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Just as sovereignty cannot be granted but must be recognized as an inherent right to self-determination, so Indian feminism must also be recognized as powerful in its own terms, in its own right.

—Kate Shanley

This essay focuses on the evolution of my classes on Native women and feminism, as well as my personal journey as an indigenous feminist. First, I must mention several academics who impacted my thinking regarding indigenous/feminism. Early in my academic career, I was heavily influenced by the writings of three Native academics: Beatrice Medicine (Lakota), Kate Shanley (Assiniboine), and Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna). Most importantly, I was deeply influenced by my mother, Opal Swaney Cajune. Each scholar added a piece to the definition and practice of feminism for and about Native people.

Beatrice Medicine

Someone who lived comfortably in both urban and reservation worlds was the late Beatrice Medicine. Her vita, located in the appendix in her
last book, published in 2001, reveals that she was a charter member of the American Indian Women’s Service League in Seattle in 1954. This was in-the-trenches activist feminist work. Medicine began the academic exploration of the roles of Native women in the 1960s. I began reading her work in the 1970s. Way ahead of the game, by 1974 Medicine was instructing a class on Native women.

I had the good fortune to meet Medicine in 1979 in Portland, Oregon. However, I was horrified when a Native man, in his lurch to introduce us, told her with great disdain that I was a “feminist.” In the mistaken belief that she would express disapproval, he was shocked when she announced that she was a feminist, too. In front of a large audience, she took my hand and warmly greeted me—feminist to feminist. She was the first powerfully out-feminist Native academic that I met. This brief encounter influenced me tremendously. Throughout the years, our paths would cross at conferences, and she always remembered me and was extremely supportive of my work.

Her work is important to indigenous/feminism because most of the early studies on Native women were anthropological, and because Medicine was an anthropologist, although she understood the discipline through the lens of a Native woman. I was drawn to her work because of who she was as a Native woman, and I was interested in culture conceptually, my discipline, sociology, did not effectively deal with culture. Her groundbreaking essay on “Warrior Women” (manly hearted women) and sex roles was published in *The Hidden Half* in 1983. This essay counters the existing negative stereotypes about Native women. Moreover, she provides excellent examples of role-flexibility and gender variability. Medicine presents a new image, one of strong and capable Native women, although she did not specifically define “feminism.” Not only did the anthology *The Hidden Half* provide a valuable text for my class, but Medicine’s work on Native women fed my soul and piqued my interest in ethnography as a method. Moreover, I began to use the notion of role and status as she conceptualized it.

**Kate Shanley**

I was greatly influenced by Kate Shanley, not through a body of work but by a single thought-provoking essay published in 1984, titled "Thoughts on Indian Feminism." Raised on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation in Montana, she was thoroughly versed in the realities of reservation life. Shanley, who brazenly calls herself a feminist in the essay, argues that many Native women misunderstand feminism and, therefore, do not want to be associated with a white woman’s movement. Then she bravely asks: Does being a feminist make her less Indian?

In her essay, Shanley outlines issues that all women encounter—for example, equal pay, children’s health and welfare, reproductive rights,
and domestic violence. However, the important difference between Native women and other women, according to Shanley, is that we promote tribal sovereignty. She continues:

Thus, the Indian women’s movement seeks equality in two ways that do not concern mainstream women: (1) on the individual level, the Indian woman struggles to promote the survival of a social structure whose organizational principles represent notions of family different from those of the mainstream; and (2) on the societal level, the People seek sovereignty as a people in order to maintain a vital legal and spiritual connection to the land, in order to survive as a people.7

This was the first definition of Indian feminism that I encountered. I was empowered by her thoughts that “feminism” has a special meaning for Native women because, as indigenous people, we are concerned with issues of sovereignty.

Recognizing that there is no single woman’s movement, Shanley believes that diversity is beneficial and powerful, and that there are and should be many strands of feminism. She says, “Just as sovereignty cannot be granted but must be recognized as an inherent right to self-determination, so Indian feminism must also be recognized as powerful in its own terms, in its own right.”8 As a Native feminist, I was encouraged by her words. This essay was immediately added to my reading packet.

**PAULA GUNN ALLEN**

The same year that I read Kate Shanley’s essay on Indian feminism, Paula Gunn Allen published her essay “Who Is Your Mother? Red Roots of White Feminism.”9 Allen’s thesis, albeit romanticized, is that Native peoples are traditionally feminist and now is the time to reclaim that belief. After all, it would become a part of our decolonizing efforts. Most important to me was the fact that Allen was not afraid to call herself a feminist. Like Shanley, she didn’t feel as though she betrayed her Native community and the label did not make her any less Indian.

Allen was also one of the first Native women to publicly discuss violence in Native communities. In 1985, she published an essay, “Violence and the American Indian Woman,” which appeared in a short-lived publication.10 In this paper, she discusses racism and the “dynamics of Indian hating.”11 She connects this dynamic with self-hate and media images and launches into a discussion of violence against Native women. For me, this was the beginning of an ongoing dialogue about violence in Native communities.

In 1986, Allen’s book *The Sacred Hoop* was published.12 This was a substantial collection of boldly feminist essays. Part of its importance is
that she defines her approach as “tribal-feminism” or “feminist-tribalism.” Allen further explains that both terms work: “If I am dealing with feminism, I approach it from a strongly tribal posture, and when I am dealing with American Indian literature, history, culture, or philosophy I approach it from a strongly feminist one.” Allen fully recognizes that not all Native women are happy with a white feminist analysis. Some of this, she believes, is because Native women are ill informed about the larger issues of feminism, sexism within their communities, and white racism.

Allen’s work was cutting-edge, and I found her early work thoroughly liberating for me as a reservation Indian woman. Her words made me think of the women in my family and reservation community who were feminists and my heroes, such as my grandmother, mother, and sisters. I began to rethink the notion of feminism. I found Allen’s idea of tribal-feminism/feminist-tribalism empowering. Her book immediately became a primary text in my class on Native women.

**MY MOTHER, OPAL CAJUNE**

As I think about the journey of my life, my mother has greatly influenced my work and my conceptual understandings of feminism. She is, without a doubt, the strongest and wisest person I have known. A graceful and beautiful woman, who is a natural intellectual, she wrote about the changes for Native women over the past one hundred years:

In contemplating the affects of change on Indian women over this time period, I had to think about the women in my family. I call them women of courage. A woman of courage was one who persevered under sometimes terrible conditions, who spent her life caring for others, and who brought love and compassion into other people’s lives. They possessed great strength of spirit and did not easily give in to hatred or anger.

My mother continues her story, saying that she recognizes these characteristics in our female relatives:

My great-grandmothers and grandmother all lived during the time of the so-called “Indian Wars” or “Indian up-risings” (an interesting term used in those days). What they actually lived through was being dispossessed of their ancestral homelands and land both in the Bitterroot and the Nez Perce country. This was a time of great change accompanied by grief, sorrow and homesickness that affected whole tribes of people, not just individual families.
Discussing the changes she has witnessed, she stated that with the coming of white people we, the Salish, were made to feel inferior, probably for the first time in our lives:

Great efforts were made by government employees and missionaries to teach them the English language creating the idea that their language was inferior. They were encouraged to change their dress. There was a saying when a young adult returned from boarding school and reverted to native dress: “she has gone back to the blanket.” This was a remark of contempt for native dress. Women were encouraged to cut their hair. Boarding school children had their hair cut as a matter of course. Adults could not leave the reservation without permission or lease their own land and collect the rent. Children were rounded up and sent far-off to boarding school, some as young as six years of age. There were even cases of marriages arranged for Indian women with white men. These marriages were arranged by the Ursuline nuns in the mistaken belief that they were doing the native women a favor.16

Discussing the changes she has seen for herself and her daughters, my mother says:

We are now encouraged to learn and speak our own language; we can wear native dress whenever we please and wear our hair in braids; and children are not arbitrarily taken off to boarding schools. I can lease my own land without the BIA Superintendent’s permission and collect the rent myself without having the funds deposited in a special account and dispersed by the Superintendent according to a volume of regulations spelling out how and when I can spend the money. I can travel where I please.17

These four brilliant women have played a profound role in my life. They embody indigenous feminism, each in different ways, nonetheless equally important. Moreover, they provide a spirit that allows me to persevere.

**PERSONAL JOURNEY**

Feminism is also a personal journey. My journey began the moment I was born. I am one of six daughters raised predominately by a mother and grandmother in an extended family on the Flathead Indian Reservation in Montana. We were raised to be strong women.
I initially became active in the women’s movement at the University of Montana in 1972, thanks to a good friend, Diane Sands. In that year, I was a single mother of a two-year-old son and on welfare. I was desperately poor and was beginning to wrestle with the fact that I had been sexually abused as a child, and violently victimized as a teenager and young adult.

Yearning for connections with other Native women, as a young feminist I attended the first national conference on Native women, sponsored by the Ohoyo Resource Center. The published proceedings of such a conference, held in 1981, included workshops and presentations on the following topics: stereotyping, networking, accessing education, role model administrators, roles of Indian women, and a talk on Indian feminism by a white woman. I remember thinking that the conferences seemed very assimilationist. I also felt out-of-place as a reservation woman—like an ignored, poor relative. I was not the only one who felt this way and recall vividly how, at a conference in Seattle, noted activist Janet McCloud chastised the well-dressed, acculturated, urban Indian women. There was clearly a split (actually, many divisions, including class) between the reservation and the urban Indian women. I imagined that we defined feminism differently, too.

**PERSONALIZING THE EARLY CLASSES**

Elaine Gilham Clayborn developed a class on Native women at the University of Montana in the fall of 1981. I began teaching this class in the spring of 1982. There were many interested students, but most of them were Native women. At that time, there were virtually no readings for me to assign. I used the romanticized book *Daughters of the Earth* and put together a reader of early ethnographies. The readings were all problematic, but I assigned them so that the class could critique them. I also encouraged the students to do research on women in their communities. The students were really interested in the topic. However, most of the Native men in the class felt threatened, and they appeared to be threatened during all the years I taught that class. Silence, secrecy, and hiding are deeply entrenched habits in many communities. Hence, these early explorations were both painful and necessary.

During this time, I was also teaching a class on images of Natives in the cinema and used Robert Berkhofer’s book *The White Man’s Indian* as a primary text. Berkhofer’s premise, that images of Natives are connected in complex ways to federal policy, guided my thinking about the Native women class. I began to incorporate images and stereotypes of Native women into the curriculum.

The early classes were filled with anthropological, and eventually sociological, literature—specifically, lectures on intersectionality (race/ethnicity, gender, class, and nationhood). My lectures are always guided
by Robert Blauner’s theory of colonialism, along with the work of Frantz Fanon and Albert Memmi.22 In these early pedagogical efforts, and my struggle to find my voice as a Native feminist, I found a common thread: The especially useful readings were those that reflected a deep understanding of the processes of colonialism and racism, and their effects upon Native people—hence my reliance on theories of colonialism.

As I think about my classes now, I am appreciative for the available literature and wonderful transnational scholarship.23 I find myself grateful, too, for the early scholars who have influenced us all. Without their work, my early classes would not have been possible.

In the early 1980s, I also organized the syllabus around my experiences of a life filled with violence. It became a very empowering class for me to teach. By the time I was teaching it in the late 1980s, I had organized retreats and enlisted the help of female counselors to aid in a healing process. Issues of violent victimization would surface, especially the violence of boarding schools. No one was openly talking about boarding schools at that time.24 In these retreats, and in the class, the women began to understand how this violence had impacted who they were, as well as how they had learned (or not learned) how to parent. These retreats were for Native women only; white women expressed that they felt left out and Native men expressed that they felt threatened. I was emotionally overwhelmed by this racism and sexism.

In the 1980s, I began giving presentations to various reservation communities about the “f” word: feminism. These were greatly appreciated on all reservations. The women yearned to speak of violence and sexism in their respective communities. This notion of feminism was grassroots, in-the-trenches, and activist.

While Native women were ready to dialogue about sexism, they were not ready to air their dirty laundry in the white women’s world. During this time period, Native women were fiercely protective of Native men, which must be viewed in the context of colonialism. Native women were not about to turn their men over to a white criminal justice system. Consequently, issues of violence were shrouded in silence. This reality made for difficult conversations. Violence is still very prevalent in Native communities, but when I was a young adult it was far worse. Remember that, at least where I’m from, if a woman had black eyes, it was referred to as “Indian love.” In fact, the violence was so normalized that no one from those reservations could speak to the issues; it was imperative that an outsider address issues of violence. I would go to several reservations in Montana and Oregon and talk about domestic violence and rape, although at that time I couldn’t use the word “rape,” because I was coming to terms with my own sexual abuse history. And, because I did speak out, I was negatively labeled.

Feminism is very empowering at its core, and we Native feminists in Montana became a power to be reckoned with. We would, with great
glee, talk about the “f” word. It was like a secret society. Being called a feminist in the Native community was not a positive thing; that’s when we started calling feminism/feminist the “f” word. Part of my strategy in calling myself a feminist was that I wanted to build a bridge with white women, who were doing great things. I wanted to be part of the larger women’s movement, even though I felt the movement was racist. However, racism was everywhere and I considered that a given.

Building a bridge with Euroamerican feminists remains difficult. Many of the public profile white feminists early in my career were anti-Indian. For one, they had very little understanding of tribal sovereignty or the realities of racism. Another example is that, the conferences they organized had little to do with our lives as Native women. In 1982, I was asked to arrange several panels of Native women for a conference organized by white women. The conference organizers gave us a list of “important” topics. It was a source of strength for us when I told them we would set our own agenda. We talked about issues important to us and the sessions were well-attended. To my knowledge, that was the first time white women invited Native women to an event in Montana and recognized us. It was truly memorable. The next time that happened was in 1989 at Northern Montana State College, and I was asked to keynote, an earthshaking event. Many women from nearby reservations came and it was a wonderful experience.

Today, challenges still remain but there have been important changes. For one, domestic violence programs are now in Native communities. These institutions are a result of Native feminist struggles. People dialogue more about issues of violence, which was difficult to do in the past. Moreover, I think feminist efforts contributed to the resurrection of various Native women’s societies. As well, we are beginning to hear the stories of brave women from our communities. Partially because of feminism, women’s stories and songs from my community are returning.25

WHAT IS FEMINISM?
WHAT IS TRANSNATIONAL FEMINISM?

As a reality, feminism remains in transition and fragile. It is clear that there are varying definitions of feminism: definitions that suit white women from the first, second, and third wave of the women’s movement; definitions created by those who aren’t white—for example, womanism; and definitions that supposedly fit the underprivileged, although they are written by privileged academics. There are black feminism, liberal feminism, radical feminism, eco-feminism, postcolonial/postmodern feminism, social feminism, Chicana feminism, state feminism, feminist fundamentalism, global/international feminism, and finally transnational feminism.

What feminism is (and is not) has been variously defined throughout time, and by different racial/ethnic groups. Since the 1970s, I have
traversed and managed the different definitions of feminism. I continue to strive to make sense of them.

It is important to note that people maintain power and control over new terminology. The new buzzword in women's studies is *transnational feminism*. In 1995, Deniz Dandiyoti stated that transnational feminism is the activism of various groups of women, whom mainstream Western feminist theory and practices traditionally marginalized, which directed feminist attention toward power difference rooted in the structures of race, culture, class, histories of colonization and migration, sexuality, and so on. While this challenge to universal feminism has enabled more contextualized analyses of women's lives and opened new spaces for coalition building, it has unsettled traditional feminist demands for gender equality that were based on developmentalist and modernization discourses.26

In 2003, Eliza Noh added another dimension to the definition and warned:

The adoption of the “post-” and “trans-” by feminism may represent an attempt not only to separate imperial feminism of old from a supposedly new and improved, more globally sensitive feminism, but to create artificially a break between the modern days of empires and the days of consolidating neo-empires. The prefixes “trans-” and “post-” are semantic smoke screens, erasing as if by magic the contemporary pervasiveness of coloniality from discourses on modernity and nationalism, all the while colonial projects rigorously persevere and expand in astonishingly flexible ways.27

As we continue to experience shifting definitions and terminology, I am reminded that complex terminology can be devoid of meaning. In academia, terminology can be used to exclude and disempower various groups. Obviously, this is damaging to indigenous people who struggle to maintain their sovereign powers. Any ideas about transnational feminism must take into account the perseverance of colonialism for indigenous women.

**INDIAN PEOPLES ARE NATIONS**

Native nations have a nation-to-nation relationship with each other, the United States, and other countries. We are transnational by
definition because we are nations. Native scholar Renya Ramirez instructs us that her definition includes reservation and non-reservation Natives:

I use the term transnationalism to emphasize that many Native Americans living away from their tribal land bases as part of the Native American diaspora nonetheless maintain connections with tribal communities or important senses of tribal identity. We urban Indians are often not living within the physical boundaries of our tribal nations and must constantly interact with U.S. institutions, such as public schools and legal institutions.29

Furthering her definition of transnational, and illustrating the complexities, Rameriz writes:

I use the term transnational because it not only accentuates Native peoples’ special status in relationship to the nation-state, but also suggests an experience of living at the interstice of various cultural and political communities. Rather than assuming that urban Indians progressively lose a sense of their tribal identity and become closer to ethnics or other minorities, the term transnational highlights their maintenance of tribal identities, even if they are not officially enrolled or federally acknowledged.30

The discipline of women’s studies is experiencing tension regarding relationships between various groups and the assortment of definitions, including the definition and practice of transnational feminism. Fortunately, the National Women’s Studies Association (NWSA) is confronting this head-on. It is noted in the NWSA’s recent call for proposals newsletter that the conference theme for next fall is titled “Difficult Dialogues.” This clearly reflects strain between feminists of color and white feminists. At the conference, one subject is the continued marginalization of feminists of color, another is intersectionality, and another is negotiating politics of memory. Yet another most important issue to me is reconceptualizing women’s studies within the notion of transnational feminism. Regarding the narrow conception that most women’s studies (WS) departments have of transnational feminism, the following points are noted:

- What does it mean to position the field of WS and feminist scholarship within a transnational frame, currently and historically?
• How do globalization and neoliberal politics manifest within the academy and within feminist theories and practices, presently and historically?
• Does a focus on transnational feminism sometimes operate as a means to evade or ignore more local issues of inequality and oppression, particularly when it comes to race?
• How does thinking about the transnational within the local (e.g., indigenous sovereignty, immigrant communities, migrant politics) shift some key questions, frameworks, methods, and theories in WS?
• What are some challenges of transnational work in WS? For example, how does Western hegemony continue to impact or impede cross-cultural feminist alliance? Whose notions of feminism, of feminist theory, and of feminist subjectivity remain operative?

This is vital to me, of course, because the examination of colonial relationships and issues of indigenous sovereignty are included. While we are encouraged to think globally, many times it is at the expense of the local issues and the indigenous peoples and their problems. I believe that it is imperative to take note of the indigenous peoples of the Americas and privilege their voices.

CONCLUSION

As we are reminded of the tension between feminists of color and Euroamerican feminists, this past year an important question surfaced among feminist bloggers: Must women of color renounce feminism in order for racism to be dealt with effectively by white women? This question reminds us of the fragility of feminist sisterhood and the pervasiveness of racism in the United States.

My feelings on the topic are stated best by blogger Viva La Feminista, when asked why she keeps coming back to feminism despite the racism:

It’s my home. Despite its flaws, calling myself a feminist is the truth. Each movement has its own devils to wrestle with—but that is an individual thing. Feminism the philosophy, transcends the bullshit and comforts me.

And I refuse to let racism define feminism for me. I refuse to be run out of the movement. I refuse to let racists have total access to the soapbox, even if their soapboxes are larger, cooler, and get more ears. I refuse to be silenced….
And honestly... if I left feminism, I don’t know how I would survive, where I could go, because seriously, feminism frames almost everything in my life. I do not see the world thru a feminist or gender lens, I see it thru a feminist eye implant. It’s there and can’t be removed.32

The heart and soul of my feminism remains the promotion of tribal sovereignty and the empowerment of women. However, we cannot afford to privilege nationhood and race over gender. Furthermore, Native women remain marginalized within the larger women’s movement and the discipline of women’s studies. This is partly due to Native women rejecting what they see as a white women’s movement and studies. However, I also argue that to reject feminism completely is dangerous. Our larger sovereignty movement cannot omit issues of gender.

My notion of indigenous/feminism seeks to empower communities. It includes female, male, and other genders. My indigenous/feminism privileges storytelling as a way to decolonize and empower our communities. Let the words of my sister, Julie Cajune, instruct on the importance and power of storytelling:

Much of my life has been spent searching for stories to make meaning of who I am and how this world came to be. It has also been through story that I learned about whom my family is and their place in the world.... Stories are such an important part of my life that I remember recounting them silently in my mind when faced with personal difficulties. These stories that I repeated in mind and heart were often in the voice of my mother. She repeated family history and reminded her daughters always of the goodness and grace of the older generations of their family. These stories carried me through adolescence and teenage identity. These stories continue to instruct me today of the generational privilege and responsibility I have as an Indian person and tribal member.33

While there is much work to be done, there has also been great progress. This growth has occurred because of courageous women. We must continue to work in ways that challenge prevailing attitudes and rigid institutions. We must continue to define what Native feminism might mean in our families, communities, and personal lives.
NOTES

1 Jaye Sablan, a graduate student in women studies at the University of Washington, suggested that I include a slash (/) between indigenous and feminism. The slash is to denote the various tensions (in theory and practice) between indigenous/feminists and Euroamerican feminists. Indigenous/feminism is also a personal journey, hence, properly it is indigenous/feminisms. As well, there is not one truth, consequently, there is not one feminism. I also want to thank the students from my class autumn quarter of 2008, Reading Native Women’s Lives, for their help in conceptualizing a course on indigenous/feminisms.

2 Beatrice Medicine, Learning to Be an Anthropologist and Remaining “Native” (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001).


7 Ibid., 214, emphasis in original.

8 Ibid., 215.


11 Ibid., n.p.


13 Ibid., 222.


15 Ibid.

16 Ibid., 45.

17 Ibid., 46.

18 Ohoyo Research Center Staff (Owannah Anderson, Director), Words of Today’s American Indian Women: Ohoyo Makachi (Wichita Falls, Tex.: Ohoyo Resource Center, 1981). For more information on these conferences, see the following publications: Ohoyo Research Center Staff (Owannah Anderson, Director), Ohoyo Ikhana: A Bibliography of American Indian–Alaska Native Curriculum Materials (Wichita Falls, Tex.: Ohoyo Resource Center, 1982), and Ohoyo Research Center Staff (Owannah Anderson, Director),
NOTES


25 Cajune, Heart of the Bitterroot. Many of the stories on this CD are written by poet Jennifer Greene (Salish).


28 For example, see David Wilkins, American Indian Politics and the American Political System (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007).


