# Indigenous Feminism Without Apology

Andrea Smith

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We often hear the mantra in indigenous communities that Native women aren't feminists. Supposedly, feminism is not needed because Native women were treated with respect prior to colonization. Thus, any Native woman who calls herself a feminist is often condemned as being "white."

However, when I started interviewing Native women organizers as part of a research project, I was surprised by how many communitybased activists were describing themselves as "feminists without apology." They were arguing that feminism is actually an indigenous concept that has been coopted by white women.

The fact that Native societies were egalitarian 500 years ago is not stopping women from being hit or abused now. For instance, in my years of antiviolence organizing, I would hear, "We can't worry about domestic violence; we must worry about survival issues first." But since Native women are the women most likely to be killed by domestic violence, they are clearly not surviving. So when we talk about survival of our nations, who are we including?

These Native feminists are challenging not only patriarchy within Native communities, but also white supremacy and colonialism within mainstream white feminism. That is, they're challenging why it is that white women get to define what feminism is.

## Decentering White Feminism

The feminist movement is generally periodized into the socalled first, second and third waves of feminism. In the United States, the first wave is characterized by the suffragette movement; the second wave is characterized by the formation of the National Organization for Women, abortion rights politics, and the fight for the Equal Rights Amendments. Suddenly, during the third wave of feminism, women of colour make an appearance to transform feminism into a multicultural movement.

This periodization situates white middleclass women as the central historical agents to which women of colour attach themselves. However, if we were to recognize the agency of indigenous women in an account of feminist history, we might begin with 1492 when Native women collectively resisted colonization. This would allow us to see that there are multiple feminist histories emerging from multiple communities of colour which intersect at points and diverge in others. This would not negate the contributions made by white feminists, but would decenter them from our historicizing and analysis.

Indigenous feminism thus centers anticolonial practice within its organizing. This is critical today when you have mainstream feminist groups supporting, for example, the US bombing of Afghanistan with the claim that this bombing will free women from the Taliban (apparently bombing women somehow liberates them).

## Challenging the State

Indigenous feminists are also challenging how we conceptualize indigenous sovereignty — it is not an addon to the heteronormative and patriarchal nationstate. Rather it challenges the nationstate system itself. Charles Colson, prominent Christian Right activist and founder of Prison

Fellowship, explains quite clearly the relationship between heteronormativity and the nationstate. In his view, samesex marriage leads directly to terrorism; the attack on the "natural moral order" of the heterosexual family "is like handing moral weapons of mass destruction to those who use America's decadence to recruit more snipers and hijackers and suicide bombers."

Similarly, the Christian Right World magazine opined that feminism contributed to the Abu Ghraib scandal by promoting women in the military. When women do not know their assigned role in the gender hierarchy, they become disoriented and abuse prisoners.

Implicit in this is analysis the understanding that heteropatriarchy is essential for the building of US empire. Patriarchy is the logic that naturalizes social hierarchy. Just as men are supposed to naturally dominate women on the basis of biology, so too should the social elites of a society naturally rule everyone else through a nationstate form of governance that is constructed through domination, violence, and control.

As Ann Burlein argues in Lift High the Cross, it may be a mistake to argue that the goal of Christian Right politics is to create a theocracy in the US. Rather, Christian Right politics work through the private family (which is coded as white, patriarchal, and middleclass) to create a "Christian America." She notes that the investment in the private family makes it difficult for people to invest in more public forms of social connection.

For example, more investment in the suburban private family means less funding for urban areas and Native reservations. The resulting social decay is then construed to be caused by deviance from the Christian family ideal rather than political and economic forces. As former head of the Christian Coalition Ralph Reed states: "The only true solution to crime is to restore the family," and "Family breakup causes poverty."

Unfortunately, as Navajo feminist scholar Jennifer Denetdale points out, the Native response to a heteronormative white, Christian America has often been an equally heteronormative Native nationalism. In her critique of the Navajo tribal council's passage of a ban on samesex marriage, Denetdale argues that Native nations are furthering a Christian Right agenda in the name of "Indian tradition."

This trend is equally apparent within racial justice struggles in other communities of colour. As Cathy Cohen contends, heteronormative sovereignty or racial justice struggles will effectively maintain rather than challenge colonialism and white supremacy because they are premised on a politics of secondary marginalization. The most elite class will further their aspirations on the backs of those most marginalized within the community.

Through this process of secondary marginalization, the national or racial justice struggle either implicitly or explicitly takes on a nationstate model as the end point of its struggle – a model in which the elites govern the rest through violence and domination, and exclude those who are not members of "the nation."

## National Liberation

Grassroots Native women, along with Native scholars such as Taiaiake Alfred and Craig Womack, are developing other models of nationhood. These articulations counter the frequent accusations that nationbuilding projects necessarily lead to a narrow identity politics based on ethnic cleansing and intolerance. This requires that a clear distinction be drawn between the project of national liberation, and that of nationstate building.

Progressive activists and scholars, while prepared to make critiques of the US and Canadian governments, are often not prepared to question their legitimacy. A case in point is the strategy of many racial justice organizations in the US or Canada, who have rallied against the increase in hate crimes since 9/11 under the banner, "We're American [or Canadian] too."

This allegiance to "America" or "Canada" legitimizes the genocide and colonization of Native peoples upon which these nationstates are founded. By making anticolonial struggle central to feminist politics, Native women place in question the appropriate form of governance for the world in general. In questioning the nationstate, we can begin to imagine a world that we would actually want to live in. Such a political project is particularly important for colonized peoples seeking national liberation outside the nationstate.

Whereas nationstates are governed through domination and coercion, indigenous sovereignty and nationhood is predicated on interrelatedness and responsibility.

As Sharon Venne explains, "Our spirituality and our responsibilities define our duties. We understand the concept of sovereignty as woven through a fabric that encompasses our spirituality and responsibility. This is a cyclical view of sovereignty, incorporating it into our traditional philosophy and view of our responsibilities. It differs greatly from the concept of Western sovereignty which is based upon absolute power. For us absolute power is in the Creator and the natural order of all living things; not only in human beings… Our sovereignty is related to our connections to the earth and is inherent."

## Revolution

A Native feminist politics seeks to do more than simply elevate Native women's status — it seeks to transform the world through indigenous forms of governance that can be beneficial to everyone.

At the 2005 World Liberation Theology Forum held in Porto Alegre, Brazil, indigenous peoples from Bolivia stated that they know another world is possible because they see that world whenever they do their ceremonies. Native ceremonies can be a place where the present, past and future become copresent. This is what Native Hawaiian scholar Manu Meyer calls a racial remembering of the future.

Prior to colonization, Native communities were not structured on the basis of hierarchy, oppression or patriarchy. We will not recreate these communities as they existed prior to colonization. Our understanding that a society without structures of oppression was possible in the past tells us that our current political and economic system is anything but natural and inevitable. If we lived differently before, we can live differently in the future.

Native feminism is not simply an insular or exclusivist "identity politics" as it is often accused of being. Rather, it is framework that understands indigenous women's struggles part of a global movement for liberation. As one activist stated: "You can't win a revolution on your own. And we are about nothing short of a revolution. Anything else is simply not worth our time."

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Andrea Smith is Cherokee and a professor of Native American Studies at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and cofounder of Incite! Women of Color Against Violence and the Boarding School Healing Project.