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ONE

Extending our Accounts of Indigenous Feminism

Gina Starblanket and Joyce Green

This book is about Indigenous feminism. While it focuses particularly on the Canadian legal and political context, Indigenous feminism exists wherever states have displaced and subordinated Indigenous Peoples. Indigenous feminism troubles the imposition and manifestation of racialized and gendered structures of power in colonial and Indigenous contexts, taking up and informing resistance to colonialism, racism, and sexism. When the first edition of this book was published in 2007, there was little scholarship on or activism mobilized by Indigenous feminism, and very few Indigenous activists self-identified as feminist. Yet, those few voices have incrementally made space for more work about Indigenous feminism, in the form of foundations, echoes, and new Indigenous feminist articulations. That space has produced better analysis of the conditions that affect Indigenous women’s lives; in particular, of distinctly gendered experiences of colonialism and attending violence.

The first edition of this book was conceptualized following a Symposium on Aboriginal Feminism in 2002 at the University of Regina organized by Joyce Green. The symposium was attended by self-identified Aboriginal feminists and some Indigenous women who were interested in women’s issues but did not take the label of feminist. The conceptualization, organization, and execution of the symposium was an exercise in feminist solidarity. With the support of a politically focused affinity group, the Kitchen Table Collective, and of some non-Indigenous and Indigenous feminist bureaucrats in the BC Region
division of Status of Women Canada, Green was able to secure a grant to hold a Symposium on Aboriginal Feminism. The presentations and discussions at the symposium impelled the inaugural edition of *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism* (2007).

While all participants were important contributors to the symposium, perhaps none was more helpful than Shirley Bear, a Maliseet activist, feminist, and Elder, who spoke of the importance of feminism to her and to many sisters around the world (Green 2007, 26). Her participation was especially powerful because so many of us had been told that feminism was untraditional and incompatible with Indigenous cultures; indeed, a couple of participants had been told their feminism was proof that they were not Indigenous. Bear told the group that she had come to challenge the prohibition on doing healing ceremonies with women when they were menstruating because of a particular woman’s need for help at that time; she said no one had ever been hurt by her ceremonies, but many had been helped. That experience led her to question other prohibitions on women. She was also a fierce advocate for Indigenous women’s equality of Indian Act status recognition. She was a traditional ceremonialist, but not a fundamentalist who insisted on mindless conformity, without regard for the critiques that feminism has raised. She prayed with and for us, laughed with us, and joined with us in claiming feminism for Indigenous women. Following her 2022 passing, we want to take the space to honour Shirley Bear and her contribution to Indigenous feminist knowledge and activism in Canada, to the search for status justice for Indigenous women, and to the intellectual genealogy of the *Making Space* volumes.

In 2007, when the first edition of *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism* was published, there was virtually no explicit writing on Indigenous feminism in Canada, although there was some work critiquing feminist solidarity across racial and colonial lines and some work claiming there was no such thing as Indigenous feminism. In the Indigenous (“Native”) studies, English, and politics areas, there were also groundbreaking accounts both biographical and activist, as well as a number of works on identity regulation in particular. This work took up two central themes — Indigenous women’s experiences with colonialism and racism, and the identity problematic, policed as it has been by the settler state and then by Indian Act bands and other Indigenous political formations. The identity and status problematic has been central in the
Canadian context because it is an effective part of the unending desire of the state to eliminate many in the state-recognized status category of Indian Act bands, including through the enforcement of European and Christian formulations of patriarchy (Eberts 2014, 2017).

The literature gap pointed to the invisibility of Indigenous women in feminist movements and in academia, and to the unthinking racism that has enabled some to fail to see Indigenous women in our full historical and contemporary contexts: as contemporary persons living in the context of colonial and gender oppression by the occupying state and populations of, for example, Canada, the US, Aotearoa/New Zealand, Sápmi, and Australia, with their racist mythologies, institutions, and practices. That gap also allowed male-dominated settler governments and some equally male-dominated Indigenous governments and lobby groups to say they spoke for women, while ignoring women in their vision, politics, and budgets. Thus, the impetus behind the 2002 Symposium on Aboriginal Feminism and then *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism* was the need to make some space in the academic and popular literature on women and liberation for Indigenous feminist voices.

When the second edition came out in 2017, much had changed, and space for Indigenous feminist analysis was being carved out in Indigenous and non-Indigenous contexts. While anti-feminist sentiment remained intact in many Indigenous communities, an increasing number of scholars and activists were less afraid to take the feminist label or deploy explicitly feminist analyses. Contributors to the second edition examined applications of Indigenous feminist theory and practice, honing the movement’s scope and intervention as a form of social and political critique. There was a growing body of theoretical, analytical, and creative writing relevant to Indigenous feminism, and within the Canadian academy, Indigenous feminism was beginning to be taken up in disciplines beyond the fields of law, politics, women’s and gender studies and Native studies. There was more lip service within some Indigenous and non-Indigenous political organizations to the need for gendered analysis for political legitimacy and for sound policy and strategy, even if commitment and action lagged. A number of prominent Indigenous scholars also began recognizing the significance of feminist analyses and theories, naming them in their own work. Dene scholar Glen Coulthard, for example, wrote of gendered analysis that “the crucial interventions of Indigenous feminist scholarship and activism over
the years have made it *impossible* for any credible scholar ... to ignore the impact that colonial patriarchy continues to have on our national liberation efforts” (2014, 157; emphasis in original).

At this point, there was a body of critical feminist anti-racist writing that framed Canada as a colonial settler state infused with racist conceptions about Indigenous Peoples and other non-white people (see, for example, Thobani 2007; Dhamoon and Abu-Laban 2009; Mawani 2009; Schick 2009; Razack 2002, 2016). Much important work was also done by non-Indigenous scholars tilling the fields of feminist, anti-racist, and post-colonial theory. A number of Indigenous scholars contributed work critical of settler colonialism that, while not always explicitly or even implicitly feminist, provided important insights for Indigenous and other feminist scholars. Thus, the scholarly literature became more robust, and the theoretical contributions more likely to take up gendered and raced accounts of Indigenous Peoples, and of colonialism’s distinctive impacts on them.

These additional theoretical and empirical tools have been useful for both scholars and activists. The fear and marginalization that Indigenous feminists felt so keenly because of explicit hostility to the presence and analyses of Indigenous feminists were somewhat mitigated (though not erased) by 2017. More Indigenous women took the label, used the analyses, and worked for liberatory objectives consistent with Indigenous feminism. Yet, sexism, misogyny, and racism continued to afflict Indigenous women, and serious engagement with these factors had not yet become consistent or routine in either Indigenous or settler governments and communities. Thus, the second edition illuminated the need for consistent application of the analyses and tools provided by Indigenous feminism while providing some first-rate scholarship about matters impacting Indigenous women.

Two decades after the first symposium on Aboriginal feminism, Gina Starblanket and some feminist colleagues from the University of Victoria and the Yellowhead Institute organized a conference on Indigenous feminism at the University of Victoria. The purpose of this gathering was to engage a broad, interdisciplinary community-engaged dialogue considering how Indigenous feminism has grown as an area of study and practice in the past two decades; to workshop papers that would ultimately lead to the development of this third edition of *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism*; and to bring together feminist colleagues
from across institutions to reflect upon Joyce Green’s scholarly legacy and her contributions to the study of Indigenous feminism. This symposium also heard expressions of gratitude and indebtedness to Green, which incisively reflected the enormity, interdisciplinarity, and longevity of her influence across generations.

Now in its third edition, *Making Space* continues to advance Indigenous feminist theory and activism through new or extended applications of Indigenous feminist methods and theories, and through reflection and conversation about the movement’s ideas, concepts, and approaches. In their invitations to write for this volume, contributors were asked to contemplate the future horizons of Indigenous feminism as it advances beyond the foundational phase of the movement. Some authors from the first and second editions were invited to provide updated chapters with an eye towards new social, legal, and political developments, and space was reserved for new chapters, solicited from leading and emergent voices across disciplines. Several new contributions are from authors who have the privilege of being trained by the first generation of scholars to call themselves Indigenous feminists; their experiences offer important insights into how Indigenous feminist tools, methods, and practices are being applied in expansive ways across disciplines. They also demonstrate the importance of having scholars legitimize Indigenous feminist analysis and practice through their teaching and research — scholarly and political invisibility renders discussion difficult.

This edition recognizes the intellectual genealogy of Indigenous feminism as well as the importance of tracing change, facilitating ongoing conversations between generations and cohorts, and pushing our horizons forward. In this context it was particularly important not to approach difference as a weakness meant to cultivate critique or divisiveness, but as a reflection of the diverse ways in which we encounter, respond, and live through different contexts from our own locations. Intergenerational, stylistic, and interdisciplinary differences in this volume were approached as generative, indicating a diversity of identities, thought, and language within the growing Indigenous feminist movement.

While this new edition reflects the fact that the content and form of some existing Indigenous feminist concerns have changed in relation to the political terrain, it also demonstrates that other preoccupations
remain intact, indicating a continuity of structures of oppression. We have now had the time to gain the benefit of hindsight with respect to many matters, and this experience allows us to hone our approaches and analyses. And, moving beyond the inaugural phase of Indigenous feminism has opened space for us to engage in greater contemplation of our relationships, which are also changing. There are more alliances between Indigenous and non-Indigenous activists and academics, and with other feminist, queer, and liberatory movements, united by convergences in our goals, analyses, and solidarities. Trans and Two-Spirit inclusivity is now a significant consideration across feminist spaces, with all feminists being prompted to give closer attention to and reflect on how they approach and engage with gender and sexual identity.

Alongside these changes, certain constants remain. There is still a fundamental hostility toward feminism in many communities, public and political spaces, and universities. Most of the Indigenous women who identify as feminists remain cautious about claiming the label and explicitly invoking the analysis, and the Canadian feminist movement’s coloniality and whiteness continue to attract significant critique in Indigenous academic and community contexts. Specific and structural colonialism, racism, and heteropatriarchy relegate our scholarly and activist contributions to the margins of dominant intellectual and political worlds. Thus, our work continues, as we must still convey, theorize, and validate our experiences and analyses to both non-Indigenous and Indigenous forms of knowledge production.

Continuing to “make space,” in this context, means engaging critical questions about the theoretical and practical foundations and advances of Indigenous feminism over past decades, while also recognizing that our own encounters with the movement’s central categories and concepts are varied, differently informed, and changing. Indeed, “making space” comprises a continuous project of being in conversation with one another about our shared and our different understandings and contexts, which in turn might enable new openings for potentially transformative conversations and relationships within our own movement, and with other movements and actors.

THE FINGERPRINTS OF INDIGENOUS FEMINISM

Women have been subjected to oppression arising from heteropatriarchy and misogyny in many cultural and political contexts, because of power
relations in which men dominate and hold cultural, economic, political, and social privileges relative to women. The way this relationship has evolved has not been identical everywhere, but its existence is predominant. It is in this context that feminist theory and activism emerge, according to specific conditions, and envisioned by feminists who seek greater measures of autonomy, dignity, opportunity, respect, contextual equality, inclusion, and agency for women in all our diversity. Feminist theory and empirical work shed a bright light on power relations wherever they occur, and foreground women's voices and experiences with the heteropatriarchal assumptions and power relations that produce other forms of subordination, such as colonialism, racism, homophobia, and transphobia. This focus on power relations and oppression also contributes to other politics of resistance, such as ecofeminism and Indigenous ecological positions, both of which focus on protecting the earth and its creatures from the ongoing assault by human and corporate activity. It includes the activities of land and water protectors, and of what we can call “all our relations” — all life forms.

Indigenous feminism is all of this and more, for it is framed by the realities and histories of Indigenous experiences in the context of colonialism, as well as by the sexism, racism, and racially motivated misogyny that infects the settler state’s populations and cultures. Indigenous feminists draw on and sometimes critique our own cultural contexts, which leads to particular insights and objectives. Indigenous feminism is a liberatory movement grounded on theoretical foundations. It is premised on rejecting oppression of Indigenous women, Indigenous Peoples, and the lands and waters that we hold responsibilities towards and from which we have been dispossessed by the settler states.

Indigenous feminism is a mode of critique, but it also entails a resurgent, future-oriented politic. Starblanket writes of three dimensions of resurgence significant to Indigenous feminism: the temporal dimension, with which resurgence illuminates present and future theoretical work; the land-based dimension, which considers land as a source of culture, education, and inspiration; and the “everyday” nature of acts of resurgence in our relationships (2017, 23–24). Ingrid Waldron provides a useful summary of Indigenous feminism and its resurgence politics:

An Indigenous feminist politics is a political, social, and cultural theory and movement premised on transformative change through Indigenous forms of governance, actions
to combat gender discrimination and the social erasure and marginalization of Indigenous women, the repudiation of patriarchy in Indigenous communities, white supremacy and colonialism within mainstream white feminism, the decolonization of Indigenous men and women, and equality and sovereignty for Indigenous people globally. (2022, 98)

Indigenous feminists find themselves in the context of colonialism and resistance; of personal, collective, structural, and environmental racism and sexism; of genocides, territorial displacements, cultural repression or annihilation; and of ongoing economic exploitations. Like other feminisms, Indigenous feminism is a broad and deep category with different strands. The broad parameters sketched here are true for the majority of these strands. Indigenous feminism is also unique as a form of grounded and transformative critique: the signal distinction between other feminisms and Indigenous feminism lies in our simultaneous preoccupation with land, with histories of land theft and oppression, with the consequent cultural and material losses, and with the denial by the Canadian state (or other states) and by some First Nations bands (and other Indigenous communities) of our identities. These matters fuel our feminism just as much as the myriad forms of sexist, misogynist, and racist oppression that afflict our lives.

Thus, in addition to confronting gendered oppression, Indigenous women’s liberation entails liberation from colonialism and the corollary practices of particularly extractivist capitalism because, as Rauna Kuokkanen writes, “the exploitation of Indigenous women and their bodies has been inextricably tied to the process of ongoing exploitation and dispossession of Indigenous lands and resources since the first contact” (2019, 191) and thus, “gender violence [is] a self-determination issue” (214). An Indigenous feminist analysis commends the withdrawal of the settler state from spaces of Indigenous sovereignty and jurisdiction; and remediation of the violence, deprivation, and dislocation imposed by the state and its corporate clients on Indigenous communities and nations. It challenges the logic of imperialism and re-centres Indigenous women (Stewart-Harawira 2007). It requires reclamation of territory, which has been stolen for settlement, state sovereignty, and “Crown lands,” and for capitalist exploitation. These deprivations require reparations for colonial injuries inflicted on specific nations, communities, families,
and individuals — and on the land itself. Those injuries are often a consequence of extractive industries supported by the state’s legislative and enforcement powers (for example, see Hall 2022; Waldron 2022).

Indigenous feminist analyses of colonialism require confronting the systemic and specific forms of racialized sexism and misogyny that settler state citizens and institutions project on Indigenous women and girls. And yes, it requires demanding respect, equality, and non-violence from Indigenous governments and Indigenous men. That includes policy decisions from the former, and a consensus on the need for cultural and behavioural changes for some who are, frankly, appallingly violent, disrespectful, and dominating in their relationships. It includes the need for confronting gender oppression in contemporary self-government regimes which deploy gendered practices “that create hierarchies and exclusions that negatively affect Indigenous women more than men” (Kuokkanen 2019, 175; see also 2014) and to also confront forms of traditionalism “deployed to discipline and morally police Indigenous women” (Craft 2023, 101).

Indigenous feminism remains relevant in the context of ongoing gendered relations of power and cultures infected with masculinist and white supremacist practices and privileges. We continue to require methods and tools that allow us to form complex analyses and accounts of how power operates in society. We are in neither a post-feminist nor a post-colonial order. We have none of us attained our goals, even if we have advanced our struggles. Heteropatriarchy and misogyny, often fused with racism, continue to circumscribe and sometimes to obliterate the lives of women (Anderson, Campbell, and Belcourt 2018; Bourgeois 2017; Eberts 2007, 2017; Kuokkanen 2014, 2017; Thobani 2007, 2020; Rebick 2005; Razack 2002; Government of Canada 2019). Moreover, misogyny functions to enhance Indigenous women’s oppression, as has been well demonstrated by Rauna Kuokkanen’s study of Indigenous government in Canada, Greenland, and Sápmi (2019) and by Mary Eberts’s important theorizations about the Victorian-inspired impositions Canada has and continues to apply to Indigenous women (2014, 2017).

Colonialism, the Canadian Constitution and federal division of powers, and the capitalist class, which works with government support to secure and “develop” resources on Indigenous lands, are perennial concerns for Indigenous feminists because “gender regimes are part of institutional design” (Kuokkanen 2019, 139). Aedan Alderson writes,
“The goal of gaining and maintaining a monopoly over Indigenous land, people, and natural resources has been an explicit part of the Crown’s colonial aspirations” (2022, 50). In this, sexism writ large works with colonialism, as corporations and both constitutional orders of Canadian government appropriate Indigenous lands and resources. Indigenous people are relationally connected to their territories. The misuse, destruction, and appropriation of Indigenous lands is a profound injury to our nations and to the women of those nations; moreover, male dominance in extractive industries’ workforces — combined with their remoteness from other employment options and from women’s support and protection services, as well as the gendered, sexist, and often racist ethos in the “man camps” — creates security liabilities for Indigenous women on our own territories (LAWS 2021; Waldron 2022).

These matters shape Indigenous feminist politics, scholarship, and priorities.

INDIGENOUS FEMINIST THEORY

The theoretical basis of Indigenous feminism is continuously being developed in relation to Indigenous feminist advocacy and activism. The contributions to the literature and activism signal what make it distinct from other feminisms. This includes its theoretical characteristics; its response to colonialism; specific Indigenous and gendered critiques and analyses; the shared terrain with other feminisms and feminists, and with other Indigenous people; its commitment to 2SLGBTQIA+ people’s rights and voices; and solidarities with other movements towards justice and liberation from related forms of oppression.

Political theory is a set of tools that reveals phenomena, relationships, and foundations, and points to frameworks of analysis. Indigenous feminist theory does precisely that but is neither entirely separate from other feminist theory nor entirely consistent with it. Its distinctions are anchored in the social and political context of Indigenous women in particular communities; in oppressive, sexist, racist, and exploitative colonial relationships. It is concerned with the violence of classification, regulation, and representation of gendered, racialized identities. It is embedded in histories that dispute the stories of settler communities and institutions, histories which frame the wounds of intergenerational trauma, and the problems of intergenerational subjugation to colonial narratives, institutions, priorities, and privileges. Like other feminisms,
it is always focused on praxis — on theoretically informed political action for transformative purposes.

The signal characteristic of Indigenous feminism to date has been its attention to the impacts of colonialism, racism, sexism, and misogyny both in private and public life, individually and systemically. This is not to deny other liberatory movements with which Indigenous feminism may ally, but to assert that there is a fundamental socially constructed, politically imposed power relationship at the core of gender- and sex-based oppression that requires analysis and resistance. Feminism employs a gendered, relational, and critical analysis of the relationships between men and women; sometimes of gender categories themselves; of male-dominated institutions and practices; and of gendered power in social and political contexts. Feminism, like resurgence, and like other critical social movements, is theoretically informed but also is directed at transformative action. It is a political as well as an intellectual exercise. Feminists have been on the front lines of political action in communities, movements, politics, and services to and protections for women and for trans and non-binary people. Feminism is not an armchair preoccupation.

In its organization and politics, feminist praxis relies on feminist processes. These have included engagements with internal movement structures and processes, with community members, and with the prioritization of specific political goals through consultation, advocacy, and often, through internal governance consensus practices. Following critiques within the Canadian feminist movement in the 1980s, the movement itself was prompted to address race and racism, sexual identity, class, and other forms of difference with political implications. The former premier Canadian national feminist organization, the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC), grappled with these on centre stage, as racialized women contested NAC’s obliviousness to the power relations consequent to racism, colonialism, and privilege (Collier 2015, 26) and to its own structural systemic racism. In the process, some white feminists in NAC demonstrated solidarity and awareness, while others refused the imputation of racism and some left the organization. Following Judy Rebick’s 1990–93 NAC presidency, NAC engaged in an internal discussion about race and racism (Rebick 2005). Subsequently, more racialized women were elected to lead the organization: Sunera
Extending our Accounts of Indigenous Feminism


Indigenous feminism is a unique position arising from the multiple forms of oppression layered onto Indigenous women, the overarching one of which is colonialism. That fundamental reality shapes Indigenous women's experiences — and that of all Indigenous people. It arguably also informs the lives of all other people, despite their general obliviousness to their privileges because of it. We contribute to theoretical development by revealing the parameters of gendered, racialized, and colonial relationships. Indigenous feminism is attentive to colonialism as a primary context for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, in a way that has historically not been shared much by non-Indigenous feminism.

Indigenous women do not have the luxury of focusing only on gender oppression or only on issues of inclusion, access, and equality, or representation, because the fundamental colonial fact constructs and maintains a cascade of other oppressions for us. The first deprivation of colonialism is the theft of Indigenous land. Much of Indigenous feminist activism and theorizing focuses on the integral relationship between Indigenous people, particularly Indigenous women, and specific natural environments on particular territories. Many women are land and water protectors, and practitioners of ancient protocols for relationship with their territories. We are scholars who frame these activities as exercises of Indigenous law, of Indigenous title. Our theorizing is for our scholarly interests but also for our political emancipation and for the liberation of particular nations, communities, and individuals from the imposed strictures of the Canadian state. Increasingly, these theorizations are being extended to interrogate the impacts of colonial and heteronormative modes of thought at interpersonal, everyday levels, pointing to other lived and embodied layers of oppression impacting many Indigenous women.

The transformative character of Indigenous feminism arises from its intellectual and political foundations and aspirations. The personal is political, especially for feminists, because of the continuous denial by many men, the state, and a host of other governments, including Indigenous ones, that women's concerns and experiences are a priority. While Indigenous women may find themselves described as the centre of cultures and communities, this understanding is not generally reflected materially — not for men in our families and relationships, not for federal and provincial governments, and not for band governments or First
Nations, Métis, Inuit, and other Indigenous organizations. Because they have been male dominated. Because men are accustomed to personal power and to being dominant. Because structural racism and sexism are inherent in state institutions. Because patriarchy and misogyny have infected colonized people — but also because, as Emma LaRocque noted, not all pre-contact Indigenous practices were benevolent for women (2010; 1993, 72–89; 2017, 75) and therefore we cannot afford the indulgence of romanticizing them.

To the extent that feminism is a theoretically informed, action-oriented social movement, it must in all its manifestations take into account Indigenous liberation in the conditions in which we have been oppressed, and in which we struggle now. For Indigenous feminists, there is no distinction between our resurgent, decolonial objectives and our feminism. Indigenous governance, self-determination, language recovery, land back, jurisdiction, and reparations for colonialism’s racist encounter are essential goals for Indigenous feminists, even if we do not define and experience our struggles identically. Indigenous feminists share broader feminist terrain of seeking social and economic justice, freedom from male violence, personal autonomy, and measures of social, economic, and political equality and opportunity. Indigenous feminists are ecologically conscious and activist, concerned with the health and care of our territories and all our relations, not only human ones. Indigenous feminists are concerned with the perpetual struggles against national and provincial governments that are always imposing on Indigenous lands and communities and continuing with land theft and their justifications for it. In other words, these political issues are of primary concern to Indigenous feminists and to those who wish to understand and stand in solidarity with Indigenous feminists.

Intersectionality theory has informed the work of many Indigenous feminist scholars and activists in our engagements with overlapping, if often distinct, experiences of oppression. Kimberlé Crenshaw’s powerful theory of intersectionality points to the importance of recognizing the multiplicity of identity categories that individuals occupy, highlighting how these inform the diverse experiences of individuals within them. Her analysis has provided important tools to analyze the ways in which location matters: it is not possible to consider power relations without accounting for the many ways socio-political locations shape
experience, opportunity, and analyses (1989). Crenshaw observed that intersectionality is

basically a lens, a prism, for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other. We tend to talk about race inequality as separate from inequality based on gender, class, sexuality or immigrant status. What’s often missing is how some people are subject to all of these, and the experience is not just the sum of its parts. (Steinmetz 2020)

Rita Dhamoon writes that intersectionality reveals a single experience at the nexus of relations of dominance and subordination, of privilege and abjection; thus, intersectionality is a synergistic totality, not a set of additive singularities (2011, 230). Intersectionality can never be an invitation to consider Indigeneity as one factor and womanhood as another, which when read together produce an intersectional analysis, because we are simultaneously all of our subject positions and they produce a single experience for individuals and classes of individuals. It is this experiential singularity that is intersectional, that requires the nuanced analysis informed by the theoretical tool of intersectionality. Because we inhabit our identities diversely, and because oppressive structures can interact or collide in many different ways, we must account for how multiple axes of oppression encounter and operate in relation to one another to form distinct experiences of oppression.

Colonialism is a factor experienced by most Indigenous people, but not identically: gender, sexuality, location, class, cultural cohesion, and political consciousness frame and impact both actual experience and subjects’ perceptions of and responses to their experience. And as Sherene Razack (cited in Dhamoon 2011, 232) argues, these positions are also produced relationally and must be considered in that context. One cannot engage Indigenous feminism without critically engaging the history, myths, and preoccupations of the Canadian state or of other settler states. Understanding how colonialism has created the conditions in which Indigenous women struggle, and thus, the conditions that have shaped the practice and discourse of Indigenous feminism, is essential to understanding the theory and practice of Indigenous feminism itself. It is an integral part of conceptualizing anti- and post-colonial aspirations for Indigenous people. Indigenous struggles are incomprehensible
without understanding colonialism, an exploitive and racialized system of plunder that is ongoing on Turtle Island (Coulthard 2014; Thomas and Coburn 2022).

Theories of gender in the context of the un-hyphenated invisible and unconscious whiteness of settler society do not account for the context of most Indigenous people’s lives. Colonialism, racism, economic class, and their consequences are largely invisible to the state’s privileged white settler population but cannot be ignored by Indigenous women and men. One must be privileged to be oblivious to colonialism, racism, and sexism in Canada. Most Indigenous feminism takes this into account, producing powerful analyses and theory.

There are structural factors that privilege some at the expense of others. These factors are enjoyed particularly by white people, who need not see it or be conscious of it in order to benefit from it. Moreover, and most importantly, these factors are reproduced systemically, rendering them impervious to personal and individual frameworks of analysis. Thus, they persist and thrive even in the context of a rising chorus of political critique.

It is because of the oppression of colonialism that Indigenous women and men share, that Indigenous feminism is quite distinct from liberal feminism. It is because of the obliviousness of white privilege that the Canadian feminist movement has been challenged for its myopia, exclusion, and arrogance, notably in the 1980s and 1990s. It is the perennial, self-serving failure of the Canadian political class and academic elite to grapple with the structural and theoretical power of colonialism in the state that insulates Canadians from learning something about their privilege and our oppression. And because of these factors, it is premature to talk about state reconciliation, given the state does not take responsibility for or demonstrate an understanding of its own implication in and perpetuation of colonialism.

It is also because of the aspirational distinctions between settler and Indigenous women and gender-diverse people that our feminisms differ. Indigenous feminists, like other feminists, seek recognition and respect for the intrinsic value of women and girls — and increasingly, for gender-diverse and non-binary people. Like others, we seek safety in homes and in other spaces, and women-positive economic and social policy. We seek the elimination of male violence against women, girls, and gender-diverse people; we seek autonomy, legal and political rights,
and personal self-determination over our bodies. But there is more, and it arises from Indigenous oppression by Canada and Canadians, from the structural conditions that shape our lives. It involves political self-determination, cultural authority and respect, language reclamation, and above all, the claim to traditional territory. It includes the right to have children, and to raise them in our families and communities, as well as the right to not become pregnant or reproduce. It takes up environmental exploitation that violates Indigenous relationships to lands and to the non-human beings that rely on them. These characteristics distinguish the grounds of our theoretical contributions and critiques, both identifying their distinctive qualities while also gesturing towards social and political convergences across theories and practices of change and liberation.

IDENTITY, INCLUSION, RECOGNITION, AND ERASURE

Indigenous identity, and particularly “Indian” status under the Indian Act, has been a major preoccupation of many Indigenous feminists because many Indigenous identities, and especially Indigenous women’s identities, have been denied or compromised by the settler state, legislatively impaired by the Indian Act, and subsequently enforced by most “First Nations” (that is, Indian Act–defined bands) with terrible consequences. It is important to remember that non-Status Indigenous, Métis, and Inuit women are often afflicted by Indigenous identity denial by the state and sometimes by particular organizations, while simultaneously being subjected to the racism endemic in the state’s populations, cultures, and institutions. Neither the lack nor the fact of a status card ever saved a single Indigenous woman from racism, violence, poverty, or marginalization. Indigenous women are identified and stigmatized as Indigenous by the dominant society regardless of their recognition by the state as “status.” And too often the scholarly and political narratives are directed only at Status Indians, mostly on reserves, thus erasing at least two-thirds of Indigenous people and their experiences from consideration.

Indigenous feminists have long pushed back against the imposition, erasure, and policing of identity. We have revealed the forms of violence and dispossession that these can entail for diversely situated Indigenous women and have employed expansive understandings of Indigeneity in our theories and analyses. We have challenged the
forms of marginalization and exclusion that arise from homogeneous constructions of Indigeneity within state legislation, and that are often reinforced in many Indigenous contexts. Many of our most prominent activists have relied on feminist methods and arguments to demand recognition of their identities and of the rights flowing from them, the state, the courts, and certain Indigenous communities (Beads and Kuokkanen 2007; Blaney and Grey 2017; Brodsky 2014; Glenn and Green 2007; Green in this volume and 2001, 1997, 1993, 1985; Attorney General of Canada v. Lavell 1974; McIvor and Kuokkanen 2007; Gehl 2021; Eberts et al. in this volume).

The Indigenous and non-Indigenous feminist movement has always included a contingent of women of diverse sexual orientations and diverse forms of association/identification with the category of woman. Indigenous women and Two-Spirit, queer, and non-binary folks in particular have troubled normative notions of gender and sexuality, advocating for fluid and non-binary understandings of gender identity, as well as more capacious grounds for conceptualizing individual identity. Just as identity remains a perpetual issue for Indigenous feminists, so too are questions of identity pointing to new conversations. For instance, Indigenous feminists are taking the lead in many contexts on questions of whiteness, privilege, appropriation/exploitation of Indigenous identities, and matters of accountability within our communities. Some are also reflecting on our own approach to, understanding of, and use of the category “woman” in our methods and analyses. We cannot yet characterize all Indigenous feminists as adequately inclusive of 2SLGBTQIA+ and gender-diverse members of our communities; neither can we claim that all Indigenous feminist accounts are centrally or substantially informed by their experiences. Still, there is some Indigenous feminist work that explicitly troubles and refuses normative constructions of sex and gender (Hunt 2018; Wilson 2015), and these questions and conversations are increasingly being engaged by activists and scholars within and in relation to Indigenous feminist thinking. The accounts offered by contributors in this volume, and their understandings of the category of “woman,” are informed by diverse social, cultural, and historical contexts. They are also differently presented in terms of language and vocabulary surrounding gender constructs and gender and sexual identity. We regard these differences, gaps, or inconsistencies as important
discursive spaces that require open, courageous, and accountable conversations into the future.

While some Indigenous scholars and activists proclaim liberation through an uncritical embrace of traditions and, particularly, traditionalist conceptions of Indigenous womanhood, Indigenous feminists do not all share the same reliance on a shared or overarching identity of woman typical of cultural fundamentalists from both Indigenous and settler communities. We are concerned with gender-specific forms of misogyny and oppression, particularly in the contexts of colonialism and with recovery of our territories and governance. We are concerned with re-animating our relationships with our territories and all our relations, not just human beings. We are concerned with re-animating our obligations to protect the land and water. Because we are concerned with our people's viability into the future, we insist on the rigorous evaluation of political and other important decisions for their impacts on us, on our territories, and on future generations. We are concerned for our families, communities, and networks of friends. We are concerned to recover ourselves.

OVERVIEW

Conversations in Making Space 3 illustrate varying avenues and approaches that Indigenous feminists have taken to contest sexism, colonialism, racism, and heteronormativity within Indigenous and non-Indigenous movements, communities, and institutions; to interrogate historical and contemporary constructions and representations of Indigenous identity; and to respond to and provide advocacy surrounding gender-based injustices, land dispossession, environmental degradation, and forms of gendered oppression at institutional, activist, and interpersonal levels. The first section looks at the trajectory of Indigenous feminist theories, analyses, and identities, exploring their historical and present-day significance and implications. Illustrating the intergenerational and transformative significance of Indigenous feminism, contributors to the early Making Space volumes sketch various intellectual and activist pathways ventured and demonstrate how they have circled those insights forward. Chapters model Indigenous feminist practices of critical self-reflection and long-term relationship building, demonstrating how the theories and analyses made possible by the first generation of Indigenous feminists have been animated, extended, and
advanced across contexts and moments in time.

Section two explores the breadth of ways that Indigenous feminists are engaging, confronting, and resisting gendered violence and marginalization. Contributors examine various scales and forms of violence experienced by Indigenous women and girls ranging from physical violence to institutional violence against Indigenous children and families, to violence towards Indigenous Peoples’ inter-subjective processes of being in relation. The third section then turns to matters of relationality with other living beings and the land. Here, contributors present the diverse ways Indigenous feminists are enacting relational ethics and practices to better care for and sustain our responsibilities to the living Earth and to other living beings. As the theorizing on relationality develops more in practice, Indigenous feminists are contemplating conditions that enable people to become active agents within new contexts, spaces, and relations of difference. Contributors point to different relational vocabularies that could be used to think through our political movements, interactions, and encounters across difference.

The last section explores the ways that binary, colonial, white, and heteronormative logics continue to configure many Indigenous and non-Indigenous social and political contexts, including in the construction of our own subjectivities and in how we understand our interrelations. Contributors explore the ways in which queer analytics and imaginaries can enable new visions of the political, prompting us to think beyond notions of decolonization that centre the reproduction of Indigenous bodies, traditionalist or essentialist notions of identity, and normative assumptions surrounding political action and change. Here, Indigenous feminism is put in conversation with other intellectual traditions and activist movements, drawing out associated influences, tensions, and entanglements and pointing to how these can be woven or braided to stitch a ground upon which to travel. Collectively, chapters point to a politics of the future that is refigurative in that it orients not just an abstract future but how we act in the present.

Intentionally, this edition presents a range of intellectual and creative production and presentation, including dialogues, non-academic essays, and untraditional formats. This diversity of style as well as viewpoint suggest the changing terrain in academic disciplines and research methodologies, and the significance of new discursive, intellectual, and activist spaces. Contributors prompt important reflections on central
concepts and categories in Indigenous studies, politics, law, cultural studies, and women and gender studies, making space for extended and new applications of Indigenous feminist theory and praxis.

SPACES MADE AND COMING

Certain transformations have taken place over the years with respect to Indigenous feminism and its critiques of colonialism. A topic that was much maligned and seldom taken seriously in scholarly, political, or community discourses has now become a central concern for critical Indigenous and other scholars of colonialism, feminism, resurgence, and critical race theory. Indigenous feminism as both theory and praxis is essential to the project of Indigenous liberation from colonial oppression in Canada, and for Indigenous women's liberation from gendered oppression wherever we encounter it in our lives.

Indigenous feminists continue to employ critiques of gendered and sexualized harm and violence in multiple forms and registers, including critiques of our own governments, men, and communities. We continue making space for important conversations around Indigenous feminist practices, solidarities, and ethics that exceed commitments of inclusion, relationality, support, and solidarity. We can and should continue calling for accountability and justice among our Indigenous and non-Indigenous colleagues, peers, and relatives, and remain just as willing to examine our own roles in reproducing harmful, tokenistic, or extractive logics and/or power dynamics.

In the face of all this, we continue to provide support, solace, solidarity, encouragement, and recognition to one another. We enact modes of governance and of relationship through our own practices, as we move through the difficult, often isolating experience of deploying Indigenous feminist analyses, doing advocacy and support, calling for accountability in our relationships, and advancing transformative perspectives, theory, actions, and research. We enact them through the fraught process of having difficult discussions with one another.

The power of specific Indigenous feminist analysis lies in our overlapping experiences subjected to political analysis, solidarities, and action. Our analyses, like others, produce shifting political discourses over time. Our words centre and foreground the often-negated humanity, knowledge, and experience of our diverse ancestors and relatives, human and non-human. Our actions, like those of our Indigenous
feminist aunties, transform the terrain of decolonial struggle now and for the future.

Unsurprisingly, this volume will not be the last word on these matters. We have not yet gained our liberation from colonialism, racism, and heteropatriarchy, although we have come some distance from the invisibility of these problematics a few decades ago. There is much room for activists and scholars to continue searching for measures of liberation, accountability, and consolation, while also contributing to the theories and empirical studies on the matters that preoccupy us.

NOTES

1 In this chapter we use the term “Aboriginal” within certain references to Indigenous Peoples, particularly those that refer to our constitutional status and rights. We use the two terms interchangeably.

2 This included Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa’s This Bridge Called My Back (1981), Lee Maracle’s I am Woman (1996), Haunani-Kay Trask’s From A Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai’i (1999), and several works by Trish Monture-Angus (1995; 1999), among others.

3 This included Enough Is Enough: Aboriginal Women Speak Out (Silman 1987), Maria Campbell’s equally profound Halfbreed (1973), Bonita Laurence’s powerful analysis of Indigenous and “Indian” identity in “Real” Indians and Others (2004), Kehaulani Kauanui’s Hawaiian Blood (2008), and Pam Palmater’s Beyond Blood: Rethinking Indigenous Identity (2011), among others.

4 Founded in 1971 to advocate for the recommendations in the 1970 Royal Commission on the Status of Women report, NAC functioned as an umbrella organization whose members were women’s organizations and individuals across the country. It was a powerful political voice in the constitutional negotiations leading to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in the 1982 Constitution Act. The organization relied on funding from the federal government and was punished for its opposition to the Charlottetown Accord with budget cuts by the Mulroney government; these were continued by the subsequent Chrétien government. After years of under-funding and increasing marginalization by the federal government, NAC dissolved in 2007.

5 AFN National Chief RoseAnne Archibald and Métis National Council President Cassidy Caron became, as of 2021, new women leaders who could potentially disrupt that male dominance — if they do not find the pressure from the institutions and their male counterparts to be unduly problematic. Troublingly, RoseAnne Archibald was deposed by the Assembly of First Nations on June 28, 2023 (Forester and Stefanovich 2023), becoming the first National Chief in the AFN–NIB’s history to be ejected before the end of their term of office. For an Indigenous feminist critique of this, see Sy and Green 2023.
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Case Law/Legislation


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