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Epidemics and Empires:  
Historicizing Covid-19 in Native Communities

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# **Epidemics and Empires: Historicizing Covid-19 in Native Communities**

Jessica J. Hauger

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## **Abstract**

Since April 2020, Navajo Nation has experienced possibly the worst local outbreak of COVID-19 anywhere in the United States. While journalists covering the outbreak often discuss the relationship between the pandemic and poverty, they fail to adequately treat the relationship between empire and epidemic disease that is operational in Navajo Nation today. Surrounded by states and municipalities responsible for their own COVID-19 responses and subject to the authority of the federal government, tribal nations have only limited recourse against this transient virus.

This essay uses newspaper articles to investigate a smallpox epidemic that hit Indian Territory in 1898, illustrating how epidemic disease exposes existing vulnerabilities to disaster that arise from the protraction of tribal sovereignty. A century ago, journalists failed to recognize the relationship between white settlement and smallpox, which contributed to the epidemic's extended presence in the region. Then as now, Native people experienced disproportionately severe outbreaks of disease as threats to their self-determination. These parallels encourage students to reflect on the historical relationship between disease, empire, and colonization, and pushes them to consider how history can inform public health policy today.

In 2020, Navajo Nation experienced possibly the worst series of Covid-19 outbreaks anywhere in the United States.<sup>1</sup> The Navajo (Diné) reservation is large and mostly remote; it is a desert landscape roughly the size of West Virginia that is home to more than 250,000 people, many of whom live without access to running water, electricity, nutritious food, or paved roads. In May 2020, Navajo Nation reported the third highest per-capita coronavirus infection rate in the country, falling lower than only New York and New Jersey.<sup>2</sup> For Diné people and other Indigenous communities across the United States, however, rates of severe illness and death were higher than those of the average New Yorker. Since then, Native people have continued to die from Covid-19 at the highest rate of any designated racial group in the United States in a collective devastation that not only brings individual and collective mourning for lost loved ones, but for lost linguistic and cultural knowledge held by community elders.<sup>3</sup>

Non-Native journalists covering Covid-19 in Indigenous communities often highlight the undeniable relationship among pandemic, poverty, and poor infrastructure that has produced disproportionately high morbidity and mortality rates in Indigenous communities. In Navajo Nation, just as in the United States more broadly, Covid-19 has “revealed a lot of truths” about the health impacts of income inequality, political corruption, and racism.<sup>4</sup> But non-Native news sources have largely failed to explicitly address *the* critical issue coloring Navajo Nation’s experience with Covid-19: the historical and ongoing restriction of tribal sovereignty enacted through American colonization. Non-Native journalists often frame colonization as a historical backdrop to modern underdevelopment on reservations rather than as an ongoing process that affects much of daily life in Native communities today.

Indigenous coverage of the Covid-19 crisis, both in Navajo Nation and in Native communities across North America, instead

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- 1 Joshua Cheetham, “Navajo Nation: The people battling America’s worst coronavirus outbreak,” BBC News, Jun. 16, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52941984>; Nina Lakhani, “Navajo nation reinstates lockdown as Covid-19 cases surge near reservation,” *The Guardian*, Jun. 18, 2020; Simone Perez and Paola Ramos, “Coronavirus is Devastating the Navajo Nation,” *Vice News*, Jul. 20, 2020, [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/4ayq3p/coronavirus-is-devastating-the-navajo-nation](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/4ayq3p/coronavirus-is-devastating-the-navajo-nation).
  - 2 Liz Mineo, “For Native Americans, COVID-19 is ‘the worst of both worlds at the same time,’” *The Harvard Gazette*, May 8, 2020, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/05/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-native-american-communities/>.
  - 3 Michael Menor Salgarolo, “Silence in the Oral History Archive: Power, Disaster, and Oral History,” *Working Papers in Critical Disaster Studies* no. 1 (Initiative for Critical Disaster Studies, New York University, New York, 2020); Chad Hunter, “20-plus Cherokee speakers lost to COVID-19,” *Cherokee Phoenix*, Dec. 27, 2020, [https://www.cherokeephox.org/news/20-plus-choerokee-speakers-lost-to-covid-19/article\\_38270204-21c3-5d86-af5c-85eab3adcc60.html](https://www.cherokeephox.org/news/20-plus-choerokee-speakers-lost-to-covid-19/article_38270204-21c3-5d86-af5c-85eab3adcc60.html); Randall Akee and Sarah Reber, “American Indians and Alaska Natives are dying of COVID-19 at shocking rates,” Brookings, Feb. 18, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/american-indians-and-alaska-natives-are-dying-of-covid-19-at-shocking-rates/>; Jessica Arrazola, Matthew M. Masiello, Sujata Joshi et al, “COVID-19 Mortality Among American Indian and Alaska Native Persons - 14 States, January-June 2020,” *MMWR Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 69, no. 49 (December 2020): 1853-1856.
  - 4 Sunny Dooley, “Coronavirus Is Attacking the Navajo ‘because We Have Built the Perfect Human for It to Invade,’” *Scientific American*, July 8, 2020, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/coronavirus-is-attacking-the-navajo-because-we-have-built-the-perfect-human-for-it-to-invade/>.

historicizes health disparities as effects of ongoing colonization. Sunny Dooley, a Diné traditional storyteller, wrote in July 2020 that “COVID is revealing what happens when you displace a people from their roots,” denying them of connections to language, cultural practice, and the land that shape daily life.<sup>5</sup> Tribal nations confronting both a long history of colonial violence and present efforts to restrict their jurisdictional authority have only limited recourse to protect their citizens from the virus. The pandemic has highlighted the dangerous effects of colonization, as in the Cheyenne River Sioux Nation’s effort to maintain road checkpoints around its reservation in the face of Governor Kristi Noem’s public and legal opposition.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, in summer 2020, Navajo political leaders repeatedly asked the federal government to keep the national parks surrounding their reservation closed to no avail, despite the risk that tourism posed to Diné communities.<sup>7</sup> Reporting on Navajo Nation’s coronavirus outbreak as an inevitable effect of poverty, rather than as a product of a historical and ongoing restriction of tribal sovereignty, inaccurately positions tribal nations as the responsible parties for elevated rates of infection and death among their citizens. Further, this failure to address the causes of socioeconomic and health-related disparities in Native communities naturalizes suffering and death, hindering the pursuit of

solutions.

Through the narration of a smallpox epidemic that plagued Indian Territory between 1898 and 1902, this paper argues that Indigenous people’s experiences with Covid-19 can only be accurately understood as part of a historical and ongoing political process of colonization. In other words, this historical smallpox epidemic is not only an analogue to Navajo Nation’s modern experience with Covid-19. Rather, the story of the smallpox epidemic includes the construction and evolution of socioeconomic and political systems which continue to restrict the ability of tribal nations to care for their own people today. Just as colonial politics and epidemic disease were connected in 2020, so too were they connected in 1898. These physical and rhetorical connections produced ineffective public health policy and provided settler institutions with key opportunities to argue for and implement restrictions to the exercise of tribal sovereignty.

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**O**n December 10, 1898, a newspaper in the fledgling capital of Oklahoma Territory published a terrifying report. On its front page, bold text reading “SMALL-POX” alerted residents to an outbreak of that exceptionally contagious disease in their

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5 Dooley, “Coronavirus.”

6 Vanessa Romo, “Checkpoint Clash Escalates Between South Dakota Governor, Tribal Leaders,” *National Public Radio*, May 12, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/05/12/85433737/checkpoint-clash-escalates-between-south-dakota-governor-tribal-leaders>; Erik Ortiz, “Dispute over South Dakota tribal checkpoints escalates after Gov. Kristi Noem seeks federal help,” *NBC News*, May 21, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/dispute-over-south-dakota-tribal-checkpoints-escalates-after-gov-kristi-n1212161>.

7 “Navajo President urges National Parks Service to keep Grand Canyon closed,” *Navajo-Hopi Observer*, Jun. 3, 2020, <https://www.nhnews.com/news/2020/jun/03/navajo-president-urges-national-park-service-keep-/>.

midst.<sup>8</sup> Public health officials had discovered an active case of smallpox in Stroud, a railroad town that straddled the border between Oklahoma Territory and Cherokee Nation. In 1898, many of Stroud's residents made a living by illegally selling alcohol into Indian Territory, their homes nestled near the tracks of a railroad that served as a lifeline between small settler towns like Stroud and the largest cities in the United States.<sup>9</sup> When an infected passenger boarded a westbound train in Chicago, the crisis was already in motion. He alighted at Stroud, and the outbreak began.

As a border town reliant upon a new railroad line connecting Cherokee Nation to the United States, Stroud exemplified the major sociopolitical changes happening in turn-of-the-century Indian Territory. Beginning in 1889 with the opening of some Cherokee land to white settlement, waves of arriving settlers produced repeated changes to the region's political borders that left the jurisdictional landscape of Indian Territory unclear to settlers, tribal governments, and the federal government alike. As a growing number of both legal and illegal white settlers built homes and towns across the Oklahoma and Indian Territories, tribal nations scrambled to exercise legal and political authority over a shrinking territory increasingly populated with non-Natives. Indian Territory's white

settlers were angered by their occasional subjection to tribal law and lack of access to tribal government services. They, along with Oklahoma Territory's expanding populace, continued to agitate for greater control over the region's political bodies and natural resources both on and off Indian land.<sup>10</sup> The federal government acquiesced in 1898, the very year that smallpox arrived, and began allotting Indian Territory. During this process, federal officials broke up communally-held tribal land into parcels, distributing them to individual Native men and auctioning the remainder to non-Native settlers. Without a coherent land base, tribal nations struggled to assert political authority between islands of settler municipalities. As a result, confusion about the nature of tribal sovereignty and the map of political authority in Indian Territory only intensified.

Because the political landscape in the territories was in constant flux during the 1890s and 1900s, public health institutions across Indian Territory faced serious challenges. It was difficult for local, territorial, and tribal medical authorities to ascertain *who* was in charge *where*, let alone to carry out effective public health work. Upon their discovery of smallpox at Stroud, leading officials in the Oklahoma Territorial Board of Health initiated a vaccination campaign and erected a quarantine around

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8 "SMALL-POX," *The Guthrie Daily Leader* 12, no. 165 (Guthrie, Oklahoma Territory), Dec. 10, 1898, p. 1, from Ancestry, *Newspapers.com World Collection*, Web, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/68262698/>.

9 Danny R. Beltz, "Stroud," *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=ST053>.

10 David Chang, *The Color of the Land: Race, Nation, and the Politics of Landownership in Oklahoma, 1832-1929* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2010); Jeffrey Burton, *Indian Territory and the United States, 1866-1906: Courts, Government, and the Movement for Oklahoma Statehood* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995); Julie L. Reed, *Serving the Nation: Cherokee Sovereignty and Social Welfare, 1800-1907* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016); Murray R. Wickett, *Contested Territory: Whites, Native Americans, and African Americans in Oklahoma 1865-1907* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000).

the town. Local people, likely non-Native settlers, joined the Board of Health in a grassroots effort to contain the infection, guarding the roads around Stroud with Winchester rifles to prevent new arrivals or departures.<sup>11</sup> Ignoring the threats of their neighbors and the guidance of public health authorities, Stroud's residents fled from the area that was under the Territorial Board of Health's jurisdiction into land still under tribal jurisdiction. Smallpox likely spread from Stroud into other communities when a local restaurant owner "went south to his father's farm" near the Sac and Fox Reservation.<sup>12</sup> Within a month of the initial report of disease, cases were present in settlements across Indian Territory.<sup>13</sup> By May, two of Stroud's residents were dead from the disease. Sac and Fox Nation experienced at least 108 deaths, including that of their chief.<sup>14</sup>

Within months, a pattern emerged. Tribal citizens across Indian Territory, confined to increasingly small and

resource-poor lands and often reliant upon substandard government rations of beef, flour, and coffee for sustenance, suffered disproportionately from smallpox. The disease thrived not only in the substandard lodgings of malnourished Indigenous people but in the barracks of railroad men and other industrial workers working in the extractive industries that were thriving on newly-opened Native lands. Tribal governments had little control over non-Indians in their midst, whether they were illegal homesteaders or struggling waged workers, and whether they had smallpox or not. Tribal governments across Indian Territory did have public health authorities, however, and used them to institute a host of containment measures during the epidemic. For example, Choctaw Nation closed its government buildings and appropriated \$10,000 toward quarantine and vaccination campaigns.<sup>15</sup> In addition to a series of vaccination campaigns in its larger cities, Cherokee Nation closed its male and

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11 "SHOTGUN Quarantine Being Resorted to by Farmers," *The Guthrie Daily Leader* 12, no. 180 (Guthrie, Oklahoma Territory), Dec. 24, 1898, p. 1, from Ancestry, *Newspapers.com World Collection*, Web, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/68263471/>.

12 "Smallpox Scare at Stroud," *The Daily Ardmoreite* 6, no. 50 (Ardmore, Indian Territory), Dec. 26, 1898, p. 1, from Ancestry, *Newspapers.com World Collection*, Web, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/351418989/>; "SMALLPOX: The Dreadful Scourge Has Broken Out Among the Sac and Fox Indians," *The Guthrie Daily Leader* 12, no. 256 (Guthrie, Oklahoma Territory), Mar. 21, 1899, p. 1, from Ancestry, *Newspapers.com World Collection*, Web, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/68245404/>.

13 "More Smallpox Reported," *The Daily Ardmoreite* 6, no. 61 (Ardmore, Indian Territory), Jan. 8, 1899, p. 2, from Ancestry, *Newspapers.com World Collection*, Web, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/351379472/>; "Under Control," Jan. 12, 1899, *The Indian Chieftain* 17, no. 20 (Vinita, Indian Territory), p. 6, from Ancestry, *Newspapers.com World Collection*, Web, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/49688944/>.

14 "SMALLPOX SITUATION Among the Indians in the Vicinity of Cushing," *The Guthrie Daily Leader* 12, no. 278 (Guthrie, Oklahoma Territory), Apr. 17, 1899, p. 4, from Ancestry, *Newspapers.com World Collection*, Web, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/68246602/>; "LONG STORIES MADE SHORT," *The Daily Ardmoreite* 6, no. 164 (Ardmore, Indian Territory), May 5, 1899, p. 2, from Ancestry, *Newspapers.com World Collection*, Web, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/351391006/>.

15 *The Wagoner Record* 8, no. 31 (Wagoner, Indian Territory), May 3, 1900, p. 1, from Ancestry, *Newspapers.com World Collection*, Web, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/509047468/>; G. A. Hitchcock to Principal Chief Pleasant Porter, Mar. 2, 1900, CRN 33, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Record Group 75, National Archives-Affiliated Archives: record on deposit at the Research and Archives Division, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.



female seminaries for nearly a month to prevent the spread of smallpox in 1900.<sup>16</sup> Postmasters across Indian Territory began fumigating the mail, a precaution thought to prevent smallpox transmission from material objects.<sup>17</sup>

Despite the actions of tribal public health authorities, reporters in the regional white press postulated an obvious cause for the rapid and ongoing spread of smallpox across the southern Plains: the reckless behavior of Indigenous people. The *Garfield County Democrat*, for example, noted that “[t]he nearness of the Indian reservations is said to make Oklahoma more exposed to small-pox [sic],” and that whites rarely contracted the disease because “[w]hite men occasionally take a good bath.”<sup>18</sup> Local newspapers routinely reported that Native people refused “to allow their possessions to be burned,” making it “almost impossible to stamp out the disease.”<sup>19</sup> In other instances, newspapers reported that Sac and Fox women “kissed the corpse” at a smallpox patient’s funeral, and posited that this event

and others like it were likely responsible for Sac and Fox Nation’s devastating three-year experience with the disease.<sup>20</sup> In these reports, Indigenous people appear as victims of their own self-governance, victimization that also threatened local white settlers and their fledgling republic. Conversely, Indigenous newspapers continually connected the ongoing epidemic with colonization. *The Tahlequah Arrow*, a major Cherokee newspaper, referenced the prevalence of smallpox in the “railroad towns” that so exemplified the acceleration of white settlement and the restriction of tribal authority over tribal lands in Indian Territory.<sup>21</sup>

The attribution of blame to Indigenous people during the epidemic led to restrictions of tribal sovereignty and attendant physical suffering. During its devastating first wave in Sac and Fox Nation, smallpox spread east into Muscogee (Creek) Nation. Like their Sac and Fox neighbors, Creek people experienced high rates of infection, severe illness, and death, but

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16 “CHEROKEE SCHOOLS REOPEN. A Long and Steady Pull from Now Until June, 1900,” *The Tahlequah Arrow* 13, no. 19 (Tahlequah, Indian Territory), Jan. 11, 1900, p. 5, from Ancestry, *Newspapers.com World Collection*, Web, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/657448973/>.

17 *The Tahlequah Arrow* 13, no. 19 (Tahlequah, Indian Territory), Jan. 11, 1900, p. 4, from Ancestry, *Newspapers.com World Collection*, Web, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/657448960/>.

18 “Oklahoma and Indian Territory,” *Garfield County Democrat* 2, no. 19 (Enid, Oklahoma Territory), Apr. 20, 1899, p. 2, from Ancestry, *Newspapers.com World Collection*, Web, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/662878903/>.

19 “Smallpox Among Indians,” *The Fort Gibson Post* 9, no. 24 (Fort Gibson, Indian Territory), Apr. 27, 1899, p. 2, from Ancestry, *Newspapers.com World Collection*, Web, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/586096636/>.

20 “Smallpox Spread by a Kiss,” *The Wagoner Record* 8, no. 24 (Wagoner, Indian Territory), Mar. 15, 1900, p. 6, from Ancestry, *Newspapers.com World Collection*, Web, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/509047388/>.

21 “Regarding Smallpox,” *The Tahlequah Arrow* 13, no. 7 (Tahlequah, Indian Territory), Oct. 19, 1899, p. 5, from Ancestry, *Newspapers.com World Collection*, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/657444479/>; “NO CAUSE FOR ALARM. We Should Not Become Needlessly Frightened at Smallpox Rumors,” *The Tahlequah Arrow* 13, no. 19 (Tahlequah, Indian Territory), Jan. 11, 1900, p. 5, from Ancestry, *Newspapers.com World Collection*, Web, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/657448973/>; “WARNING!” *The Tahlequah Arrow* 13, no. 18 (Tahlequah, Indian Territory), Jan. 4, 1900, p. 5, from Ancestry, *Newspapers.com World Collection*, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/657449054/>.



there was “no person to enforce quarantine regulations” so far from the Creek Indian Agency.<sup>22</sup> Lee Patrick, the federal agent who oversaw public health efforts in Sac and Fox communities from the beginning of the outbreak, evidently became concerned about epidemic spread among local Creeks. In a letter, Patrick asked the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to give him authority over smallpox mitigation efforts among nearby Creek people, including those who lived within Creek Nation’s Western District. The Commissioner assented, and beginning January 26, 1899, Patrick sent Creek smallpox patients to isolation camps in Sac and Fox Nation where 71 of 115 patients reportedly died within six weeks.<sup>23</sup> Patrick argued that confinement to detention camps was “the only way to prevent their running around and spreading the disease,” parroting claims about the relationship between Indigenous culture and disease that were often made in Indian Territory’s settler newspapers.<sup>24</sup>

Creek political leaders did not learn of the extent of the Indian Office’s approved public health actions until March 15, at which time Principal Chief of Creek Nation Isparhecher and the Creek National Council received communications from the Office of Indian Affairs demanding they reimburse Patrick and the federal government for expenses they incurred while treating Creek

smallpox patients. Creek leaders refused, eventually appealing to President William McKinley to overturn the Indian Office’s claims of Creek liability for unauthorized public health expenses. The letter made clear that the Indian Office’s violation of Creek sovereignty was both a dangerous legal precedent and a physical threat to Creek people. At the direction of Lee Patrick and other federal officials, the letter claimed, “[t]he houses and furniture of quite a number of Creek Indians and freedmen were burned . . . and many families were rendered homeless.” The primary argument against Creek Nation’s culpability for public health expenses, however, was that smallpox suppression efforts were undertaken “for the benefit of all the people, white, black and Indians, residing in the Indian Territory, Oklahoma and adjoining States and Territories” and therefore their cost should be borne by the federal government.<sup>25</sup>

It is not clear whether President McKinley or the Office of Indian Affairs released Creek Nation from liability for unauthorized public health work during the epidemic. Settler newspapers, however, did garner a federal response to their suggestions that only federal involvement could prevent tribal governments from unleashing smallpox-ridden people on the helpless residents of more ‘civilized’ white towns. In 1900, the United

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22 “Smallpox Among the Indians,” *The Chandler News* 8, no. 27 (Chandler, Oklahoma Territory), Mar. 24, 1899, p. 1, from Ancestry, *Newspapers.com World Collection*, Web, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/657938816/>.

23 “Smallpox in Creek Nation,” *The Daily Ardmoreite* 6, no. 74 (Ardmore, Indian Territory), Jan. 23, 1899, p. 1, from Ancestry, *Newspapers.com World Collection*, Web, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/351380864/>; “Oklahoma and Indian Territory,” *The Wellston News* 6, no. 15 (Wellston, Oklahoma Territory), Mar. 31, 1899, p. 2, from Ancestry, *Newspapers.com World Collection*, Web, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/659017184>.

24 Lee Patrick to D. M. Wisdom, U.S. Indian Agent, Feb. 27, 1899, CRN 33, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Record Group 75, National Archives-Affiliated Archives: record on deposit at the Research and Archives Division, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

25 Ibid.

States Congress voted to approve an appropriation of \$50,000 for alleviating public health expenses and suppressing the spread of smallpox in Indian Territory's unincorporated white settlements.<sup>26</sup> The epidemic waned late in the year 1901, but it continued to reappear across the Oklahoma and Indian Territories as late as 1907 when it broke out among representatives at Oklahoma's state constitutional convention.<sup>27</sup> Whether smallpox served as a point of argument among the convention's pro-statehood attendees is unclear, but at the height of the epidemic, smallpox was useful for those seeking to reduce Indigenous power in Indian Territory. Given the way tribal governments had dealt with smallpox, one white newspaper in the region argued, it was "[n]o wonder the people of the territory asked to be permitted to govern themselves."<sup>28</sup>

**I**n 1898, smallpox entered a volatile political environment in the Oklahoma and Indian Territories, where tribal nations struggled to maintain their sovereignty and their homelands against accelerating settler incursions. In the epidemic that followed, Native communities

sometimes experienced enormous loss of life, tragedy that transformed into rhetoric which settler newspapers used disease to justify restrictions of tribal sovereignty. We see the ripples of this history today, as multiple Indigenous nations in North America struggle to protect their people from Covid-19. But it might make a difference now, as it could have in 1898, to recognize that struggle not as a deficiency of tribal governance or community care, but as a product of colonization. As Pawnee citizen and public health researcher Abigail Echo-Hawk wrote in 2019, failure to link epidemic and empire in the study of health disparities is both dangerous and incorrect. Indigenous people are not "a 'historically' underserved population. My history is one of ancestors who survived so I could thrive. My history didn't start with 'western civilization.' I am colonially underserved. I am institutionally underserved. And I am historically resilient."<sup>29</sup>

Echo-Hawk's words are borne out in the public health programs that tribal nations created both in 1898 and 2020. In 2021, tribal nations have led the way in Covid-19 vaccine distribution across North America. In Oklahoma, for example, tribal nations opened their vaccination campaigns to non-citizens within weeks, making Oklahoma

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26 "APPROPRIATIONS FOR INDIANS: SENATE COMMITTEE MAKES IMPORTANT CHANGES," *The Daily Ardmoreite* 7, no. 117 (Ardmore Indian Territory), Mar. 15, 1900, p. 2, from Ancestry, *Newspapers.com World Collection*, Web, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/351388204>; "INDIAN APPROPRIATION BILL. Sections in Which Citizens of the Five Civilized Tribes Are Interested," *The Wagoner Record* 8, no. 37 (Wagoner, Indian Territory), Jun. 14, 1900, p. 3, from Ancestry, *Newspapers.com World Collection*, Web, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/509047562/>; "GOVERNMENT NEWS," *Muskogee Phoenix* 13, no. 27 (Muskogee, Indian Territory), Aug. 2, 1900, p. 3, from Ancestry, *Newspapers.com World Collection*, Web, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/611412362/>.

27 "SMALLPOX IN CAPITAL CITY," *The Daily Oklahoman* 18, no. 242 (Oklahoma City, Oklahoma), Jan. 24, 1907, p. 1, from Ancestry, *Newspapers.com World Collection*, Web, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/440950023/>.

28 *The Wagoner Record* 8, no. 31 (Wagoner, Indian Territory), May 3, 1900, p. 1, from Ancestry, *Newspapers.com World Collection*, Web, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/509047468/>.

29 Abigail Echo-Hawk, Twitter post, September 17, 2019, 12:21 p.m., <https://twitter.com/echohawkd3>.

a top-ten state in vaccination rates by the end of January 2021.<sup>30</sup> Their response to Covid-19 shows that health disparities facing Indigenous people cannot simply be attributed to internal failures. In fact, tribal nations' vaccination campaigns reveal the positive medical effects that can arise from a strong ethic of community care, an ethic in which medicine is for "all the people."<sup>31</sup> Yakama citizen and historian Emily Washines argued in September 2020 that health disparities like those visible in Native communities dealing with Covid-19

have arisen because "we haven't been allowed to be who we are."<sup>32</sup> What kind of epidemiological futures can we imagine if Indigenous peoples are allowed to live self-determined lives? Productive reflection on this question can only begin if we first understand the historical and present operation of systems that restrict self-determination. But there are hints across the United States, as Indigenous communities wading through the Covid-19 crisis take the lead in equitable healing work.

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- 30 Harmeet Kaur, "Anyone in Oklahoma can now get the Covid-19 vaccine, thanks to several Native tribes," CNN, Mar. 16, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/03/16/us/oklahoma-tribes-offers-vaccine-to-all-trnd/index.html>.
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