

Glišić Dunović, Marija

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# Deconstructing Indigenous Feminism: A View from the Other Side

Déconstruire le féminisme indigène :  
une vue depuis l'autre côté

Marija Glišić Dunović

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## Abstract

The paper addresses key concepts of Indigenous feminism and the phenomenon of the female marginal *Other* seen in the fiction and non-fiction works presented by distinguished Canadian female authors in postmodern, racial and women's studies. They have shared their intimate memories and personal impressions on the experience of being women surrounded by the social constraints of racism, sexism, and ethnic oppression.

A contemporary Indigenous woman and her female public voice are examined through conventional postmodern and post-colonial notions of archetypal femininity, motherhood, and *red womanhood* stereotypes. Native understanding of the postmodern phenomenon of *cultural hybridity* as fragmented and fluid female identity is presented in connection with the perception of Indigenous gender roles. Indigenous feminism promotes reconceptualization and prefiguration of an ingrained vision of Aboriginal female identity. Pursuing sexual and ethnic liberation, the Indigenous woman is articulating her feminist native speech.

**Keywords:** woman, the *Other*, identity, ethnicity, feminism

## Résumé

L'étude aborde les concepts clés du féminisme indigène et du phénomène de la femme marginale "autre" vus dans les œuvres fictionnelles et non fictionnelles proposées par d'éminentes femmes canadiennes, auteures des études postmodernes et raciales ainsi que par les femmes qui partagent leurs mémoires intimes et leurs impressions personnelles sur l'expérience d'être une femme entourée par les contraintes sociales du racisme, du sexisme et des oppressions ethniques.

La femme indigène contemporaine et sa voix publique féminine sont examinées à travers des notions postmodernes et postcoloniales conventionnelles empreintes de l'archétype de la féminité et de la maternité, ainsi que des stéréotypes de la *féminité rouge*. La compréhension indigène du phénomène postmoderne d'*hybridité culturelle* appliquée à l'identité féminine fragmentée et fluide est présentée en regard d'une perception des rôles du genre autochtone. Le féminisme autochtone promeut des préfigurations mythiques du rôle de la



femme indigène et de la reconceptualisation de l'identité de celle-ci dans la poursuite de sa libération sexuelle et ethnique par l'articulation de son discours autochtone.

**Mots-clés :** la femme, l'autre, l'identité, l'ethnicité, le féminisme

## Introduction

Throughout history, Aboriginal women in Canada have been fighting multiple opponents: male colonizers, white females, Indigenous men and, above all, the passive stance of other Indigenous women. Therefore, forming the Alliance of Indigenous<sup>1</sup> women and integrating it with the non-Indigenous female collectives is a feminist imperative.

A new preternatural synergic world of bipolar oppositions, hierarchy, patriarchy, ethnic nationalism, sexism, globalism, and consumerism, predisposed the destiny of Indigenous women. Still, Aboriginal women persisted in validating their Indigenous female cultural experience by articulating authentic community and personal voices in the literary outlet. Harmony of native<sup>2</sup> being is vocalized in the orature and literature, which implies an ongoing construction and reconstruction of the Indigenous natural feminine essence of identity. A fundamental constituent of female indigeneity in the literary world is aimed at ascertaining the existence of resistance literature.

## Postmodernist and post-colonial feminist frame

Cultural hybridity attains an entirely new meaning in the context of Canadian historical experience. When white people conquered the New World, they wrongly named it, thinking they had landed on the Indian subcontinent. Colonizers also carelessly disregarded differences within nations, using one common denominator for all the peoples they had encountered. To the newcomers, the scene and autochthons they had seen seemed primitive since Native Peoples did not use the wheel or because most of them were illiterate.<sup>3</sup> However, in matrilineal societies (Hopi, Iroquois, etc.)

1) The expression "Indigenous" is globally accepted to denote distinctiveness of Aboriginal cultural groups with reference to specific nations.

2) The nonexclusive term "Native" will be used to encompass the overall Aboriginal population targeted by white cultural male domination.

3) Indigenous illiteracy is here mentioned as exemplary colonizers' preconception. The colonists, superficially, failed to notice the existence of Indigenous literacy. Some of the Native Peoples, like members of the so-called Five Civilized Tribes (Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek (Muscogee), and Seminole), wrote a letter that was created by the Cherokee Chief Sequoyah, which was first printed in *Phoenix* magazine on 21<sup>st</sup> February 1828.



women were respected and empowered in tribal decision-making. Indigenous women were traditionally influential and authoritative what had not been detected in the European patriarchal world of male dominance. Beverly Jacobs, a former NWAC president, and Mohawk activist indicates that:

Women were respected for their spiritual and mental strength, and men were respected for their spiritual and physical strength. Women were given the responsibility of bearing children and were given the strength and power to carry that responsibility through. Men had always respected that spiritual and mental strength and women respected the men's physical strength. There was always a balance between men and women as each had their responsibilities as a man and as a woman. (2008: 35)

Instead, the colonists made an agenda to “civilize” the “brute” up to their European model. The settlement entailed a European system of values that ruined the native social structure. As Huhndorf and Suzak note:

Although Indigenous women do not share a single culture, they do have a common colonial history. The imposition of patriarchy has transformed Indigenous societies by diminishing Indigenous women's power, status, and material circumstances. (2011: 4)

Purportedly, before colonization all Indian women were treated equally. Thus, all feminist inclinations tend to be regarded as exclusively “whitish.” Moreover, the oxymoronic caption Indigenous feminism still implies the umbrella term of mainstream white feminism, which is again contradictory since it is not the prevalence of dominion of any kind, especially not white feminists', that is involved in the struggle of Indigenous females. Stated differently, if mainstream (predominantly white) feminisms exist despite sexist, racist and political obstacles, the point is, why is, then, Indigenous feminist articulation being questioned? To put it again differently: are mainstream and Indigenous feminisms complementary or contradictory trends?

Linda Hutcheon, in her essay “Circling the Downspout of Empire: Post-Colonialism and Postmodernism,” questions the broad sense of multiple Canadian marginalities: “It is almost a truism to say that Canada as a nation has never felt central, culturally or politically” (1989: 154). Thus, for the Indigenous woman, quadruple marginalization occurs: Canadian marginality toward dominance of the British Empire or recently America; native marginality within a white Canadian society; native women's submissive role regarding white women, and submissive position of Indigenous women within the Aboriginal community in their relations with Indigenous men. While writing about Canadian colonial experience, Hutcheon adopts W. J. Keith's concept of the psychological effect of the colonial past (154). The drawn



conclusion depends on the stance in the dialogue with Canada' history ever since its establishment as a colony. If Canadian post-colonial culture is frivolously defined as a consequence of cultural imperialism in a Third World, the cultural attainment was differently positioned for the whites and the Indigenous inhabitants who were almost entirely conquered by the English language. Ironically, what is for the First World postmodern might, from a Third World perspective, seem post-colonial.

Prominent literary theorist Edward Said claims that nowadays the traditional concept of identity has been drastically changed, if not destroyed. Moreover, the notion of identity intermingles with sexuality, gender and ethnicity issues. Indigenous and Western perspectives of Indigenous gender concepts differ in their initial ideas. By following the examples from nature, North American Native Peoples embraced gender diversity as a universal creation of a divine totality. Native ethnic organization pristinely took this diverseness for granted and welcomed differences as a blessing. In contrast, Western superficial and simplified gender restrictions reduced gender variety to heteronomous binary oppositions judging the Indigenous gender roles as deviant and abnormal Otherness. The position of the dominant culture, unlike dominated Others, is a matter of legitimacy and power. The society is challenged by its historical heritage and will inevitably enter the period of uncertainty and forceful universal domination of the center (1993: 326–328).

In that early 19<sup>th</sup>-century milieu, a plurality of feminisms occurs and among many nuances of feminist tendencies, postmodern feminism inclined to ethnic and political discrimination criticism. Lee Maracle, a renowned Canadian Aboriginal author and First Nation activist, debates the situation of Indigenous women in the frame of reference of North American feminism, and proposes the approach of “decolonization in the feminine” (Morton, 1999:18).

## Ethnic feminism thrust

Indigenous feminism as a theoretical concept is prone to contradictory interpretations especially because before the contact with white people, undeniable Indigenous female identity was axiomatically implied in practice, and thus there was no need for theorizing it. In her interview titled *Theorizing Feminism and Postmodernity*, Linda Hutcheon does not consider feminism just as a postmodernist appearance.<sup>4</sup> However, she uses a postmodernist critical tool of predetermined and static identity to develop her gender and racial theoretic contemplation on the “variety of political positions possible within the term of gender.” She observes feminist discussions as “complex-

4) Linda Hutcheon recognizes and examines *feminism* not as a single ideology but a variety of *feminisms*, of movements with naturalistic and historiographical differences.



ified questions of identity and difference” (O’Grady, 1998: 20). Hutcheon reviews the complex strongly overlapped relations between post-colonialism and postmodernism, regarding all their significant formal, thematic and strategic differences. While post-colonialism professes a particular political agenda, and even though postmodernism is politically ambivalent, it is feminism that helps to foreground those differences. The very same term – i.e. post-colonial – implies the historical position within time. Moreover, it distinguishes a period before and after independence, casting the light on the difference between colonialism and post-colonialism and pointing out that the majority of the world is infected by its influence, either directly or indirectly. “Framed geographically and historically between two major Anglophone empires (past and present), Canada has experienced an odd amalgam of British and American influences and both have played their role in shaping our intellectual heritage” (O’Grady, 21).

For a better understanding of Indigenous feminism, this paper takes on the various perspectives on the issue of social and cultural marginality. The viewpoint is different from the Indigenous prospect on the one hand, and, on the other, from the “white” point of view (often defined as being non-Indian) (Hoy, 1997). Normative feminist definitions do not make the distinction between white women and women of color. However, since the 1990s Indigenous feminism implies that gender struggle is a critical practice for cultural identity, political autonomy, and decolonization.<sup>5</sup> In feminist theory, Indigenous feminism occupies a space for debating the Aboriginal women’s role in Canada.

We are part of a global movement of women in the world, struggling for emancipation. The world will define the movement. We are part of the women who will define it... I represent the future of the women in North America, just as any other woman does. That white women only want to hear from me as a Native and not as a voice in the women’s movement is their loss...Who can understand the pain of this land better than a Native woman? The road to freedom is paved with the intimate knowledge of the oppressed. (Maracle, 1996: 137–139)

Maracle’s book *I Am Woman: A Native Perspective on Sociology and Feminism* is regarded by some as being “too beautiful to be political” (Kelly, 1994: 82) – such as in the horrific story of tragic heroine Rusty, who is captured by her fear of life beyond oppressions. Maracle’s mission is “empowerment work through writing and counseling” (73), to cure the fear of the whites and liberate the social and historical tension which locked Native Peoples in the apathy of their self-imposed era of segregation. Maracle suggests that the First Peoples establish a starting point and

5) As Lee Maracle sees it, colonialism has never been finished. It might have been coated in post-colonialism but in its classical detection it is still very lively and present. (Kelly, 1994: 83)



vivify an existing human connection with the white outer world and to follow the path of a trickster. Necessary in this regard is the constant spiritual growth and transformation within the native community (74). The role of the reformer should be brought to the daughters of the nation.<sup>6</sup>

Indigenous feminism understood as organization and process, gathers both men and women who are willing to speak out publicly about the issues of Indigenous women. The first specter they are fighting is the skepticism of Indigenous women toward feminism. The feminist postulate is to erase all the differences even though it proclaims a universal support for the oppressed. However, for women of color, a bone of contention adds sensitivity aura.

The other limitation of the Indigenous feminist theory is traditional justification of clan sexism. Whether inherited or adopted, sexism promotes gendered ways of colonial oppression style. Sexism is covered by colonial and post-colonial racism and must be observed in the symbiosis of the influences. Unfortunately, “Native women are very likely to be abused sexually and physically in their lives” (87). Thus, “to deal with the violence outside the home as well as inside the home” (87) is a must. As Maracle further writes,

I have not found a Native man whose sexism extends to a white woman in quite the same way that it operates in our community. If we're sitting at the table and there's one white woman and four Native women and one Native man, very often the exchange will take place between the Native man and the white woman and there will be silence from the four Native women. Very often racism operates in our community and often sexism operates as internalized racism...Racism operates at the table of sexism. Now, when you have life inside the home then sexism is operative, it becomes operative on a personal level. Outside the home, the racism is operative. It just depends on where he's standing. I don't think those two things are separate phenomena in our communities. (80)

A possible reason for not having a plenitude of Indigenous feminist texts is that native feminist authoresses<sup>7</sup> mostly write in English, which is imposed on them by colonialism, and not in the languages of their national ancestry. Thus, the probability that the external white non-native reader will read feminist texts is considerably greater than expectations of encountering a native one. The literary audience is anatomy not mobilized by author's skin color, though.

6) Allusion to Maracle's novel *Daughters are Forever*.

7) The term *authoress*, even though archaic, is a gender styled one. The perception that there are no notions on the Native feminist (male) authors, whose enunciation is warmly welcomed, does not match reality. However, because a key concept here is the native feminist role in Canadian society, the term will not be repeated. Moreover, Maracle is harsh toward men's prospect for change: “Men aren't very good in the realm of anti-sexism. Their intentions might be there, but they haven't done much anti-sexist work.” (Kelly, 1994: 83)



Among significant additions to theorizing gender from the feminist Native women perspective, the studies *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*, (1986) and *Off the Reservation: Reflections on Boundary-Busting, Border-crossing Loose Canons*, (1998) written by Native American critic Paula Gunn Allen are salient. North American native experience is determined by traditional ethnic, cultural and historical circumstances. The dissonance between national and established feminism is reflected in implied methods and expected goals. Allen tracks the hurdles in the monolithic designation of identity. Cultures and identities are in a constant flow, and hence female identity as a syncretic concept is prone to the interflow of socio-historical, political, economic, and ethnic currents, which define the native women's subject. Thus, Allen proposes the value of an ethnic, feminist methodology. Another famous theorist, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak notices the endurance of the existence of binary oppositions in feminism expressed as epistemological violence toward Third World authors. The reach of the minority writers positioned on the boundary is not accessible to the females who are overtly endangered. For Allen, feminism, in all its modifications, is the product of a dominant society, which is why it is not interested in and does not dare to reassess the patriarchal institutions (Allen 1986: 213). Moreover, the feminist focus is on gender issues, while the racial struggle is considered completed or notably accomplished. So, Gloria Anzaldúa promotes hybrid mestizaje identity:

At the confluence of, two or more generic streams, with chromosomes, constantly “crossing over,” this mixture of races, rather than resulting in an inferior being, provides hybrid progeny, a mutable, more malleable species with a rich gene pool. From this racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollination, an “alien” consciousness is presently in the making – a new mestizaje consciousness, una consciencia de mujer. It is a consciousness of the Borderlands. (Anzaldúa, 1987:77)

Both Allen and Anzaldúa are aware of their mixed origin: “Yet however, mixed in ancestry heritage and culture, we are all, all of us Indians, and have been ‘off the reservation’ at all times” (Allen, 1998: 6). Allen proposes a border theory, a new direction in North American ethnic studies. After crossing the border to *the Other* side of the incompatible world, the realm of freedom liberated from domination will be reached. In other words, one will reach a new world of inclusivity of contrasts and omnipresence of plurality:

This body of work, literature that rides the borders of a variety of literary, cultural, and ideological realms, has not been adequately addressed by either mainstream feminist scholarship or the preponderance of ‘ethnic’ or ‘minority’ scholarship. However, in the past





decade a new field of study has emerged that resists definition by other critics that seems determined to define itself. This new field raises questions that mainstream feminist and 'ethnic' or 'minority' approaches fail to address and simultaneously begins to open before us new possibilities for inquiry. (166)

The predominant themes of native feminist writing are colonialism, sexism, and racism in North America. Maracle, who openly declares herself an Indigenous feminist (Maracle, 2015: 149), proclaims: "Some women accuse me of being angry and bitterly resentful about the life that this society handed me. You miss the point. I write about racism to free my mind" (Maracle, 1996: 138). For Maracle stories are therapeutic (2015: 158). She does not invent them. Somehow, stories find a way to her to be retold and heard. For Maracle, the ethnic revolution never happened in Canada and, as Jennifer Kelly confirms, "Tolerance isn't the movement..." (1994: 85) It is not the understanding of the white people that Natives are hoping for, but acceptance. To start the healing process, she suggests that whites and Indigenous Peoples start a necessary mountaineering journey in the menacing mountains of racism, sexism and nationalist oppression to rule out discrimination.

Acclaimed Indigenous author Maria Campbell, meanwhile, says, "I am not bitter. I have passed that stage. I only want to say: This is what is what like, this is what is still like" (Campbell, 1983: 9). Unlike Maracle, who addresses Aboriginal women, Campbell, dedicates her autobiography and a personal narrative *Half-Breed* to all non-Native Peoples: "I write this for all of you, to tell you what it is like to be a Half-breed woman in our country. I want to tell you about joys and sorrows, the oppressing poverty, the frustrations and the dreams" (1983: 2). If the world is a cruel place for Indians, for the Métis or Half-breeds it is hellish. On the scale of social marginality Half-breeds are the lowest of the low: "If the Indians are the Undesirable Other, the Métis are the Despised Other in Canada" (Lal, 1997:130). Métis are neither white nor Indians, and, according to Campbell, are certainly undesired in either community. They are seen as a consequence of the interaction between whites and status-Indians, and they occupy the minimal space in the history and territory. Campbell remembers that no whites ever visited them and in the church, even if they were allowed to attend the service, everybody was sitting on the other side of the room. Half-breeds fit nowhere and are accepted by no one. The quest for Métis female identity toward self-definition is a dangerous path of self-denial and rejections of the society through staggering into prostitution, alcohol, and drugs. Campbell is not telling a tale to amuse the readers. Her life-story is "unmelodramatic but poignant presentation" (131). Half-breed women have no friends, and in Campbell's reminiscence, the only light is her great granny Cheechum, the incarnation of hope and purity and a landmark in her self-discovery wanderings. For Campbell, the worst among her adolescence memories



were those scenes of brutality demonstrated by the “Half-breed” men. Halfbreeds were, unlike Indians, quick-tempered but easy to forget (1983: 25), whereas whites were expectedly and regularly brutal in their sexual, economic, and ideological exploitation. Campbell rejected the church and was skeptical about Christianity. Instead, in a search for salvation, she looks deeper within herself where it resides and where peace only survives.<sup>8</sup>

## A feminist reading of Indigenous women’s writing

Most contemporary native female writers share the reliance on oral sources, primarily the inspirational stories of women’s ancestors in the family and community to whom the voice is given. Their fiction often contains autobiographical elements. Thus, they combine native oratory with the European story. In her monograph *Oratory: Coming to Theory*, Maracle clarifies that oratory is a theory presented through story (2015: 162–164). An Indigenous story humanizes theoretical framework by infusing an essential Canadian self into it (110). Moving toward a definition of the literary tradition of new realities from marginal to emergent implies that Indigenous literature is a component of postcolonial literary canon on account of the discursive, syntactic and semantic features of the bicultural “composite composition” (Krupat, 1985: 31). Procreation of a nation is inscribed into the awakening of Aboriginal articulation through orature and literature and, as Maracle claims, “I come from a speaking culture. I come from a culture that says words are sacred, and I have an obligation to my community as a woman” (Kelly, 1994: 87). The phenomenon of the restrictions within reservations creates the space for echoing imagination of silent voices as holy sound. Postcolonialism institutionalizes margins by exerting to convert “savages” to “civilization,” hence replacing the “inferior” by a “superior” race, which often entails destroying ancient traditions of the Other. Differentiation has been one of the exclusions and the borderlines of Self and Other. However, Christianisation and an intrusive educational crusade did not coerce the Native Peoples to abandon their cultural values. For Maracle, a story is a foundation of culture (2015: 156). It is “the curious tension of cultural ‘revelation’ and cultural ‘silence’” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1989: 59) of the language that make a story.

To the Indigenous female authors, writing becomes a way they can generate not only the memory, but also the identity because, through remembrance, female writers establish a connection with the homeland of their ancestors – ancestors who are

8) The researcher, who is white and non-Indigenous and from the part of the world not directly being targeted by colonialism, even though the distant ranged imperialistic impact is unavoidable, tends to objectivize her position as an outsider. She resembles the stance of the narrator in the article written by Hoy Helen “Because You Aren’t Indian”: The Politics of Location in Lee Maracle’s novel *Ravensong* (1997).



a part of their cultural heritage, but also the connections to the contemporary society. Identity is a mystical category, and for its preservation Hutcheon suggest an implying of parody:

“It seems that, as Canadians, women are often in the position of defining themselves *against* a dominant culture or discourse. One way to do that, a way with great subversive potential, is to speak the language of the dominant (which allows you to be heard), but then to subvert it through ironic strategies of exaggeration, understatement, or literalization. Parody is the mode that allows you to mimic that speech, but to do so through re-contextualizing it and therefore without subscribing to its implied ideals and values. “(O’Grady, 1998: 21)

Turning *the Other* into the Same, as Simon During views it, is improbable since subdued *the Other* can never speak for itself loudly enough to be heard (1987: 33). In the post-colonial discourse of resistance, *the Other* is able and must be allowed to speak. For Spivak, academic thinking always serves Western economic goals. Imperial rhetoric about *the Other* is formulated as a white, male colonial discourse talking to a white interlocutor and is less critical than hegemonic. It resembles feminist writing when it complies with the patriarchal academic conventions. The colonial project, which has been presented as a philosophical design, disregarded the Indigenous cultural roots and Aboriginal ethnic capacity. That thought was planted in Aboriginal Peoples’ land and nourished by colonists’ rhetoric, to be harvested to sustain the Western ideology. Beneficial for the Western writers, non-Western writers’ urges are disregarded. The Western subject ostensibly scrutinizes a non-Western object. The plot is reduced only to the Western agent’s performance, while the non-Western object is opposed and uncalled for. No, the subaltern cannot speak in the role-play where the West is directing the show (1994). However, as Bhabha claims, the content of articulation is not the only thing that matters but the place it is verbalized as well (Bhabha, 1990: 312).

In such a climate of female power on the fertile ground of feminism, the Indigenous stories blossom. Indeed, feminism itself brings all sorts of distortive conservative interpretations. Indigenous feminism is even more indefinable. What is unknown might seem chimerical, and thus ethnic feminism looks as if it is under-theorized or at least not explicitly defined. Indigenous feminism is a unique phenomenon shaped by post-colonial knowledge and rendered mostly throughout postmodernist male constructs. It is inseparably linked to colonization and violation of Indigenous women’s human rights; it does challenge dominant discourses, often deconstructing them, but it rarely reconstructs. The occurrence of the driving current of Indigenous feminism within mainstream feminism engaged in the issues of national identity and decolonization requires the border crossing of disciplinary discussions. In the domain



of ethnic minority and feminist theory writing, Indigenous theorists are continuing to construe a political and social native feminist context to stop institutionalization of gender and racially discriminatory policies.

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**MARIJA GLIŠIĆ DUNOVIĆ** / who holds an MA in English Literature, graduated from the Faculty of Philology at the University of Belgrade. She has been working in the field of American Literature and Indigenous Studies since her undergraduate years. She took an interest in Canadian Studies during her PhD studies while working on the doctoral thesis *The Quest for Identity in Native American Literature*. The results of her research have been disseminated at several national and international conferences in her home country (the University of Novi Sad, the University of Belgrade, Alfa University in Belgrade, the University of Kragujevac) and abroad (University College London). At present she is volunteering at First Nations House at the University of Toronto.

**e-mail:** marija.glisic.dunovic@gmail.com