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Native Presence and Sovereignty in College: Sustaining Indigenous Weapons to Defeat Systemic Monsters

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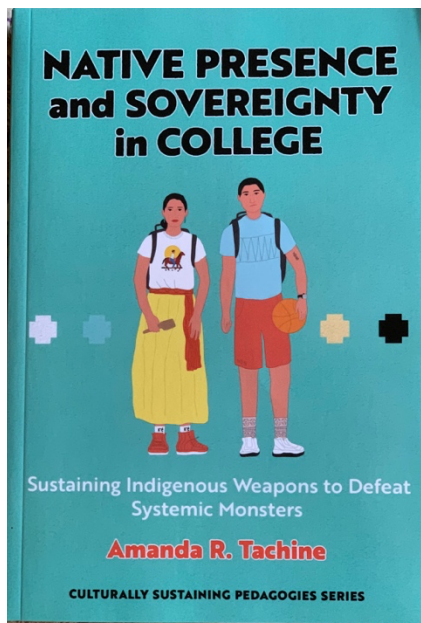
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Sustaining Indigenous Weapons to Defeat Indigenous Monsters

Amanda R. Tachine. *Sustaining Indigenous Weapons to Defeat Indigenous Monsters*. Teachers College Press, 2022. 209 pp. \$39.95 (paperback). ISBN 9780807779965.

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In *Sustaining Indigenous Weapons to Defeat Indigenous Monsters*, Amanda Tachine delineates the barriers that hinder the personal and academic goals of Navajo students, and what sources of strength and comfort these students channel to guide them toward college. Tachine stresses the importance of story-sharing and world-making, which she herself employs. She uses a story rug technique, weaving together the narratives of ten Navajo students as they journey to and through college, bringing together their experiences of belonging in educational settings and offering us lessons gleaned. The storylines serve as threads,

which she connects to construct collective themes as part of a larger tapestry. In particular, she unmasks the insidious workings of White supremacy, settler colonialism, and cisheteropatriarchy in American education (pre-K through university) and society at large, forces which systematically disadvantage Indigenous and Other non-White populations in their efforts toward college attainment. Ultimately, she suggests ways

to confront White privilege in education and to center and nourish the voices, perspectives, aspirations, and needs of Indigenous students.

Being Navajo herself, Tachine is intimately connected to Navajo lived experiences and effectively able to articulate her community's desires and dilemmas. She opens with the Twin Warriors tale, an origin myth following two brothers who use powerful tools and prayers to save their people from monsters (naayéé'). By beginning with Diné storytelling, she centers Diné ways of being in the world and highlights the importance of harnessing ancestral and memory knowledge. She stresses, in her introduction, that belonging, while desired and needed, is a deeply contested concept and shows how Western universities are exclusionary and elitist sites that maintain the status quo of whiteness. She recounts ways in which Black, Brown, and non-cisgender bodies are policed, harassed, or pushed out simply for existing as different in White spaces such as college campuses, dispossessions and removals that upset the victims' personhoods and fracture their ideas and practices of self-acceptance. She poses the questions: Who belongs in college settings? And who defines and sets the terms of belonging?

She defines systemic monsters as "interlocking structures of power rooted in White supremacy" (p. 7) that are disruptive to harmony, balance, and goodness. For example, while COVID-19 was detrimental to Native communities, the virus was not the real monster but rather the larger structural preconditions that exacerbated health disparities. Tachine explains that normative constructions of everyday logics and behaviors delegitimize, devalue, and decenter non-White ways of acting, thinking, and being and reinforce the nation state's control over Native bodies, lands, and minds, thereby reproducing harm and trauma. Hauntings are described as vestiges of colonialism, genocide, slavery, and disinheritance, which Navajo and more broadly Black and Brown peoples encounter on a daily basis. She offers weapons to defeat monsters, describing these as knowledges and ethical engagements rooted in Navajo place-based knowing, that sustain Navajo students and ignite their power, presence, and persistence.

This book commences with a concise foreword by Django Paris and is divided into three parts. In the first part, Tachine introduces the financial hardship monster, anchored in settler colonialism. She provides a historical overview of the devastating hardships that Native peoples underwent at the hands of settlers, and laments that even today, Native lands are occupied and controlled by a government that has failed to adequately acknowledge and provide for Native interests. Many Navajo students come from low-income livelihoods, with limited access to basic sustenance needs and preparatory educational pathways, which in turn

threatens their chances of college attainment, diminishing their agency and ultimately survival. The financial hardship monster manifests as limited scholarships and high tuition and living costs for Native students and can, the author argues, be resisted if students tap into Diné values to enact the weapon of resurgence, described as generative and love-centered.

In part two, Tachine covers the deficit monster, born of assimilation to Whiteness, and recounts how conceptions of deficiency were historically employed to legitimize the civilization and taming of Natives by Europeans. She elucidates how assimilationist practices to educate Native children and youth through special programs fostered damaging perspectives of Native identity and self-worth. The deficit monster manifests as measurements, achievement gaps, and outcomes based on non-Native notions of success and is internalized as feelings of being unaccepted and unloved, responses to historical trauma. It can be overcome by deploying the weapon of continuance, grounded in matrilineal teachings of birth and life. Tachine encourages readers to revisit narratives of meritocracy and disrupt settler ideologies in curriculum.

In the third part, Tachine elaborates on the failure monster, which stems from capitalism, and informs that while meritocracy poses as a fair system, it breeds entitlement and disprivileges the disempowered. Native students are often cash-strapped and food insecure, and when grades and money determine belonging, these students internalize a fear of failing that is not an individualized problem but rather a collective burden. Tachine is critical of the neoliberal model of education, which prizes individual over communal achievement, and reminds that education can be used to strengthen Tribal sovereignty and wellbeing instead of priming students for hierarchy and maintaining White standards of belonging that are cloaked in the language of “success.” To vanquish the failure monster, Tachine recommends activating reverence, which is sacredness-centered and grounded in a connection with divinity.

The final monster mentioned by Tachine is the (in)visibility monster, which recreates centuries of harm by dehumanizing and pathologizing Indigenous peoples, dimming their intellect, unsettling their connection to home(lands), and perpetuating erasure. She offers, as an example, the writing out of Indigenous peoples from the Morrill Act. She explains that Natives have been both invisibilized as unimportant and hypervisibilized as flawed, misrepresentations that serve the interests of White domination and are based on the White gaze through which “Indianness” is constructed as inferior. As a result of this manipulation, many Native students internalize inadequacy and second-guess their identities. To ward

off this monster, Tachine urges actuating the sovereignty-centered weapon of refusal, a discarding of the White gaze.

Tachine wraps up by reiterating the importance of examining hegemonic frameworks and disengaging from colonial thinking. She invokes la paperson's (2017) call to theorize in the break, recommending that we detach from constructions of belonging that serve the interests of White patriarchy and capitalism. Her advocacy brings to mind Mignolo's (2020) definition of decolonial thought and action as an attempt at delinking from the epistemological foundations of colonialism. Mignolo further described a second stage, which he termed as re-existence: "a sustained effort to reorient our human communal praxis of living" (p. 106), and this is echoed by Tachine's demand for rematriation, a call to upend the heteropatriarchal underpinnings of settler colonialism. Tachine also asks that we reconceptualize belonging from our ethical engagements and land-based sensibilities, which she terms as a peoplehood sense of belonging.

Since this book employs Diné thought to interrupt colonial practices in education, it bridges theory and practice. It upholds and champions Native epistemes, a crucial endeavor considering that non-White forms of knowledge production have historically been invalidated and peripheralized in settler dominated spaces. It adds to a growing body of literature on Native student persistence and provokes us to reimagine education in ways that affirm Indigenous stories, myths, and worldviews without setting them in opposition to Western knowledges. Moreover, it celebrates hope and survivance and exemplifies what Tuck (2009) has referred to as desire-centered research. Though the lessons offered are centered toward Navajo students and their lands, languages, lifestyles, and futures, they can pave educational pathways for Black, Latinx, Asian, Pacific Islander, Arab, and Other marginalized students.

This book is a beneficial resource for educational practitioners and policymakers who wish to address equity gaps in education, particularly with respect to enhancing access of Native students, boosting Native degree attainment, and increasing Native visibility. It may, for instance, help student success personnel rethink assimilative normative notions of educational success and formulate counter-hegemonic points-of-view of success. It can equip teachers, professors, and administrators alike with the knowledge and empathy to build support structures and weaponry that enable all students to succeed, weaponry in the shape of culturally-sustaining and responsive pedagogies, curricula, policies, and practices that impede the inclination of schooling toward the social reproduction of racial and class inequalities.

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