



Brianna Theobald. *Reproduction on the Reservation: Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Colonialism in the Long Twentieth Century*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019. 288 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4696-5316-7.

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Reproduction, Sovereignty, and Settler Colonialism

"Reproductive matters," historian Brianna Theobald argues, "cannot be separated from broader political struggles or from the economic, social, and cultural contexts that shaped women's lives" (p. 4). In *Reproduction on the Reservation*, Theobald astutely details how Native women's reproduction (including pregnancy, childbirth, and early infant care) has been a core target of settler colonialism throughout the late nineteenth and long twentieth centuries. In this context, government efforts to control Indigenous reproductive health are inextricably linked to other institutional interventions across Native lifespans, including boarding schools, allotment, reservations, termination policies and relocation programs, and adoption and foster care.

Two related points deepen Theobald's overarching assertion. The first is that individual people's agency over their bodies is a vital component of Indigenous sovereignty work. The second is that Western medical professionals, reservation agents, and other authorities pathologized Native women and their biological reproduction to justify intrusions into Native life and sovereignty. As active agents of their lives, Native women adapted, selectively used, and resisted

Western biomedical institutions and practices; they also created wide-ranging alternatives anchored to Indigenous values and health practices—all parts of the long fight for sovereignty.

Theobald supports her layered and nuanced critique with vigorous archival research including dozens of manuscripts and oral history collections as well as government institutional records. Extending the primary source base, the author conducted extensive oral interviews with Crow Nation members and incorporated family records shared with her. These materials enhance the overall work, adding depth and complexity to everyday experiences and reminding readers of Native women's humanity. *Reproduction on the Reservation* also draws on a vast array of scholarship from Native American Indigenous Studies and other fields, including the social history of medicine, gender studies, reproductive justice, eugenics, and medical and health humanities; their robust integration across the book reflects the author's careful attention to interlocking systems, issues, and historical perspectives.

Theobald uses an Indigenous-centered reproductive justice framework that engages with interlocking oppressions and wide-ranging reproduct-

ive issues. She centers the people most targeted by systemic oppression—Native women generally and Crow women specifically. Women's unique lived wisdom and diverse strategies to support reproductive health, broadly defined, are the core around which the book develops. For example, Theobald highlights Women of All Red Nations (WARN) and other reproductive justice activist organizations to underscore the historic value of autonomy over one's body/mind and to consider broader matters of access to reproductive health care.

The Yellowtail family history illustrates the impact of reproductive politics, settler colonialism, and the long struggle for self-determination. Raised by extended kin after her mother died, Susie Walking Bear Yellowtail (Crow) attended off- and on-reservation boarding schools. In the 1930s, she gave birth to her first child at a private hospital, chose the reservation's government hospital for her second child a year later, and opted for a home birth supervised by a Crow midwife for her third. Soon after, Yellowtail was involuntarily sterilized. She also worked as a nurse at the Crow Agency Hospital and as a midwife. All of these experiences fundamentally shaped Yellowtail's lifelong advocacy around reproductive issues. In the 1950s, she became the first chair of the Crow Health Committee, which advocated for maternal and child welfare. Yellowtail's descendants continue to advocate for Indigenous-centered reproductive care.

Susie Yellowtail's story points to the range of struggles and strategies Native women employed to maintain their individual autonomy and tribal sovereignty. While federal representatives increasingly sought to eradicate traditional birthing practices, some women actively sought and maintained them; others selectively used clinics, reservation hospitals, or blended forms of reproductive care. They compelled medical staff in hospitals to accommodate Indigenous medicine alongside Western biomedical approaches. Theobald inter-

prets these different approaches not as oppositional but as rooted together in reproductive justice goals of women having agency over their bodies. These insights apply more broadly to the history of reproduction on and off reservations.

The book is organized chronologically and thematically, with six main chapters and an epilogue. The chapters flex between micro and macro history, centering on local contexts and individual and family lives of Crow Nation members to spotlight childbearing, motherhood, and activism as well as broad settler-federal reproductive policies and efforts that targeted Native women. This interpretive approach shows that federal reproduction-related policies unfolded unevenly and were shaped by everyday factors, including "local conditions, the availability of resources, the whims of individual employees, and perhaps most significantly, Native response and engagement" (p. 14). Contrasting micro and macro histories also buttresses Theobald's assertion that there is no single "representative" story of reproductive policies and practices among Native women.

The first chapter provides a panoramic description of Crow Nation history, birthing culture, and increasing efforts by the US government to control reproductive practices. In subsequent chapters Theobald details federal efforts to deploy Western medical practices to pregnancy and childbirth on Crow and other reservations in the early twentieth century, telescoping out to consider the forces of assimilation, erasure, and Native self-determination in the 1930s and 1940s. Tracing the migration of Native women and men to cities after World War II as part of the US government's relocation program (among other factors) clarifies the changing context in which women made decisions over pregnancy and childbirth. Employer health insurance, low-income clinics, and public hospitals play significant roles in this era. As termination policies in the mid-twentieth century undercut reservation hospitals and broader medical networks on reservations, Crow women expanded

advocacy networks to protect maternal and infant health. Chapter 6 centers on the 1960s and 1970s overlap of "Family Planning Services" medical-technological interventions, including abortion, sterilization, and contraceptives, with ongoing efforts by Native people to protect and expand their self-determination. The epilogue continues these histories into the twenty-first century, detailing Native women's collective efforts for reproductive justice. As WARN members and others pointed out, involuntary sterilizations and the coercive removal of American Indian children to white foster families, among other abuses, subverted Native sovereignty.

Reproduction on the Reservation is the only work of its kind to foreground reproductive politics, self-determination, settler colonialism, and Indigeneity in the long twentieth century. Among its other signature scholarly interventions, this work complicates standard interpretations of North American eugenics history that typically have downplayed or dismissed the relevance of Native women's experiences. Further, Theobald provides vital information about coerced sterilizations of Crow women in the 1930s, stretching the trajectory of this violent practice to decades earlier than generally has been documented.

Theobald shows how sterilizations and medicalized childbirth aligned with other settler programs that targeted Native families and family life. In doing so, she extends scholarship at the overlaps of Native American Indigenous Studies, gender studies, eugenics, and medical humanities. The clear and elegant prose is both a signature feature and scholarly intervention, reflecting the author's broader commitment to community accountability and justice-informed scholarship.

Reproduction on the Reservation is an essential work for scholars and students of American Indian history, the social history of medicine, medical humanities, women's history, and reproductive justice, among other fields. This thoughtful close study of birthing, child-rearing, and activism

on and off the Crow Reservation is instructive to the field of American Indian history and to ethical historical practices. Theobald invites other scholars to add to the historical understanding of reproductive justice and Indigenous-centered work, offering an innovative, engaging model to emulate.

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