

Representations of Indigenous Feminism and Social Change

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Abstract

Indigenous feminism is important to understand in that it completely revolutionizes our notion of contemporary western feminism. It also proves quite controversial in that it represents the voice of the oppressed in a patriarchal society. This essay seeks to analyse the union of Indigenous artistic representation and the proliferation of Indigenous feminism through that medium. It is crucial to recognize the necessity of alternative forms of feminism, considering the historically exclusive nature of a feminism that primarily serves the white middle class. Compositions such as acrylic art, literature, oral storytelling, political speech, and dramatic performances reinforce the primary argument of this essay that Indigenous women are here, even if no one is listening. The oppression of Indigenous women, and the necessity for the oppression to be addressed is confronted in this piece that encourages its audience to tap into an innate racism they have acquired in order to facilitate a reclamation and resurrection of previous notions of what it meant to be an Indigenous woman in a patriarchal world.

Key words: Indigenous, Feminism, Patriarchy, Decolonization, Gender, Equality, Malinche, Pocahontas, Oppression, Native American Feminism.

Introduction

Long before patriarchal societies ventured into uncertainty and this continent, there lived the feuding Oneida and Mingoe tribes. After much fighting and chaos amongst the two, the Mingoe succeeded in pillaging the Oneida. The Great Spirit had a plan in helping the Oneida find a hideout – one that was only able to be seen by their tribe. The Great Spirit offered the Oneida a refuge when the very existence of their tribe was threatened, but as time waned, they began having difficulties in securing enough nourishment for their people without being found in hiding by the Mingoe.

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One night, an Oneida girl named Aliquipiso awoke from a dream; good spirits spoke to her and appointed her the saviour of her tribe. She was to approach the Mingoe warriors, and lead them to the bottom of the cliff in which her people were hiding. The next day, upon drawing near to the Mingoe, Aliquipiso was captured and offered a place in the Mingoe tribe if she disclosed the location of the Oneida hideout. Not only did Aliquipiso initially (and intentionally) refuse, but she suffered greatly at the hands of the Mingoe before carrying out her plan of leading them to the bottom of the cliff where her people hid. There, Aliquipiso and the Mingoe men perished under the plunging boulders of the mountain. The Oneida people were saved, thanks to the bravery and selflessness of Aliquipiso. Following the sacrifice of Aliquipiso, The Great Mystery allowed for her hair to be transformed into woodbine, and from her essence and woodbine sprang the medicinal honeysuckle. To this day, honeysuckle is still regarded by the Oneida as the “blood of brave women” (Rendering from “The Warrior Maiden” of the anthology, *Spider Woman’s Granddaughters*). When I first read “The Warrior Maiden,” all I could think of was its age. It was a story that dates back centuries. And traditional American tales of women bravery have only really caught on in 21st century writing. Only in the past 15 years or so have authors been composing literature with strong female protagonists.

When I was a newly-wed, my husband Mark and I would set aside time each evening after a long day’s work and alternate introducing one another to our favourite television shows and films. Mark’s favourite show from the 80’s was MacGyver. It was entertaining, to say the least, but not in the way one might initially perceive. Episode, after episode, MacGyver dismantles the time-bomb, uses gum, Slinkies, and duct tape to create some innovative creation to undo his foe’s treacherous scheme. Every episode was filled with all of the things one might want from an action-series, including the useless, inept woman that consistently needs saving; and this, dear friends, is where I had to draw the line. By episode six I reached my breaking point, for it was the sixth point in which I had to witness this patriarchal fantasy unfold. I stopped the DVD as soon as the weak, inane woman was introduced to the scene. Mark was entirely bewildered during my fit of vexation, whilst I went on about how we would never play another episode of his ridiculous show again in our home. It seems funny now, but when you take a step back and really think about it, our passivity to these pop-culture phenomena play a key role in the way women perceive their own value and power. I juxtapose this event of my life with

the enlightenment I experienced when I was first introduced to Indigenous feminism and Indigenous feminist literature. Through this essay I wish to examine how Indigenous stories and artistic renditions challenge the status quo, and seek, more than just reclamation or decolonization, to correct the issue of western socialization, and the overarching patriarchal influence imposed upon the “civilized” world.

On Oppression of the Body and Mind

One facet of Indigenous feminism is the necessity to make oppression within Indigenous communities visible. I’ve made this point before with colleagues – if we don’t expose the despotism against Indigenous women, then most non-Indigenous people would quickly dismiss Indigenous feminism as meritless. In “Indigenous Women and Feminism,” Kim Anderson argues that “until we seriously address the political, social, and economic inequities faced by the Indigenous women, we will never achieve full healing, decolonization, and healthy nation building.” (2011: 85) I like to parallel this notion to the idea to someone having a piece of parsley stuck in their teeth. The person with the parsley in their teeth represents the general public, and the parsley, the patriarchy. We, the observer of the poor chap, represent the enlightened. To the person with the parsley in their teeth, everything is simply splendid. To the mischievous parsley stuck in society’s teeth, the world is in their control. The parsley does well to shield the ignorant from the oppressive truth in order to give them the false perception that all is well in the world, that we are governed by an egalitarian system that is progressive. And finally, to the observer of this person with parsley in their teeth, we’re obviously trying to find a way to let this individual know that something’s not right without being too brash or offensive. We are trying to point out the unseen to the society who perceives systemic racial or cultural injustice as something that we’ve moved past; that we have somehow overcome these crimes against humanity because we’ve accomplished such feats as electing a black president, or outlawing sexual discrimination in some of our states. Unfortunately, even when the parsley is exposed, it can be hard to remove until one takes a good, hard look in the mirror and really analyses the extent to which they’ve been spoon-fed heaps of Anglicized, tasteless, mass-produced ideas.

For the past 30 years, the Indigenous women of Canada have contributed greatly to the mass disappearances and murders of as many as 4,000 women. This event has only recently received (very little) media

attention, but it has been a continual phenomenon in Canada for over three decades. Unfortunately, one of the bigger issues concerning this circumstance that is directly impacting the families of these victims are the ways in which the Canadian government is choosing to deal with the issue. Many of the cases of disappearances and murders are being written off as accidental or self-inflicted. And many Indigenous societies are so plagued by other difficulties such as poverty, over-incarceration of Indigenous males, and lack of education on systemic oppression, that it becomes increasingly more difficult for activist groups to band together and adequately address issues such as the mass disappearance of these women (Canadian Government to Investigate Thousands of Missing Indigenous Women).

In addition to understanding the necessity of Indigenous feminism out of circumstance, I believe it is important to understand one thing: Native American feminism's fundamental similarity with contemporary western feminism is the word 'feminism.' The establishment of western feminism in America during the 1800s had a way of serving one particular member of society, which was the middle-class white woman. The exclusionary nature of feminism at that time did not grant women of colour, or Indigenous women, the right to voice their deprivation and oppression. For instance, a regular occurrence during the suffrage movement involved the segregation of marches. When Black feminists entered the scene, white feminists were positioned on the front lines, their male counterparts following them, and black feminists at the tail end of the march. In reading "Segregated Sisterhood: Racism and the Politics of American Feminism" (Caraway 1991), I found a plethora of black female intellectual voices exposing the nativist racism inherent in western feminism. Anna Julia Cooper, in her excerpted essay entitled "Woman versus the Indian" (1892) exposes the tendency of western feminists to forsake "alliances with Blacks, the poor, and other disenfranchised classes of Americans to gain the support of racist southern states for suffrage." (152) Because of the exclusionary nature of white feminism, Cooper deemed black and Indigenous feminism as having radically different objectives. Cooper argues, that rather than feed into a system that demands white feminists to disengage with feminists of colour, they should recognize that their feminist counterparts have suffered at the hands of Anglo-Saxon power as well, and "If the Indian has been wronged or cheated by the puissance of this American government, it is woman's mission to plead with her country to cease to do evil and to pay its honest

debts" (152). And this is where the stark difference between Indigenous feminism and western feminism lies: one seeks reclamation and decolonization, and the other seeks equality and freedom; one culture possessed innate feminism, the other has developed their notion of feminism because of the circumstantial gender deprivation and inequity of their patriarchal, western world.

There were many erroneous conclusions made about Indigenous women by Europeans upon their arrival that ought to be addressed. Because the *only* standard for defining inequity amongst the sexes during times of colonization was via the "civilized" world, Europeans viewed such norms as Indigenous women carrying heavy loads, or doing farm work as oppressive, when in reality, these norms simply represented the division of labour amongst males and females in various tribes (Garbarino 1976: 404). It is important to question how such false perceptions of reality have the capability to impact the general notion of what it means to be an Indigenous woman. Even today, hundreds of years after these faulty ideas were perpetuated via imperialist governments, society still proliferates false notions about what it means to be a contemporary Indigenous woman.

When analysing my previous viewpoints of what it meant to be a Native woman, I have to say that it is rather embarrassing to admit that I once viewed Indigenous women as the inverse of feminism; they were submissive, mute, and obedient because subliminally that was what I was told they were. But it wasn't like someone published some faulty documentary or text that directly told me that Indigenous women were disempowered –the impression was made through years of subliminal exposure via media and pop culture. My exposure to Native American anything seemed to possess this innate racist impression that even my own wisdom could not tap into –and isn't that just *scary*? This returns to the notion of what makes Indigenous feminism fundamentally different from western feminism, which is the necessity for decolonization, both of the physical world and of the mind. This encompasses who gets to define what about whom. Decolonization in Indigenous feminism seeks to reclaim sovereignty. Because of the extent to which Indigenous societies were historically vilified, sensationalized, and falsely advertised, there came a point in time where almost every piece of information the western world believed and disseminated about Indigenous societies was pretty much a load of garbage. Not to mention, in lacking sovereignty, these societies (or what was left of them after an imperialist rule) were essentially rendered

voiceless, without the least bit of say in how they and their people were to be governed. And that's where Indigenous feminism comes into play. Because of the suppression of the Indigenous voice in the public eye, many Indigenous women resorted to communicating their plight through artistic representations; whether through physical art, theatre, literature, or poetry, Indigenous women are relating their realities to the world in front of them. In refusing to be silenced, and in indicating through art that they have been, these women challenge authority and elicit *real* social change through penetration of the mind.

The Woman Who Fell from the Sky: The Trickster Unaware

In the Iroquois creation story of "The Woman Who Fell from the Sky," a powerful young woman is directed by her deceased father to marry a strange sorcerer who tests her worth through physical torment. Nevertheless, she endures the tests with a calm face and demeanour. Upon passing his tests, the two marry. They never consummate their marriage, "sleeping opposite each other with the soles of their feet touching." (Spider Woman's Granddaughters: Traditional Tales and Contemporary Writing by Native American Women) Outside of the sorcerer's lodge, there is a blossoming tree which emits light and allows the young woman to converse with the spirits and her father. She loves the tree, and opens her legs to it. The tree drops a blossom onto her vagina and soon after she is impregnated. The sorcerer falls ill and attributes his sickness to his wife's presence. His advisors recommend he uproot the tree of light. Following the tree's uprooting, the sorcerer was to allow his wife to sit next to him so she would fall into the chasm, upon which he would replant the tree and regain his health. Only there was one thing the sorcerer could not comprehend; to him, the hole was simply a chasm, but to his wife, it was so much more. As she gazed down into the abyss, she saw a bright, blue something glowing in the darkness. She willingly jumped into the abyss, and with great joy, as her marriage to the sorcerer was anything but delightful. Soon after, the sorcerer replanted the tree. In jumping, the young woman escapes her enemy. In jumping, she turns the sorcerer's deceit into planet Earth, the sun, and the moon. She follows the rules of respect for her deceased father, while retaining her dignity and bravery as a sacred woman of her nation (Rendering from "The Woman Who Fell from the Sky" of the anthology, *Spider Woman's Granddaughters* 1989: 65-68).

Chief Mark on Polygamy

I told myself, upon undertaking this project, that I would attempt to utilize mostly female Indigenous authors to prove my point, but there was a speech given by Chief Mark in 1871 in Warm Springs, Oregon that really captured my attention. It addressed the belief of polygamy in Indigenous societies, and the conflicts of colonial interests in juxtaposition to Chief Mark's convictions. The speech was reported by A.B. Meacham, superintendent of Indian Affairs in Oregon, who was pursuing the abolishment of polygamy. Meacham was working alongside Captain Smith, superintendent of Warm Springs to accomplish a quashing of polygamous marriage in Warm Springs. Ultimately, both Meacham and Smith won their case, and the settlement involved the outlawing of polygamous marriage and relations in Warm Springs. Chief Mark's speech reads:

"My heart is warm like fire, but there are cold spots in it; I don't know how to talk. I want to be a white man. My father did not tell me it was wrong to have so many wives. I love all my women. My old wife is a mother to the others, I can't do without her; but she is old, she cannot work very much; I can't send her away to die. This woman cost me ten horses; she is a good woman; I can't do without her. That woman cost me eight horses; she is young; she will take care of me when I am old. I don't know how to do; I want to do right. I am not a bad man. I know your new law is good; the old law is bad. We must be like the white man. I am a man; I will put away the old law. I want you to tell me how to do right. I love my women and children. I can't send any of them away; what must I do?" (Hymes 1981: 202).

It is critical that one reads Chief Mark's words with respect to the times and the culture. Polygamy in the 21st century has been assailed to such a degree by the media that as soon as most Americans hear the word, they have the tendency to instantly dismiss polygamy as backwards or immoral. In contrast, monogamy was seen by various tribes as unnatural and constraining. One thing we have to understand here is that both sexes in Indigenous cultures were seen as equals. So when a woman would marry, she would not lose any of her rights or be vanquished by her male counterpart. Here, we have to recognize that certain colonial ideas have been imposed upon our consciousness – ideas that are no different or better than Indigenous peoples' beliefs on interpersonal relationships. In the speech previously excerpted, Chief Mark is simply communicating the incongruity of the colonial white man's imposed laws and ways to that of

his tribe. This speech addresses the issue of colonization, as well as the issue of western socialization and the overarching patriarchal influence imposed upon Chief Mark's people. Unfortunately, Chief Mark's speech was made during a time where Indigenous societies were not granted the least bit of sovereignty, representation, or say in United States policy-making. His words were ultimately used against him in order to check off yet another win for the United States colonial agenda. It was unfathomable for imperialist America to perceive polygamy as just or equal. The United States failed to recognize that in Indigenous polygamous marriage, there is no ownership or territory; marriage was very casual and could commonly result in divorce, even when initiated by Indigenous women, and *how dare they?* Moreover, polygamous marriage served more than a means for sexual gratification or affections of either association. Women were commonly wed to their sister's husband if they were widowed, as a means of protection and security. In the western world, we tend to find this an anomaly. 'How could her sister possibly consent to this?', one might ask. Or, 'surely this must have been carried out against the will of women in their societies', another might say. Au contraire, because of the western construct of the submissive wife, non-Indigenous peoples have the tendency to believe that this would be the only possible elucidation. You wouldn't find the territorial husband, or the jealous girlfriend in those parts of the Indigenous world because everyone belongs to everyone. Indigenous societies function as one large family. Therefore, if you were an Indigenous child being raised in almost any given tribe, you had many mothers, many fathers, many siblings, and many potential husbands or wives).

Yellow Woman and the Abolition of Gender Norms

In Leslie Marmon Silko's "Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit," I received my first introduction to gender norms (or the lack thereof) within Indigenous societies through storytelling. Silko introduces her audience to the Laguna tribe, and the plastering, home-owning Laguna women of her time by relating the following:

"At Laguna, men did the basket making and the weaving of fine textiles; men helped a great deal with the child care too. Because the Creator is female, there is no stigma on being female; gender is not used to control behavior. No job was a man's job or a woman's job; the most able person did the work" (1974: 66).

When I first read this, all I could think was just how damn logical it all sounded. Silko relates a time in her childhood where Laguna women had a place in society that didn't involve sexualized images, submission, or patriarchy. She goes on to examine the dichotomy of the perception of beauty in the western world versus perceived beauty in Pueblo societies. Silko states that the idea of beauty was simply a manifestation of one's comportment and interactions with others in their society; "The whole person had to be beautiful, not just the face or the body; faces and bodies could not be separated from hearts and souls" (65). In relating this aspect of her culture, Silko clearly juxtaposes what beauty we perceive in our contemporary world to the definition of beauty in her Indigenous world. We recognize through her story that social markers such as gender, age, physical differences, or sexual differences do not inhibit her society in recognizing the individual and the potential for strengthening and contributing to one's society.

Silko makes several salient points on the manifestation of colonialism in her text that addresses the necessity of decolonization in order to return to the egalitarian state her people were once in. She recognizes that much of the cultural shifting in Indigenous societies was a direct result of imperialism, by remarking that prior to the influx of Christian missionaries, "a man could dress as a woman and work with the women and even marry a man without any fanfare. Likewise, a woman was free to dress like a man, to hunt and go to war with the men, and to marry a woman" (67). She later regards the duality in one's sexuality by inadvertently referencing each person's Two-Spirit. In doing so, Silko states that the disregard for this way of life of the Pueblo people, is what ultimately lead to laws of sexual inhibition that were imposed upon Indigenous societies via colonialism and Christianization.

Although many Indigenous feminists attempt to express their political views through their art for the sake of undermining the political system, there are some who try to make political statements that represent balance between the two worlds in which they live. Some may see these types of artists as being adulterated, yet others may see them simply working within the system in place in order to be more inclusive and identify with a larger audience. In being inclusive, Indigenous artists create avenues for substantial enlightenment. Also, in recognizing that Indigenous women can identify with multiple cultures and ideas, Indigenous art has the potential to bridge the gap between white and non-white -yielding a more unified influence in eliciting *real* change. As a non-

Indigenous woman, I can identify with this, in that I was drawn to the field of contemporary Indigenous feminist composition *because* it was inclusive; these artistic representations did not seek to alienate or vilify me as a white person (although in being of Middle Eastern descent, and being considered “white” according to the western world, I refuse to identify with the notion of race). Okay, so I’m slightly biased. I lied. Even if these compositions *were* exclusionist, I would probably still love them. But I can at least imagine how turned off most non-Indigenous people would be when being vilified by Indigenous people in their political compositions, regardless of how disempowered and historically degraded Indigenous societies are.

A very good artistic representation of balance in the world of Indigenous feminism can be found in “Contemporary Native American Women Artists: Visual Expressions of Feminism, the Environment, and Identity,” as Indigenous artist Nadema Agard’s piece titled *The Virgin of Guadalupe is the Corn Mother* is featured, and demonstrates “the power of tribal art as a ‘vehicle for cultural and political resistance and a spiritual grounding for a world that has become unbalanced’”(106).



Many Indigenous feminists align themselves with Agard’s way of including “the other (i.e. non-Indigenous peoples),” because it is widely recognized that “the other” represents more than the audience –it represents the problem. While attempting to explain to the masses that do not see how problematic their views and their ancestral presence are in this nation, we must recognize the necessity of conveying to them their role in the poor conditions of reservations. It is exceptionally important to communicate to others that they have a responsibility to do their part in working for equity and in recognizing the struggles Indigenous women and men face today because of the historical privilege of certain races. In “Native American Sovereignty, and Social Change” Andrea Smith writes:

“When I worked as a rape crisis counselor, every Native client I saw said to me at one point, ‘I wish I wasn’t Indian.’ My training in the mainstream antiviolence movement did not prepare me to address what I was seeing –

that sexual violence in Native communities was inextricably linked to processes of genocide and colonization" (2005: 116).

In writing this, Smith contends that in making analyses like these, she elicits a level of moral culpability to her audience. She seeks to change the way in which Native activism is perceived because according to her, the way in which Indigenous feminism is theorized, it "straightjackets Native women from articulating political projects that both address sexism and promote Indigenous sovereignty simultaneously" (118). This is important to note in that one of the major tenants of Indigenous feminism involve the exposure and emphasis of the oppression Indigenous women face today in the 21st century that isn't being addressed, heard, disseminated, or analysed by the general public.

Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots

Drawing on the Indigenous play *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots*, by Monique Mojica, one may find various instances where Mojica directly addresses the historical and contemporary injustices towards the Indigenous female population through satire. She directly quotes a famous Cheyenne saying that "A nation is not conquered until the hearts of its women are on the ground." (1990: 12) In using this particular quote, Mojica expresses the pain and resilience necessary for the survival of the Indigenous woman after living under colonial rule for so long. She also uses an exceptional amount of farce through the trickster character, Princess Buttered-on-Both-Sides, to undermine that same colonial rule by exposing the absurdism behind the colonizer's distorted images of Indigenous women. Her primary role, for those who can perceive, is to reclaim what it means to be an Indigenous woman, before it was defined by the white man, and before the white man defiled the Indigenous woman through his assertive and vigorous introduction to patriarchy.

In her play, Mojica does more than challenge the patriarchal influence over the world – she utilizes what critic Maria Lyytinen describes in *Native American Performance and Representation* (2009) as "Trickster 'deconstruction'" in order to challenge the status quo, and correct the issue of western socialization – that same socialization that contributed to the stereotypes and disempowerment of Native women. The play opens with Princess Buttered-on-Both-Sides adorning the popular image of Native women during the 498th annual Miss North American Indian Beauty Pageant. She satirizes the image of Disney's rendition of the story of Pocahontas during her talent segment by proclaiming she will dance in

“savage splendor” and throw herself “over the precipice, all for the loss of my one true love, Captain John Whiteman” (19). In reference to Princess Buttered-on-Both-Sides’ survived leap over the Niagara, it is clear that Mojica intentionally permits the survival of her trickster coyote in order to make a statement about the resilience of Indigenous women. By design, what she infers is that, regardless of the false stigmatization of her women, they have always fought and continue to in order to overcome those stereotypes and patriarchal fantasies of cultural submissiveness.

In Transformation 3, Mojica employs a different kind of voice – one that highlights the impact of colonization on the unity of the Indigenous. This scene relays the story of Malinche from the western viewpoint, but also allows for the Native perspective on her position. Malinche was known as the interpreter and lover of Hernan Cortes. Prior to her introduction to the Spanish conquistador, Malinche was part of a noble family, but upon the death of her father, and the re-marriage of her mother, Malinche was sold into a Mayan slave trade, which eventually led her to work for Hernan Cortes. She was discovered to be an excellent interpreter, so she was utilized for her skill by the conquistadors, and even helped them evade an Aztec attack by informing Cortes of the plot. Naturally, as years went on, Malinche and Cortes formed a close relationship, and Malinche even bore Cortes a son (La Malinche). In Mojica’s play, when the story of Malinche is mentioned, we are offered the perspective of her Indigenous counterparts as they curse her for her desertion and betrayal of her people. But then Mojica allows for Malinche to be given the opportunity to voice her side of the story. She begins: “They say it was me betrayed my people. It was they betrayed me.” (22) She then continues by making an exclamation towards her child as “La Chingada! The fucked one!” (22), regarding his Indigenous features as a curse from her blood. Mojica expresses the suffering and struggle that Malinche endures as the mistress of the married Hernan Cortes. She is within and without because of her blood and because of her abandonment. Throughout Mojica’s play, Malinche is constantly engaged in a dance with molten lava. The overtaking of the lava at the end of the scene represents her struggle for survival – one that ultimately leads to her demise. The colonial force overtakes her through possession, disempowerment, and yet another dereliction.

Concluding Lines

Whether addressing artistic renditions of Mojica, Agard, or Silko, or delving into the anthology of the numerous Indigenous stories of "Spider Woman's Granddaughters," one thing becomes evident: for so many Indigenous works to maintain the same theme of oppression and disempowerment, something serious that is afflicting contemporary Indigenous nations isn't being addressed. There have been several waves in Native writing and artistic works, and the subject of the marginalization of Indigenous women recurs over and over again. Native artists are constantly attempting to challenge the status quo, are constantly seeking more than just reclamation or decolonization, they are seeking to correct the issue of western socialization, and the overarching patriarchal influence imposed upon their nations. This leads to the question of *who* is responsible for ensuring that measures are taken to guarantee the rights and protection that Indigenous women are seeking through their works. The answer to that question is us. I suppose the bigger question is whose side one chooses to be on, as it certainly *is* a choice, considering we are all bred to function as components of the patriarchal machine. I guess it would be easier for one to remain on the side of the oppressor, to inadvertently defend the established racist patriarchy. Note that I utilize the term 'remain.'

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