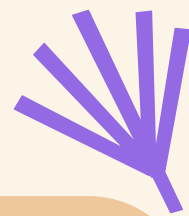




Five Challenges of Native Feminist Theories



Definitions

- **Native feminist theories:** theories that focus on the connections between settler colonialism, heteropatriarchy, and heteropaternalism, and how these interact with issues of gender, sexuality, race, indigeneity, and nation. Native feminist theories are not a closed practice; non-Indigenous scholars may, and are encouraged to, engage and contribute to these theories meaningfully.
- **Settler colonialism:** an active and ongoing socio-political structure in which newcomers/settlers/colonizers come to a place, claim it as their own, and aim to eliminate the land's Indigenous population through exploitative labour, extraction of value from the land, and genocide.
- **Heteropatriarchy:** social systems in which heterosexuality/patriarchy are “normal”, anything else is abnormal and not preferable.
- **Heteropaternalism:** the presumption that heteropatriarchal arrangements in which the father is in charge/centered should be the model followed by the state and its institutions.

Introduction

In “Decolonizing Feminism: Challenging Connections Between Settler Colonialism and Heteropatriarchy,” Arvil, Tuck and Morrill argue that, when it comes to Native feminist theories, Indigenous women's issues cannot be separated from all Indigenous peoples' issues. **Indeed, the goal of Indigenous peoples, as well as Native feminist theories, is to achieve decolonization and sovereignty; in other words, total independence from the Western nation-state on their own terms.** To achieve this, the authors address mainstream/“whitestream” feminists, as well as scholars of all different disciplines, in their argument for the importance of unmasking the forces that have silenced Native feminist theories within women's's studies, as well as ethnic and Indigenous studies. Native feminist theories thereby suggest that, **ethnic and Indigenous studies must center heteropatriarchy and gender, and women's studies must centrally address settler colonialism and indigeneity.** The authors suggest the following five challenges that must be overcome for decolonization.



1. Problematize Settler Colonialism and its Intersections

Settler colonialism persists because of the naturalization of heteropatriarchy and heteropaternalism, which interrupts **the sense of being a people** within Indigenous communities. While nation-states are governed through domination and coercion, Indigenous sovereignty and nationhood is achieved through interrelatedness and responsibility to others and to the land. **Problematizing settler colonialism implies a need for feminism to reassess its goals,** and in doing so, should refuse to assume the innocence of the settler state. Indeed, when it comes to Native feminist theories, they differ from mainstream feminism because **these theories do not assume that the nation-state is, or should, be permanent. Therefore, the authors posit the question of whether it is possible to have a society that does not rely on maintaining the nation-state.** Using this lens, it becomes possible to envision a version of women's studies that is decolonized, and uses Native feminist theories.



2. Refuse Erasure But Do More Than Include

It is not sufficient to simply “include” Native feminist theories in the broader disciplines of gender, womens', and ethnic studies, as “inclusion” implies a racial hierarchy that is implicit in settler colonialism. **Native feminist theories aim to disrupt the entire discipline and existing discourse of women's studies, as well as ethnic and Indigenous studies.** For example, as the social categories of man and woman are inventions of settler colonialism and heteropatriarchy, Native feminist theories suggest that Indigeneity and womanhood are interrelated and inextricably linked facets of the identities of Indigenous women. **As is true of the present, Indigenous women have always led resistance against genocide and settler colonialism. This resistance has always been an act of *nation building*, not a performance of feminism.** Furthermore, political and economic injustices happen to both Indigenous men and women, which is why it is often the case **that Indigeneity and womanhood are equally important facets of one's identity** within Native feminist theories.





3. Craft Allegiances That Directly Address & Respect Differences

When it comes to meaningful allyship, it is essential to address the differences between Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous people. Issues of land and tribal belonging should never be erased for the sake of creating solidarity solely on the grounds of feminism; **it is imperative that relationships to settler colonialism are directly acknowledged as a critical central focus of social justice and political work, especially for settler allies.** Arvin, Tuck and Morrill maintain that potential allies and collaborators with Native feminist theories must reflect on why they want to do this work, and expect Native peoples to do the same in their own contexts. Allyship is not a trend; **allies must commit to proactivity in these decisions, refrain from relying on Indigenous peoples to tell them how to be good allies, and commit long-term to working towards structural change.**



4. Recognize Indigenous Ways of Knowing

Mainstream/white feminists must recognize Indigenous peoples as authors of important theories about the world. Three key areas of concern for Native feminist theories engaged with Indigenous ways of knowing include 1) land, 2) sovereignty, and 3) futurity and decolonization.

Land

Land is knowing and knowledge, *not* property, *nor* a source of extractable capital. The dispossession of Native land is both materially and spiritually destructive to the profound connection that exists between Indigenous peoples and the land. The desire to reclaim relationships with the land that is held deeply by Indigenous peoples requires sacrifices that settlers cannot fully comprehend. For example, this is manifested in Native Hawaiians living on beaches rather than relocating away from Native land due to the cost of living in Hawaii.

Sovereignty

Native feminist theories radically reshape notions of Indigenous sovereignty, which is occasionally hostile to some Indigenous peoples' investment in the nation-state and heteropatriarchy. Native feminist theories undermine Native governments that claim sovereignty, but still depend on the nation-state. Additionally, **Indigenous sovereignty is concerned with problematizing the idea of geographical location as a marker of who may be considered “more Indigenous,”** particularly in the case of comparing those who live on reserve, versus those who live off reserve. Indigenous sovereignty means recognizing Native communities across many different locations, rather than solely the “proper” space of the reserve.

Futurity and Decolonization

Sovereignty and decolonization are and have always been the goals of Native feminist theories, but **it is essential to keep in mind that these goals are in place for the purpose of creating a people-possessed Indigenous future.** Native feminist theories actively construct the future of sovereignty, or, **what sovereignty could mean for Indigenous peoples in the future.** The authors enforce the importance of framing futurity as being on the terms of Indigenous peoples alone; prioritizing futurity and decolonization directly counters settler colonial tactics that cause significant harm to Indigenous peoples to this day.

5. Question Academic Participation in Indigenous Dispossession



Finally, academia must **divest from practices that may give way to participation in the dispossession of Indigenous land, livelihood, and futures.** Rather, academics should teach Native scholarship as co-contemporary with other feminist scholarship, placing Indigenous peoples within modernity as active and highly respectable scholars. **Scholars must prioritize learning more about *current* struggles for sovereignty over land claims, and use *recent* analyses of the anti-Indigenous practices of the government and its corporations.** Additionally, scholars should reassess what they presume that Native feminist theories, and Indigenous theories more broadly, are actually concerned with; the reality is **that these theories are very expansive, and can be meaningfully applied across several different disciplines.** By making the effort to integrate Indigenous and decolonial theory, as well as addressing and problematizing settler colonialism and heteropatriarchy, feminism may be reshaped into a practice that centers dismantling the nation-state, and can be meaningfully practiced by anyone who resonates with this goal, Indigenous or not.

