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Indigenous Feminisms

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Indigenous feminisms as a scholarly field and way of thinking have long been ignored by mainstream and Western feminisms. Indigenous feminism is an approach to gender inequity, oppression, and rights in the context of Indigenous communities, more specifically Native women, queer people, and Two-Spirit people. It is separated from mainstream feminism given the central role that tribal values and sovereignty play in Indigenous people's lives, as white, non-Native women and queer people face an entirely different set of struggles. The readings thus far have challenged us to tackle the way settler colonialism has existed and exists today in the lives of Native women and queer people, and to understand that Western feminism's empty notion that "we're all in this together" is false, as colonization creates the dichotomy between mainstream and Indigenous feminisms. We are challenged to accept that Native women's fight and struggles have been silenced since colonial times; therefore, mainstream feminism and its goals often do not align with the goals of Native women (Shanley, 214).

Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill offer a discussion on how to think about Indigenous feminisms and their theories, through clear definitions and intersections of settler colonialism, heteropatriarchy, and heteropaternalism in Native feminist theories (11-13). In my understanding, there are fundamental conceptions to be had across almost all Indigenous feminisms, despite their complexity: that Native women and queer people face different challenges than Western

and mainstream feminists, that these challenges are hugely impacted and informed by settler colonialism that still exists today, and that tribal sovereignty matters and can present difficulties Native women and queer people. These approaches are the backbones of theory in Indigenous feminisms, because they operate outside of the realm of even the most progressive feminist theories that are, try as they might to remain objective, still white (Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill, 10-12). There is a notion of the pursuit of tribal sovereignty from the legal and social influences of colonialism present in the readings, that must be explored in tandem—how Native women and queer people (some Indigenous feminists do not explore the nature of gender identity in the readings) interact with and relate to both of these ideas is the focus of Indigenous feminism.

There are undoubtedly a number of tensions within Indigenous feminisms and between Indigenous and mainstream feminisms; they are not a monolith, and neither are Native tribes. Each Native nation has unique manifestations of patriarchy and dispositions towards Native women and queer people, its own understandings and definitions of freedom in regards to Native women and queer people, as well as their own jurisprudence towards gender violence. There is no shortage of work to be done within Indigenous communities in regard to gender relations and violence. As noted in Sarah Deer's book, *The Beginning and End of Rape*, some tribes do not have clear, written laws regarding rape and sexual violence, and to do so requires culturally-relevant constructions of gender, law, and crime (108-109). Tribal governments and patriarchies have failed in many ways to protect women and queer people. Deer discusses an Indigenous theory of rape, in which tribes construct the criminal act of rape comprehensively and in a way that speaks to the history of it as conquest (Deer, 114-115). Indigenous theories of rape are an example of how there must be regard for individual histories and cultures of Indigenous

communities, and that there is no true way in which a colonizing society can serve as the protection of women and queer people.

The construction of gender in Native communities varies, and therefore Indigenous feminisms must be adequately equipped to understand and challenge those notions. For example, mainstream feminism is largely characterized by the restructuring of traditional family dynamics, freedom to engage in historically male-dominated spaces, and wanting to be valued outside of motherhood. These ideals of mainstream feminism employ a narrative that may not coincide with Native women's histories and cultures. Anderson writes that before the colonization of Native people, motherhood was a source of power for women both in personal and private spheres (86). She is critical of the modern diminutions of political power for women when that power is only seen as the birthing and teaching of entire nations, and that this overworking of Native women confuses their strength with willing to accept neglect (88). However, in St. Dennis' exploration, some Aboriginal women held high status in society and in the Navajo nation, membership is matrilineal (St. Dennis, 46-47). This represents tensions between ideas of womanhood and motherhood in Indigenous communities. Ideas around motherhood also inform kinship structures; in many Indigenous communities, livelihoods were "sustained by strong kin relations in which women had significant authority" (Anderson, 83). As Shanley writes, Native women have always held a different idea of family (214), and may not be seeking to redefine these familial frames. There is little discussion of where queer people fit into these narratives; when one does not have the ability or the desire to give birth, is that womanhood less valuable? How do queer people operate within patriarchy in Indigenous communities? Are their identities recognized and normalized? These are questions being asked, but can never be answered simply or universally.

However, the lionshare of the complications within Indigenous feminisms lie in the colonial legacy left by settlers. The continued, purposeful perpetuation of Native women as invisible, discardable, and unworthy of humanity; Native tribes as helpless and broken; and Native justice systems as uninformed and dated by settler states has rendered Native tribes to the jurisdiction of those that have committed genocides against them (Deer, 2015). Despite the technicality that Native reservations in North America operate under their own rule of law and jurisdiction, the extension of federal involvement into tribal law has greatly reduced and undermined Native tribe's ability to confront gender violence through "anti-sovereignty legislation" (Deer, 94); for example, non-Native men could rape Native women and face virtually no consequences due to the inconsistencies and blurred lines between federal and tribal law (Deer, 41). Before the imposition of Western values and trauma on Native people by colonial settlers, rape was taken seriously within tribal law (Deer, 33)—thus, rape as a means of colonization has severely damaged the social construction of the crime against Native women today. Women are being left behind, in some cases by both their tribes and the federal government, in these justice systems. The trafficking and disappearance of Native women without so much as a headline is a direct indication of existing colonial sentiments. Native women have been assigned hegemonic labels as the dirty, helpless, deplorable "others" that exist outside of mainstream realities of a racialized, gendered, and colonial society (Jiwani and Young, 898). Thus, violence against them is deemed permissible while the world fights tooth and nail for missing white women (Jiwani and Young, 899).

It is clear that there is no one way to define Indigenous feminisms, because there is no one way to define Indigenous women, men, and queer people. However, they can be categorized as the effort to understand and better the lives of Indigenous women through explorations of

intersectionality. They problematize the realities of colonialism and tribal sovereignty for Indigenous women and queer people in ways that mainstream feminists may not feel are relevant or had not connected before. They are unafraid to critique tribal culture and law's own shortcomings and patriarchies, but acknowledge their deeply rooted histories. They seek to provide potential for feminist solutions that actually cater to the unique needs of Indigenous women and queer people, instead of trying to adapt modern feminist ideals. In these pursuits, Indigenous feminisms are paving the way for tribal responsibility in gender violence, a path to tribal sovereignty, and to a more just society for Indigenous women and queer people that is defined in their own terms and by their own experiences. While these ideas may seem specific to Indigenous women, Arvin, Tuck and Morrill note that the theorizing of colonialism and heteropatriarchy may influence feminisms for other groups of women and queer people who are marginalized by white heteropatriarchy in more than one way (11-12).