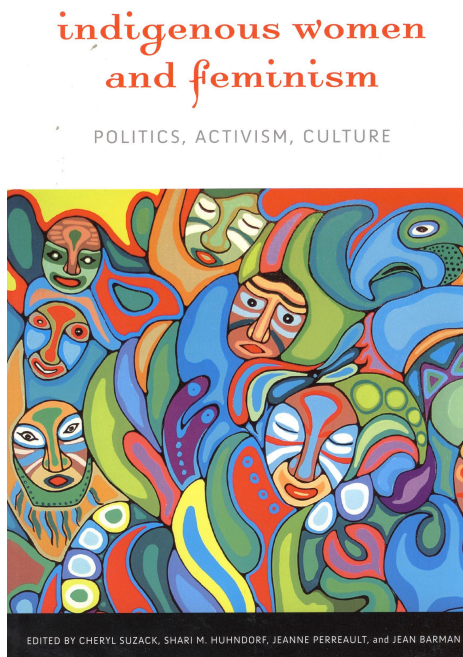


Book Review

‘Indigenous Women and Feminism: Politics, Activism, Culture’

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Indigenous Women and Feminism: Politics, Activism, Culture. Cheryl Suzack, Shari M. Huhndorf, Jeanne Perrault, and Jean Barman (Eds.). Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010. 344 pp.

In *Indigenous Women and Feminism*, the editors re-frame feminism in light of Indigenous contexts, boldly arguing for the necessity of a specific Indigenous feminism to address the dual marginalization of Indigenous women. Regardless of discipline, nation, or land base, Indigenous women must daily navigate the challenges of being marginalized as women within their own nations and the broader society, as well as being marginalized as Indigenous peoples. The scholars and writers represented in this clear,

comprehensive, and trenchant collection present the Indigenous women's perspective on the effects of continued colonization and the necessity of both intellectual and practical decolonization. With the exception of two essays on Ainu and Inuit women, the collection focuses primarily on North American and Canadian cases, while bringing together scholars and activists from such different disciplines as Women's Studies, Law, History, and Ethnic Studies. The geographical restriction might influence the normative notion of Indigenous feminism and may also explain why 'Indigenous feminism' is still so difficult to define. Overall, the collection critically engages "with the crucial issues of cultural identity, nationalism, and decolonization" (2). Within this book, eight Indigenous women and nine non-Indigenous women theorize a diversity of topics and issues cohering around the challenging notion of how colonization has transformed Indigenous communities, as well as how "culture complements and extends Indigenous women's activism and political work" (9). The editors worked hard to select essays with different approaches, from personal narratives of experience (Minnie Grey or Kim Anderson) to an exploration of issues in the academy (Patricia Penn Hilden and Leece M. Lee) such as questioning the value of intellectual work in general. In the introduction, the editors ask which term – Indigenous or feminism – should take precedence, while acknowledging the sometimes tense history between Indigenous women and second- and third-wave feminism, arguing that "Indigenous women and feminist issues remain underexamined in contemporary feminist theory" (1). The inclusive nature of this collection responds effectively to this problem, considering a range of Indigenous feminist practices from scholarship, legislation, and tribal politics to performance, film, and poetry.

Structurally, the editors divide their collection into three parts: Politics, Activism, and Culture. The first four chapters of the Politics section cover the relevance of feminism to cultural

traditions, the interconnectedness of feminism and politics for contemporary Indigenous women leaders, representations of gender and tribal politics in early Cherokee writings, and the creation and maintenance of racial and gender inequalities for Indigenous women in the academy. Minnie Grey, the former head negotiator for the Nunavik regional government and current executive director for the Nunavik Regional Board of Health and Social Services, addresses the changing roles for Inuit Women in “From Tundra to the Boardroom and Everywhere in Between”, in which she not only grapples with the term “feminism”, but also explores how her traditional education and upbringing help her cope with modern-day challenges. The chapters on “Native Women and Leadership” by Rebecca Tsosie (Yaqui) and the “Indigenous Feminism Project” by Patricia Penn Hilden (Nez Perce) and Leece Lee (Blackfeet) are particularly promising because these writers challenge readers to “reclaim, reread, and rearticulate” the roles and representations of Indigenous women in leadership roles within the realm of politics and academia (74). Tsosie sets out to locate a “Native feminist ethics” as a lens for examining Native women leaders that differs from the feminist ethics of women’s studies. Using the stories, wisdom, and writings of such Indigenous women as Joy Harjo (Muskogee Creek) and Jennie Joe (Navajo), Tsosie constructs a critical framework for considering how colonialism has impacted Native women’s leadership, particularly the problem of “acculturation policies” that supplanted “traditional governments and judicial values and norms with structures modeled upon Anglo governance, including gender hierarchies and systems of oppression” (33). Interviews with Native women in leadership positions allow Tsosie to construct a list of qualities that such leaders possess, including visionary skills, the ability to articulate goals, integrity, honesty, and strong faith. Building upon these ideas, Hilden and Lee attempt to “decolonize scholarship and history”, by considering the promises and problems of

Indigenous feminism in the academy. They focus on a lesser-known early 20th-century activist and strong critic of American capitalism, Laura Cornelius Kellogg, whose intellectual work informs the present foundation and potential future of Indigenous feminist scholarship. Hilden and Lee also tackle the persistent historical representations of Blackfoot women and through their examination of contradictory evidence from non-Native anthropologists and scholars, they suggest that the “cultural-intellectual framework of the Blackfeet” provided a counter-narrative to the “Western lens” so often preferred by those studying this culture (72). The breadth of examples, depth of insight, and range of cultures represented by these chapters clarifies the positive potential of the contributors’ approach to this subject.

A dynamic range of essays with thematic cohesion round out the Activism section, covering such issues as indigenous women prior to first contact, the emotional intelligence of mothering, the concept of a “red-black coalitional feminism”, the emotional and legal effects of gender discrimination on Aboriginal women, and narratives of empowerment for Ainu women in Japan. Kim Anderson’s (Cree-Métis) “Affirmations of an Indigenous Feminist” launches her essay with a typically-heard litany of dismissals of feminism in general, emphasizing the difficulties that Indigenous women have when attempting to identify with Western forms of feminism, particularly that feminism is a negative and exclusive endeavor. Anderson argues for opening “a dialogue about how Indigenous feminist thought can help us re-create a world that validates life in all its forms”, grounding her ideas in foundational principles of Indigenous societies such as the ways in which her land-based ancestors were “much more engaged with ways of honouring and nurturing life – all life” (82). Acknowledging the stark contrast with contemporary Indigenous societies’ survival in “a violent and militarized world, a world that operates on hierarchical systems and in which women and children suffer disproportionate

levels of poverty and abuse”, Anderson suggests that “we have much to learn from the systems our ancestors created to protect themselves and Kā wee ooma aski, their original mother, the earth” (82). Making the past present and influential on the future is the driving goal of Anderson’s essay and her engagement with ideas such as the “emotional intelligence of mothering” are truly compelling (83). Another strong contribution in this section is written by Cheryl Suzack (Anishinaabe), also one of the editors. Her essay, “Emotion before the Law”, uses several important legal cases from Canada to locate her examination of Aboriginal women in legal and political contexts. Underlying every turn of the argument is Canada’s Indian Act of 1876, which Suzack calls “an instrument of bureaucratic regulation” with a “dehumanizing structure, engendering consequential emotional, social, and political effects” which heavily impact Aboriginal women, including such outcomes as “gendered and racialized status categories” and the “continuing disempowerment of Aboriginal women” (129). According to Suzack, new knowledge gained from these struggles should lead not only to questions about disempowerment, injustice, and politics, but also to activism by and for Aboriginal women as a “politically important and inclusive feminist goal” (142). Finally, ann-elise lewallen goes “Beyond Feminism” in her discussion of Indigenous Ainu women and narratives of empowerment in Japan. Tackling the long-standing problem of ecological colonialism and its disastrous impact on both the environment and Ainu relations with “the non-human pantheon,” lewallen explores how contemporary Ainu women recover traditional practices to “restore the ethos” of earlier generations (153). Specifically, she focuses on the Ainu Women’s Survey project and project members “because this group is self-consciously addressing sex and gender issues as political concerns” (155). This small group within the Ainu community represents a shift among Ainu women and “emphasizes the disconnect between strict traditionalist revivalism and more

recent hybrid forms of cultural revival” (155). These issues of gender identity and cultural expectations resonate across all of the essays in this section and connect deeply to the message of the collection overall.

Turning to the Culture section, one finds a broad range of artistic productions under scrutiny, including the stage plays of Monique Mohica (Kuna/Rappahannock), the poetry and creative nonfiction of Marilyn Dumont, Joy Harjo, Ruby Wiebe, and others, as well as paintings, films, and performances by Indigenous women. Interestingly, this is the longest section with seven articles, suggesting the primacy of cultural production to Indigenous feminist scholars and the diverse ways they speak back against patriarchy and oppression. The greatest value of this section comes from introducing readers to contemporary Indigenous artists who are producing vital feminist works, which are in direct opposition to and often challenge the patriarchal, colonial expectations of Western governments and laws. In “Memory Alive”, Jeanne Perrault, also one of the editors, uses Indigenous theorists to analyze the use and importance of memory in the works of Joy Harjo, Marilyn Dumont, Jeannette Armstrong, and Louise Halfe. Of particular importance to her exploration is the “intimate relationship” that memory has “to speech, history, and the sacred” (199). Close readings of these poets’ words bring Perrault to the conclusion that memory has weight and “holds us, individually and culturally, to our Earth” (215). Storyweaving and the “Indigenous Feminist Performances of Spiderwoman Theater” take center stage in Katherine Young Evans’ essay. Storyweaving is an original performance technique that “combines mythic stories, personal and familial memories, popular culture references, songs, movements, and video clips” to bring “diverse audiences the active presence, in Gerald Vizenor’s words, of Native American women within both Euro-American society and contemporary Native artistic production” (258). One provocative assertion in Perrault’s

argument is a call for scholars to focus more attention on “live performance as a site of revitalization for contemporary Native communities fractured by centuries of colonialism” (258). The potential of Native theater is embodied by Spiderwoman Theater’s “combination of irreverent comedy, personal stories, and mythology” that has the potential to challenge the colonial status quo and heal communities, and provide a “multifaceted model for navigating the process of decolonization” (274). The final chapter in this section is Patricia Demers’ “Location, Dislocation, Relocation: Shooting Back with Cameras”, in which the author undertakes the question, “How is the connection between aboriginality and historical narrative, between the crucial specificity of affiliation with a First Nation and the relation of a specific moment or series of moments in time, announced, facilitated, and complicated by filmmaking?” (299). Demers’ intensive focus on the objects, performances, and goals in three documentary films by Indigenous women filmmakers results in the conclusion that “through respect for tradition and ceremony, the integrity of storytelling, and the honesty of a personal, direct voice, these films activate their revisionist impulse to document the fight for justice and redress” (312). As this book seeks to address the challenge of finding a basis for collective political action and engagement in broader anti-colonial struggles that also addresses the particularities of Indigenous women’s social positions, the Culture Section implies with its length and diversity of mediums that Indigenous women’s cultural productions may be the central loci for political action and engagement.

Clearly, the aim of this collection is to shine a light of understanding on the unique challenges that Indigenous women face as they strive for justice, visibility, and empowerment within their communities, as well as the necessity of a specific Indigenous feminism. Ultimately, the scope of works here provides a new lens into the intellectual, theoretical, and cultural lives of

contemporary Indigenous peoples. Indispensable and thought-provoking, this collection will add to any scholar's understanding of contemporary Indigenous women and the new field of Indigenous feminism. As gender reshapes indigenous politics, Indigenous feminism is an emerging field that is helping to rethink current mainstream feminist theoretical concerns about the intersections of gender, race, sexuality, and the significance of politicizing identity and locating (or dislocating) the female subject. As Patricia Penn Hilden and Leece M. Lee state in Chapter Four, "[w]e offer only a glimpse of the necessary future of Indigenous feminist scholarship, work that must reclaim and rearticulate the voices of all our forebears, whose intellectual work offers a solid foundation for our own and that of our daughters" (65). This collection would be valuable to any scholar studying multiculturalism, gender equality and cultural rights, democracy and difference, feminist theory, cultural identity, nationalism, post-colonialism, decolonization, survivance, or rhetorical sovereignty.