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Feminism and First Nations: Conflict or Concert?

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Introduction

This paper explores some of the reasons why First Nations women have resisted feminism: the historical insufficiency of feminist theory and practice to seriously address issues of women of colour; the failure of White feminists to acknowledge their role in the oppression of minority women; processes which White women and First Nation communities use to silence First Nation women who attempt to raise their issues; and the emergence of a separate simultaneous First Nations women's movement are explored.

This paper emerged from three feminists, two First Nations and one White woman, who wanted to explore whether mainstream feminism worked in conflict or in concert with First Nations women. Did feminism fit within a First Nation setting, and if not, what were the places of dissonance?

We began this exploration by considering the effects of colonialist oppression on First Nations people from a feminist perspective. We questioned whether the feminist movement acted as an assimilative strategy by absorbing First Nations women's issues into a mainstream, colonialist setting. Would the unique status of First Nations women be compromised for the more homogenic equality of all women, and could this be a reason why many First Nations women were resisting feminism?

To pursue the question of conflict and concert between feminism and First Nations women, we initiated a review of the existing literature, including the different schools of feminist thought (radical, socialist, and liberal). However, regardless of the "type" of feminism we encountered, few authors[1] incorporated a serious analysis of race.

We (the authors) had expected to finding substantiation of an integrated feminism that was inclusive of First Nations women. This assumption was not supported, and this had a significant impact upon our personal paradigms.

Our reflective dialogue helped to refocus our discussion to the examination of the conflict between feminism and First Nations women. We began to consider race in greater depth, and it altered our perspective of the feminist movement. Then, we became keenly aware of the multiple hierarchy of oppression, and were alerted to the exploitive dimension of feminism. Thus, we decided to explore three major phenomena in the relationship of feminism and First Nations women: the historical overview of the interconnection of race and gender; the silencing processes women of colour experience in addressing their issues; and the exploration of a simultaneous First Nations women's movement.

The 'Herstory' Imperative

The "herstory" of the contemporary women's movement (White feminism) did not include the struggles of women of colour within its chronology. The dominant women's movement did not advocate for the emancipation of all women — though this was seemingly part of its mandate. Historically, feminists have neither addressed minority women's issues, nor have they considered their own role in the oppression of minority women.

> Canadian feminist history has failed by and large to document the history of women of Colour. This can hardly be accidental, or the result of lack of information. It is part of the systematic pattern of exclusion of women of Colour from much of the feminist discourse and praxis.[2]

Early contemporary feminism, with its origins in the United States, was noticeably devoid of minority women's presence, and it appeared ignorant of the issue of race. Feminism emerged as a White middle class phenomena, though minority women were centrally involved in both the women's and the civil rights movements in America.[3] When minority women were considered, it was in the context of gender and not race. Consequently, their experiences were appropriated by the dominant movement into the feminist analysis without the incorporation of the race variable. As a result, the portrait of feminism had a white face.[4]

Occurring simultaneously with the early feminist movement was a minority women's movement, with a race and gender focus; however, it was not integrated into the published historical accounts of feminism. Furthermore, any dissemination of the early writings by women of colour was dependent upon the benevolence of White feminists for connections to journals and the press. For minority women, this created both pragmatic and political difficulties in publishing articles of their experience, and subsequently, the public knowledge of early feminist action by women of colour was minimal.[5] This initial lack of recognition for their work, and the neglect of their concerns by the mainstream feminist agenda, caused minority women to mistrust a movement which claimed to advocate for the rights of all women.

A historical analysis of women's work clearly illustrated the dilemma of 'herstory'. For the most part, the history of women's work has been examined within a gender analysis[6] and has largely ignored the context of race. The nature of domestic labour has been a frequent subject of analysis by feminist scholars, yet the same attention has not been given to the domestic labourers who were primarily minority women. Such narrow analysis highlights the White feminist movement's misunderstanding of the interlocking issue of race and gender in women's work.

While feminists advocated the freedom from burdensome tasks of domestic and/or institutional labour, they appeared unaware that their liberation required that these tasks be performed by women of colour. The experience of minority women in these low-level positions was not a priority of the feminist manifesto, and ironically, women of colour were the labour force which freed up time for White feminists to talk about women's emancipation. In many ways (tracing women's work) feminist scholars historically have failed to address how "race and gender emerge as socially constructed interlocking systems that shape the material conditions, identities, and consciousness of all women".[7]

As with feminist analysis of labour, which tended to exclude the race variable, there has been a parallel pattern in feminist practice. Integral to feminist practice has been the establishment of women-focused services. However, many of these feminist services have been slow to meet the needs of women of colour. For example, transition houses have not always been designed to effectively serve minority women. In Britain, Black women found that when they went to these houses, which were to offer safety, they were subjected to racial abuse and marginalization.[8] Consequently, there is a move to create services, such as transition homes, specifically for women of colour.[9] Such dilemmas reveal the hierarchial dynamics of oppression that racial minority women have had to confront in both feminist theory and practice. First Nations women have been marginalized in feminist theory just as they have been marginalized in feminist organizations.

In First Nations communities, there is an evident gender hierarchy as the men have the power to determine issues of priority. Concerns of family violence, sexual abuse and other "First Nations women's issues" appear secondary to constitutional entrenchment of self-government and land claims — issues brought to attention by a predominantly male leadership. It seems that the urgency of the day-to-day subsistence and care-taking needs for which First Nations women are taking responsibility, are not central on the First Nations political agenda. Sharon McIvor explains the dilemma of First Nations women:

> We as aboriginal women working in the field of aboriginal rights talk to our women, and when we ask, 'what do you think about aboriginal government?' the answer invariably is, 'I want to know how I am going to feed my children today . . . ' Until we get our people into a position where they don't have to worry about the basics of health of our children, and food for our families, and shelter for our families, it is very difficult to talk about representing our communities and self-government for our communities.[10]

If First Nations men do not recognize the parity of the concerns put forth by First Nations women, they will continue to silence the women and subjugate their experience. In one situation where First Nations women attracted public attention (the 1992 Charlottetown Accord), the attention was diverted from the substance of their concerns to, as a prominent male First Nations leader commented, 'our women' being influenced by those White feminists.[11] While First Nations women continue with the work that needs to be done, it is not without prickly encounters from others of their gender and their race.

It seems clear that First Nations women occupy the periphery in the women's movement and in their own community, as do other women of colour. Given this context, minority women (including First Nations) have had to develop their own movements to bring their concerns to the forefront.

The First Nations women's movement evolved primarily as a re- action to the *Indian Act*, which cast their struggle into both a race and gender context. While the *Indian Act* regulated all First Nations people, there were a number of sexist clauses which accentuated the sexual oppression of First Nations women. As Kathleen Jamieson[12] articulated, First Nations women experienced "multiple jeopardy": they were women, who were First Nations, facing White male governments, and male-dominated Native organizations. Because of such structural barriers during the late 1960s, First Nations women began to organize. Their concerns were fundamentally different from those of their White feminist counterparts, who were tackling issues of reproductive rights, divorce laws and equal pay for equal work.

The First Nations women's movement began from within the Homemakers Society which offered the opportunity for First Nations women to gather. The original mandate of the Homemakers was to "assist Indian women to acquire sound and approved practices for greater home efficiency".[13] At the Homemakers meetings, First Nations women could speak of the inequalities they faced as women and as "Indians", and as they spoke, a shift began to occur toward a more political agenda. The first Alberta Native Women's conference of 1968 was the catalyst for the First Nations women's movement. "It was the first time that the nature and extent of discrimination against Native women was brought to the attention of the Canadian public".[14]

The First Nations women's movement, as with the Black women's movement in the United States,[15] became a separate, simultaneous movement in relation to mainstream feminism. Both minority movements began from a different place, and were focused on different issues because their experiences were unique, and because they felt unwelcome in the dominant feminist movement. The construction of historic accounts of feminism, and the internal hierarchy has led women of colour to question: how could White women feel so "comfortable and natural" in an oppressive system.[16] Perhaps it is partly because, as an oppressed group, White women focused their attention to the oppressor (White men) and not to groups that the mainstream women's movement may be oppressing (women of colour). Nonetheless, what feminist scholars must understand is that the 'feminist herstory' is not the whole story. The development of the dominant feminist movement as a White cultural movement was not inclusive of minority women, and has been inappropriate because of its lack of relevancy to ethnicity. As Donovan explains:

> Another important aspect of the feminism articulated by women of colour is their concern to retain their racial and ethnic roots. In many cases this concern is manifested as a desire to preserve authentic women's traditions, to preserve the history and culture of their mother . . . A concern that the mother's culture remain alive and that its moral vision be at the foundation of any feminist change.[17]

Silencing

> No one of the feminists I taught with in those heydays of the discovery of patriarchy thought that "race and class" mattered . . . the shame and anger of the days when I sat among these women, being women together, tongue-tied, becoming smaller with my irrelevance.[18]

When First Nations women attempt to voice their issues or change their life circumstances, they are often stymied through various silencing processes. Both the dominant women's movement and the First Nations community

are responsible for some of the silencing of First Nations women, while some of their voices are self-silenced — a result of internalized oppression. The concept of chilly climate has been useful in describing women who enter male dominated environments. Being treated as though you do not matter creates a chilly climate, although this behaviour is very covert. The First Nations authors could identify with what it means to work in a chilly white climate, though it was difficult to describe due to the masking of incidents with humour, innuendo, politeness, and isolation. It is an increasingly frustrating experience as one is aware of being treated differently without concrete evidence to validate such feelings. In the context of feminism, being set apart and considered secondary, women of colour have often been relegated to the women's auxiliary of the women's movement.

Tokenism is another common technique of silencing. Being identified as the 'the on-call Indian', or the expert, silences one as a person and as a woman. It also acts to exclude and silence other First Nations women, because having a singular representative can be justification not to consult with other First Nations women. In feminist literature, tokenism occurs often as First Nations women's issues are tacked on to the primary discourse. As Brown noted, tokenizing is marginalizing:

> my point is that recognizing and even including difference is, even in and of itself, not enough. In fact, such recognition and inclusion may be precisely the way to avoid the challenges to reaffirm the very traditional stances women's history sees itself as challenging, and to write a good classical score silencing everyone else until the spotlight is on them but allowing no interplay throughout the composition.[19]

By controlling the feminist agenda, White women can manipulate the issues of minority women by considering only those which do not threaten the sisterhood myth. The universalizing concept of sisterhood, that all women experience the same oppression, negates minority women's unique experience.[20] It encourages denial of the internal oppression within the sisterhood where alternative ideas are deemed divisive.[21] The universalization of women's experience is contrary to tokenism, yet, ironically, the impact is the same. Glen argues against the "universalizing tendencies in feminist thought which leaves race unexplored in gender inquiries".[22]

First Nations male leaders have played a role in silencing First Nations women in several ways. The women who have made political statements contrary to the male agenda (Charlottetown Accord, Bill C-31) have been labelled as divisive to the First Nations cause, and were perceived as betraying their people. Parallel to mainstream politics, males have effectively silenced women through monopolizing the political leadership. In First Nations communities in British Columbia, 95 percent of the band councils are composed of men.[23] First Nations women are often told that once

self-government is achieved, their issues (poverty, family violence) will be addressed. This experience is similar to that of Black women in the United States during the fight for civil rights in 1964. While proposed civil rights legislation included provisions for race, Black women lobbied for gender issues to be included. Black leaders told the women to seize the opportunity to pass the bill promising that when civil rights were achieved gender issues could be advocated. Black women were accused of betraying the welfare of their race because they were critical of a bill which dealt only with race, and not with gender.[24]

Unfortunately, First Nations traditions have been used to "quiet the women" by prescribing that women should act and behave a certain way. During the Tobique women's fight for Bill C-31, the National Indian Brotherhood tried to disrupt their effort by saying that gender discrimination was part of the Indian tradition.[25] Because of their gender-based political action, their commitment and identification with their culture was attacked. What constitutes a First Nations women's traditional role is problematic as it must be considered in the context of contemporary society, and how that has shaped both the value and perception of women's traditional role in the First Nations community (e.g., the role of women in the fishery). An example of an overly simplistic understanding of First Nations women, their role both then and now, is an advertisement put out by the American Indian College Fund which has the caption "I'll never fight for women's rights." The explanation given is that traditional Navajo women have always had as much power and respect as Navajo men;[26] however, this does not consider the effect of 500 years of indoctrination by a predominantly White patriarchal system. As Sally Gaikezheyongai, an Ojibway women, explains:

> In the native communities, our men have been affected by colonialization. By that I mean the European cultures brought patriarchy, and inherent in patriarchy is a sexist attitude.[27]

The ad gives the message to modern women that if they disagree, or if they speak out, they are not being traditional — a silencing technique.

Internalized oppression is another factor of silencing. Because of the external forces mentioned, some minority women silence themselves. This can be for their own survival or for the greater good of the First Nations movement. For example, like the famous Hill-Thomas harassment trial, the First Nations women in the Saanich Peninsula in B.C. may have been initially afraid to speak out against male abusers of their own race, because of the potential to re-stigmatize the community and race.[28] Though both the First Nations women and Anita Hill eventually spoke out, the threat of re-stigmatizing the community or race was, no doubt, a consideration.[29]

First Nations women also silence themselves for various reasons including the internalization of racism.[30] The subtle reminders that one's contribution is devalued — "chilly climate" — is a significant factor in the self-silencing of women of colour. Yet, when women of colour are in a position of being heard, they may have to polish their words and play down their anger in the spirit of anti-racist education. It is not expedient to alienate potential supporters, both White women and men of colour, and often women of colour must compromise expression of personal feelings for political advantage — a silencing process. Bannerji speaks of an incident in a course which she taught on anti-racist education, where a young White woman makes a racist comment:

> My body feels tense and hot, I want to shout at her, just plain scream — "you fucking racist idiot", "you killer" — but I cannot . . . My anger seeking a release of name calling, a slap across the face, not this mediated rage. Of course I dissociate. My work and I part company. I am aware of doing violence to myself by choosing this pedagogic path.[31]

Conclusion

"Solidarity may be a goal but it is not a reality."[32] Feminist practice, without the theory or the label of feminism, seems one area of concert. Holistic traditional healing approaches among First Nations communities are in alignment with feminist principles of an integrated balanced approach to life, such as the personal and political, the emotional and intellectual, and the physical and spiritual.

There are positive signs within the dominant feminist movement as feminist scholars begin to seriously consider race and class as part of their gender analysis.[33] Increasingly, minority women writers are asking White feminists to consider their own race: "Why don't they move from the experience of sharing our pain to narrating the experience of inflicting it on us?"[34] The level of sincerity by White feminists to reflect on their race will determine the evolution of an inclusionary feminism where all women can see themselves in it.

> Feminism is the political theory and practice that struggles to free all women: women of colour, working-class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbian women, old women — as well as white, economically privileged, heterosexual women. Anything less than this vision of total freedom is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement.[35]

While much of the literature exemplifies the multiple jeopardy that First Nations women experience, and thus leads to some resentment, it is recognized that there are a multitude of issues to be examined and that

priorities for social change are necessary. Women of colour do not want feminists or the men of their culture to go away, it is not a "them or us", "our issues or their issues" concern. Rather the goal is to have access to the process that determines the priorities — to be a voice at the decision table. A part of creating this vision is recognizing that First Nations women are defining their own women's movement, and are reclaiming their own history. Feminists must recognize and accept the route whereby minority women choose to empower themselves.

Women of colour are concentrating on defining their own labels and are resisting being defined as "others" within the feminist movement. Accordingly, the ideas of feminism may be used in social work practice or community organizing without being identified as feminist. They resist the need to do so, and wonder at others' desire to corral their practice into the feminist literature. The Tobique women, who lobbied to change the *Indian Act*[36] did not wish to call themselves feminists; they were women "activists" who were concerned about housing conditions. The Guatemalan indigenous women saw their activism as distinct from the feminist movement.[37] Black women redefined themselves as the National Black Feminist Organization,[38] finding a need to route their efforts away from Black men and from White feminists, to name their own issues and experience. Women of colour alternative press publications focus on gender issues for women of colour in a forum that is unique to themselves, claiming the right to "set the record straight by defining our own reality instead of being theorized about."[39]

As women and racial minorities realize they do not have to be one to be allies, efforts can be put into moving on and resolving other issues. "We struggle together with Black men against racism, while we struggle with Black men about sexism."[40] Women need to respect that there are many paths and we do not need to agonize over them, we do not have to be identical. Feminists and First Nations have autonomous and yet connected struggles. The state of conflict and concert must be accepted, not as polarities, but an existential necessity, either of which can provide collaboration or oppression.

Race makes us separate but not always in ways we expect. It can create oppression and alliances. The theory of feminism, the social construction of race and gender interstruggle, leads to the conflict between feminism and First Nations. It is in the application of the theory, the real practice of feminism, where the concert can occur.

NOTES

1. For example, Lena Dominelli, "Race, Gender and Social Work," in M. Davies (ed.), *The Sociology of Social Work* (London: Routledge, 1991); Kathleen Jamieson, "Multiple Jeopardy: The Evolution of a Native Women's Movement," *Atlantis*, 4,2 (1979), pp. 157–178.

2. Linda Carty, "Women's Studies in Canada: A Discourse and Praxis of Exclusion," *Resources for Feminist Research*, 20,3/4 (1991), pp. 13.
3. Elsa Barkley Brown, "What Has Happened Here: The Politics of Difference in Women's History and Feminist Politics," *Feminist Studies* 18,2 (1992), pp. 295–312; Mark S. Hickman, "Black Women on the Edge," *Women and Language*, 12,1 (1990), pp. 5–14.
4. Maureen Honey, "So Far Away from Home: Minority Women Writers and the New Woman," *Women's Studies International Forum*, 15,4 (1992), pp. 473–485.
5. Ibid.
6. Anita Sheth and Amita Handa, "Politics, Identity and Organizing — A Jewel in the Frown: Striking Accord Between India/n Feminists," *Resources for Feminist Research*, 20,3/4 (1991), pp. 65–79.
7. Evelyn Nakano Glen, "From Servitude to Service Work: Historical Continuities in the Racial Division of Paid Reproductive Labor," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 18,1 (1992), p. 42.
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9. Sharlene Frank, *Family Violence in Aboriginal Communities: A First Nations Report* (Victoria: Ministry of Women's Equality, 1992).
10. Sharon McIvor's chapter in Frank Cassidy (ed.), *Aboriginal Self-Determination* (Lanntzville: Oolichan Books, 1991), p. 83.
11. Holly Nathan, "Nightmare of the Shadow People," *Times-Colonist* (July 27, 1992), A7.
12. Jamieson, "Multiple Jeopardy".
13. Ibid., p. 163.
14. Ibid., p. 164.
15. Hickman, "Black Women".
16. Himani Bannerji, "Racism, Sexism, Knowledge and the Academy — Re: Turning the Gaze," *Resources for Feminist Research* 20,3/4 (1991), pp. 5–11.
17. Josephine Donovan, *Feminist Theory: The Intellectual Traditions of American Feminism* (New York: Continuum Publications, 1988), p. 159.
18. Bannerji, "Racism", p. 8.
19. Brown, "What Has Happened Here", p. 298.
20. Hickman, "Black Women".
21. Brown, "What Has Happened Here".
22. Glen, "From Servitude", p. 31.
23. Susan Winkelaar, "First Nations Argues Best Way for Natives is Self-Government," *Times-Colonist* (August 14, 1992), A6.
24. Hickman, "Black Women".
25. Cheris Kramarae, "The Language of Multicultural Feminism," *Women and Language*, 12,1 (1990), pp. 15–18.
26. *Harpers Magazine*, Advertisement (February 1993), p. 81.

27. Mary Jankulak, "Hearing the Unheard: An Interview about Power, Oppression and the Native Community," *This Magazine*, 26,5 (1992), pp. 28–31.
28. Nathan, "Nightmare".
29. Brown, "What Has Happened Here"; Nathan, "Nightmare".
30. Sheth and Handa, "Politics".
31. Bannerji, "Racism", p. 7.
32. Kramarae, "The Language".
33. Dominelli, "Race, Gender".
34. Bannerji, "Racism", p. 10.
35. Barbara Smith, "Racism and Women's Studies," in Gloria Anzaldua (ed.), *Making Face, Making Soul: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Women of Color* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Foundation Books, 1990), p. 25.
36. Kramarae, "The Language".
37. Derrick Speirs, "Five Hundred Years After Columbus: Rigoberta Menchu Tells Her People's Story," *Sparerib Magazine* (October/November 1992), pp. 41–43.
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Round Up/Tour d'Horizon

Disabilities

Roy Hanes

Persons with Disabilities, Social Policy Research and the Need for Inclusion

Disability has become socially constructed as a medical category but it stems from a social-legal category found in English Poor Laws of 1601.[1] While the disability category has been a component of social welfare for many generations, disability receives minimal attention in social work education, research and policy analysis.

At a direct practice level most social work involvement with persons with disabilities is based on medical model criteria wherein persons with disabilities are treated as patients or clients who need to be fixed or cured. Rarely does social work practice go beyond a traditional focus of individual