Learning across Differences: Native and Ethnic Studies Feminisms

Renya K. Ramirez

Some colleagues—who are members of Native studies departments—tell me I occupy a precarious and vexed position as part of the project and field of American studies. They argue that my living and breathing within an interdisciplinary space weakens my ability to theorize Native studies from uniquely indigenous perspectives. They tell me the goal of American studies is inconsistent with the objectives of Native American studies, because indigenous peoples occupy such an exceptional position vis-à-vis the U.S. nation-state. While I definitely agree that I must highlight our specificity by remaining in conversation with other indigenous feminists, at the same time my involvement in American studies has encouraged me to read other feminist scholars of color, contributing to my elaboration of Native feminisms. Even more important, I have grown as a Native feminist by interacting with other ethnic studies feminists at UC Santa Cruz and as part of my participation in the Gender and Cultural Citizenship Working Group.

Because American studies is an interdisciplinary project that stimulates discussion across various disciplines and different ethnic studies concentrations, I am open to reading the writings of women of color feminists in order to help me theorize Native feminist theory and praxis. Understanding why some African American women choose not to identify as feminists has helped me appreciate the similar choices of many indigenous women.1 Like some African American women, some Native women have considered sexism to be racially disruptive and divisive. Indeed, they sometimes assume that a feminist consciousness will automatically create tension between themselves and indigenous men. The sexism common in the American Indian Movement (AIM)—which is similar to the sexism in other people of color movements—could also influence how indigenous women relate to feminism. Native women frequently occupied subordinate positions within the movement, and were expected to satisfy and fulfill the sexual desires of AIM’s male leaders. Native women were, therefore, encouraged to believe that indigenous men should be in power.2 Native American women were taught in this sexist environment to support an indigenous nationalism that disregarded their own antisexist priorities.

©2008 The American Studies Association
Reading Patricia Zavella’s work about the importance of recognizing the diversity of the Chicana community in order to theorize Chicana feminisms encouraged me to think about the diversity of the indigenous community. Indigenous women come from divergent tribal nations and maintain different relations to their particular settler nation-states. Many reside on reserves in Canada, reservations in the United States, or villages in Mexico, and many others dwell away from their indigenous lands in rural or urban areas. In the United States, some are struggling to become federally acknowledged while others are already members of acknowledged tribes. These diverse circumstances shape how we as indigenous women relate to the world and make decisions about our needs. In fact, how we name ourselves differs in relationship to country of origin, geography, and tribal nation. In the United States, we often identify as “Native American” or “American Indian.” In Canada, indigenous women claim the terms “First Nations” or “aboriginal,” while in Mexico they identify as “indigenous.” Many other Native women name themselves only by tribal nation and reject using any of the above terms. I utilize the word Native in the term Native feminisms in order to concentrate on our similar experiences as indigenous women all over the Americas. But whether one utilizes “a tribal name,” “indigenous,” “Native,” “First Nations,” or another term, highlighting our heterogeneity is essential for appreciating our varied experiences as indigenous women. Indeed, similar to other women of color feminists, this diversity encourages me to argue for the development of multiple feminisms rather than a singular feminism.

In contrast, other indigenous women scholars do not engage with women of color feminists and, unfortunately, conflate feminism with white feminism. For example, in 1996 Haunani-Kay Trask argued that since feminism relates only to gender issues, it is not relevant to a Hawaiian nationalist struggle and is ultimately a white notion. She assumes feminism and white feminism are interchangeable terms, not discussing or recognizing feminist theory created by women of color. She writes:

I recognized that practicing feminism hampered organizing among my people in rural communities. Given our nationalist context, feminism appeared as just another haole [white] intrusion into a besieged Hawaiian world. Any exclusive focus on women neglected the historical oppression of all Hawaiians and the large force field of imperialism. Now that I was working among my people, I saw there were simply too many limitations in the scope of feminist theory and praxis. The feminism I had studied was just too white, too American.
Trask further argues that sovereignty is a more vital goal than political or educational equality with the men of her Hawaiian nation. In this way, she asserts that race, and indigenous nation are more important than gender issues.

Rather than assuming that a Native feminist consciousness is a white construct or that it automatically creates internal conflict, it should be viewed as advancing a critical and essential goal for indigenous scholars and communities to confront sexism. Moreover, Native scholars’ prioritizing of race and tribal nation over gender is a mistake, since sexism and racism oppress indigenous women at the same time.\(^9\) Sexism, therefore, becomes too frequently ignored in indigenous communities and scholarship.

In fact, my engagement with path-breaking work by and about U.S. women of color and Third World women has taught me the importance of emphasizing the intersectional relationship between race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and nation.\(^{10}\) These scholars’ critique of universalistic notions of womanhood and their discussion of the interlocking nature of various axes of exclusion have provided me with some of the most important scholarly insights in many years. Bringing intersectionality into my own work has helped me avoid the mistake of privileging one kind of exclusion over another, ultimately contributing to my theorizing of Native feminisms.

Black feminist Patricia Hill Collins has also contributed to my development as a Native feminist scholar. Her recognition of everyday black women as social theorists with standpoints of their own who can provide “new angles of vision” on social realities has encouraged me to view Native women activists as social analysts in their own right.\(^{11}\) Certainly, my assumption that Native women activists have valuable knowledge to contribute to Native feminist theory and praxis has been at the very core of my ethnographic research endeavor. I therefore view research participants not only as collaborators but also as producers of Native feminisms.

Being situated here at UC Santa Cruz, where I am in close contact with prominent women of color feminists, including Patricia Zavella, Olga Najera-Ramírez, Norma Klahn, Angela Davis, Aída Hurtado, and many others, has helped me develop into a Native feminist scholar. Many welcome me into their research clusters as part of the Chicano Latino Research Center and invite me to participate in their events. They are easily accessible and are always willing to comment on successive drafts of my essays. They not only assist in my development as a Native feminist, but also advise me through each step of the tenure process. Indeed, many have become valuable mentors.

Furthermore, my involvement in the Gender and Cultural Citizenship Working Group—including feminist ethnic studies scholars Kia Caldwell,
Kathleen Coll, Lok Siu, and Tracy Fisher—has been essential to my theorization of Native feminisms. Even though we work at different academic institutions around the country, we keep in regular phone and e-mail contact. In our often virtual Working Group space, I am able to share my ideas without fear. Their excellent knowledge of Chicana/Latina, Asian, and African American feminisms has helped me think through Native feminist concerns. Our dialogues, therefore, have been invaluable to my scholarly development as a Native feminist.

While I have learned a great deal from interacting with other ethnic studies feminists, my involvement with indigenous feminists—including Lee Maracle (Salish), Luana Ross (Salish), Kate Shanley (Assiniboine), Verna St. Denis (Cree/Metis), J. Kehaulani Kauanui (Kanaka Maoli), Jennifer Denetdale (Diné), and Andrea Smith (Cherokee)—has been particularly helpful and illuminating. My participation in a “Native Feminisms without Apology” symposium in which many of the above-mentioned indigenous feminists participated—held at the University of Illinois/Urbana-Champaign in April of 2006—contributed to my elaboration of Native feminisms. Native feminists’ work to engender tribal nationalism and sovereignty, for example, has been absolutely central to my discussions of Native feminisms. Indeed, I must always foreground the foundational concepts that are specific to indigenous peoples’ experience in the creation of Native feminist thought.

My involvement in American studies has deepened and complicated my Native feminist work. The discipline’s emphasis on interdisciplinarity and conversation between various ethnic studies concentrations has encouraged me to be in dialogue with women of color feminists, helping me theorize Native feminist theory and praxis. More importantly, my involvement with other ethnic studies feminists at UC Santa Cruz and as part of the Gender and Cultural Citizenship Working Group has contributed greatly to my development as a Native feminist scholar. At the end of the day, however, I must always remain in dialogue with other indigenous feminists. Otherwise, I could lose sight of our Native specificity as indigenous peoples.

Notes


4. It is important to note that indigenous women activists south of the U.S.-Mexico border also often reject the term feminisit.


8. T rask, “Feminism and Indigenous Hawaiian Nationalism,” 901.

