

# An Act of Resistance: A Comparative Study of Indigenous Women's Narratives

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Feminist cultural practice which defines specific gender roles has often been inadequate to the agenda of Indigenous<sup>1</sup> North American<sup>2</sup> women's concerns for identity and self-determination. Through a few comparative case studies, this paper focuses on how such authors have tried to negotiate the challenge of representing the past from the unspoken but inexorable reality of the present. In her essay on "A Vanishing Indian? Or Acoose: Woman Standing Above Ground?", Janice Acoose (Sakimay (Saulteaux) First Nation and *Ninankawe* Marival Métis) analyses her experiences in teaching as an Indigenous professor of English at the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College and as a PhD candidate in English at the University of Saskatchewan. As an indigenous woman and as a writer/critic, her dilemma is in the fact that "her resolve to resist the ideological influences of the colonizer becomes weaker" when she has to negotiate with the "Wiintigolike forces of Western literary criticism and its accompanying critical language."<sup>3</sup> Most importantly, indigenous women have often been concerned with issues related to land, sacred places, education stemming from a communal space. Therefore, issues related more directly to gender have not been prioritized.

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<sup>1</sup>According to the United Nations, Document, NUE/CNH/SUB2/L566 of June 29, 1972, "Indigenous" populations are the existing descendants of the people who inhabited the present territory of a country at the time when persons of the world overcame them and somehow reduced them to a non-dominant or colonial situation, and who today look more in conformity with their particular social, economic, and cultural customs and traditions than with the institutions of which now they form a part.

<sup>2</sup>A reading into indigenous literatures becomes even more pertinent with the political significations of the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel. The 49<sup>th</sup> parallel is more than often ignored by aboriginal authors in North America as a superfluous identity, imposed by imperial administration. In the introduction to *Reinventing the Enemy's Language: Contemporary Native Women's Writing in North America*, Muscogee (Creek) poet Joy Harjo elucidates: "We decided that the work should be arranged by theme, rather than by false political boundaries (or any other arbitrary category). This was important. As Native peoples, we are now restricted by national and political boundaries that did not exist before colonization. There was no Canada, United States or Mexico, for example. And nations such as Yaqui, Okanagan, and Mohawk weren't falsely divided by their boundaries as they are now, their lands separated by two international borders." In the course of my readings, I shall attempt to deconstruct the notion of "North America" as a fluid space of contact between different nations. This would problematize the concept of a "postcolonial" state, as well as bring to the foreground the white-Canadian/ American self-image of non-racist tolerance.

<sup>3</sup> Janice Acoose, "A Vanishing Indian? Or Acoose: Woman Standing Above Ground?" in *(Ad)dressing Our Words: Aboriginal Perspectives on Aboriginal Literatures*, ed. Armand Garnet Ruffo (Penticton, B.C.: Theytus Books Ltd., 2001), 37.

In a special issue on Native women in *Canadian Woman Studies/ Les Cahiers de la femme*, Marlyn Kane (Osennotion) and Sylvia Maracle (Skonaganleh:r ) problematize the concept of feminism from an indigenous perspective. Sylvia Maracle argues,

I agree we had a hard time with this thing called ‘feminism’, and writing for a ‘feminist’ journal ... I understand the nature of being defined as a ‘feminist’ and wanting some sense of equality, but frankly, I don’t want equality ... I want to make an effort at going back to at least respecting the role that women played in communities...<sup>4</sup>

Kane and Maracle’s standpoint asserts a radical dismemberment of preconceived notions of gender and critical theory. The volume, which “permits” a collective of Indigenous women to be guest editors, calls for an unification of different women artists, writers and critics, “who are burdened with such labels as immigrant women, or visible minority women.” Acoose, too, would like to empower the voices of her ancestors such that they are much more assertive than “muted echoes.”

One of the methods of asserting their voices is the entry of Native oral traditions into print culture. In this manner, mainstream forms are revitalized with the usage of traditional forms of storytelling. Philosophical questions of difference are addressed through critical historical, geographical, and cultural transactions, which in turn revamp epistemological supremacy. For postcolonial feminist theory, Jeannette Armstrong’s *Slash* caused much controversy with a male protagonist delineating feminist concerns. Armstrong’s agenda of highlighting the Native man in a positive, communal role is in synchronization with the larger goals of healing the community. In a dedicatory poem to the novel, Armstrong stresses the importance of telling stories, as almost the sacrosanct function of anyone voicing a concern for the community. The poem narrates the story of a friend suffering from alcoholism and the necessity of telling stories as a source of empowerment:

We all walk in the shadow of the beast  
so we will step lightly  
All the stories you used to make laughter  
will be told around the tables of your people  
And we will be rich with weapons<sup>5</sup>

It further highlights mainstream feminism’s negation of issues of racism and internal colonialism. In *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism*, Craig Womack suggests that “Native literature, and the criticism that surrounds it, needs to see more attention devoted to tribally specific concerns.”<sup>6</sup> Womack articulates his

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<sup>4</sup>Marlyn Kane (Osennotion) and Sylvia Maracle (Skonaganleh:r ), “Our World.” *Canadian Woman Studies/ Les Cahiers de la femme* 10: 2-3 (Summer/ Fall 1989) [Special issue: Native Women]: 15.

<sup>5</sup>Jeannette Armstrong, *Slash* (Penticton, B.C.: Theytus Books, 1988).

<sup>6</sup> Craig Womack, *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 1.

responsibility to critique Native literature from his specifically indigenous identity, in this case Creek – Cherokee epistemology. The imperative is to supersede the indoctrination enforced by the “power of white europeanchristian patriarchal institutions.”<sup>7</sup> Beatrice Culleton Masionier’s *In Search of April Raintree* and *In the Shadow of Evil* epitomize the economic and social discrimination faced by the Métis in the representation of the two sisters. Furthermore, the complex relationship between women within a particular community subjected to hegemonic racial discourse is highlighted through subtle textual representations of colonial ruses of power. Masionier’s concerns are accentuated by a keen awareness of the government’s abduction of Native children and the involuntary sterilization of Native women, along with high infant mortality rates. According to Julia Emberley,

If the critical project of feminism is ultimately to transform the hierarchies of heterosexism, gendered and racist oppression, and class exploitation, then the prevalent form of cultural feminism in Canada must be reinvented in the historical and cultural relations of Native women’s struggle for self-determination.<sup>8</sup>

Indigenous authors have engaged in dialogues which seek self-determination embodied in a desire to articulate literary theories and practices from an Indigenous perspective. Authors such as Lee Maracle have vociferously critiqued colonialist assumptions of Native identity, refusing to be labeled within western literary traditions of criticism. In the celebrated instance of Anne Cameron’s collection of oral stories *Daughters of Copper Women*, Maracle wrote, “Anne thinks that a writer has a perfect right to write about anything under the heavens. In the larger sense, this is true. But right now, it is a bitter pill for me to swallow.”<sup>9</sup> Indigenous woman authors assert their feminism by refusing to internalize the “white idea.” Refusing to feel “inferior, stupid, lazy,”<sup>10</sup> Maracle creates characters such as Marianne and Stacey who consistently provide honor and protection to their homes and community. The relevance of such a project increases since the disintegration of family and community have been historical facts of Native history in the face of internalized pain and increasing death statistics from suicide, violence, alcohol, drug-abuse and similar socio-political problems. In a moving footnote to her assertion that colonialism cannot merely be a theoretical framework but a reality connected to everyday life, Janice Acoose writes,

As I write this paper, my family is entangled in a very painful process. Because of years of drug and alcohol abuse, my youngest sister’s six children were apprehended by the Department of Social Services. Ironically, it was one of my former students of ‘Literature for Decolon-ization’ who rescued my nieces and

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<sup>7</sup>Janice Acoose, *IskewahKah’ Ki Yah Ni Wahkomakanal: Neither Indian Princesses Nor Easy Squaws* (Toronto: Women’s Press, 1995), 19.

<sup>8</sup>Julia Emberley, *Thresholds of Difference: Feminist Critique, Native Women’s Writings, Postcolonial Theory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 98.

<sup>9</sup>Lee Maracle, “Moving Over.” *Trivia: A Journal of Ideas: Part II: Languages/ Differences: Writing in Tongues* 14 (Spring 1989): 9.

<sup>10</sup>Howard Adams, *Prison of Grass: Canada from the Native Point of View* (Toronto: New Press, 1975), 7.

nephews. And I am thankful that between my two sisters and me, we could provide safe and loving homes. Unfortunately, my baby sister is not so lucky for she remains a shadow hidden in the statistics of the ‘social problems’ of Native peoples.<sup>11</sup>

Acoose’s addition of the footnote dramatizes another mode of subversion of mainstream methods of ideological containment. It suggests a cultural politics of difference, whereby the crumbling of socio-cultural relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous women are articulated. Furthermore, it draws our attention to an already present site of productive struggle, which recognizes the power of stories to negotiate gender roles from indigenous perspectives.

In 1981 *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, was published by Persephone Press, a Massachusetts-based, white feminist press. The book was conceived as a response to Anzaldúa being labeled as an “outsider,” a token representative of the visible minority at a women’s retreat just north of San Francisco. The beginnings of a retreat conversation of encouragement between two individuals revolutionized into group activism, bringing together the voices of women of color as a response to the Left’s “shaky and shabby commitment to women” and white feminism’s exclusion of issues of race and class.<sup>12</sup> “*This Bridge Called My Back*,” wrote Moraga and Anzaldúa in the introduction to the first edition,

intends to reflect an uncompromised definition of feminism by women of color in the US. We named this anthology ‘radical’ for we were interested in the writings of women of color who want nothing short of a revolution in the hands of women—who agree that that *is* the goal, no matter how we might disagree about getting there or the possibility of seeing it in our own lifetimes.<sup>13</sup>

In fact, contemporary Indigenous women, both in Canada and the United States have been politically active in Indigenous rights movements for over forty years. They have also expressed a deep-rooted reluctance to be part of white feminist movements of North America, which have often bypassed culturally and politically specific issues of race and gender. In spite of differences in community backgrounds, academic or cultural affiliations, conflicting ideologies, Native women activists, academicians, artists, and writers have evoked and theorized issues of common concern for Native communities on the basis of precontact histories of egalitarian societies.

Raised on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation in Montana, Kate Shanley wrote a powerful essay entitled “Thoughts on Indian Feminism” in 1984. The essay articulated concerns of indigenous sovereignty as well as Native women issues such as equal pay,

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<sup>11</sup>Acoose, “A Vanishing Indian?” 55.

<sup>12</sup>Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1981, 1983), xiii.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* xxiii-xxiv.

children's health and welfare, reproductive rights, and domestic violence. According to Shanley,

Thus, the Indian women's movement seeks equality in two ways that do not concern mainstream women: (1) on the individual level, the Indian woman struggles to promote the survival of a social structure whose organizational principles represent notions of family different from those of the mainstream; and (2) on the societal level, the People seek sovereignty as a people in order to maintain a vital legal and spiritual connection to the land, in order to *survive* as a people.<sup>14</sup>

Shanley rejects the idea of a single woman's movement and concentrates on difference as an empowering and constructive parameter directed towards solidarity between the multiple strands of feminism. She argues, "Just as sovereignty cannot be granted but must be recognized as an inherent right to self-determination, so Indian feminism must also be recognized as powerful in its own terms, in its own right."<sup>15</sup>

Julia Emberley also delineates the process by which aboriginal women's literature in Canada resists alignment with "the colonialist assumptions in academic feminist theory," claiming that feminist theory of the 1980s "failed to consider what Aboriginal women said about their particular concerns within the movement."<sup>16</sup> This problem is characterized as one of inequality—the "academically privileged" exercise imperialist, "first worldist" feminist practices such as "elitist lament for the marginality and dispossession of Aboriginal women," while aboriginal peoples who have systemically been excluded from higher education serve as the ground—the oppressed.<sup>17</sup> Such hegemonic feminisms have been systematically critiqued by women of color and have now been compelled to include transnational feminist ideologies and increasing consideration of indigenous values and activism. Sylvia Marcos, for example, describes the dominant discourse of urban feminism in Mexico that "portrays indigenous women as passive, submissive subjects, bound to inevitable patriarchal oppression springing from their cultural background."<sup>18</sup> In a similar manner, Obioma Nnaemeka highlights the "intellectual gymnastics and empty theorizing in feminist scholarship"<sup>19</sup> and its lack of engagement with social utility. She also draws attention to the epistemological distinctions between African women as "knowledge producers and as subjects/objects for

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<sup>14</sup>Kate Shanley, "Thoughts on Indian Feminism," in Beth Brant, ed., *A Gathering of Spirit: Writing and Art by North American Indian Women* (Firebrand: Ithaca, N.Y. 1984), 213–15.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 215.

<sup>16</sup> Julia Emberley, *Thresholds of Difference: Feminist Critique, Native Women's Writings, Postcolonial Theory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 100.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 102.

<sup>18</sup> Sylvia Marcos, "The Borders Within: The Indigenous Women's Movement and Feminism in Mexico." In *Dialogue and Difference: Feminisms Challenge Globalization*, ed. Marguerite Waller and Sylvia Marcos (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2005), 81.

<sup>19</sup> Obioma Nnaemeka, "Negro-Feminism: Theorizing, Practicing, and Pruning Africa's Way." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 29:2 (2003): 364.

knowledge production.”<sup>20</sup> Nnaemeka asserts that third-world women are often neglected or ignored in gender and international rights publications and limited to case-study and country-specific locations, which implies that “these women can speak only to the issues pertaining to the specific countries from whence they come and do not have the capacity to dabble in the intricacies of theory as an intellectual, scientific abstraction.”<sup>21</sup> She claims that this distribution of roles is “colonial both in intent and execution”<sup>22</sup> and is an exemplification of gender discrimination. Nnaemeka believes in “building on the indigenous” by positioning feminisms in Africa as dynamic acts—as a “third space” where negotiation, compromise, and balance are mobilized—as opposed to Western feminisms that tend toward challenging, deconstructing, and disrupting normative sexual politics.<sup>23</sup>

Indigenous women have also felt the necessity of educating non-Native women about traditional roles of Indigenous women within a community. They have also helped create a zone of active participation, of deep and prolonged dialogues between equals. Invoking traditions of female leadership roles, Blue (Tulalip) asserts,

It is going to be the job of Native women to begin teaching other women what their roles are. Women have to turn life around, because if they don't, all future life is threatened and endangered. I don't care what kind of women they are, they are going to worry more about the changes that are taking place on this Mother Earth that will affect us all.”<sup>24</sup>

Blue believes that women as procreators have a responsibility towards a deeply personal and all-pervasive feminized Earth. Indigenous women recognize the tormented history of their families and identify the destructive forces as external rather than internal to their family. Therefore, individual and group survival, family integrity, and empowerment become issues of overriding concern for Indigenous women. Indigenous women insist that their prospective partners recognize traditions of female autonomy and prestige that can offer models in both Indigenous and non-indigenous contexts. The story of empowerment runs parallel to material realities of the widespread violence committed against Native women. Many indigenous authors, such as Maracle, Armstrong, and Mosisionier, have commented on the common occurrence of rape, genocide, murder and mutilation of leaders, friends and activists (such as the murder of activist Annie Mae Aquash or the Cree student Helen Betty Osborne). Indigenous women have participated in creating a new language for communities to address the real multilayered facets of their histories and concerns. They have insisted on the inclusion of lived experience, enriched with emotionality as an aesthetic marker. The significant relationship between felt experiences and community knowledges has also been explored by Indigenous authors. Indigenous women have challenged academia as gatekeepers barring the entry of

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 366.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 367.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 367.

<sup>23</sup> Obioma Nnaemaka, “Negro-Feminism: Theorizing, Practicing, and Pruning Africa’s Way.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 29:2 (2003): 379-80.

<sup>24</sup> Blue Yet Si in Farley, *Women of the Native Struggle*. Ed. Jane Katz. (*Messengers of the Wind: Native American Women Tell Their Life Stories* (Ballantine Books: New York, 1995), 83.

Indigenous women to the process of social discourse and literary history. It is important to note that the ability to feel does not negate the ability to think in terms of socio-political histories. Indigenous women have questioned the suppression of their oral traditions and their literary and historical voices. Academia repetitively produces gatekeepers to our entry into important social discourses because we *feel* our histories as well as think them. Their voices have refused to be relegated to the margins of academic and public discourse in North America. Moreover, their voices articulate past silences as well as the present colonial conditions. Elizabeth Archuleta in a powerful essay entitled “I Given You Back: Indigenous Women Writing to Survive” asserts,

Indigenous women do not rely solely on Western tools, world-views, or epistemologies as methods of interpretation. Indigenous women reject paradigms that ask us to disassociate ourselves from our lived experiences before we can claim to have the skills and knowledge to theorize. We believe theory comes not from abstract written ideas but from the collective knowledge of Indigenous women whose lives have not informed feminist theories, methods, or policy concerns and whose lived experiences mainstream feminists will continue to ignore unless Indigenous women question and deconstruct existing methodologies.<sup>25</sup>

Archuleta emphasizes that Indigenous women and feminist issues are not “undertheorized” but are rather envisaged in a different epistemological perception. Indigenous women have protested against oppression and injustice and have become visible, politically, culturally, and socially, in spite of assimilationist tactics.

On the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the first publication of *This Bridge Called My Back*, a third edition was published in 2002 by Norma Alarcón’s Third Woman Press of Berkeley, California. In her Publisher’s Note, Alarcón writes,

In the Spring of 2000, Third Woman Press began conversations with the co-editors in order to acquire the rights to put in print, once again, *This Bridge Called My Back*. Both editors believed it appropriate that a press run by women of color print the revised third edition. It is very unfortunate that Third Woman Press founded in 1979 has become virtually the only press of color surviving from that earlier feminist activist period. It is our great pleasure to publish *Bridge* in the year of its 20th anniversary. Though the copyright will read 2002.<sup>26</sup>

Alarcón articulates her right to publish this book, as one of the leading publishers of individual works and collections by women of color through the 1980s and 1990s.

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<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth Archuleta, “I Given You Back: Indigenous Women Writing to Survive,” *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 18:4 (Winter 2006): 88-89.

<sup>26</sup> Moraga and Anzaldúa, *This Bridge*, expanded and revised 3rd edition, (Berkeley: Women of Color Series: Third Woman Press, 2002.), vi.

Alarcón, herself, as a graduate student at the University of Indiana, had contributed a major essay entitled “Chicana’s Feminist Literature: A Re-Vision Through Malintzin/or Malintzin: Putting Flesh Back on the Object” in the original edition of *This Bridge Called My Back*. This essay has been a significant contribution in the development of Chicana feminism. Alarcón, as writer, theorist, professor, mentor and founder of Third Woman Press, is one of the key figures (along with Moraga and Anzaldúa) in Chicana/Mexicana feminism in North America. Therefore, it has indeed been appropriate that Third Woman Press, spearheaded by Norma Alarcón should have published the 2002 edition. The new edition also articulates the changes in the world reflected through the effects of migration and globalization. Consequently, transnational, transcultural and transgender identities have also been addressed.

More importantly, through such multifarious publications, Indigenous women have sought to address the lack of a critical inclusion of racial identities in early hegemonic feminist theory. Black feminist scholars such as Irma McClaurin-Allen challenged the feminist debates of the 1970s by asking them to acknowledge the influence of race and class in the production of gender. According to her, the production of gender was often considered to be “‘epiphenomenal,’ ignoring the fact that the particular way in which women define themselves and experience gender oppression arises out of a cultural history shaped and determined by race, class, and particular events.”<sup>27</sup> McClaurin connects the various socio-political identity markers to the lived experience of individual women’s lives. She draws attention to the fact that the lives of Native women symbolize the marginalization of communal rights on the altar of nationhood and the history of genocide practiced through colonialism. Lee Maracle also notes that the impact of colonialism in the lives of Native women is subject to a history of state-controlled machinery. In her path-breaking book *I Am Woman*, she writes,

If the State won’t kill us  
we will have to kill ourselves.

It is no longer good etiquette  
to head hunt savages.  
We’ll just have to do it ourselves.

It’s not polite to violate “squaws”  
we’ll have to find  
an Indian to oblige us.

It’s poor form to starve an Indian  
we’ll have to  
deprive our young ourselves

Blinded by niceties and polite liberality

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<sup>27</sup> Irma McClaurin-Allen, “Incongruities: Dissonance and Contradiction in the Life of a Black Middle-Class Woman.” In Faye Ginsburg and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, eds., *Uncertain Terms: Negotiating Gender in American Culture* (Beacon Press: Boston, 1990), 316.

we can't see our enemy,  
so, we'll just have to kill each other.<sup>28</sup>

Maracle discusses how sexual violence has been perpetuated by the imposition of European gender roles and relationships in Native communities. In fact, the Indian Act of 1876 facilitated the repositioning of prescribed gender roles in Native communities from a colonial perspective. The violently imposed gender roles in residential schools and the Indian Act ensured that Indian families would be reorganized on the basis of a uniform patriarchal order. Societies which had been matrilineal or those in which both mothers' and fathers' lines had determined identity, property, and responsibility, were forcibly brought within the purview of a rigid patriarchal hierarchy with Indian men positioned in a descending order of authority, with white male Indian agents and male priests at the top. Old lineages were further disenfranchised as Indian women and their children in interracial Indian/white marriages were denied membership in their own communities and sometimes in their own families. On the other hand, if Indian men married outside their communities, their white spouses became tribal members. The result was a major disruption of traditional kinship systems, matrilineal descent patterns, and matrilineal post-marital residency patterns. Furthermore, it embodied and imposed the principle that Indian women and their children, like European women and their children, would be subject to their fathers and husbands. The Indian Act left community resources, such as housing and aid to women and children, in the hands of men who could marry white women and make them into instant Indians. After 1970, the provision disenfranchising Native women for interracial marriages in the marriage clause of the Indian Act, Section 12.1.b, became an important point of contention amongst Indigenous women activists. In 1981, Indian women organized a successful national and international campaign for their rights before the United Nations. As a result, Canada was found in violation of Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Canada promised to amend the Indian Act by mid 1981, which it then ignored for four more years. Bill C-531, the amendment that abolished the Indian Act's most deliberate sex discrimination, was not passed until 1985. While the Bill has not yet redeemed all acts of discrimination, it has brought to the forefront the Indigenous woman's right to be heard on political issues at the public and private levels. Jeannette Armstrong, however, argues,

We are all very much aware of the history of the colonization. . . .  
What is not as well known is that the influence of a patriarchal and imperialistic culture upon a people [that] has not only been devastating, but also dehumanizing to a degree that is unimaginable. . . . I speak in specific of the severe and irreversible effects on Aboriginal women, and the resultant effect on our nations.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Lee Manacle, *I Am Woman* (Vancouver, B.C.: Write-On Press, 1988), 11-12.

<sup>29</sup>Jeannette Armstrong, "Invocation: The Real Power of Aboriginal Women" in *Women of the First Nations: Power, Wisdom, and Strength*, Manitoba Studies in Native History IX, ed. Christine Miller et al. (Winnipeg: The University of Manitoba Press, Manitoba, 1996), ix.

White feminists have struggled against patriarchy but have also received the benefits of a white power structure. Aboriginal women, on the other hand, have not been empowered within the community or without in the post-contact era. For many aboriginal women, it has been a daunting task to explain the complex roles of racism and sexism in their lives. Moreover, when they have ventured into institutions and seats of learning created by white men, their worldviews have often been ignored or sidelined. Also, a worldview based on Christian theology is often inadequate as representative of non-Christian, Indigenous knowledge, experiences, beliefs and motivations. For instance, the sisters in Mosionier's fiction are initially shown as archetypes of a Western colonial discourse, which labels the Indigenous woman as "immoral." April and Christine are in constant confrontation with the white patriarchal state, which condescendingly and forcibly becomes their family, and then, subjects them to culturally insensitive manipulative parameters. In an essay entitled "A Return to Reciprocity," Lorraine Mayer explains the dilemma she faced when confronted with the white elitist feminism:

My reasons for rejecting feminism on any level were due in part to three major influences in my life. First, I agreed with Native women activists like Janet McCloud of the Tulalip tribe, who criticized feminism as an attempt to "divert us into participating as 'equal' in our own colonization" .... As I understood it, feminism was about asserting one's rights to be like white men. Second, since a gendered pronoun was absent from the Cree language, I could not conceive of Cree people ordering their world around a male-created reality; therefore, I reasoned, it must be a colonial construct. Third, and just as important to me, was the absence of domination in my early personal experiences with Native men.<sup>30</sup>

Mayer proposes a "respectful reciprocity"<sup>31</sup> to negotiate the disturbing and alluring aspects of feminism for Native women. She asserts that indigenous feminism would be fostered through a return to one of the most fundamental values of reciprocity or symbiotic learning within indigenous communities. In *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues for a transnational, anti-capitalist feminist critique that focuses upon racialized gender as the most inclusive paradigm for thinking about social justice.<sup>32</sup> Mohanty stresses experiential, epistemic knowledges by asserting: "I believe there are causal links between marginalized social locations and experiences and the ability of human agents to explain and analyze features of capitalist society."<sup>33</sup> Mohanty informs that women and girls are seventy percent of the world's poor and the majority of the world's refugees.<sup>34</sup> She writes,

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<sup>30</sup> Lorraine F. Mayer, "A Return to Reciprocity" *Hypatia* 22.3 (2007): 23.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 26.

<sup>32</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. (Duke University Press: Durham, NC, 2003), 231.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 231-32.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 231.

It is especially [on] the bodies and lives of women and girls from the Third World/South—the Two-Thirds World—that global capitalism writes its script, and it is by paying attention to and theorizing the experiences of these communities of women and girls that we demystify capitalism as a system of debilitating sexism and racism, and envision anticapitalistic resistance.<sup>35</sup>

Indigenous men and women have experienced genocide for the past five hundred years of colonialism. Their identities are being uniformly informed rigidly defined Western male and female roles. In fact anthologies such as *Telling It: Women in Language Across Cultures* (1990), the proceedings of a conference of lesbian and women of color writers on conflicts and exclusions in Canadian literary feminism questioned the ideological and theoretical premise of feminist founding nations. Such anthologies have advocated for an inclusive indigenous content which promote politically engaged and thus highly contextual inquiry into Indigenous issues and concerns. Lee Maracle writes,

Until white women can come to us on our own terms, we ought to leave the door closed. Do we really want to be part of a movement that sees the majority as the periphery and the minority as the centre?<sup>36</sup>

Indigenous women have been treated as passive objects of study for feminist theorizing, and Indigenous knowledges have been relegated to the margins of academic hierarchies. Andrea Smith protests that “even within feminist circles, the colonial logic prevails that women of color, indigenous women, and women from Global South countries are only victims of oppression rather than organizers in their own right.”<sup>37</sup> As a response to such elitist feminist spheres of belonging, Native women themselves have marked clear boundaries between themselves and their white sisters.

The distinct ideological construct of gender in indigenous communities demands feminist inquiries that travel beyond the premise of the universal oppression of women. The variables of history, time, and, most prominently, community must be considered crucial if an indigenous feminist analysis is to find relevance. An ethically informed ethnographic research methodology also significantly permits long-term, reciprocal, mutually meaningful and constructive criteria that are demanded in indigenous research methodologies. For instance, on the first page of *Storyteller*, Leslie Silko informs the reader about the Hopi basket that contains her family's photographs. She divulges that there are hundreds of photographs in the basket, taken from the 1890s around Laguna, and explains the significance of these photos to her memories of family, community, and tribal stories:

It wasn't until I began this book

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 235.

<sup>36</sup> Maracle, *I Am Woman*, 138-39.

<sup>37</sup> Andrea Smith, *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide*. (South End Press: Cambridge, MA, 2005), 25.

that I realized that the photographs  
in the Hopi basket  
have a special relationship  
to the stories as I remember them.  
The photographs are here because  
they are part of many of the stories  
and because many of the stories can  
be traced in the photographs.<sup>38</sup>

She locates her identity firmly in Laguna Pueblo history, tradition, and landscape, through the multifarious aspects in her personal life which have constructed her selfhood. Hawaiian scholar Haunani-Kay Trask envisages the apparently challenging concepts of gender and culture by formulating lateral and vertical divides:

[O]ur efforts at collective self-determination mean that we find solidarity with our own people, including our own men, more likely, indeed preferable, to solidarity with white people, including feminists. Struggle with our men occurs laterally, across and within our movement. It does not occur vertically between the white woman's movement and indigenous women on one side and white men and Hawaiian men on the other side. . .

[W]e have more in common, both in struggle and in controversy, with our own men and with each other as indigenous women than we do with white people, called *haole* in Hawaiian. This is only to make the familiar point that culture is a larger reality than "women's rights."<sup>39</sup>

Trask asserts the primacy of culture by stating, "At this point in our struggle, race and culture are stronger forces than sex and gender."<sup>40</sup> Gender does not, therefore, exist, as a mere colonial development of prescribed roles for men and women in public and private lives. A more culturally holistic imperative which highlights the responsibility of protecting land and family becomes an overriding concern.

A gendered experience of change, place, and belonging has informed Indigenous Canadian women's experiences in socio-political and cultural territories. Their narratives have theorized their empirical encounters with the arts as an integral part of indigenous knowledge systems, which in turn, have offered possible readings for indigenous feminist ideologies. Feminist perspectives into indigenous lives have to be applied with the help of central feminist paradigms of intersectionality and complementarity. This would provide useful identity markers for analyzing dispersed power relations in Indigenous contexts. The study of literature by the Indigenous Canadian authors in focus provides a trajectory to evaluate modes of embodied knowledges and communal values. A gendered selfhood

<sup>38</sup> Leslie Marmon Silko, *Storyteller* (Little, Brown and Company: New York, 1981), 1.

<sup>39</sup>Haunani-Kay Trask, *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai'i* (Common Courage Press: Monroe, ME, 1993), 264-65.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid. 265.

in these contexts is not distinct from, but may also be indispensable to, conveying a holistic, complex framework of indigenous knowledge building. Tessie Naranjo, artist from the Santa Clara pueblo community describes the connection between her art, her feminine identity and her community in the following words:

I've been talking about pottery-making as a real feminine journey. And I've been talking about my ties to my community as a very feminine, symbolic connection. It's all about . . . I don't know what it's all about, but it has to do with femaleness in a big way. Femaleness, femaleness. My community is female. My culture is female. I'm female. My art-making is female.<sup>41</sup>

Such a pervasive reading of gender encompasses a larger knowledge system which is different and offers an alternative pathway from the materially constructed application of gender rooted in colonialism. This would enable indigenous feminism to introduce different levels of knowledge formation in terms of human interaction, theory, knowledge representation and reasoning. It would also recognize the challenges in relation to the creation and maintenance of high quality knowledge formation in terms of ethical, linguistic, political, aesthetic, and pedagogical issues. Therefore, colonized genders as well as more culturally appropriate gendered feminisms may initiate a feminist discourse, encouraging possible rapprochements of Indigenous Canadian Studies and feminist discourses. Indigenous Canadian literature serves as a crucial medium for initiating dialectic between indigeneity and feminism.

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<sup>41</sup>Quoted in Nancy Marie Mithlo, "'A Real Feminine Journey': Locating Indigenous Feminisms in the Arts." *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* 9.2 (2009): 1.