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# Decolonising Feminism: Aboriginal Women and the Global 'Sisterhood'

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## Introduction

*“Women have been a footnote in [a] male-defined system. And if women are the footnote, then Aboriginal women are the footnote to the footnote”* (Patricia Monture, as cited in Boulton, 2003: par. 4).

For several decades the caution that “[w]omen should not position themselves ‘on the same side’ without any regard for the differences in power and privilege among women” (Grande, 2003:342) has circulated; yet feminism continues to espouse a ubiquitous ‘sisterhood’ based on common female experiences, perceptions, values and goals. Unfortunately, feminists have neither sufficiently examined differences between and among women, nor adequately considered the historical and material specificity of Native<sup>1</sup> identity. In light of this, the claim that ‘feminism is for everybody’<sup>2</sup> seems more politically useful, or optimistic, than accurate.

Jackie Huggins<sup>3</sup> (1994) writes that, “[d]espite the general diversity of opinions in Aboriginal society, the strong stance that Aboriginal women take against the white women’s movement remains universal” (76). This explains, in part, why so few Native women self-identify as feminist, and why alternative names for Native women’s movements abound. Some writers employ variations on Patricia Hill Collins’ term ‘motherwork,’ which seeks to soften the feminist dichotomies of home/work,

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper the words ‘Indigenous,’ ‘Native’ and ‘Aboriginal’ will be used interchangeably to refer to the “communities, peoples and nations [...] having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, [who] consider themselves distinct from other sectors of societies now prevailing in those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop, and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems” (definition from the United Nations; see <http://www.undp.org/csopp/CSO/NewFiles/ipaboutdef.html>). Quotations are an exception to this; the work of other authors is, naturally, their own.

<sup>2</sup> The title of a 2000 publication by feminist author bell hooks.

<sup>3</sup> Jackie Huggins is an author and academic of the Bidjara and Birri-Gubba Juru peoples of Australia.

individual/group and personal autonomy/collective self-determination (Hill Collins, 1994, as cited in Udel, 2001:58). Sandy Grande (2003) self-describes as ‘Indigena,’ asserting: “I theorize and act in public life from a standpoint that presumes *decolonisation* (not feminism) as the central political project” (329). Women are also said to take on the political identity of ‘motherists’ – militant mothers fighting for the survival of their children – when crisis makes the traditional women’s role in Native society difficult or impossible to perform (Snitow, 1990, as cited in Udel, 2001:49). M.A. Jaimes\*Guerrero<sup>4</sup> (2003) employs the term ‘Native Womanism’ to describe a struggle aimed at “restoring the female principle to challenge the prevailing colonialist and patriarchal denigration of women and nature” (67).

The widespread and strategic use of alternative descriptors amounts to an intentional separation from both the theory and practice of feminism (Udel, 2001:49). This underscores Melissa Lucashenko’s<sup>5</sup> (1994) claim that, “[...] while feminism is a global movement with *potential* global applicability, political, regional and ethnocultural factors can mean that mainstream feminist ideology is not appropriate for indigenous women [...]” (par. 2, emphasis added). Ultimately, despite strong proclamations of universal acceptance, relevance and coherence, a worldwide feminist ‘sisterhood’ has thus far proven unable to embrace Native identities.

### **Defining and Applying the Terms: ‘Native’ & ‘Feminist’**

*“What you call patriarchy, I call one aspect of colonisation: for all their commonalities, for all your hoping and wishing it, our oppressions are not interchangeable”* (Lucashenko, 1994: par. 5).

In struggling against male domination and patriarchy, feminists seek a distance from – and even an overthrowing of – ‘classic’ Western cultural values and systems. In contrast, Aboriginal women seek a negotiated renewal of ‘traditional’ Native cultural values and systems. The difference between these two goals maps well onto the difference between ‘mainstream’ feminists and Native women activists.

Both of these terms are, to a certain extent, generalizations. Acknowledging that the label of ‘aboriginality’ has been used to clumsily lump together the different experiences of distinct Native groups (Tuhivai Smith, 1999), all Native peoples possess a historical trajectory significantly altered by colonialism and imperialism (Anderson, 2002). Additionally, Aboriginal individuals and groups struggle with strikingly similar questions of identity and sovereignty arising therefrom. Consequently, as Grace Oullette<sup>6</sup> (2002) asserts, colonized women are unique in their perception and articulation of oppression, having much more in common with one another than with non-Native women.

Feminism, too, has been used to label a rather wide variety of political views and movements that share a focus on the empowerment of women and an opposition to patriarchy, sexism and male domination. While the public face of the feminist movement – ‘mainstream’ feminism – has remained grounded in a predominantly white, middle-class struggle to gain equality within existing social structures, there exist now myriad streams of feminist thought. This multiplicity has been touted as evidence of the outright fall of ‘mainstream’ feminism and the rise of innovative, inclusive forms that deal effectively and

<sup>4</sup> Marianette Jaimes\*Guerrero is a scholar, writer and researcher of Native and Mestiza descent.

<sup>5</sup> Melissa Lucashenko is an Australian writer of mixed European and Murri (Aboriginal) heritage.

<sup>6</sup> Grace Oullette is a Native author raised on the Red Pheasant Reserve in Saskatchewan.

insightfully with race and difference.<sup>7</sup> The majority of Native women, however, remain unconvinced. Sandy Grande<sup>8</sup> (2003) has commented on this recent pluralism:

I agree that liberal, postmodern, Marxist, critical race, socialist, lesbian, womanist, and transnational feminisms, among others, do all occupy a proper and legitimate place in the feminist diaspora. But this apparent eclecticism can be deceiving. [...] [A] persistent *whitestream*<sup>9</sup> discourse continues to define the public face of feminism. This implicit structure marks the feminist terrain as not simply “pluralistic” but, more critically, ghettoized – indicating that whitestream feminists merely perform multiplicity, continuing to resist any significant attenuation of the racial divide (332, emphasis added).

### Disharmonies and Contradictions

*“Beyond strategic questions are the familiar feelings and realities of struggle. The cultural lines are drawn deep and fast across [hundreds of] years of history”* (Trask, 1996:915).

### A Significant Departure from the Feminist Canon

Despite existing evidence that the feminist canon is not universal, it is still widely claimed that ‘in all places and times women have been oppressed.’ Prominent academics with extensive field research in Aboriginal communities have asserted – some for several decades<sup>10</sup> – that “the oppression of women as a cultural construct is nowhere near as prevalent as we have been led to believe [and] where it does exist, its parameters most likely differ from ours” (Hardman, 2004:80). A continued insistence on the ubiquity of male domination, despite dissenting views, has two significant implications: it creates an atmosphere un conducive to dialogue between feminists and Native women, based on the lack of a pivotal shared experience and the subsequent muting of other potential commonalities; and it denigrates Native voices who continue to assert that their societies were not oppressively patriarchal prior to the experience of colonialism. This disjunction is critical as the past, for Native women, serves to both inform the present and shape contemporary action:

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<sup>7</sup> Two varieties of feminism that are often touted as inclusive and welcoming of Indigenous women are cross-cultural (including ‘global,’ ‘critical race’ and ‘Third World’) feminisms, as well as ‘ecofeminism.’ Both are problematic. Cross-cultural feminisms, while they have addressed the nexus of race and gender, lack a space in their theory for the environment and the ways in which ecological issues and Indigenous rights intersect. Ecofeminism, on the other hand, deploys a well-developed framework describing how linked conceptual structures endorse the subjugation of women, the natural world and people of colour; but have yet to offer a theory that can effectively articulate cross-cultural issues (Gaard, 2001:2). Further, one of the main streams of ecofeminism – ‘animal’ or vegetarian – cannot be adopted by Native peoples participating in traditional practices of hunting or fishing (both prime loci of struggles over Indigenous rights) (Gaard, 2001:23).

<sup>8</sup> Dr. Sandy Grande is an Indigenous professor specializing in Native American education and critical race theory.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Whitestream’ is a term coined by Claude Denis – an adaptation of the feminist term ‘malestream.’ It describes the fact that, “[...] while society is not white in sociodemographic terms, it remains principally structured around the basis of white, Anglo-Saxon experience” (Grande, 2003:330).

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, the work of M. J. Hardman and that of Sally Roesch Wagner.

Despite differences in tribal affiliation, regional location, urban or reservation background, academic or community setting, and pro- or antifeminist ideology, many Native women academics and grassroots activists alike invoke models of pre-conquest, egalitarian societies to theorize contemporary social and political praxes (Udel, 2001:43).

Traditionally, Indigenous women were central to family, community, political, social and cultural expression; all of which operated on foundational principles of balance and consensus (Sunseri, 2000:146). Even where gender relations were not ideal, there is little contemporary writing that extols the beneficial influence of colonialism on female oppression. The very existence of different gender spheres, however, has often been heralded as evidence of oppression - though the specific situations cited are usually open to interpretation.<sup>11</sup> In a 2003 interview, Mohawk activist Patricia Monture noted that even positive portrayals of traditional gender relations are inadequate: “The anthropologists describe us as a matrilineal society, but that doesn’t really cover the way our culture is and our traditions are. Women are very much valued and that’s more about there not being a gender hierarchy in the traditions of my people [...]” (Boulton, 2003: par. 13). Going a step further, Nahanni Fontaine<sup>12</sup> (2003) argues that the very terms ‘matriarchal’ and ‘patriarchal’ apply to Western frameworks unsuited to describing the nuanced gender relations found in pre-contact Aboriginal societies. “Here, again, we get caught up in utilizing concepts foreign to us,” she writes (par. 5).

### Patriarchy as a Colonial Construct

Invariably, in Native nations, the power of women waned as colonial power expanded (Fernandez, 2003:244). Typically, those who married European men “lost power, autonomy, sexual freedom [...], maternity and inheritance rights [...], ownership rights to their land, and suffered diminished economic autonomy and political status” (Udel, 2001:45). The process of disempowering women was codified in the policies and laws of the settler colony, and later in those of the nation-state:

In order to break down and destroy a culture, you have to get to the root of it. The heart of Aboriginal cultures is the women. So it makes sense to start making policies that would banish the women, the givers of the language and the culture and the life. The ones who brought in the Native children and made them Native (Anderson, 2000:26).

Assimilation, as a colonial project, was intentionally structured to attack the bond between men and women in Native communities, and proved most effective when channelled through policies that amounted to the outright theft of generations of Indigenous

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<sup>11</sup> “The separation of women during their menstrual cycle is a prime example where women’s position in society can either be read by the outsider as ‘sacred member of society’ or derogatively ‘polluted’” (Tusitala March, 1999:671). Laura Tohe provides an interesting illustration of this very case, using Diné views on the commencement of menstruation: “Celebrating puberty with the Kinaaldá ceremony ushers the young woman into society that values her. As I recall it now, how different this experience was from the seventh grade teacher who taped black construction paper to the windows and gave the boys a longer lunch break, so that he could show us “The Film” on female puberty” (Tohe, 2000:107).

<sup>12</sup> Nahanni Fontaine, an activist and writer, serves as a council member for the Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg and as a council member for the Manitoba Women’s Advisory Council.

children. Institutionalization and adoption into non-Native households has had an immeasurable impact on gender dynamics in Aboriginal societies. Dawn Martin-Hill<sup>13</sup> (2003) writes that the deliberate alienation of brothers and sisters through residential schooling created “a legacy that has deeply affected the relationship between Indigenous men and women and that has shaped men’s psychological attitudes towards women” (115).

The sexual oppression that Native women currently face on a day-to-day basis cannot be separated from the twin legacies of colonialism and racism, which continue to marginalize Aboriginal peoples *en masse*, devaluing their cultures and traditions (Oullette, 2002). “In the face of coerced agrarianism and the attending devaluation of hunting and the consequences of forced removal and relocation, Native men have suffered a loss of status and traditional self-sufficiency even more extensive than their female counterparts [...]” (Medicine 1991, as cited in Udel, 2001:54). The loss of self-esteem associated with this erosion of autonomy and cultural support has created a situation in which women are the primary subjects of mistreatment; significant secondary effects are experienced by a much wider group. Men, then, “are also adversely affected by poisoning their own community” (Fernandez, 2003:247).

Dawn Martin-Hill (2003) has observed that “[t]he fragmentation of our cultures, beliefs and values as a result of colonialism has made our notions of tradition vulnerable to horizontal oppression – that is, those oppressed people who need to assume a sense of power and control do so by thwarting traditional beliefs” (108). This hybrid structure has been accurately called a “trickle-down patriarchy” (Jaimes\*Guerrero, 2003:58). Thus Native women express the desire to both interrogate and revitalize ‘tradition’ (Fernandez, 2003:252), and to have an equal voice in the determination of which contemporary practices properly express Indigenous traditions and cultural values. While that process is now underway – and in many cases, thriving – there is no absolute end in sight. To answer Selina Tusitala March’s<sup>14</sup> question: “[d]oes this mean that the addressing of women’s oppressions must be shelved until a mythical postcolonial era has been achieved?” (Tusitala March, 1999:669), Osenontion (Marlyn Kane) and Skonaganleh:rá (Sylvia Maracle) say that “[w]omen have a responsibility to make sure that we don’t lose any more, that we don’t do any more damage, while we work on getting our original government system back in good working order” (as cited in Udel, 2001:55).

### Community: Relationships with Men and the Land

“[T]he self-empowerment inherent in ‘Women’s Liberations’ and ‘Women’s Rights’ has largely been perceived as being gained to the detriment of the family and of the Nation as it omits one half of the population” (Tusitala March, 1999:670). Native women leaders characterize their responsibilities as extending to the well-being of the whole community, without prioritizing the concerns and needs of women on the basis of gender alone (Prindeville, 2000). Rather than the gender equality sought by feminists, Aboriginal women most often speak of the goal of gender harmony. This quest for balance is also found in the writings of Aboriginal men, who discuss the male and female members of society as necessarily interdependent: “Gender balance strengthens our circles,” writes Carl Fernandez (2003:242), “the values and teachings show us that women occupy one side of

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<sup>13</sup> Dr. Dawn Martin-Hill (Mohawk, Wolf Clan) is the Academic Director and one of the founders of the Indigenous Studies Program at McMaster University.

<sup>14</sup> Selina Tusitala March is an academic and activist of mixed (European and Native Pacific Islander) heritage.

the circle and men occupy the other. The vision is not to make one better than the other, but to show how they are complimentary” (254).

“Our men are our equals, our partners – we should cherish one another mutually,” writes Dawn Martin-Hill (2003:118), articulating a commonly-held view among Native women who work toward restoring traditional gender interaction. Acknowledging that struggle can, does and indeed must occur - yet rejecting the ‘mainstream’ feminist construction of oppositional groups and cross-cultural affinities therein - Haunani-Kay Trask<sup>15</sup> (1996) states bluntly that, “[s]truggle with our men occurs laterally, across and within our movement. It does not occur vertically between white women and indigenous women on one side and white men and [Native] men on the opposing side” (914). Irene Watson<sup>16</sup> (2001) asserts that a focus on sex-based discrimination is too narrow to encompass either the immediate or long-term goals of Aboriginal women. Watson also argues that “to frame the struggle in terms of gender equity leaves an entire realm of life unaccounted for” (35). With an acknowledged goal of renewing tradition (in which gender roles were interdependent), it follows that Native women require the participation of men in the social, political and spiritual life of the community. The survival of culture and perpetuation of tradition necessitate the fostering of collective experience; exclusion of any segment of the population is not a viable option. Many Native women see themselves as having a key function in the restoration of traditional male roles; historically, in many Aboriginal societies, women were the selectors and trainers of appropriate male leaders (Udel, 2001:54-55).

It is true that a gender-inclusive approach is not unique to Native women’s action and activism, and gender balance not an unknown goal in feminism; yet the views of Native women remain distinct. At the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 (the ‘Beijing Conference’), Indigenous women argued for the goal of ‘self-determination’ rather than ‘gender equity,’ stating that the empowerment of Native women simply could not occur outside the context of decolonisation (Watson, 2001:35). Additionally, while the ‘radical’ feminism of women of colour<sup>17</sup> is committed to the survival and well-being of a whole culture (both its men and its women), Native women “have a concept of womanism literally derived from a ‘sense of being with a sense of place,’ in which is found ‘matrilineal kinship in reciprocal relations with one’s natural environment in an indigenous homeland” (Jaimes\*Guerrero, 2003, as cited in Waters, 2003: xvi). This is a critical distinction since the relationship to land, home and place is not equivalent in the different ‘minority’ groups affected by colonialism:

[They] may see [it] as beautiful, or exploited, or crowded, or expensive, or hostile, or even as a haven for racism, but they cannot ever see our land as familial. That is to say, [non-Natives] can never know what we know, or feel what we feel, about our mother, the land. Thus does history – and genealogy – separate our politics, and our analysis (Trask, 1996:912).

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<sup>15</sup> Dr. Haunani-Kay Trask is an activist, teacher, writer and one of the leaders of the movement for Hawai’ian sovereignty.

<sup>16</sup> Dr. Irene Watson is of the Tanganekald and Meintangk peoples of the Australian southeast.

<sup>17</sup> See, among others, the work of Black American feminist author bell hooks.

Similarly, Native women reject the inclusion of Indigenous issues in ‘cross-’ or ‘multicultural’ feminist agendas. Almost thirty years ago Connie Uri<sup>18</sup> stated: “[w]e are not like other minorities. We have no gene pool in Africa or Asia. When we are gone, that’s it” (as cited in Udel, 2001:46). Although it is invariably positioned as a positive and empowering sociocultural condition, Indigenous peoples find that “[m]ulticulturalism [...] functions not so much *against* Eurocentrism (or Anglocentrism) as *for* ‘ethnic diversity’” (Mohanram, 1996:53). Multiculturalism typically strips Native men and women of their status as ‘first peoples’ and replaces that status with an ‘ethnicity,’ circumventing the issue of land title and sovereignty in the process. To even begin to appreciate the identities of Native women, then, feminists must first acknowledge that race is more than colour and culture (Grande, 2003:344), and that all people, even in an age of international migration and accelerating globalization, have a specific historical and material *place*.

### ‘Sisterhood,’ Essentialism and Complicity

“In their eagerness to coalesce, white feminists have been rightly accused of ignoring or eliding differences between and among women” (Udel, 2001:56). Ill-founded and under-examined proclamations of unity have the unfortunate consequence of obscuring the inequalities between Native women and ‘mainstream’ feminists, downplaying the substantial benefits that non-Native (primarily Western European) women have reaped from colonialism (Trask, 1996), while legitimizing the broader feminist agenda’s subsumption of Native women’s goals and concerns. All three of these effects serve to distance feminism from Native women’s action and activism.

Indigenous women, in general, repudiate the relativizing of disparity (Grande, 2003), asserting that this essentialism is one way in which “feminism, in the name of the common context of struggle, once again erases Native American specificity in a different form of hegemonic violence” (Mohanram, 1996:53). Appeals to globe-spanning feminine unity are too often made without attention to the very real political, social and economic privilege enjoyed by ‘mainstream’ feminists throughout history. As Melissa Lucashenko (1994) has wryly pointed out, “Playing ‘but white women are powerless too, let’s be powerless together’ has no appeal, nor indeed meaning, for most [Native] women” (par. 4). Sandy Grande (2003) places the very real gains made by feminists in the context of a longer view of history:

While, like other indigenous women, I recognize the invaluable contributions that feminists have made [...], I also believe that their well-documented failure to engage and acknowledge the complicity of white women in the history of domination positions ‘mainstream’ feminism alongside other colonialist discourses (329).

Another powerful criticism levelled by Indigenous women comes in the form of a simple observation: through the first two waves of historical feminism (and arguably, in the third as well), Native issues failed to make it onto the ‘official’ roster of women’s concerns

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<sup>18</sup> Dr. Connie Uri is a Choctaw physician who played an active role in bringing to light the eugenic practices of the Indian Health Service. See “The Scythe and the Scalpel: Dissecting the Sterilizations of Native American Women in the 1970’s,” by Amy Skylark Elizabeth, <[http://clem.msced.edu/~princer/ant440b/paper\\_01.htm](http://clem.msced.edu/~princer/ant440b/paper_01.htm)>.



(Trask, 2003:475). Devon Mihesuah<sup>19</sup> (2000) asserts that a general lack of Native voices in contemporary feminist writing exacerbates a history of being objectified and manipulated by scholars and authors with personal biases and agendas, “because whites are usually the ones speaking about women outside their group, as well as gathering information, creating theories, and benefiting from all this writing” (1247-8). Now that Native images and ideas are quite plentiful in the ‘mainstream,’ Andrea Smith<sup>20</sup> (1994) describes a lack of critical attention on the part of non-Native academics and activists today, to the form and substance of Native inclusion in feminist dialogue and media:

I can’t seem to go to a feminist conference without the woman who begins the conference with a ceremony being the only Indian presenter. Participants then feel so ‘spiritual’ after this opening that they fail to notice the absence of Indian women in the rest of the conference, or Native American issues in the discussion. And I certainly can’t go to a feminist bookstore without seeing books by Lynn Andrews and other people who exploit Indian spirituality all over the place (par. 16).

Still noteworthy for their absence on the feminist agenda are issues of Native sovereignty, land rights and reparations – on the part of governments, churches and other organizations – for massive dispossessions; displacements; and acts of violence, abuse and ethnocide. Occasionally, ‘mainstream’ feminists are actually hostile to these struggles (Trask, 2003). Sunera Thobani, a prominent Canadian feminist writer and academic, observed that “there will be no social justice, no anti-racism, no feminist emancipation, no liberation of any kind for anybody on this continent unless aboriginal people win their demand for self-determination” (Thobani, 2001: par. 3). However, declarations of this stripe seem unlikely to resound through the ‘mainstream’ women’s movement. The continuing influence of liberalism gives rise to the reality that feminism often privileges individual choice over radical social transformation. This dangerously implies that dominant paradigms are equally legitimate alternatives, and exploitation a possible ‘free choice’ that is theoretically no better or worse than ‘liberation’ or ‘resistance’ (Grande, 2003:337).

### Kinship, Family and Motherhood

‘Family feminism’ is rejected by most mainstream feminists (Fox-Genovese, 1996). For Native women, however, motherhood carries a very different connotation – mothers are more than caregivers (Tohe, 2000), and far more than (as the first two waves of feminism proclaimed) persons oppressed by the biological burden of childbirth and the inequitable division of labour in the nuclear family. Female reproductive function is central to a woman’s social role in Native societies, and is itself a source of struggle and empowerment, given a history of child theft; high infant mortality; genetic ‘bioprospecting;’ stripping of status (including contemporary blood quantum laws) and eugenic sterilization. “Native women emphasize women’s ability, sometimes ‘privilege,’ to bear children. Within this paradigm, they argue, Native women’s procreative capability becomes a powerful tool to

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<sup>19</sup> Dr. Devon Abbott Mihesuah is a Professor of Applied Indigenous Studies and History, and a member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma.

<sup>20</sup> Dr. Andrea Smith is the interim coordinator of the Boarding School Healing Project and a member of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma.

combat Western genocide [...] and choosing to become a mother takes on political meaning” (Udel, 2001:47-52). As do many black feminists, Native women strive to protect the integrity of their family and to instruct and empower their children, creating the task of motherhood as a form of resistance to oppression from outside the family and community, rather than a form of gender exploitation. However, because ‘family’ itself is perceived and acted upon differently in Aboriginal and ‘mainstream’ women’s movements, there is a widespread sense among Native women that feminism devalues their traditional roles and responsibilities (Jaimes\*Guerrero, 2003). “[M]odels of kinship [mother, sister, grandmother, aunt] are used by Indian women to measure their capacity for leadership and to measure the success of their leadership” (Green, 1990, as cited in Udel, 2001:48). Extended family and networks of kinship ties provide support, affirmation, comfort and happiness, so that “[t]he trap of the nuclear family simply doesn’t exist in the village situation” (Tusitala March, 1999:668).

### Looking to the Future: Potential Alliances

*“We must be patient with each other as we learn to live in a decolonised way”*  
(Monture-Angus, 1995, as cited in Udel, 2001:53).

“We indigenous people occupy two cultural worlds,” notes Haunani-Kay Trask, “white people occupy only one” (1996:911). Laura Tohe<sup>21</sup> agrees, adding: “When we leave our traditional world and step into the Western world, feminism becomes an issue, and we must confront and deal with the same issues that affect all women” (Tohe, 2000:109). Fortunately, this bicultural Indigenous reality permits a space for non-Native feminists as allies to Aboriginal women’s movements. In the context of biculturalism, both may “join in opposition to white male-dominated culture” (Dominy, 1990, as cited in Mohanram, 1996:60). This would likely be a strategic partnership, organized around specific projects, rather than a long-term unity involving the conflation of Aboriginal and ‘mainstream’ gender issues. The tasks assumed by non-Native feminists in such alliances call for humility, and absolutely demand that the terms of cooperation are dialogic. As Haunani-Kay Trask cautions:

This does not mean that [whites], including feminists, have no role to play in our movement. They have the role we assign to them, and no more: to support our efforts publicly, to form antiracist groups that address our people’s oppression through institutional channels, and to speak out in our defense when we are attacked by white people. These are the roles white people can and should play. And they should do so under our direction (Trask, 1996:914).

In addressing collaboration, Selina Tusitala March (1999) speaks of the work of Ni-Vanuatu feminist poet and activist Grace Mera Molisa, who “proclaims the inhumanity of pedantic hierarchies of concern” (670). Concordantly, she asks that feminism work to remove its blatant Eurocentrism, through which it gives males outside of the West good reason to discredit feminists and, from there, deprioritize and manipulate all women’s goals. Tusitala March also underscores Margaret Jolly’s assertion that Western women should fight Eurocentrism *from within*, calling ‘Women’s Liberation’ a ‘European disease,’

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<sup>21</sup> Laura Tohe is a Diné (Navajo) author, poet and academic.

to be cured by Europeans (Jolly, 1991, as cited in Tusitala March, 1999:670). Naturally, views on alliance vary. Haunani-Kay Trask (1996), for example, dismisses the applicability of feminism to Native women's struggles entirely, stating: "[f]eminism and white feminists are out of place here, that is, out of geographic and cultural and historical place" (909). Indeed, the Native women's and feminist movements may prove operationally incompatible, as "Native women argue that they have devised alternate reform strategies to those advanced by Western feminism" (Udel, 2001:43). Trust in the long-term success of cooperation is also an issue; particularly when the processes of decolonisation and healing, in the opinion of many Native women, are gaining momentum. As Ienhotonkwas (Bonnie Jane Maracle) points out, "why get off a ship that is heading somewhere to get into a rowboat that may sink at any time?"<sup>22</sup>

Feminists outside of the Aboriginal community, particularly those who hail from the 'dominant' society in former colonies, will have to actively demonstrate their dedication and clarify their aims if their hope is to position themselves as allies of Native women. The movement (or diversity of movements) will need to examine those areas at which Indigenous women direct criticisms of feminism. If a bridge is to be built between women's movements within and beyond Aboriginal communities, non-Native women must not delay in laying foundations on their side of the divide – mobilizing resources, taking action on economic neo-colonialism and addressing racism and sexism everywhere they are found (in the legal system, media, government, within feminism itself and out on the street):

In so far as we presume to take feminism into post-colonial areas, we should at best consider our work reparations for the damage Euro men did. Our goals could best be honoured, both for us and for the women whose heritage was wiped out or badly damaged by colonialism, within a cooperative attempt to help them to reconstruct the pre-colonial structure, insofar as they might wish to. We need to do so respectfully and non-judgmentally and without projection of the biases of our EuroAmerican historical stream (Hardman, 2004:80).

The task of forming alliance would begin with simple recognition; for while Native women's bicultural existence provides them with a good understanding of the 'dominant' society, women in the 'mainstream' know little (if anything) of either historical or contemporary Aboriginal societies (Lucashenko, 1994: par. 3). Again, hope for positive change in this regard will depend on whether or not non-Native women are willing to labour in the task of educating *themselves* and informing their feminist views. As Melissa Lucashenko (1994) asserts: "While our communities face endemic violence, child abuse and alcohol and drug problems – problems for which your feminism may suggest some solutions – we simply do not have the time to build bridges to unaware whites" (par. 10).

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<sup>22</sup> Personal correspondence with the author, 2004.

## Conclusion

*“To be truly visionary we have to root our imagination in our concrete reality while simultaneously imagining possibilities beyond that reality”* (hooks, 2000:110).

At the heart of the disharmonies between feminism and Aboriginal women’s struggles lies a differing perspective on the source and nature of oppression, and therefore the foci of resistance and action. Feminism posits male domination through patriarchy as the source of women’s oppression, while in the view of many Aboriginal women, colonialism is the ultimate source of oppression, with male domination an imposed value resulting from the entrenchment of alien systems in traditional communities (Oullette, 2002). “Native women have a unique response to sexism, which is that it is a manifestation of being assimilated, and that acting sexist is a way of exhibiting ignorance of Indian traditions” (Waters, 2003: xx).

A feminist ‘sisterhood’ between Native and non-Native women is neither a given, nor necessarily appropriate, either now or in the future. Whatever that future brings in terms of alliance, non-Native feminists must become, and strive to remain, cognisant of their own histories and the ‘baggage’ those histories carry into even the most constructive dialogues. There is, after all, a reductionism inherent in liberalist conceptions of unity; and from the Aboriginal perspective, the best laid plans for Native/non-Native partnership may always have the feel of homogenization. “It is plain,” writes Melissa Lucashenko (1994), “that we cannot afford to dismiss our indigenous identities in the name of female solidarity, for that is no more than assimilation by another stratagem” (par. 5).

While Native women’s movements, actions and activism do target ‘mainstream’ feminist issues – control of choices surrounding fertility and reproduction, freedom from sexual abuse and domestic violence and equality in economic status and employment – these issues do not describe the totality of their concerns, and their aim is not merely to tear down male-oriented social constructs (Irlbacher Fox, 2002). Aboriginal women articulate priorities informed by their own culture and sense of place and traditions; in which gender is found alongside issues of socio-economic inequality, racism, assimilation, cultural renewal and self-determination. For Aboriginal women, gender is one aspect of a larger struggle whose ultimate goal lies in the achievement of healing, balance and the reclamation of what was stolen, altered or co-opted through colonialism. Rather than *feminism*, then, Aboriginal women’s movements can more accurately be described as *decolonisation*. Both are emancipatory political movements with revolutionary goals; yet while certain efforts within decolonisation can be coincident with feminist praxis, the two are not equivalent projects. The distance between these two positions has been magnified by the actions, words and works – both long-ago and recent, well-intentioned and opportunistic – of ‘mainstream’ feminists. The possibility of a bridge being constructed across this divide will depend on whether or not non-Native feminists are truly prepared to equally value Native perspectives, prioritize Indigenous issues and work in these areas under the direction and leadership of Native women. It will also depend on an ongoing evaluation of the applicability of feminist theory and practice in the service of Aboriginal goals. Ultimately, “[i]ndigenous women in struggle fashion indigenous-based views of what constitutes women’s issues, about how women should lead [...] indigenous nations, and about the role, *if any*, of feminism” (Trask, 1996:911, emphasis added).

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