

Ain't No Sunshine When She's Gone: Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls in North Carolina

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The Lumbee are the largest tribe in North Carolina and primarily reside in Robeson County, which has made lists of the most dangerous counties nationwide. Indigenous women are more likely to be murdered than any other racial group, wherever they live. This work explores violence against Natives and the dangers to Lumbee women in particular.

Content Note: This commentary discusses traumatic topics, including rape and murder, which some may find distressing.

Introduction

In 2014, I was working as a school social worker at Lumberton Senior High School, the school I graduated from. I worked with a myriad of kids—those impacted by domestic violence, struggling in school, or who just needed a little extra support and guidance. There are students I worked with that I will never forget. One of those students is Marcey Blanks. She was a whirlwind of a girl, bright and witty and sharp-tongued, but also kind, empathetic, and thoughtful. She was brown-skinned, thin as a rake, with soft, brown, wavy hair and the biggest brown eyes I'd ever had the privilege of seeing. After I left my job in 2015, I often checked on Marcey on social media to see how she was doing. And in 2016, I remember exactly where I was when I got the news: Marcey had been brutally murdered. Once I learned more details—that she had been raped, that her home had been set on fire, that she had been stabbed 89 times, and that she managed to, after all of this, walk out of her home to a neighbor's and name the person who did this, after which she died on his doorstep—I was even more horrified that such a thing could happen, let alone to someone I knew.

Marcey's story, in all of its horror, is unfortunately not unique. I host a podcast called *The Red Justice Project* with Chelsea T. Locklear, another Lumbee woman, and each week we cover the story of a different Indigenous person who has gone missing or been murdered, with a particular focus on cases in Robeson County, North Carolina, where the Lumbee Tribe is centered. Every story is horrible in its own way, but the stories are endless. Someone once asked us what we would do when we ran out of stories to tell from our home

county; I realized in horror that we never will. This list is never-ending.

North Carolina is home to eight state-recognized tribes, including my own Lumbee people. The Lumbee Tribe is the largest tribe east of the Mississippi, with more than 70,000 members, and North Carolina is home to more than 122,000 Indigenous people [1, 2]. Robeson County, where the Lumbee Tribe's headquarters is located, has topped many statewide and national rankings as one of the most dangerous counties to live in, and Lumberton, the county seat, has been named as one of the most dangerous cities in America [3, 4]. But for Native women living in the county, the reality is particularly dire. Indigenous women in the United States are 10 times more likely to be murdered than the national average and 84% have experienced violence in their lifetime [5]. Indigenous women are also the group most likely to be victims of sex trafficking, with 40% of all women who are sex trafficked in the nation identifying as Native American [6].

In my work on our podcast, people often ask us why. Why is this happening? Why is there this epidemic of violence against Indigenous women? I always respond that it is not an epidemic. Sarah Deer notes in her 2015 book *The Beginning and End of Rape* that the word *epidemic* "allow[s] society to absolve itself of blame...suggests that the problem is biological, that the problem originated independent of long-standing oppression...suggests a short-term, isolated problem" [7]. The problems that Indigenous women face are neither short-term nor isolated. These were the same problems faced by their mothers and grandmothers before them, the same problems that their own daughters and granddaughters face now.

Violence Against Native Women: The Beginning

When Christopher Columbus first landed his fateful ship in the "new world" on his voyage, one of the first acts of the

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settlers he brought with him was to start a sex slave trade of Indigenous girls. In the year 1500, Columbus wrote this to a friend in reference to Taino girls: “there are many dealers who go about looking for girls; those from nine to ten are now in demand” [8]. Pocahontas, who many consider the most famous Native woman of all time, was just a child, 8 or 9 years old, when she met John Smith, and oral traditions and other written records indicated that she was raped by the colonists in the area, that other Native children were routinely raped by colonists, and that Native women would offer themselves up to prevent this abuse [9]. Pocahontas died at age 20, the location of her remains unknown [9]. Sacajawea, who was used by the women’s suffrage movement as the image of women’s liberation and independence, has a similarly sad story: she was kidnapped as a child and sold into slave marriage at age 13 to a 34-year-old colonist, after which, at age 16, she was forced to accompany him and Lewis and Clark on their journey west. She died at age 25.

The targeting of Indigenous women is not a new phenomenon, and certainly not an epidemic. Our girls and women have always been isolated, preyed upon, hunted. What is happening now nationwide, in North Carolina, and in Robeson County in particular, is “a fundamental result of colonialism, a history of violence reaching back centuries” [7] and that now reaches forward, seizing our mothers, daughters, sisters—and our Marceys.

Despite this centuries-long assault on our women and girls, the matriarchy reigns and remains. Our women are still at the center of our cultures, our mothers are still the leaders in our households, our grandmothers are still the backbone of our families. A few years ago, my granddaddy expressed annoyance that we called their house “grandma’s house.” This was never intended as a slight, but as an ancestral reminder that we are a matriarchal people, that property belongs to the women, just as all life springs from them.

The colonizers knew upon arrival to Indigenous soil that women were revered, that we were leaders amongst our people, working and owning land and property [7]. For colonialism to work, this system had to be uprooted to mirror more closely the subjugation of European women, in order to justify the seizure of Indigenous land and labor from our women. And ultimately, though colonizer men have been the primary abusers, Indigenous men began joining in on the degradation of Indigenous women. Patriarchy and colonial behaviors have impacted us all, but none more than Native women, as they face threats from both within and outside of their communities.

Violence in Robeson County Continues

In Robeson County in 2017, the bodies of three women—two Indigenous and one White but enmeshed in the Native community—were found. Rhonda Jones was found in a trash can, and the same day, just feet away, Kristin Bennett was found in an abandoned home in a television cabinet. A friend

of theirs, Megan Oxendine, spoke to the news about their deaths. Weeks later, her body was found less than a mile from the others, beside an abandoned home [10]. The medical examiner listed the causes of the three women’s deaths as “undetermined.” Two other women—Cynthia Jacobs and Abby Patterson—went missing from the area within weeks of these deaths [11].

When asked by a reporter about information on missing and murdered Indigenous women (MMIW) in the county, local sheriff Burnis Wilkins stated, “I wasn’t really 100% familiar with our cases until you actually brought it to my attention and wanted some statistics” [12]. What the sheriff “wasn’t familiar with” are the stories we can’t forget, the murders that rip apart families, that traumatize communities. They are the Marceys, Rhondas, Kristins, Megans, Cynthias, and Abbys, and they are not statistics to us. *They are us.*

When we tell our stories on *The Red Justice Project*, they are not just cases. They are our people. Each mother or sister or friend of a victim we speak to, we share a special bond with. They share with us the most intimate and violent loss they have experienced. Marcey’s mother told me that after she learned of her murder, she wanted to go to Marcey immediately; she said, “I felt like if I could just get to her to touch her, hug her, she would be all right” [13]. She told us that she goes to Marcey’s grave every single day.

Generational Trauma and Healing

Native communities throughout the state, but the Lumbee community in particular, are marred by the collusion of colonial violence and historical trauma, defined as the “cumulative emotional and psychological wounding across generations...which emanates from massive group trauma” [14]. Though in modern medicine the focus is often on the body and studying the quantifiable through Western science, there are other forms of science that are innate, immutable, and ancestral to Indigenous peoples that are harder to name or measure. As Indigenous people, we do not just experience our own realities, but the realities of our communities and of our ancestors. This aligns with the Indigenous concept of *blood memory*, which is a “common tribal value of multigenerational remembrance [that] runs directly counter to prevailing Western traits of individual achievement, lack of transgenerational memory, and transcendence of one’s genealogical fate and place of origin” [15].

Though we seek neither to transcend our “genealogical fate” nor forsake our blood memories, there is a systemic unhealth prevalent in Indigenous communities through both direct and peripheral violence. *What happens to my mother also happens to me. What happens to my sister also happens to me. What happens to my neighbor also happens to me.* Indigenous healing is not individual, it is communal. How can I heal myself if my sister is in pain? How can my sister heal if she sees me suffering?

There are many steps that we can take together toward healing. Currently, the Lumbee Tribe is being denied full federal recognition. For us, this recognition would mean access to funding, services, and greater self-determination to create policy, health services, domestic violence services, and healing modalities for our people. Though we have done much already, bureaucracy prevents us from doing more. Our bodies are being judicated through court systems that care little for our lives, and by sheriffs who know nothing of our stories. Indigenous health needs to be managed by Indigenous peoples. Full federal recognition is one way to secure this.

However, non-Natives need to take their place on this issue as well. Ninety-six percent of perpetrators of sexual violence against Indigenous women are non-Native [16]. More education on Indigenous people should be required in schools, including on their nations and societies pre-colonization and the ways in which colonization has impacted them from 1492 to today. Rather than putting the focus on women preventing their own rape or murder, the onus needs to be placed on non-Native men and strategies they can take toward self-control and healing. Much violence can be prevented in this way, rather than taking the reactive approach of making it a women's issue.

Though there is much healing that needs to be done in Indigenous communities, our state and country have their own historical trauma that needs addressing. A country that began through so much violence, pain, and degradation cannot be sustainable for anyone—regardless of whether you are the ancestor of the colonized or of the colonizer. A wound comes whether you are the inflicted or the inflictor. How can you be healed if you are a creator of pain? White supremacy, racism, and colonialism, are a mar on us all. And no one knows this more than Indigenous women. NCMJ

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