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“A Real Feminine Journey”: Locating Indigenous Feminisms in the Arts

Abstract

Despite the prevailing acceptance of homogenized global sensibilities in media productions, many American Indian and other indigenous artists continue to articulate a sovereign, bounded, and discrete identity based on land, family, and memory. Both material (embodied knowledge) and ideological (the interconnectedness of people, the earth, and culture) constructs enable communal paradigms rather than individualistic or gendered identities to rise to the fore. Given these parameters, how can the testimonies of native women’s lives as artists inform debates of indigenous feminisms? Drawing from Native women artists’ narratives, transnational feminist scholarship, and ethnographic and historical texts, the author demonstrates how indigenous communities become gendered communities as a result of colonialism.

Can Gender Exist outside of Culture? Sites of Struggle

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. Everything is female and it’s very interesting and important to me that you can crown it all with one big bow by saying, “Yeah, I’ve got this cord that

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I'm symbolically tied to my community, and by the way, my artwork is a part of that symbolic cord, and I can't ever stray from it because I know where I belong." In the most . . . I don't want to get away from it. Because I know who I am, and I know where I'm at, and I know where I've got to be. (Naranjo 1991)

Tessie Naranjo's poetic description of herself as a female, an artist, and a cultural person resonates with a certainty, a sense of place and belonging. Her narrative creates a bounded space; a gendered assertion of identity tied to place, process, and community. This simultaneous claiming of the feminine and of tribal responsibility signals a sensibility that runs counter both to implied requisite freedoms of the modern artist as well as to societal resistances championed by Western feminist ideologies (Okin et al. 1999). Naranjo's symbolic cord presents an image that is representative of female fertility and reproduction (as in the umbilical cord), while also claiming recognition of that which sustains life—the larger community of Santa Clara pueblo. She does not resist association with the consumer of her work in the style of a contemporary artist, nor does she oppose her community of origin as an oppressive structure. This uncompromising allegiance to community appears to challenge feminist demands for equal rights against the “unequal power arrangements in society, in particular, a societal system in which men and masculine qualities are more highly valued and privileged than women and femininity” (Williams 2000, 9).

Naranjo's text collapses the feminine and community in ways that resist standard binaries in arts practice (artistic freedom vs. commercial success) and feminist dialogues (male control, female subordination). How do the variables of gender and culture inform indigenous identity in the arts? Referencing Naranjo's passage, can gender even be said to exist outside of, or dissociated from, culture? Both the cognitive categories employed (such as the standard conceptual frameworks of individual and community allegiances as separate and alienated categories) and the social and political aims championed (Native American arts as expressive of Native identity as well as providing income) demand inquiry. Naranjo's holistic orientation tells of the challenges inherent in interpreting contemporary Native women artists' lives. Although their experience is grounded in the realities of indigenous womanhood and arts commerce, Native women in the arts are

not easily defined either as fine artists or feminists. In fact, the women I interviewed generally dismissed any form of labeling altogether.¹

Susan M. Williams and Joy Harjo note, “Feminism is not a word found in tribal languages” (Williams and Harjo 1998, 198). Although the assertion that feminism is not compatible with indigenous values has more recently been questioned by aboriginal scholars who find increasing similarities with other feminists of color, the critical debates about this intersection are far from being mapped or fully developed as theory. The assumption that traditional gender relations (characterized as egalitarian, complementary, or matriarchal) have survived colonialism is now fully exposed as a questionable assertion (St. Denis 2007), yet the parameters of this overlap remain largely unarticulated.

In my conceptualization of these questions, I have been challenged by other women of color scholars to assign feminist identities to my research, even when Native American women did not self-describe as such. Although I have benefited greatly from my exposure to transnational feminist discourse,² ethically I feel I cannot pursue this type of labeling. Legacies of appropriations in Native communities (appropriations of land, language, spirituality, even human bodies) dictate that respect be shown to people’s own self-designations. I can and do, however, explore how multiple forms of feminist ideologies may be viewed as variously applicable or inaccurate in understanding indigenous worldviews.

Given these multiple conceptual challenges, why do I choose to pursue an inquiry specific to Native American women in the arts? What can be drawn from this privileged positioning? I argue that if contemporary Native arts are to be considered as a political manifestation of cultural identity, communal referents (tribal, pan-tribal, family) therefore take precedence over individual achievements (prestige, individual advancement). In this respect and according to these frames of reference, contemporary Native women artists exhibit an uncompromising allegiance to their extended lives as mothers, tradition-bearers, and wage-earners. As image-makers, Native women who refuse to dissociate themselves from their identities as women and as tribal members are positioned to make more salient social and political commentaries than are either their non-Native or male Native peers.

I argue that in Native arts, a denial or diminishing of community allegiances in an effort to be considered a fine artist (“Artist First, Indian

Second”) does not simply affect agency but also reinforces false paradigms of artistic freedoms that are applied unequally to artists of color. The assumption that indigenous artists must choose one role over another (artist or Indian) evidences racist typecasting of one-dimensional, historical, and non-contemporaneous identities. Likewise, the dismissal of common female attributions, including fertility, softness, or domesticity (relegation to craft) does not erase these qualities from the public’s imagination nor does it necessarily empower women who may choose to distance themselves from overt expressions of tribal sensibilities. The cultural values of gender and economics in the arts are both constitutive of and reactive to established paradigms of knowledge. These multiple sites of knowledge have the opportunity to be contested in the social arena of arts production and consumption, thereby allowing for highly charged articulations of identity claims. Qualities such as femaleness, maleness, isolation, belonging, and community find voice in these moments where conflicting ideologies meet.

The privileging of a tribal identity as more relevant than other descriptive terms such as educational status, gender, or age is illustrated in the following passage from Naranjo’s interview in 2000. My interview trajectory with artists followed my experience as an American Indian student, and later researcher, professor, and museum director at the Santa Fe, New Mexico-based Institute of American Indian Arts, a tribal college. Over a twenty-year period, I established relationships with Native artists in the urban arts hub of Santa Fe that formed the basis of my dissertation research in cultural anthropology at Stanford University in 1993. In the ten years since I had previously interviewed her, Naranjo had completed a Ph.D. in sociology at the University of New Mexico. Our relationship was in part defined by our shared experience of working on graduate degrees concurrently, and I was curious as to how her academic achievements may have informed her ideas of self-identity.

NM: I was wondering, do you now call yourself something different, like if someone says, you’re giving a paper at a conference and they want you to put something in parentheses, do you now choose to say, sociologist, artist, tribal person, woman, how do you handle that?

TN: How do I define myself?

NM: Yeah.

TN: UM, (pause) it's neat that you ask that question. And people have asked me, every time there's a presentation to be made they say "How do I introduce you?" And I say I have a passion for community, I have a passion for family. Please tell in your introduction that I am from the community and I am very much a part of my extended family. So that's what they'll do. In terms of the labeling, the Ph.D. thing, I almost never use it to define myself. I just say that I'm Tessie Naranjo and as far as a sociologist is concerned, almost never do I say that but I do know that privately they have impacted my life so, so significantly, but that's my private experience. For the public world, I don't need to; I don't need to define myself in that way. In fact, I almost . . . well, for sure, I prefer not to. I prefer not to because it is almost as if you are (sigh) depending on those labels to define you and I don't need to have those labels define me. But I do need to let the rest of the world know I am from Santa Clara Pueblo and I am a woman who treasures the wisdom of our past and who treasures the wisdom of what we still have, and those are the ways that I work. (Naranjo 2000a)

I heighten Naranjo's narratives to explore how the multiple identities of tribal person, artist, and woman intersect in meaningful ways. I am careful to delineate the manner in which these connections appear to contradict prevailing intellectual trends in feminist theory, art criticism, and cultural studies. For example, although hybridity is heralded as a normative reference for contemporary arts dialogues, tribal communities claim segmented spaces. Art historian Lucy Lippard's *Mixed Blessings* claimed "Faced with the facts of nomadism and displacement, many artists are trying to form a new hybrid cultural identity and to locate themselves therein," adding that tribalism in its exclusive sense "is a perverted, embattled form of community" (Lippard 1990, 153). More recently, Native theorists have championed similar post-Indian sentiments in the curation of contemporary art exhibits (Mithlo 2007). By comparison, Naranjo writes of tribalism as an organic philosophy of life, "The notion of the container is crucial to the worldview of the pueblo. The lower half of our cosmos is a pot that contains life, the womb of the mother. The notion of containment also is evident in the pueblo plaza, which contains outdoor community activities and is bounded by the house forms and the hills and the mountains" (Naranjo 2000b).

Despite the prevailing acceptance of homogenized global sensibilities in media productions, many Native American and other indigenous artists continue to articulate a sovereign, bounded, and discrete identity based on land, family, and memory. A continued sense of separateness prevails, fully positioned in the unique status of tribal nations and their special relationship to the federal government. This boundedness, however, cannot be interpreted as static; belonging is not enforced but rather is employed according to political, technical, economic, and educational developments and changes in the world at large. Both material and ideological constructs enable communal paradigms rather than individualistic or gendered identities to rise to the fore.

If gendered identities are conceptualized as part of the totality of communal identity, then what relevance can feminist theory have for Native women? Given the separate ideological constructs of how gender “works” in tribal communities, can the experience of Native women ever be comprehensible to feminist inquiries that often premise their arguments on the universal oppression of women? Adopting Naranjo’s perspective, if the whole world is feminine then how relevant can feminist thought be?

This essay will track certain moments when feminist theory has drawn from Native women’s experience to see what aspects of Native women’s lives seemed to have relevance for feminist thought. Similarly, indigenous women’s narratives will be assessed for indications of feminist ideologies and their relevance to indigenous rights. My research suggests that the crossover applications between feminist theory and indigenous knowledge systems for which productive theory-making may be structured include: intersectionality (often defined as holism in Native contexts), universality (or community values), and identity claims (including art-making and performance).

My parameters locate this discussion in light of ethnography, feminist literature, indigenous rights discourses, and cultural theory. Although parallel developments in feminist art history may be pertinent to this exercise, the field’s current lack of sustained engagement with indigenous communities at this time positions this body of literature outside of my present inquiry. I have therefore situated my discussions in places that are both inclusive of indigenous content and that advance a politically engaged and thus highly contextual inquiry. A traditional art-historical analysis of form alone cannot accomplish my goal of advancing an embodied theoretical analysis. Likewise, although the major geographical focus of this essay

is Native North America (where the majority of my research is based), the voices of theorists whose works have become central to American Indian studies discourses—voices from Mexico, Hawaii, New Zealand, Africa, Bolivia, and Canada—are included as well. My field of inquiry is not defined by existing academic disciplines, geography, or nationhood, but by the logic of contemporary theorists committed to a just and politically salient indigenous research methodology.

Appropriations, Exclusions, Self-segregations

Henrietta L. Moore defines feminist anthropology as “more than the study of women”; it is rather “the study of gender, of the interrelations between women and men, and the role of gender in structuring human societies, their histories, ideologies, economic systems and political structures” (Moore 1988, 6). Moore describes how the deconstruction of the social category of “woman” led feminist anthropology to “formulate . . . theoretical questions in terms of how economics, kinship, and ritual are experienced and structured through gender, rather than asking how gender is experienced and structured through culture” (9). Contrary to the inseparable identities of femaleness and culture demonstrated by Naranjo’s opening passage, within this construct, gender concepts are prioritized.

The lack of a critical inclusion of racial identities in early hegemonic feminist theory led black feminist scholars such as Irma McClaurin-Allen to charge that feminist debates of the 1970s acknowledged the influence of race and class in the production of gender, but often treated them as “‘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.” Importantly for my argument, McClaurin-Allen describes these identity attributes as “inextricable from one another” (McClaurin-Allen 1990, 316). Black feminist ideology of this period argued for a consideration of “dialectical interrelations of race, class, and gender,” and in particular how forms of social inequality are “created, manipulated, and incorporated into individual identities” (316). A concern with individual experience rather than institutions of dominance was advocated as a way to gain new perspectives on the contradictions within systems of social inequality.

My inquiry finds affinity with McClaurin-Allen's impulse to locate the intersections of various identity constructs within individual women's lives, yet the experience of individual Native women's lives alone problematically marginalizes communal rights inherent in nationhood and fails to recognize the unique history of genocidal practices exercised in policies of colonialism. Andrea Smith argues for the agency of indigenous women in an account of feminist history that begins in 1492 when Native women collectively resisted colonization (Smith 2005).

Although black feminist paradigms have become central to a genealogy of feminist theoretical developments over time (including the use of intersectionality and positionality described above), indigenous ideologies have remained largely outside of the feminist mainstream. I believe that this separate narration of Native women's experiences is attributable to both internal self-segregation and external exclusion. By exclusion, I refer specifically to the lack of serious engagement with Native American intellectual traditions with respect to gender analysis.

Native women's lives and bodies have historically been incorporated into the Western feminist movement as an expedient means of advancing predetermined theoretical aims, but not often as a viable alternative dimension of gender analysis. In a related manner, Native American activists and scholars have often themselves claimed a unique space apart from a totalizing gender discourse that appeared unwilling or unable to accommodate an interrogation of central feminist tenets.³ For example, when I questioned Santa Clara Roxanne Swentzell about on her conception of her career trajectory over the past decade, she responded by imparting an appreciation of lived knowledge over abstract thought:

The last ten years . . . (long pause) I think more clearer [sic] on what it is that I'm doing. And what I find . . . when I was younger . . . I thought I knew more than I know. And I suspect that as I get older I'll even feel that more. And, life seems to be of those very, very mundane small things that happen and it becomes more and more that way, stronger and stronger to me. So it's like when you talk about a male mind vs. a female mind, it's almost like, to me it's proving itself too, that it's less and less ideal. It's more like these really little things.

Like I noticed, instead of these big goals that I have in life, even as a woman, a goal looks like, "I'm going to make this home for my kids," or

women's goals, whatever; it gets more and more like, I'll stop and pick up a little piece of trash, even if I'm in a hurry. And before, "I'll pick those up when I get, next week, we'll go around the yard picking up trash, all of us." No, it's almost like, no, it's right now. I'll just stop and pick up that gum wrapper. And that's real significant to me, like it's never been. And if anything changed, that was really changed. It's very now. And it's just these tiny little things because I can't put my life on my kids, I can't put my life on my art, my name. I can't put . . . it's just these very, very little things. (Swentzell 2000).

In this passage, a life fully lived is a life that is noticed, experienced in the *now*, rather than in an abstracted knowledge, separate from the business of living and appreciating each moment. But even beyond this hesitancy to disassociate oneself from the immediacy of life, there is concurrent recognition of identity that goes beyond the typical variables of home, children, career, and even gender. Identity in this respect is a holistic experience of thought, presence, and being, enacted in a physical location, in this case the Santa Clara pueblo. This very sophisticated ideology cannot be easily accommodated within existing frameworks of feminism, gender, or the arts. This multiple way of being present in the world is accessible only through careful attention to the intersections of these approaches, with indigenous voices as primary knowledge conveyors, as central subjects rather than objects of study.

Julia Emberley describes how 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" (Emberley 1996, 100). 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 (102). Likewise, Andrea Smith charges 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" (Smith 2005, 25). 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?" (Maracle 1996, 138–39).

This character of exploitation thus seems to form a circular pattern of exclusions whereby indigenous women serve as raw data for feminist theorizing (and at times, political gain) while concurrently, indigenous knowledges (in large part due to exclusionary academic hierarchies) remain unincorporated. Subsequently, Native women themselves withdraw or mark clear boundaries outside of perceived elitist feminist spheres of belonging.

Contemporary critiques of hegemonic feminisms reflect the broadening of the field to include transnational feminist ideologies and increasing consideration of indigenous values and activism, rather than tribally specific histories. Sylvia Marcos examines 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" (Marcos 2005, 81). She cites two contradictory phenomena emerging in Mexican social movements. Although the Mexican feminist movement has participated more in international women's movements due to globalization, a new recognition and reappraisal of the indigenous (as evident in the Zapatista uprising) has developed concurrently. Marcos identifies the tensions resulting from "a new breach between elite feminists who travel, consult, interact, and negotiate with the international feminist voices (frequently from the 'North') and the grassroots poor and/or indigenous women" (84–85).

In a similar manner, Obioma Nnaemeka critiques the "intellectual gymnastics and empty theorizing in feminist scholarship" and its lack of engagement with social utility (Nnaemeka 2003, 64). She specifically notes the epistemological divide between African women as "knowledge producers and as subjects/objects for knowledge production" (66). Nnaemeka argues that third-world women are often banished in gender and international rights publications 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." She charges that this allocation of tasks is "colonial both in intent and execution" (67).

Nnaemeka advocates “building on the indigenous” by locating 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. She illustrates the third space in her description of the women’s studies department at Makerere University, Uganda that functions in a gendered context (“a healthy mix of men and women”) rather than the feminized environment of women’s studies in the West (“all/almost all female”). She notes how complementarity as an indigenous concept informs everyday practice for African women as a “willingness and readiness to negotiate with and around men even in difficult circumstances” (Nnaemeka 2003, 79–80).

Dorothy Goldin Rosenberg suggests that traditional cultural paradigms (especially women’s indigenous knowledges) be “reclaimed” within ecological feminisms. Rosenberg’s advocacy for moving away from patriarchal biomedical models, militarism, and environmental racism and toward holistic health and traditional well-being is politically progressive yet lacking in a nuanced reading of an indigenous-knowledge-systems approach. Indigenous knowledges in this example are highly generalized: “The spiritual traditions of native peoples, Africans, Asians, and other cultural groups, and the pre-Christian traditions that survived in Europe, shared a common world view in which the sacred was seen as a part of the living world” (Rosenberg 2000, 140). Although transnational inquiries are often effective in challenging globalized systems of inequality, the inclination to enter totalizing paradigms diminishes the overall weight of these arguments.

A review of these data reveals that Native American women (and by extension in recent scholarship, indigenous women) have historically been represented as cultured, exotic others, inserted into existing feminist paradigms for the political, social, and intellectual advancement of non-Natives. Early blatant examples of appropriations from the suffragist movement and second-wave feminisms suggest that recognition of these selective borrowings or even a formal apology may offer a productive route for reconciliation between mainstream elite feminists and Native American communities.⁴ However, contested spaces and conflicting ideologies appear remarkably persistent even in recent scholarship.

When contemporary theorists suggest that they can “build upon” (Nnaemeka), “draw from” (Rosenberg), and “help” (Marcos) indigenous

women, a danger zone of active and passive participation is created. The writings of each of these contemporary feminist scholars reflect a deep concern and engagement with indigenous communities; each recognizes the liabilities of encompassing Native realities into hegemonic, urban, elite feminist movements. Yet there is a sense of distance, of token engagement rather than a deep, prolonged exchange between equals. Nnaemeka's isolated reference of the Igbo spirit figure *nmanwu* as an illustration of indigenous wisdom and complexity accomplishes too little; Rosenberg's totality of holistic religions assumes too much. Marcos's confession that the Zapatismo indigenous women's law was for her "like a dream come true" because it bridged her own interests in indigenous and feminist practices appears hopelessly self-referential (Marcos 2005, 86).

Given the complexities of exchange and interactions too easily interpreted as appropriative, what models of analysis might yield some of the depth conveyed in Naranjo's opening statements of "Femaleness, femaleness. My community is female. My culture is female. I'm female. My art making is female" (Naranjo 1991)? Returning to Nnaemeka, it is apparent that her analysis relies upon the division of theory and practice, with mainstream feminists overly concerned with theory and African communities too often referenced only as data. How can the intersections of feminist inquiry and indigenous knowledges reach rapprochement, given the limited conceptual repertoires available? Is the comparative method (the West and the Rest) a useful and productive approach for an articulation of conceptually distinctive approaches to gender and community?

"A Commonality of Difference": Searching for Indigenous Feminisms in Ethnographic Accounts

Searching for an adequate theoretical method with which to describe Native women's lives, Choctaw scholar Devon Abbott Mihesuah asserts the primacy of self-narratives and self-naming. Her argument draws from black feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* in advocating for an experiential, lived knowledge as a basis of theoretical positioning (Collins 2000). Mihesuah states, "Native women—and there are many, many different world views, values, and traditions represented in those words—are the ones who can best describe what it means to be Indigenous women, because, like African

American women, they are ‘those who live it’—not non-Native theorists” (Mihesuah 2003, 29). This advocacy asserts the primacy of experiential knowledge while diminishing disembodied, cognitive theorizing.

Cherokee scholar Rayna Green’s 1983 contextual bibliography *Native American Women* cites the “persuasiveness of testimony” by Native women leaders and writers writing about their own lives. Comparing these works to that of mainstream scholars, Green notes, “I know of no Indian woman preparing systematic studies of puberty rites, for example. Women may believe in them, honor them, and participate in them but they do not, for the most part, document them or wish to do so. They do not document change, they make change. Their focus remains on strategies to address problems, rather than on the descriptive analysis of problems” (Green, 1983, 12).

Although self-narratives as a legitimate knowledge base hold promise for avoidance of the theory/practice divide, the case for Native American communities is somewhat more complex. Mihesuah qualifies her advocacy of personal narrative by citing the problematic of tribal diversity (the “extraordinary differences in cultural audience, geographic location, blood quantum, appearance, and reliable memory”), concluding, “There certainly can be no theory that encompasses all these voices, except maybe that Indigenous women share what I call a “commonality of difference” (Mihesuah 2003, 30). Green cites the difficulties for non-Natives gaining research access and a lack of interest for Natives, “given the hostile climate for discussion of any theory applied to Native people, I doubt that feminist theory of any stripe would be well received. For Indian feminists, every woman’s issue is framed in the larger context of issues pertinent to Native peoples” (Green 1983, 14).

Although these Native scholars do not dismiss theory altogether, the inherent problems appear insurmountable. The rejection of theory, however, is unproductive in light of the continued marginalization of Native women purely as sources for field data. Following Mihesuah’s desire to embrace both commonalities and differences and Green’s emphasis on agency and sovereignty, it would appear that ethnographic research that attends to both communal and individualist structures would find the most relevance in advancing the holistic community imperatives of embodied research. An ethically informed ethnographic research methodology also importantly allows for the long-term, reciprocal, mutually meaningful criteria that are demanded in indigenous research methodologies (Smith 1999).

I will briefly examine two contemporary ethnographies of Native American women that are not straight personal narratives or segregated case studies in academic volumes. The ethnographies proactively engage feminist theories and attempt to address the problems inherent in semiotic and ontological differences. My aim is to examine what alternative patterns of analysis may possibly yield in clarifying intersecting feminisms and tribal women's knowledges as a productive basis for application to Native women in the arts. Both studies are authored by women; one Native one non-Native. Although not specific to the arts, a consideration of these ethnographies renders competing paradigms available for discussion. In particular, attention will be paid to how identity claims are structured in communal paradigms.

Lillian Ackerman's study, *A Necessary Balance: Gender and Power among Indians of the Columbia Plateau* (Ackerman 2003) asserts that gender equality existed among all Plateau groups of the past and is likely to be present among all Plateau Indians today. Ackerman claims a prior existence of gender equality, terming it an "indigenous trait" and a "legacy from the past" that predates Euro-American culture (Ackerman 2003, 229). She bases her findings on her extensive study of the Colville Indian Reservation of north-central Washington state from 1979 through the 1990s. Combining historical archival research with participant observation and interviews with fifty-one men and women, Ackerman adopted a definition of gender equality authored by Alice Schlegel that stresses balanced access to power, authority, and autonomy by males and females (Schlegel 1977).

Ackerman's ethnography aims to "portray gender equality on the Colville Reservation sufficiently well so that no one can deny the existence of gender equality somewhere in the world" (Ackerman 2003, 239). Specifically, Ackerman notes, "I hope this study will contribute to the demise of the notion of universal male dominance" (239). The Colville (and by extension, Plateau) data reveal that women retained equal status even after Euro-American colonialism and capitalism, due largely to the women's continued prominence in economic activities as well as the important role women played in the survival of the family and tribe. Ackerman notes these traits make women's equality "necessary" and "structural," noting that women are "so integrated into the everyday mechanism of life that to make them unequal would make the society unworkable" (249).

Ackerman's findings are congruent with the following description by Joy Harjo and Susan Williams writing on American Indian feminism: "In recognition of the importance of women in sustaining tribal cultures, community takes precedence over individual women's rights yet conversely there are no human rights until femaleness is respected and venerated" (Williams and Harjo 1998, 198–99). These interpretations of gender as an integral component of community, inextricable from consideration of other cultural values, echoes the concerns of second-wave women of color feminists (womanists) who advanced intersectionality as a theoretical methodology.

Ackerman openly rejects a reading of her Colville Reservation data as feminist, noting that gender differences are less important to Plateau people than to Euro-Americans. "Colville roles are complementary; Euro-American roles are opposite. The Colville define people as individuals first, then as a particular gender. Euro-Americans tend to see a particular gender first and individuals second" (Ackerman 2003, 250).

Thus, both complementarity and intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991) emerge as potentially productive theoretical bridging concepts.

Phyllis Fast's ethnography *Northern Athabaskan Survival: Women, Community, and the Future* (Fast 2002) explores Northern Athabaskan ontologies and epistemologies in relationship to theories of gender, history, wellness, and social relations with outsiders. Both Fast and Ackerman describe Euro-American hegemonies in direct opposition and conflict with indigenous theories (re: the West and the Rest). While Ackerman seeks to assertively confront and dispel feminist theories of universal gender oppression and asymmetry, Fast pursues a more nuanced analysis. The tension between individual actions and collective norms finds relevance throughout Fast's work in what she describes as a "cultural contradiction" among Athabascans, that is, "they become socially and emotionally independent of others while at the same time weaving intricate fabrics of social independence within their society." Fast describes these activities as bordering on nationalism—there exists the tendency to "denounce otherness"—yet the institutional structures of a nationalist movement are absent (Fast 2002, 181).

I suggest that the concepts of subordination and equality in gender relationships so commonly referenced in the feminist literature are constitutive of a hierarchical structure of power as well as a belief in the individual as separate from society. The overlay of these generalized categorical assumptions onto Native American cultural traditions inhibits

an accurate reading of Native theoretical orientations that are not so easily compartmentalized. For example, Fast draws from oral traditions to demonstrate how group survival through independent action is an ideal in Athabascan culture; consequently, gender status was not traditionally forefronted as a cultural theme in survival situations.

Today, Gwich'in women exercise gendered responses in their approaches to social healing, utilizing an Athabascan model of cultural survival while their male counterparts pursue political courses defined by United States government policies. The women's "mental codes" for healing are characterized by independence and social aloofness while simultaneously teaching social interdependence within their society (Fast 2002, 181–82). In this way, "women are the primary instruments of shaping Athabascan social identity and solidarity" (225). Does this indicate that women therefore exercise more or less power than men in these situations? Clearly, not only indigenous models of leadership and authority need to be examined thoroughly, but rapid social changes occurring in response to colonialism and capitalism must be considered as well.

In this regard, Fast's analysis importantly pays particular attention to the "addictive infrastructure" of drugs, alcohol, and gambling (including related social crises such as rape, child abuse, and poverty), noting how these social disruptions are part of a larger global addictive economy. Fast estimates \$11 million a year circulates through the town of Gwichyaa Zhee related to these addictive behaviors, from health-care services, law enforcement, and state and federal administration, to the alcohol and drug products themselves. She defines this addictive system as "the biggest business in Athabascan territory and one whose prosperity renders impotent ideas about removing it from Gwichyaa Zhee or elsewhere" (Fast 2002, 277).

Transnational Indigenous Feminisms: Productive or Misleading?

Clearly, a productive theoretical inquiry into the status of indigenous women's roles must utilize a transnational model that accounts not only for the existence of indigenous cognitive patterns for right living but also the brutal impacts of environmental, political, and social oppressions fueled increasingly by corporate capitalism. Examples of this theoretical methodology may be found in Andrea Smith's work, *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide*, as she advocates building transnational relation-

ships in the fight to end violence against women. Citing the ability of the prison industrial complex as well as the non-profit industrial complex to manage and control dissent by incorporating it into the state apparatus, Smith argues for adopting alternative models of social change utilized throughout Latin America and in India. These social movements have created accountability strategies that do not rely on the state. Non-hierarchical leadership, constituent-funded organizing projects, and family rather than individual participation are some of the strategies she identifies as alternatives to state-run domestic violence programs (Smith 2005, 164–68).

In *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, Chandra Talpade Mohanty advocates a transnational, anti-capitalist feminist critique that centralizes racialized gender as the most inclusive paradigm for thinking about social justice (Mohanty 2003, 231). Like Green, Mihesuah, and Collins, Mohanty privileges experiential, epistemic knowledges, linking her work to post-positivist realists

(Moya and Hames-Garcia 2000) by stating, “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” (Mohanty 2003, 231–32). Mohanty’s call to “read up the ladder of privilege” is centered specifically on the lives and interests of marginalized communities of women; she notes that women and girls are seventy percent of the world’s poor and the majority of the world’s refugees (231). Mohanty writes, “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” (235).

The transnational feminist strategy of originating both theoretical and activist agendas with women, based on their status as the world’s most disenfranchised population, provides a productive platform for consideration of how indigenous feminisms may work in the context of the arts. The “experiential and analytic anchor” (Mohanty 2003, 231) that Mohanty cites appears to offer an inclusive point for Native North American women to enter into dialogue with feminists, rather than serve as objects of study.

Yet, in what ways can this transnational feminist approach then engage with the realities of Native North America, poised geographically as it is

outside of the scope of what is being termed the Third World South? How do anti-capitalist resistances speak to the efforts of Native Americans fighting for the right to establish casinos as a means of providing an economic infrastructure for their members? How then to account for Native American sovereignty efforts within a global, anti-nationalist construct? Is this another missed opportunity, similar to Green's early lament that the abundance of feminist consciousness in Native women's struggles is too often only a "rhetorical recognition of the similarities" with feminism? Does Green's conclusion that American Indian women's writing of the 1980s "bears little resemblance to conventional feminist analysis of the status and circumstances of women's lives" still hold? (Green 1983, 13).

Summarizing the question of productive theoretical avenues for bridging feminist and Native women's concerns, these studies suggest that the comparative methodology presents a useful model for identifying unique cultural values, yet also confines discussions to a level of analysis that is ultimately insufficient for conveying the intricacies of unique, indigenous worldviews. Ethnographic works that particularize on the level of the individual, while accounting for tribal, regional, and even transnational patterns do, I think, hold promise for conveying some of the intricacies and "commonalities of difference" that Mihesuah recognizes. Within this format, feminist theory has proven to be both productive and potentially misleading, as ethnographers struggle to relate theoretical stalemates to the Native American material. Debates such as domestic vs. public status, individualism vs. communal identity, and even theory vs. practice do not seem to guide contemporary discussions in a deeply meaningful manner. The complexity of interpreting sovereign nationhood demands more than mainstream feminist theoretical approaches have to offer. This assessment follows Green's conclusion noted some twenty years earlier that "feminist rhetorical consciousness is used, only in part, by Native women to be explanatory and activating, but not to encompass the sum total of interest or concern" (Green 1983, 231).

I noted earlier that the concepts of intersectionality and complementarity appeared to have parallel applicability to Native American values of holism, multiple identity referents, and the inclusion of men in gender research and practice. Although these terms offer useful cross-cultural referents, they do not address either the question of how Native communities engage individualism or the quandary of theory and practice perceived

as separate and distinct sites of knowledge-production. I hope to resolve these oversights by returning to my discussion of Native women in the arts, and in particular to the salience of gender constructs in Native imagery and image production. As Native women artists navigate intersections of access, assimilation, and confrontation, they articulate unique identity claims based on simultaneous references to their individual, tribal, and gendered statuses. These “social arenas” enable women to make “political claims and initiate personal strategies” (Moore 1988, 37).

An Indigenous Knowledge Systems Approach: Colonialization, Communalism, and Embodied Knowledge

I live with another male artist who happens to be European. When people walk into our spaces, they would look at his paintings, and then they would look at my work. And people would automatically go, OK, he's the male, the real male, his work really shows the male side and your work is very feminine. I don't know, with native artists, but I think there is to some degree that female, male.

You know, my work, I tend to be very low key, there's not very much bravado. When it comes to the work, when you look at the work, it's very inward, it's very reclusive. You really have to kind of follow the work. And then it releases itself to you or it opens up these secrets to you. It's not something that says, “Here I am” or just hit you over the head with its message. I think with Native male artists you do get a sense of that, there is a lot of bravado.

But as in life, I think there is definitely a difference between how males and females treat each other in life and it's much different than the Western ideal where male and female relationships are so very different, as much as we try, or tell yourself that they're enlightened . . . it's still very permanent. It's still very male, always dominant. The female is always domestic, stay at home, always lower than. . .

I say that now because (my mother) heading out of the whole husband thing as soon as she started becoming financially secure and went out and got a job, he had a very hard time with that, (to) handle that, and (he) just divorced her. And in my case, the same thing happened. I was way much too successful, too independent. . . . So I guess it just depends on the maturity of people. I think we always, we all pretty much suffer

from . . . those stereotypical tendencies when it comes to male–female relationships. (Whitehorse 2000)

Black feminist scholars Johnnetta Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftall write about the power of discovering that what was assumed to be particular to an individual woman was in reality a common experience in the lives of women—the personal is political (Cole and Guy-Sheftall 2003, 5). The disconnect between the personal read as woman’s domain and the political read as man’s sphere allowed for the naturalization, privatization, and individualization of women’s experiences that could be directly attributed to societal and structural forms of oppression. It is at this personal level that the interconnections between competing ideas of womanhood, both symbolically (the reading of the painting as female) and in practice (the meaning of women’s economic autonomy) become apparent.

On the symbolic level, Whitehorse’s painting is interpreted by consumers as clearly female (no bravado). Whitehorse does not claim that her painting is demarcated as female; the work is “inward,” “reclusive,” and “low-key,” not as gendered attributes, but simply as a non-gendered description of her genre. In this realm, although she has control over the material work (how it is executed), she cannot exert control over the interpretation of her work in a gendered fashion. The artistic symbolism is in many ways colonized by the preconceptions of the viewer as to Whitehorse’s racial, ethnic, and gendered identity. On the level of arts practice, Whitehorse’s role as an accomplished female artist is also read in a colonizing fashion. Her ability to sustain a career in the arts as a woman makes her “way too successful” for her male non-Native partner. This gender bias is importantly intergenerational; her mother’s experience was similar. Ethnicity in this narrative is collapsed under the weight of gender. Male artwork, white and Native, both demonstrate the “Here I am!” aesthetic. Males both white and Native resent women who are economically successful and independent. Whitehorse’s analysis of ethnicity cites traditional Navajo culture today as fairly restrictive in its assumptions about female domesticity and subservience.

Gender as a primary reference in this passage complicates indigenous ideologies. Indigenous patterns of complementarity are nonexistent here. We do not find an anti-capitalist agenda. In a reverse of hierarchical tendencies, non-Natives appear less domineering than Natives. What the passage does evidence is the Westernization of the Native male, compared to the rela-

tive cultural orientation of Native females. As demonstrated elsewhere in my research, Native women continue to exercise their economic independence, prioritize communal obligations, and embrace their role as educators, even as they experience the impact of patriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism.

I wish to be careful about how independence is read in this context, as too often independence is taken to connote individual autonomy and rejection of social mandates. In a hegemonic feminist reading, freedom to earn money may commonly be interpreted as an exercise of female agency. For many Native American women, the ability to earn an income is a necessity, not a choice. The type of autonomy I am referring to is similar to Fast's description of Athabascan ideal behavior: group survival through independent action. Commonly, freedom in these contexts references the freedom to act and think in terms of collective, not individual, rights.

I suggest that the arts as a profession exemplifies the bridge between the individual and society in symbolic and engaged ways: symbolic, because the concept of woman has applicability to related referents of family and community, engaged due to the enacted roles, both generative and destructive, that a gendered analysis of Native arts reveals. I wish to theorize the practice of the arts as a component of indigenous knowledge systems utilizing the concepts of culture and gender as variables. Universalistic ideas of individualism and change are forwarded as key platforms of analysis. As useful as a comparative methodology (the West and the Rest) is in highlighting identity claims and enabling communication across conceptual chasms, I suggest that the deconstruction of these divides by way of a gendered inquiry enables a nuanced reading of indigenous knowledge practices. An example of this indigenous response is characterized by Gloria Emerson, Navajo painter and educator, who attributes the Westernization of Navajo men to their participation in the armed services. A woman eighteen years older than Whitehorse, Emerson relates the impact of World War II on traditional Navajo matriarchy and notes how women have responded:

Navajo society, well it used to be, was matriarchal and there is a lot of ownership of our own property, of our this and that, and the men's roles were almost secondary. And it's changed, flip-flopped it seems with the return, the men returning from the wars, with their attitudes about gender roles and such. With Westernization processes, education and so on. And maybe there are a lot of conflicts yet. I don't know. I think a

lot of kitchen art is created that way, art around the kitchen table, clear the table to cook, to feed and then when everybody is sleeping that's the time they can take the table back for their own work. And it's just not . . . there's very little give and take, I think. (Emerson 2002)

Here, the idea of “kitchen art” is forwarded as a dynamic illustrative of Westernization. Commerce is suggested by the production of crafts; women's roles are apparently marginalized. In a standard feminist critique, this account of women's apparently secondary status would surely be followed by a call for change based on a social-justice agenda, including organized resistance and direct confrontation with oppressive gender practices. If we consider the multiple readings of this imaginative feminist intervention for a moment, it becomes clear that separate value systems are at play. The variables of racism, ways of belonging, and concepts of time and tradition find differing relevance in classic feminist ideology and in indigenous ideology. Native American women and men continue to respond to the legacy of colonialism based on their race, not primarily on their gender. Native men and women were systematically killed, tortured, enslaved, and imprisoned by foreign nations at contact; these histories continue in struggles for present-day sovereignty, rendering race and ethnicity primary.

Hawaiian scholar Haunani-Kay Trask visualizes the apparently competing concepts of gender and culture by referencing 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.” (Trask 1993, 264–65)

Trask summarizes this prioritization of culture by stating, “At this point in our struggle, race and culture are stronger forces than sex and gender” (265).

Gender, however, cannot be dismissed as a central consideration, for the ways in which Native American men and women have experienced the genocide of the past 500 years has been and continues to be uniquely informed by rigidly defined Western male and female roles. Native communities became gendered communities as a result of colonialism, disrupting other intellectual traditions of leadership and the uses of power. This “gendering” of the community was evident in how Hawaiian statehood developed in 1959: “As our men sought power in the Americanized political system, they internalized the values of that system: politics is a man’s world, family life is a woman’s world. While some of our men, the most educated and articulate, rose up in the ranks of the political system, our women tended the home” (Trask 1993, 120).

The resultant economic and cultural exploitation of post-statehood Hawaii is characterized by Trask as “beyond imagining. Our Hawaiian people have been further marginalized, our living conditions and general health diminished, our lands developed and poisoned” (120). Yet in the 1970s a self-determination movement led by Native Hawaiian women activists (“articulate, fierce, and culturally grounded”) emerged. A new form of power based on traditional Hawaiian beliefs developed with “women asserting their leadership for the sake of the nation.” Nation in this instance is not strictly conceived in the sense of a bounded political entity alone, but as an extension of a holistic belief system including family and land. “Caring for the nation is, in Hawaiian belief, an extension of caring for the family, the large family that includes both our lands and our people. Our mother is our land, *Papa-h nau-moku*—she who births the islands. This means that Hawaiian women leaders are genealogically empowered to lead the nation” (121–22).

The Hawaiian example that Trask provides illustrates the problematic nature of conceiving gender and therefore feminism in indigenous contexts. Gender does and does not exist. Gender does exist as a colonial development—an imposition of typical male and female roles with males exercising political and therefore public power and females exerting only private power in domestic contexts. This strict definition of gender cannot be said to exist, however, in more accurate and culturally aware readings where the responsibility of protecting land and family resides holistically with women. Trask’s example importantly conveys this indigenous-knowledge-systems reading as living and enacted—an embodied knowledge—

that can and does occur in contemporary settings—not an imagined, historical, authentic belief system alone. This impulse is centrally characterized as a communal imperative.

The communal-individualistic variable in feminist discourses is exposed in a similar critique by Frédérique Apffel-Marglin and Loyda Sanchez's discussion of developmentalist feminism in Bolivia. Their analysis interrogates the state agenda that promotes birth control for indigenous women under the rubric of self-determination. Here, the concept of a self apart from the community or the land is a misreading of indigenous realities:

The world for which women are being prepared is emphatically not that of their campesino native communities. They are being prepared to be individuals and citizens with their autonomous access to “resources,” decision-making, services, education, their bodies, etc. . . . The State uses a developmental feminist discourse to create individual female citizens. Such a discursive move is at once creative and destructive; the female individual citizen emerges from the destruction of the *comunera* and of her world. (Apffel-Marglin and Sanchez 2002, 6)

This transnational perspective demonstrates that the concept of gender is not only a separate and inaccurate reading of indigenous worldviews, but gender as an imposition of individualism actually destroys a communalistic indigenous life. A feminist perspective can be said to then dangerously replace the ability to enact—to embody—an indigenous world. This prohibition problematically impacts the survival of indigenous peoples, attacking as it does the reproductive ability of women to produce a future generation.

Apffel-Marglin and Sanchez continue their essay by interrogating essentialist notions of the body and gender, concluding, “the term ‘gender’ (*género* in Spanish) has forced itself on many Andean peasant communities . . .” (19).

The unicity of the biological body is taken by developmentalist feminists as a universal given, thus holding constant the correlation between an unchangeable biological body and a variable socio/cultural “gender” (the sex/gender differentiation). Although “gender” is recognized as variable across time and place, what is not variable is gender's anchoring in a universally given biological body and with it the notion that gender is something that characterizes individual human men and

women. . . . When deployed by developmentalist feminism in an Andean context it becomes a (neo)colonialist move. (17–18).

So while individualism may be clearly demarcated as a foil of indigenous knowledge systems (defined variously as communal or nationalistic), gender as a variable continues as a marked, but not explicitly demarcated reference. In other words, gender has multiple and contradictory referents; the term may be dismissed as not accurately representing indigenous cosmologies (such as the notion of the body discussed by Apffel-Marglin and Sanchez) or variously assigned utility in charting a colonial trajectory (Trask's discussion of nationhood); as an overarching frame of reference, however, gender serves to obscure rather than clarify. A holistic and nuanced worldview as described by these authors emerges as having more utilitarian and theoretical worth than the over-determined connotations of gender referenced in standard feminist discourses.

One manner in which we might conceptualize these divergent readings (gender as a product of colonialism and gender as an inaccurate reading of complementarity) is a temporal approach. As Trask described in pre- and post-statehood Hawaii, can a meaningful analysis emerge from interrogating historically situated frames of reference? Specifically, what utility does the notion of social change hold for uncovering possible forms of indigenous feminist orientations? Does a call to pre-colonialization norms (or pre-World War II, in Emerson's example) provide more clarity?

The concept of change in many social-justice movements indicates a type of linear progress whereby tradition is viewed negatively. How many times have we heard of progressive politics as social-change movements? Yet, if we start from the standpoint of marginalized communities of women, as Mohanty suggests, then change in the Native American context would most often connote assimilation; assimilation by boarding-school practices, assimilation by conversion, assimilation by forced relocation to cities. The genocide of Native North America was accomplished by forced rejection and cessation of traditional religions, economies, languages, arts, social customs, child-rearing practices, and politics, rendering the rhetoric of change suspect.

For example, Louise Lamphere's 1989 article "Historical and Regional Variability in Navajo Women's Roles" indicates that Navajo men's and women's roles changed drastically with the influx of capitalism (Lamphere

1989). The sexual division of labor was altered under an enforced wage-system economy, with wage labor in the immediate postwar period being generally male-dominated. Lamphere notes how various residence patterns established under government programs may negatively impact the ability of women to engage in female exchange networks, an important indicator of Navajo women's agency.

Conflicting ideas of gender hierarchies, social change, and the constitution of community are often encapsulated in the comparative ideology of Western and indigenous traits. Classically, under this rubric, feminism is identified as a Western conceptual framework due to its emphasis on individual change and agency as well as its often ahistorical orientation. The variables of history, time, and, most importantly, community must be considered primary if an indigenous feminist analysis is to find relevance. Consider for example, Emerson's passage below that illustrates how traditional gendered orientation enables collective response.

NM: WHAT is an issue that you have to address in your work because you're a woman? Are there things that come up that are unique for you, that you have to negotiate?

GE: Time, I think time. I think time on women, women's time is owned by others. You're not, you don't belong to yourself. You belong to your family, your clan, your mother, your parents, your relations. In Navajo, it's even stronger, that sensibility of belonging to a community of relations, clan, family. They all have demands on you and you have to respond if you want to maintain your place in that social fabric. If you want to be honored and respected, you have to respect others, too. And part of respecting others is giving up your time. Right? (Emerson 2002)

Emerson demonstrates the centrality of an embodied knowledge—a lived and experienced reference that has utility and applicability. This engaged site of knowledge is not an abstracted ahistorical framework, but is an enacted knowledge. It is, in Green's words cited earlier, a form of testimony by doing. For Roxanne Swentzell, it is about embracing "the now." Santa Clara artist Nora Naranjo-Morse (sister of Tessie Naranjo) similarly describes how a woman's responsibility enhances her grounding as a tribal person:

I come from Pueblo people who still have an ideology of community and what community does. Because of the choices I have made, I live on the

periphery. I don't know if the people who live in the community understand that I am learning how to be a contemporary Native woman. What they do understand is that I make really good chili. And that I had not one, but two children. To be a mother, a nurturer, is how I'm valued by my people. It has nothing to do with what you've achieved in the outside world, or what your name is. When my son was dancing for the Deer Dance, I made a whole feast where I fed about one hundred people. I felt I was a very important person—even though I was slaving over the stove. Maybe feminists would deem this a step backwards, but I had a role in my community. I was happy because I was nourishing my son through his spiritual journey, and, on a different level, I was being nourished through his dance and his energy. (Naranjo-Morse 1998, 86)

In what ways has a gendered experience of change, place, and belonging informed Native women's experiences in the arts specifically? These narratives help theorize the practice of the arts as a component of indigenous knowledge systems and specifically offer possible readings for indigenous feminist ideologies. This essay has suggested that although various forms of feminist approaches to indigenous lives have been unevenly applied over time, feminist perspectives are not altogether irrelevant. Central feminist paradigms of intersectionality and complementarity provide useful constructs for interpreting diffuse power dynamics in Native contexts. Specific to this study, the arts provide a channel for assessing modes of embodied knowledges and communal values. A gendered personhood in these contexts is not separate from, but may also be essential to, conveying a holistic, complex framework of indigenous knowledge construction. As in Naranjo's opening statement "My community is female. My culture is female. I'm female. My art making is female. Everything is female," a totality reading of gender encompassed within a larger knowledge system can be altogether different, but parallel to the equally materially constructed application of gender as a product of colonialism. This historicized deconstruction of unique knowledge fields exists alongside and in concurrence with indigenous frames of reference. Thus, colonized genders as well as more culturally appropriate gendered feminisms may concurrently be at play in feminist discourses, confounding discussions and possible rapprochements of American Indian Studies and feminist discourses. The weighty variable that must be attended to is

the possibility that one frame of reference may be premised on the marginalization or even destruction of the other. The field of contemporary arts serves as a useful platform for considering these intersections of indigeneity and feminisms.

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NOTES

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2. I was fortunate to be chosen as a Future of Minority Studies fellow for the 2005 summer institute “Feminist Identities, Global Struggles,” taught by Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Anna Julia Cooper, professor of women’s studies and English, Spelman College, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, professor of women’s studies and the Dean’s Professor of the Humanities, Syracuse University. I am grateful to the instructors, guest presenters, and the other participants for the many inspirational conversations that emerged in that setting.
3. However, this marginalization is now more often contested. Note the recent conference and proceedings in Canada that resulted in Green 2007.
4. Formal apologies as a mechanism of dispute resolution have been utilized in other circumstances where historical oppressions have occurred. See the Kevin Gover (Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs Department of the Interior) apology at the ceremony acknowledging the 175th anniversary of the establishment of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, September 8, 2000: <http://www.tahtonka.com/apology.html> (accessed May 12, 2009).

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