

2019

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Recommended Citation

Brown, Bella (2019) "The Shapes of Solidarity Through Difference," *Acta Cogitata: An Undergraduate Journal in Philosophy*. Vol. 7 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://commons.emich.edu/ac/vol7/iss1/10>

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THE SHAPES OF SOLIDARITY THROUGH DIFFERENCE

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Abstract

The following paper will track the subtle and not-so-subtle differences between various forms of feminism, specifically the differences between Indigenous and white feminism. Though the differences can outnumber the similarities, I do not see this as a discouragement for forming intercultural bonds for a peaceful coexistence, in fact this is the opportunity for solidarity to change the perception and reach of feminism as a movement. Feminism has the potential for reaching a broader audience without minimizing the differences of separate groups. This paper does not call for the aggregation of different groups in order to further the goals of white feminism, but rather highlights the differences of Indigenous and white feminism through historic and current context to show the specific needs of multiple groups. The works of Lorraine Mayer, Deborah McGregor, and Paula Gunn Allen are used to highlight the unique relationship of Native women with the colonizer's culture in Canada and America, as well as what Indigenous feminism looks like. Works by Kimberlé Crenshaw and Allison Jaggar are used to explore Black and white (respectively) feminist perspectives. Intersectionality and sovereignty are two topics that will guide the paper in showing ways that solidarity can look, ultimately calling on informed digression of the individual.

Feminism has a long history of only being viewed through a white lens, of leaving out minority groups. From the racism of suffragettes to modern day sex wars, feminism has long had a diverse and widely disputed definition. However, I do not see this separatism as an inherently detrimental aspect of the feminist movement; these differences do not mean the end to solidarity. Solidarity can take an academic form of spreading the word of other people's stories, solidarity can take the form of elevating those who have less privilege systematically involving leadership positions, and solidarity can take the form of allyship through sovereignty. The following paper will explore two different forms of feminism, white and Indigenous feminism; they differ in many epistemic values and have varying influence of understanding of the word feminism. Although these two forms are very different, I am going to examine the intersections and ways the two are intertwined.

I would first like to start with the acknowledgment that Indigenous feminism stands separate and independent from feminism as an overarching term. Indigenous feminism has roots and a lived existence that are incommensurable with that of other branches of feminism. The realities of colonialism and specific philosophies of different geographical locations are two of the ways that Native women have a different understanding of themselves within the patriarchal world. I would also like to clarify that I am not equating solidarity with the generalizing that takes place within some forms of attempts of solidarity. A universalistic approach to feminism fails because it leaves out what differentiates and enriches separate communities. With this in mind, there are ways that these groups can work together: one popular way the dominant culture (white feminism) can elevate other groups is by giving their privilege and leadership roles to those with less institutional

privilege. This solution provides another complication, however, because it is not the goal of Indigenous scholars or activists to be incorporated into North American culture and engulfed into the colonizer's world. One goal of current Indigenous work is sovereignty. Recognition and acceptance by America are not something that Indigenous academics strive for because it is not the goal to be brought into another culture, the goal is to thrive and develop as an independent community. Universalism combines types of feminism into one meaningless blob, it eliminates cross-cultural communication and erases goals of individual groups that are different. Thus far I have highlighted a type of solidarity and cross-cultural communication that is not apparent in dominant society, nor one of the priorities of the feminist movement overall.¹

In *A Return to Reciprocity*, Lorraine F Mayer chronicles her coming to terms with the word feminism as an Indigenous woman. I think it is worth noting that she never actually calls herself a feminist or endorses the way that feminism as a movement has been inclusive or supportive to Natives. Her story begins with an animosity toward the word because of the colonial construct of the patriarchy. The cultural construction of the patriarchy and the goal of becoming equal to the white man is not one of the objectives of Native women (or Native men for that matter). Many Native women stand as a powerful force within their communities and that recognition is what is validating to their work, as opposed to recognition from colonized governments and culture. The kind of equity and rights that feminists who are looking to live and work within colonized North America set as their goals are very different from the goals of many Native women. Another reason she initially dislikes the term *feminist* is because for many it still operates within the colonizer's binary of gender which is not extant in many Indigenous communities.

Mayer is *Métis*, meaning that she traces her roots to both the French and the Cree in Canada. Her identification with the Cree roots has largely informed her understanding of being equal with but holding separate roles from that of men within society. This is one of her large disconnections with settler cultures because westernized gender relations are generally reliant on dominant and non-dominant power relations. She identifies divine rights and the "self-proclaimed sons of God... [who] believe that they can make the world up as they will" as a source of the ways that this power relation can be identified in clear contrast with the ways that Native communities function (Mayer 23). The move for any Native woman to not identify as a feminist does not change the inherent attempt to deconstruct the way that Native women are stereotyped in their daily lives. The integration and equation with current power dynamics of western culture is not one of the goals of Native people, but rather sovereignty from and evolution of the ways that colonialism has subjected those who do not fit the rigid definitions of acceptance. Sovereignty contributes to the rejection of the identification as a feminist for some Native women.

Along with Mayer's definition of differing forms of feminism, productive solidarity by non-Native feminists looks like support: supporting the Native cause by not interrupting it. Financial support is not productive in this aspect because it denotes a degree of reliance by those who would be receiving money. Some forms of constructive support look like coexistence and allowing Indigenous groups to take action as they see fit. Political philosophy relies on the discretion of individual actions in relation to the larger picture. By this I mean that there are no overarching or all-inclusive rules to follow in order to form solidarity. The necessary interconnectedness of different communities living close to each other takes a synthesis of historic and current objectives of groups (in their own terms) to create a functioning larger community.

¹ Although, there has been increasing attention through conferences and academic investigations dedicated to intersectional work.

The myth of “the common struggle” among all women must not obstruct the diversity of difference. Mayer highlights the alluring nature of “the common struggle,” and she ultimately rejects its substance due to the differing ways that different women understand themselves in relation to greater society. The struggle of a middle-class white woman working her way through the capitalist maze of business is a much different reality than that of a Native woman living her traditions. The realities of Indigenous woman are starkly contrasted with that of white women and the ways that the two groups understand the concepts of dominant and non-dominant. Ultimately Mayer attempts to work with feminism in order to “...find a common ground from which to communicate, a ground that was not fraught with further identity problems” (Mayer 26). She concludes that similar to the colonizer’s tendency to demonize the “Other,” she used to reject all who identify as feminists, she now understands feminists without identifying with them personally.

Mayer’s experience of the value of women in leadership roles for the health and success of her Cree community is paralleled by many other Native cultures. Some of the more well-known tribes that are traditionally matrilineal are Lenape, Hopi and Iroquois. Deborah McGregor, an Aboriginal² scholar in Canada, highlights the interconnectedness of women and water in *Anishnaabe-Kwe, Traditional Knowledge, and Water Protection*. The worth of water within Aboriginal communities has a long and profound history. Water is the life-giving force and one cannot compartmentalize the ways that woman and water are critical to their communities because they are both vital life-giving forces. This idea is recognized through an act of decolonization in the value of traditional knowledge for addressing the current water crisis in Ontario area. Numerous workshops across this province have taken place to express, from an Elder’s perspective, the Anishinaabe values and interconnectedness of women to a traditionally westernized and “scientific” audience. There is nothing new about Aboriginal efforts to conserve the purity of water. Women and their intimate relationship with water have always been recognized in Anishinaabe and Akii Kwe communities through their important leadership roles.

The connection between women and water stems from the personification in Aboriginal worldviews of the moon as Grandmother. *She* is directly in control of the ebb and flow of the water, and *her* reach goes to large and small bodies of water; the importance of the biggest rivers and the dew in the morning are matters of life and death. Our continued existence is because of our mothers and their mothers, their breastmilk, their blood, and their follicular fluid because they are life giving, “Women thus have a special relationship with water, since, like Mother Earth, they have life-giving powers” (McGregor 28). McGregor’s article highlights the important work going on by Aboriginal women in Canada and their lack of recognition within the Canadian government and water conservation corporations. There is no solidarity on the part of the government so Indigenous women are no longer waiting for permission, but rather acting independently to raise awareness for their cause of protecting the water.

McGregor includes two examples of women who act on their commitment to the water, rather than waiting for legal permission. The first being the protests and action taken to speak for the water as a reaction to the continued pollution of water by Imperial Chemical Industries’ in the Bkejwanong Territory. The second being the 1,300 kilometer trek lead by a large group of Akii Kwe grandmothers around Lake Superior with water and eagle staffs in hand in order to “... change the perception of water as a resource to that of a sacred entity which must be treated as

2 Aboriginal and Indigenous are used interchangeably in this paper. I use the different words to duplicate the wording of authors according to their different origins even though both words mean natives. Generally in this paper, Indigenous is used in America and Aboriginal is used in Canada.

such” (McGregor 29). These are two ways that separate groups of Aboriginal women and allies are coming together, working in solidarity, to raise awareness about water crises in Canada. The numbers of Aboriginal people are simply too low to successfully work separately within a colonial system in Canada, and so some of the action must come from allies.

There are many forms of oppression identified in this paper imposed on certain groups of people, but where can this neglect be pinpointed? Is it reliant on gender or race? Kimberlé Crenshaw, a civil rights advocate, highlights the inextricable nature and importance of both race and gender on the impact of political recognition in her coining of the term “intersectionality.” Black feminism is another independent branch of feminism that has a unique history of being Othered on both bases of race and gender. The foundation of America and its historic reliance on slavery created a specific reality of Black women that is independent of other groups. However, they differ in that Black feminism overlaps with white feminism by working within wider mobility of individuals within capitalism. Native women are Othered on the basis of race as well, there is racism deeply entrenched in the history of colonization that has contributed to Indigenous people’s current lived experience. I see the intersections of different forms of feminism as a basis for solidarity through shared experience. There is understanding that is gained through this lived experience of living as an intersection of race and gender that cannot be taught through academia. Though the two movements have separate goals and independent cultures, there is a common understanding of the intersected life as defined by the colonizer or slave master.

The most constructive types of feminist critiques are the ones that highlight not just the way that women are treated in their personal lives, but address the institutional roadblocks that limit the progress of women and minorities in their local system (whether that be capitalism, the work force, politics, etc.). In “Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology,” Alison M. Jaggar highlights the detrimental nature of a narrow and “unbiased” approach on the field of science. The rejection of biased or emotional responses from “legitimate” academic fields is from a hegemonic source of who, namely men, will be trusted throughout history to conduct “dispassionate investigations” which contribute to the wealth of intergenerational knowledge.

Jaggar states that emotional responses of subordinate groups are to be trusted because they “motivate new investigations.” A marginalized individual’s apprehension or uneasiness is to be trusted because the way that progress takes place is through challenging the dominant thought of the time. The trust of lived experience and the legitimacy of personal stories from those who are marginalized is one way that solidarity can occur within fields. This validation of the experience of an oppressed community (such as Indigenous people) can contribute to a broader understanding of the field of inquiry. For example, history is a widely contested field that has long only given a platform to the colonizers and slave masters, however, there is work being done to provide accurate recounts of history from previously undocumented perspectives.

Paula Gunn Allen highlights a specified and truthful account of the history of the formation of white feminism in *Who is your Mother? Red Roots of White Feminism*. Attention is called to the origins of white feminism that are ingrained in long histories of matrilineal Indigenous tribes. All the way back to “the earliest white women on this continent” knowing and living in harmony with their Indigenous neighbors to the idolization of Sacagawea by suffragettes, white women have taken influence of the empowerment of Native women. Gunn cites numerous cultures and prominent figures from history who have been influenced by the Indigenous vision of intergenerational importance of memory:

...from Francois Villon to John Locke, from William Shakespeare to Thomas Jefferson, from Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, from Benito Juarez to Martin Luther King, from Elizabeth Cady Stanton to Judy Grahn, from Harriet Tubman to Audre Lorde, from Emma Goldman to Bella Abzug, from Malinalli to Cherri Moraga, and from Iyatiku to me. (Gunn 6)

All of the previously listed historical individuals used ideas of “Grandmother societies” and the rejection of patriarchal values (many without giving credit to Indigenous ideals) in order to develop their critiques of dominant culture. The following two examples state the roots of two prominent individuals from the extensive list above; Gunn cites Marx’s understanding of women’s liberation as key to the development of communism as learned from the account of Iroquoian matriarchal culture: additionally, Gunn cites Sacagawea as an influence on the very ideals of “liberty and justice for all” through her leadership and patience. This lack of credit does not erase the fact that the movement of feminism that we know today began with tribal sources. The ideals of tribal women have influenced the ideals of feminists and other social theorists for hundreds of years, their influence has been on the colonizer, not the other way around.

This paper has acted as an aggregation of many different forms of feminism that have influenced my personal understandings of the word. There are common threads of equality and empowerment throughout them all, though they differ on many foundational accounts. There is no straightforward answer to the intersections of different types of feminism. The grey area of exactly how one group relies on another, and how the two can work together through shared goals even while maintaining their differences is one of the main challenges that feminism faces in becoming a solidified movement with the force to bring about change. Change and progress are very different terms as exemplified by the continual problems of adherence within sociopolitical activist groups. Everything is always changing, on a macro and micro level there is nothing that stays the same due to external forces acting upon us. However, whether or not these movements and individuals are getting better, progressing, over time is a much different matter. The progress of a movement is reliant on the solidarity of these interrelated groups through discursive action. Challenging the dominant culture and questioning what it means to be a feminist is one way to check whether or not progress is taking place. Decolonizing, infiltrating the power structures at hand, and relying on one’s roots are all very different ways that are taking place now within America towards strides of progress. Solidarity throughout the above listed actions can lead to power in numbers across the many different shapes that feminism can take.

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