

A Few Cautions at the Millennium on the Merging of Feminist Studies with American Indian Women's Studies

At the millennium, more scholars than ever are writing about feminist theory. To borrow from Kramarae and Spender, the field has exploded with theory, diverging opinions, and unanswered questions about women's marginalization. At the same time, American Indian Studies has also grown to the point that Standing Rock Sioux writer Vine Deloria, Jr., has written, "I can see no useful purpose for any additional research or writing on Indians, other than as a form of entertainment" (1991, 461).

Though the integration of American Indian women's studies and feminist studies would seem a logical project for the new millennium, the progress on such an initiative should be both cautious and deliberate. The introduction of the multifaceted lives and values of American Indians into feminist discourse will necessarily and appropriately confuse the understanding of "women's" experiences. Indeed, while clarity about gender may be compelling, it is often at the expense of the visibility, agency, and identity of those represented. I therefore add my cautions here to the arguments put forth by other women of color, seeing both the need for appreciating women's heterogeneity and the need for more sensitivity in studying and writing about individuals outside one's racial and cultural group. I believe all feminists can learn from American Indians, but care must be used in researching, interpreting, and formulating ideas about "others."

At the year 2000, and 502 years after what Natives commonly refer to as the beginning of the "invasion," thousands of books and articles have been written about Natives. With the exception of works of fiction, the vast majority of these are written by whites who analyze their subjects using Eurocentric standards of interpretation not Natives' own versions of their cultures and histories. Because whites are usually the ones speaking about women outside their group, as well as gathering information, creating theories, and benefiting from all of this writing, Natives' images are

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often at the mercy of author bias, power positions, and the personal agendas of scholars and of authors of popular literature.

Scholars often rationalize that because they are armed with written documentation and theories (often formulated by thinkers who have never met an Indian), they can write from a Native perspective. It is dangerous and unethical to presume to know what motivates Native women without talking to them, but scholars do it all the time. Some refuse to speak with Natives, believing that informants who are not formally educated have no information worth garnering. Occasionally, shyness or respect keeps researchers away, as in the example of a former non-Native graduate student of mine who never completed her nicely conceptualized dissertation on the activist women at Wounded Knee in 1973 because of my requirement that she conduct interviews with Native women present at the encounter. My personal standards — gut feelings, actually — are that I should not produce a manuscript about my tribe or another tribe unless it is useful to them and that I will not write about historic Native women unless the project benefits their descendants.

Feminist scholars who wish to write about American Indian women must be aware of the various voices among them. For example, some writers suggest that traditionalist Native women are the authoritative voices on Indian issues rather than those more assimilated. In the four pages that M. Annette Jaimes and Theresa Halsey devote to feminism in their 1992 essay “American Indian Women at the Center of Indigenous Resistance in Contemporary North America,” they criticize prominent Native writers such as Shirley Hill Witt and Suzan Shown Harjo because, in their opinion, these women are too assimilated and are more concerned with fighting for “civil rights” than with fighting for tribal sovereignty. Crow Creek Sioux novelist and editor Elizabeth Cook-Lynn offers a similar thesis in her 1998 essay “American Indian Intellectualism and the New Indian Story,” in which she argues that the writings produced by mixed-blood authors are rooted in “a deconstruction of a tribal nation-past, hardly an intellectual movement that can claim a continuation of the tribal communal story or an ongoing tribal literary tradition” (128). She also contends that successful writers such as Louise Erdrich, Paula Gunn Allen, and Wendy Rose (and males Sherman Alexie and Gerald Vizenor) exude “excesses of individualism” when she believes they should be advocating tribal unity.

These stances include two of the important political issues within American Indian Studies among Natives. The first is identity politics: the women whom Jaimes and Halsey take to task actually are strong advocates for tribal rights, and Cook-Lynn tends to ignore the reality that the majority of Indians today are of mixed blood, often disassociated with their

tribe's culture perhaps, but still possessing strong Native identities. Within and outside the academy, these voices debate, validate, and negate each other. Second, these sentiments contribute to my answer to the question of authoritative voice: there isn't a single one among Native women, and no one feminist theory totalizes Native women's thought. Rather, there is a spectrum of multiheritage women, in between "traditional" and "progressive," who possess a multitude of opinions on what it means to be a Native female. The label "third world women" is only a large umbrella under which another umbrella, "Natives," may fit, but underneath that umbrella are all of the three hundred or so modern U.S. tribes and, further still, all female members of those tribes. Thousands more umbrellas are needed to account for the tribal and individual sociocultural changes that occur over time. The complexity of Native women and the elements that make up their values and personalities are addressed in my essay "Commonality of Difference: American Indian Women and History" (1998), in which I also warn that identifying and categorizing these overlapping variations among Native women are formidable tasks. Knowledge of these complexities, however, is crucial to understanding the rationales behind the Native voice the scholar hears, in addition to knowing that it is not representative of all Natives.

Non-Natives must take care that the voice they hear actually *is* Native. Within the academy, numerous "wannabe" and "marginal" Natives with few connections to their tribes publish with the claim of writing from an Indian perspective. The voices of Native women have also been undermined by the cultural and literary appropriations of New Age fraudulent "medicine women" who have convinced the public that theirs are the truthful works about Native religion and culture. For instance, the well-published charlatan Lynn Andrews distorts the reality of traditional Native male-female relationships and advises her followers that their quests to find their true "feminine" selves are hindered by male oppression.¹ Native writers such as Wendy Rose and Andrea Smith discuss the potential damage done to constructive cross-cultural relationships between authentic American Indians and non-Indians when these "plastic" medicine women and men (whose works have found their way onto university required reading lists) assert that they are the authoritative voices on Native spirituality.²

Assuming that a given researcher has real American Indian informants in mind, she must be aware that many tribes have strict research guidelines

¹ Andrews is the author of, most notably, *Medicine Woman* (1981), *Jaguar Woman* (1985), *Star Woman* (1986), and *Crystal Woman* (1987).

² See Andrea Smith 1991; Rose 1992; Andy Smith 1994.

that outsiders must follow when interviewing tribal members, as do universities with institutional review boards (see Mihesuah 1993). And, good intentions do not always garner results. While some Natives are willing to share information with researchers, others are tentative and will discuss only bits and pieces of their lives and tribal goings-on. Traditional Native women—who might more accurately be called “tribalists” because they believe they are disadvantaged by the colonialist ideologies that disempower their race and contribute to dysfunctional tribal gender roles—have no interest in white feminist theory because they know from experience that white women have enjoyed the power privileges that come with being white at the expense of women of color. They are aware that white scholars usually just want information that they use to build their academic careers, while the knowledgeable “objects of study” receive nothing in return.

If feminist scholars want to learn about themselves and others and to contribute to their discipline, they should approach American Indian women only because of genuine, but respectful, curiosity about another way of life. If allowed to enter the lives of Natives, researchers should be forewarned that interviewing American Indians is very time consuming, that interviewers must be sensitive to the privacy and self-respect of those women, and that they must have a project that is important to the women whose voices they utilize. They must abandon any posturing about being an expert on what counts as important knowledge about Native women. If feminist scholars can engage in reciprocal, practical dialogue with their informants, then Native voices, too, will become a part of feminist discourse.

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