Chapter 2 Indigenous female sexuality, menstruation, reproduction, and motherhood	57
Chapter 3 What happened? How gendered colonial strategies targeted Indigenous women's bodily sovereignty and harmed the nations	81
Chapter 4 Stealing back the thunder: Indigenous communities decolonizing reproduction and motherhood	111
Chapter 5 Final thoughts	123
Notes	129
Recommended projects & discussion questions	139
Bibliography	140
About the author	149
Index	151

Foreword

Jana McKeag, citizen, Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma and president, Lowry Strategies Government Affairs

I have had the honor and privilege of teaching a class on “Contemporary Native American Issues” as part of Dr Stephanie Sellers’s course on “Foundations of Native American Studies” for nine years. I was pleased to learn that my alma mater, Gettysburg College, had the foresight to include classes on diversity, including those that educate a primarily white student body about Native American culture and history that has for so long been ignored or, even worse, grossly misrepresented in our education system.

I am a proud citizen of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma and was certainly an anomaly when I attended Gettysburg College over 50 years ago. Since graduating from Gettysburg, I have dedicated my professional career to advocating for Native American issues, including serving as a lobbyist for the past 25 years. In that capacity, I have come to especially appreciate the work that Dr Sellers has been doing in educating her students about the horrors as well as the beauty of the story of Native American people in our country because those students will leave her classroom with more knowledge and empathy for Native Americans than

the majority of congressmen, senators, and federal officials who I have worked with over the years. Those same legislators and officials, in large part, have failed miserably in upholding and maintaining treaties and the federal trust responsibility for the tribes that were entrusted to them decades ago.

I was especially pleased to learn that Dr Sellers's book would focus on the influence and importance of generations of Native American women, a topic that is overlooked and misunderstood. Like so many of my female Native American colleagues, I have been influenced and inspired not only by my grandmothers and aunties but by numerous Native American women who provided leadership to their tribal members as well as nationally in a variety of ways. Moreover, in the Native American tradition, which Dr Sellers addresses in her book, these women provided inspiration, wisdom, and leadership for generations of male tribal leaders.

My own story traces back to the Cherokee "Beloved Woman" Nanye'hi, also known by her English name, Nancy Ward. I am a direct descendant of one of the most famous leaders in Cherokee history. However, Nanye'hi was not influential as a tribal "chief" or "warrior". She was a diplomat and a businesswoman, and she was recognized for her talents by being elected as the only female voting member of the Cherokee council. Because of her talents, she was elected as the leader of the Cherokee delegation to negotiate with all male British and European American delegations, who were astonished that a woman would be entrusted with such important negotiations.

My more recent story, like many of the Native American women of my generation, goes back to my great-grandmother and my

grandmother. Both strong, independent women, they divorced their abusive white husbands at a time when women did not get divorced. They were single mothers who, during the Dust Bowl and the Depression, raised children who went on to become attorneys, businessmen, and earn advanced degrees. When my great-grandmother's children were taken from her to attend Indian boarding school, most likely knowing that they may meet the horrible fate of other children attending the now infamous schools, she followed them to Haskell Boarding School, secured a job in the school's laundry, and stayed with them until they were able to graduate and leave.

After leaving her husband, my grandmother and her three children moved to Pawhuska where my grandmother, a secretarial school graduate, found work with the Bureau of Indian Affairs and Phillips Petroleum. However, she developed an ear infection and, because she was "Indian", she was prohibited from being treated at the "White" hospital and was forced to travel miles to the Indian Health Service (IHS) clinic. The IHS was infamous for employing doctors, nurses, and other medical professionals who, due to a variety of societal issues such as alcoholism and drug abuse, were prohibited from practicing medicine in "White" hospitals but were welcome in the "Indian" hospitals. After repeated trips, each time being told that "there's nothing wrong with you", my grandmother became completely deaf. Nevertheless, she was able to raise three children, all of whom graduated from college and became successful in their respective fields.

This is my story but, in Indian Country, it is not an unusual story. My female colleagues working not only in Washington, DC, but

nationally on behalf of tribal issues have all been inspired, mentored, and motivated by grandmothers, aunties, and female tribal leaders. However, as Dr Sellers points out, it's not only the female advocates and leaders who are inspired by tribal women but the tribal men as well. My first boss, the brilliant Chuck Trimble, executive director of the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI), was the protégé of his fellow Oglala Sioux tribal member Helen Peterson, who founded the NCAI. Moreover, Mel Tonasket, the president of NCAI, was under the tutelage of another member of the Colville Tribe—the amazing anti-terminationist warrior Lucy Covington.

Both gentlemen provided leadership that has improved the lives of generations of Native Americans, but they could not have done it without the guidance of these remarkable women.

Although the book addresses the influence of these women in a historical and cultural context, the impact of their enduring generational influence is evident, and even growing, among today's Native American female leaders. You are probably familiar with many of them: U.S. Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland, Congresswomen Sharice Davids and Mary Peltola, the late former Cherokee Nation Principal Chief Wilma Mankiller, former Mille Lacs Band Chief Melanie Benjamin, and former Crow Creek Tribal Chairwoman Sue Shaffer. Others may not be a household word but have been equally influential: Patricia Zell, Wendy Helgemo, Holly Cook Macarro, Sheila Morago, Valerie Spicer, Jackie Pata, Shelley Buck, and the like. Every tribe has benefited over decades from the strength and guidance of its female cultural, religious, and political leaders.

Dr Sellers's book is a tribute to a culture defining generations of Native American women *and* men. It is also the heretofore untold story of why and how Native people have endured despite countless attempts to eradicate their existence. And it is a lesson for future generations, both Native and non-Native.

Learning objectives

- Demonstrate how the creation stories of some Native American nations affect their social structures.
- Describe the impact of the divine creatrixes on beliefs about Native women and girls as related to reproduction.
- Contrast the beliefs about women in the American expression of western culture versus those held by some Native nations.
- Critically examine the beliefs about the roles of girls and women in society and discern their origins.

Introduction

Female reproduction is power: personal, cultural, societal, religious, and political. All human life comes through women and people who birth. We are the doorway between the realms of spirit and this three-dimensional world on Earth. Though adults of all gender identities rear children, females are the biological and psychospiritual hub—a term that highlights the interconnectedness of mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of life, centered around female reproductive roles. We are arbiters of life. In many traditions globally, women gather the bones after death and conduct funeral rites. We are the original Alphas and Omegas of humanity. Ancient civilizations, as well as contemporary ones that still function on ancient beliefs, understand the profound realms of women across vastly diverse cultures. As the ancient Greeks recognized, a woman is “All that is”; as the Laguna Pueblo Indigenous people note, “In the beginning was Thought, and her name is Woman”; and in the Yoruba tradition of Nigeria, “Ajé is female power at all levels.” Many historians, archaeologists, and anthropologists in western cultures have been working for centuries to ignore, discredit, and rewrite those stories of nations all over the globe that centralize femaleness, recognize female sanctity, support all forms of female reproduction, and bow to the power of mothers. To recognize how taboo and terrifying

to patriarchy such a reality is, one needs to look no further than to the decades of vehement attacks by powerful gatekeepers in academia on distinguished archaeologist Marija Gimbutas (1921–1994). Gimbutas wrote volumes on archaeological evidence of the Divine Feminine in ancient European cultures and was blacklisted by women and men academics in her discipline for doing so. Gimbutas, a renowned archaeologist, faced significant backlash for her research on the Divine Feminine, which challenged male-dominated narratives within archaeology. Only recently⁴ were those attempts at discrediting her research and claims about Mother-Goddess cultures magnificently vindicated, albeit posthumously.⁵

This book argues that the systemic control of female reproduction, rooted in colonial and patriarchal ideologies, has been a central mechanism for sustaining social hierarchies and continues to impact gender equity today. Female reproduction is fundamental to all aspects of human life, influencing cultural, social, and political spheres. Recognizing this allows us to understand its impact across many sectors. And what is yoked with biological reproduction, but sex and the menstrual cycle. So they too must be factored into the biological realities of human systems if one is to command the powers of reproduction specifically and the entire society broadly. Procreation is not merely a biological function however, but it reflects what cultures understand the categories of woman (femininity) and man (masculinity) to mean, the power those principles lack or assert, and who exactly has one, both, or fluid versions of them. Hence, from procreation comes power, but power for whom? And what do people who cannot biologically bear children do to gain the power afforded only to

those females who create not only life biologically but who perpetuate culture by teaching its rules to the rising generations of human life? In addition, if reproduction is understood as sacrosanct and connected to the Divine, and you do not have that power, what gods will be created to position and thus exalt the non-childbearing biological sex and cast down those who can bear life? That conundrum was already addressed in geographic spaces overseas during the rise of patriarchy nearly 6,000 years before the European colonizers arrived on Turtle Island. In this new land to the colonizers, patriarchy had to be reasserted and institutionally standardized at all levels of society in order to undermine and control Native American nations, most especially disenfranchising Indigenous women.

The American Founding Fathers recognized the need for establishing a power structure that would assign people based on gender, class, and race in their “proper” places in the hierarchy taking shape in the New World, and biological reproduction played a key role in that endeavor. William Penn wrote in 1681 that “[c]olonies are the seeds of nations...best for the increase in Humane Stock”.⁶ One of their primary goals in accomplishing that task was to shape social norms and laws about female sexuality and reproduction that essentially mandated serial pregnancies and forced motherhood for all women. Much of the female oppression rampant in the American colonies was imported entirely from English Common Law; thus, the Founders had little to alter on that score that mandated women and their children were the property of men. They did so to create a new government based on liberty and freedom—high-minded ideals in which Americans still take pride. However, those ideals had

to be shaped by keeping the sexes in what they deemed their "natural" places: females in the home; males in government and commerce. The Founders looked to biblical edicts to populate the earth (with Christians) and connected fertility with patriotism. Ultimately, they looked through the wombs of women as one key route to make America exceptionally prosperous and an ideal model to eclipse the European nations from whence they came and, in many ways, disdained. Some of the goals from the nation's founding included not just American individualism and personal liberty but also ideals specifically related to reproduction, like "commanding men, domestic wives, and grateful, obedient children".⁷ Reproduction in the colonial era was also a means to create child labor⁸ to benefit individual working-class, poor, and enslaved families. To middle-class and wealthy families, having many children was a means for men to demonstrate social status and economic prosperity, as well as an expression of their perceived virility.

Promulgating the misconception that females have been subjugated by males since the beginning of time and that God has always been male anchors indisputable, universal male supremacy. These beliefs also assert that men are natural-born leaders. All these assumptions may have been easier for the American Founders to believe themselves and use to shape laws and norms if not for the Indigenous nations of the Eastern Woodlands. The European settlers were well-acquainted with the Haudenosaunee/Iroquois nations in upstate New York, the Mohegans of Connecticut, the Shawnee of Ohio and Missouri, and the Lenape in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, among many other Native nations in the East that functioned on matrilineal

social structures. Whether by nation-to-nation negotiations or newspaper stories about lacrosse games and naming ceremonies or by the personal friendships and marriages between settlers and Indigenous peoples, the Founders and the population at large knew exactly what was going on in Indian Country in the eighteenth century: Native women directed their own lives within the cultural values of community, and their word was law to the nations. The Founders' letters in historical records unequivocally demonstrate their knowledge of these matters as well as their clear-eyed positions on female reproduction and the importance of controlling every aspect of it. This is how America was founded. Control of females broadly and reproduction specifically were critical lynchpins in the promulgation of the new American elite and the Founders' values, ideologies, and mythologies on what America could and should be.

For this reason, America continues its deeply contested struggles around female reproduction as some groups attempt to wrench themselves free of the oppressive past while others fight to sustain the original colonial norms that made females powerless in the eyes of the law. Putting those norms in context, we must remember that they were established by intellectually admirable men who believed in certain types of liberties. Some of these men also held a worldview that embraced the barbaric "appropriateness" of enslaving African and Indigenous people, militarily slaughtering Indigenous men, women, and children, and limiting all women's agency—essentially reducing us to our reproductive abilities. Though repugnant, accepting the paradox that individuals could uphold the concepts of liberty for some people and slavery for others at the same time is necessary to understand

the founding of the United States. Rather than attempting to diminish the Founders' extraordinary vision and legacies to the U.S. on one hand or to ignore the atrocities they committed on the other are not useful approaches to a holistic rendering of U.S. history, in my assessment. Only when dismantling this reality by examining it through the lens of gender, race, and class—and connecting those concepts through a worldview of patriarchy—can we grasp how concepts can be twisted to justify and sustain our own privileges.

The apologists' claims that the Founders merely reflected the values of their era and thus should not be judged by contemporary ethical standards that value social equity is an academic misconception that utterly disregards the presence of social equity in Indigenous cultures that the colonists were fully aware of. Importantly, Indigenous peoples of the Eastern Woodlands certainly did invade other Native nations and take captives. There was at times political corruption in the nations along with every human ill that plagues us today. However, the widespread evils of race-based slavery, rape and domestic violence as commonplace, utter female subordination, and a brutal class system had no corollary in Native nations as they did in European countries and the United States at the time. Much of these forms of violence still exist in America today and are absurdly discussed as if they are normal patterns of humanity and not merely reflections of a warped cultural ethos! Cadwallader Colden (1688–1776), a governor of New York as well as a physician and scientist who was recognized as the best-informed man in the New World on the affairs of the British-American colonies, compared the Iroquois' governing structure to the [most admirable components of] the

Romans.⁹ Colden believed that the Indians in general, and the Iroquois specifically, “provided the new Americans with a window on their own antiquity [that] was shared by Franklin, Jefferson, and Thomas Paine, and a century later, by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels as well as the founders of modern feminism.”¹⁰ Colden wrote, “We are fond of searching into remote Antiquity to know the manners of our earliest progenitors; if I be not mistaken, the Indians are living images of them”—this was a belief held by many writers of this era, not solely Colden.¹¹ Last, Colden wrote of the Iroquois that “they allow no Kind of Superiority of one over another, and banish all Servitude from their Territories.”¹²

My brief epistle is not meant to harshly admonish academics who so often ignore this history but to adduce that the social and governing structures of Native Americans in the East, and certainly elsewhere on Turtle Island, at Eurocolonial contact were generally egalitarian. What this means for reproductive agency is fundamental to that observation: since there were no oppressive systems of power in the East certainly that subjugated women socially and economically, there was also no regulation and oppression of them in regard to biological reproduction, marriage, and sexuality. The works of Native historians, anthropologists, professors, authors, and activists gathered in this book will demonstrate that position assuredly. Rayna Green addresses this issue in her review of ethnographic literature about Indigenous people over the twentieth century and notes the problems with western-cultural academic approaches to the study of Indigenous women in particular:

The clichéd concerns that every discipline has with women—those primarily from their biological functions

as mothers, their social functioning as wives or lovers, and their economic functions as producers or helpmates—are still the concerns every discipline has with Native American women. Women as defective beings, psychologically, physically, or as inferior beings, socially, intellectually, and politically are yet the interpretive frameworks within which Native women are cast along with their non-Native American counterparts.¹³

Finding productive ways to reconceptualize the founding and creation of America, while including all the best attributes and worst offenses of our past, is imperative to move out of the American Dark Ages from where we seem at times to emerge but eventually slip back into its shadows in devastating ways, like the U.S. Supreme Court overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in June 2022. Female reproductive justice is the American litmus test of how far we've come in that endeavor. Considering news headlines in 2024, we are still grossly failing as pregnant American women in the midst of miscarrying are refused emergency medical treatment to save their lives, as their doctors are too frightened of being imprisoned to intervene.¹⁴ Elected officials securing the highest political offices disdain women without biological children as “childless cat ladies” and claim that childless Americans are unpatriotic and have no stake in America's future.¹⁵ This rhetoric echoes colonial-era ideologies that linked women's value solely to their reproductive roles. Honoring the contributions of our Founders, including American Founders of all genders, races, and classes who are rarely identified in that cohort, while simultaneously acknowledging their moral downfalls would be an act that signals American maturity. While we may love and admire

our national “parents”, we must also accept their tragic flaws that have negatively impacted our nation for centuries. Lying by omission about our robust and enigmatic histories in the United States, and burying profound collective wounds, only harms everyone and creates barriers to moving in healthier directions. Remembering the full American story is not an act of historic revenge or castigation of individuals or groups, but a form of reclamation that can only heal the collective.

In the Eastern Woodlands nations, Indigenous women not only ran their governments with complementary roles for males, but they also had wide latitude in sexuality and control of their reproduction. The Founders corresponded with one another about this issue that they dubbed the root of barbarous societies, namely, having women till soil they solely manage, express open sexuality, and limit their numbers of offspring. Thomas Jefferson wrote, “They [Native American women] raise fewer children than we do...The women very frequently attending the men in their parties of war and of hunting, child-bearing becomes extremely inconvenient to them...[and] it is said, therefore, that they have learnt the practice of procuring abortion by the use of some vegetable; and that it even extends to prevent conception for a considerable time after.”¹⁶ Further, there was anxiety among American elites that the agency of Indigenous women would influence Euro-American women to challenge their subjugated status. Indeed, that is precisely what happened, and the influence of Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) women on the feminist movement is well chronicled. The early suffragists had close relationships with Haudenosaunee women. For example, Mathilda Joselyn Gage (1826–1898) was adopted into the Mohawk nation

as a relative, just as Cadwallader Colden had been in the previous century.¹⁷ While some may argue that Indigenous gender complementarity is idealized, archaeological and anthropological evidence, alongside oral traditions, firmly supports the reality of these egalitarian structures.

Ensuring this part of American history remains hidden has been an ongoing problem in the full telling of how the United States was shaped in the past around reproductive restrictions, and how that issue is played out in contemporary times. We cannot know who we are as a nation, or why the war against female reproduction is raging as strongly as ever, until we look closely at the Founders' strategies and the presence of Indigenous women's sovereignty over their own bodies and lives. In the twenty-first century, we are still battling the legacy of the Founders' visions when it comes to female reproduction, as birth control and abortion are becoming more restricted and at times outlawed throughout the United States. In this way, the worst visions and intentions, not the best, of the Founding Fathers are still haunting America like starving ghosts who are invisible and unacknowledged, thus wielding considerable power over our country's psyche as we plummet into an era of wholesale, widespread anti-female attacks on reproduction. That means, fundamentally, attacks on all females' human dignity and agency and the ill health of our entire country.

From America's founding as a budding nation, it was profoundly shaped by attempts to control female reproduction: Indigenous women's, enslaved women's, and all classes of free women's sexuality and fertility were policed in the colonial states from points of desire to birth. The Founders focused on female sexuality and

fertility to simultaneously further their vision of American exceptionalism in the areas of commerce, their versions of morality, and national governing. While Indigenous women's reproductive agency was undermined to dismantle matrilineal governance, enslaved African women's reproduction was commodified to sustain the economic interests of the elite. These divergent strategies illustrate the flexibility of patriarchal systems in maintaining control across racial and class divides. Since much of the spirit and language of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Constitution ideologically impacted the Founding Fathers, particularly in writing the Articles of Confederation,¹⁸ clearly delineating a system that ensured female subjugation was critical. The Haudenosaunee are governed communally by all genders with women central in that role. But Indigenous women of the Eastern Woodlands also presented the Founders with larger issues that were disruptions to the gendered power structures they put in place: Indigenous women had agency over their own lives. Attacks on Indigenous women—literal assaults and demonizing them through colonial writings—were necessary to upend their governing power. George Washington was known by the Haudenosaunee as “He Burns It” and “The Town Destroyer” for his campaigns against them. In addition, he especially endeavored to destroy the wampum writings that were not only the purview of the women but noted female controls of land. Jefferson wrote that those societies that allow women in the public sphere are barbarous and, in a letter to George Washington, made clear that women confined to domestic lives as wives and mothers allowed for a more civilized society and better governing.¹⁹ The Founders' letters and writings reveal their anxiety about Indigenous women's

reproductive agency and their efforts to impose Eurocentric patriarchal norms, a strategy that shaped early American governance.

Colonial-era use of birth control, abortifacient plants, spacing births to ensure proper childrearing, and so forth were standard practices among women, including Indigenous women, for centuries. What these social norms created in Native nations was female-bodied people's control over how many children they would birth, without stigma or repercussions. Reproduction was under the purview of Eastern Woodlands Native women as they had rights to the soil and the responsibility for feeding the populace through agriculture. When children are understood as identifying through their mother's clan—and not conceptualized as either legitimate or illegitimate based on male ownership as they were in Eurocolonial society—strict controls over the numbers of sexual partners and reproduction are unnecessary. To the power brokers of the colonial era, this set off alarm bells as imminent threats to the foundational values of the new nation they intended to build that privileged males. However for Native women, once the European settlers arrived with their patriarchal social structure that mandated compulsory heterosexuality that centralizes males and understood them as heads-of-households in civilized nations, this led to targeted attacks on their centuries-old practices. This thwarted their control over their reproduction as well as their sexual practices.

Punishments in the colonial era for unwed, free women who became pregnant included not only steep social stigma and ostracism but also criminal charges. In the 1700s, eight Euro-American women were hanged in the state of Pennsylvania