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Indigenous Women and Research: Conversations on Indigeneity, Rights, and Education

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I am moved by my love for human life;
by the firm conviction that all the world
must stop the butchery, stop the slaughter.
(Lee Maracle, from “War”)

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Guest editors' introduction

We open this special issue with Stó:lō woman poet Lee Maracle's words in order to set the tone for readers that this collection is about three things—love of land and people, naming and transcending injustices, and our responsibility to heal our world for future generations.

As guest editors, we have known each other for nearly a decade, and our respect for each other is grounded in mutual understanding of the significance of our homelands, cultural practices, languages, and ancestral values. We observe and appreciate the ways in which our peoples resist and reshape the conditions that coloniality has created in our communities; meaning, we see the practicality, sacrifice, and beauty in everyday acts—those who offer prayers at first light, the farmers who wake up in the middle of the night to irrigate their fields, the teachers who bring everything that they are to their classrooms. We also see the persistence of coloniality, which as an ongoing system of conflict and oppression impacts those everyday acts—prayers are said amidst widespread language loss and shift; the plants and animals with whom we share our homelands are threatened by environmental contamination and climate change; and fewer and fewer Indigenous teachers confront increasingly powerful neoliberal agendas.

Challenges are part of the human experience, but our resilience does not mean that we do not feel each assault on our lands and beings and over generations. At the same time, what we hold close and dear and how we imagine a future “full of both history and desire” (Arvin, Tuck, & Morrill, 2013) for ourselves and our communities constitutes how we define and exercise being Indigenous on our own terms. Today, Indigeneity based on life, land, and cultural practices requires claiming our right to Indigenous self-determination and self-development—freedom to choose the ways we want to organize our lives and the ability to do so over time (Gray, 1986, p. 7).

We are also Indigenous women of two different generations witnessing changes and continuities in the places that matter most to us. We have been doing research in our own villages and elsewhere and writing about and with our people, which are experiences that require reflection (of

what we see and hear), circumspection (regarding knowledge seeking and dissemination), and action (contributing to transformation). Thus, this special issue is also the result of our questions as Indigenous women researchers seeking to learn how others define self-determination and navigate whose interests are represented, as well as through what lenses we process our research and how other Indigenous women see themselves in relation to community and the global social, cultural, and political movement of Indigenous self-determination.

Indigenous rights as reconciliation with *the feminine*

A strategy of imperialism, colonization is anchored by principles that have informed international law, like the Doctrine of Discovery, which is based on ten elements—first discovery, actual occupancy and current possession, preemption/[European] title, Indian [Indigenous] title, tribal limited sovereign and commercial rights, contiguity, *terra nullius*, Christianity, civilization, and conquest (Miller, 2011). Each element establishes and justifies the expansion of imperial power and leaves an indelible mark on colonized lands and peoples. Each element also provides a point of entry for examining impact to Indigenous communities, including when and where certain community members have been disproportionately affected and how Indigenous peoples have been responding over time. For example, from early European colonizer accounts, we can glean that despite their encounters with Indigenous peoples, *terra nullius* or “nobody’s land” fit a political and economic agenda that would lead to exponential wealth and prosperity for colonizer nations and the construction of Indigenous lands as ‘unused,’ ‘uncivilized,’ and gendered as a ripe and bountiful female ready for the taking. Counternarratives therefore become an important part of Indigenous responses to these constructions, and the work of Seneca scholar Mishuana Goeman offers exceptional insight regarding the discourse of mapping the colonial imaginary. Through the use of Native women’s literature, she asserts that Native women are at the center of how Indigenous and settler nations have been imagined (2013). Furthermore, in other writing, Goeman

urges us to also reconsider how we conceptualize ideas of land and participate in its oversimplification. She argues that despite evoking “Indigenous identity, longing, and belonging” (2008, p. 24), land is a living term attached to Indigenous knowledge systems and specifically, our stories. She writes,

By organizing meanings of land around ideas of territory and boundaries in which our rights are retained, we miss out on very important mechanisms of fighting colonialism. Seeing land as storied and providing stories from time immemorial, rather than as a confined place within rigid boundaries, will remind us of the responsibility to each other. The people still speak of the sacredness of places now claimed by the parks services for instance, or even those gravesites found under shopping malls. (2008, p. 32)

These are reminders to Indigenous peoples that in our fight to maintain access to our lands, there is distance between the ways in which land and natural resources are limited in their conceptualization on the one hand by historic and ongoing colonial exploitation, and on the other hand, through ostensibly benevolent contemporary rights discourses.

Amongst Indigenous women scholars, there is general agreement that mainstream public and political discourses must be consistently interrogated as they can often reflect colonial heteropatriarchal normative ideologies. This process includes discourses that Indigenous peoples have (re)claimed, including Indigenous rights. For example, within Indigenous communities and beyond, the idea of universal rights brings to the forefront debates between collective and individual rights, which Sami scholar Rauna Kuokkanen argues is illusory (2012). Tracing the relationship between Indigenous rights and women’s rights, Kuokkanen explains that as third generation human rights, Indigenous rights focused on self-determination reflect aspirational declarations of international law difficult to enforce¹

¹ For more information on rights relating to women and the codification of these rights see 1979 CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women): <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cedaw.aspx>. See also the

(2012, p. 227). She challenges us to consider who is represented in Indigenous peoples' rights—who are the “peoples,” what are their distinct experiences, and how are we addressing gender and violence in Indigenous self-determination efforts? While she recognizes that Indigenous women strive for self-determination for their communities, she also argues that “un-gendered research on Indigenous self-determination conceals patriarchal structures and relations of power” and that Indigenous women must “pursue a human rights framework that not only simultaneously advances individual and collective rights, but also explicitly addresses gender-specific human rights violations of indigenous women” (2012, p. 226 and 232).

Building on these arguments is Sam Grey who views the individual and the community as “parts of a constellation of human rights capable of accommodating the needs, aspirations, experiences, and perspectives of both *women* and *peoples*” (2014, p. 529, Grey’s emphasis). Theoretically, there should be no tension between individual interests and the collective because as Grey writes, individuals operationalize, promote, and protect collective human rights while also holding rights by virtue of their place within the collective wherein Indigenous self-determination and women’s rights are therefore co-equal concerns (2014, p. 529). However, she acknowledges that conflicts arise when co-equal concerns are resisted for whatever reason, both within and outside of Indigenous communities, and so Kuokkanen’s illusory question remains relevant—Can Indigenous self-determination can be achieved without considering women’s issues?

We propose that rather than perpetuating colonial gender divisions, which promote normative and often oppressive ideas in Indigenous communities, that we take up Goeman’s call for decolonial conceptualizations of what matters to us as Indigenous peoples, or what we

United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld>.

believe constitutes our Indigenous selves. We must comprehend the workings of settler colonialism as we also maintain and revitalize our connections to our sacred places, languages, and cultural practices. The task is then to consider with community members what our Indigenous self-determination involves while trusting Grey's assertion that the framework of Indigenous human rights *(re)defined in our own Indigenous languages and using our own knowledge systems* is malleable and big enough for our respective work. In other words, in order to look to stories of how our societies functioned and to decolonize our thinking, we must actively seek knowledge as we navigate the remnants of the colonial world and its material and new neoliberal trappings.

There is a role for all of us here. Maile Arvin, Eve Tuck, and Angie Morrill underscore a crucial point: They write that because the U.S. "is balanced upon notions of white supremacy and heteropatriarchy, everyone living in the country is not only racialized and gendered, but also has a relationship to settler colonialism" (2013, p. 9). This is true of numerous settler colonial societies. As Indigenous women writing, they address the academy, challenging ethnic and Indigenous Studies to address theories of heteropatriarchy and gender and women's studies to center settler colonialism and Indigeneity. Towards these shifts, they offer "Native feminist theories" as theories "that make substantial advances in understandings of the connections between settler colonialism and both heteropatriarchy and heteropaternalism²" (2013, p. 11). Most importantly, they offer five challenges that Native feminist theories offer feminist discourses, which we see as critical if the academy is to institutionally address the marginalization of Indigenous scholars: 1) problematize settler colonialism and its intersections; 2) refuse erasure, but do more than include; 3) craft alliances that directly address differences; 4) recognize

² The authors also note that Native feminist theories can be differentiated from Native feminism in that Native feminist theories are not necessarily labeled as "feminist," nor are they produced solely by Indigenous, feminist, or woman-identified scholars. For information on feminist scholarship, see the special issue in *Wicazo Sa Review* guest edited by Goeman & Denetdale, 2009, which includes Luana Ross's *From the "F" Word to Indigenous/feminisms*.

Indigenous ways of knowing and its emphasis on land, sovereignty, and futurity and decolonization; and 5) question academic participation in Indigenous dispossession.

Further problematizing the invisibility of Indigenous women researchers and the idea that Indigenous women are absent in the production of theory is Yaqui scholar Elizabeth Archuleta's argument for "Indigenous women's feminist theory." She asks, "Because mainstream research has not used Indigenous women's intellectual traditions—constructed and utilized within our own communities—are we to believe that the ways in which we make meaning of our lives or understand the world are not theory?" (2006, p. 88). She further notes,

we do theorize our lives but that we theorize differently, meaning, Indigenous women do not rely solely on Western tools, worldviews, or epistemologies as methods of interpretation. Indigenous women reject paradigms that ask us to disassociate ourselves from our lived experiences before we can claim to have the skills and knowledge to theorize. We believe theory comes not from abstract written ideas but from the collective knowledge of Indigenous women whose lives have not informed feminist theories, methods, or policy concerns and whose lived experiences mainstream feminists will continue to ignore unless Indigenous women question and deconstruct existing methodologies. (2006, pp. 88-89)

Archuleta's strong defense of Indigenous epistemologies and Indigenous women's processes of knowledge acquisition and theorizing speak back to colonial and academic claims over knowledge production that are persistent in their deception. She asks us to look at ourselves and to look to each other and recall that what Indigenous women contribute intellectually and through all our capacities, whether within universities or elsewhere, is rooted in and has life beyond the academy.

One of the most eloquent examples of this point is Laguna Pueblo scholar June Lorenzo's work on spatial justice, Indigenous rights, and reconnection with *the feminine* (see this special issue; 2017). Her work draws from Paula Gunn Allen, also from Laguna, whose writing questioned

among other processes the transformation of Indigenous societies through the displacement of female creators with male figures, the replacement of Indigenous women clan leaders, and the institution of the Western nuclear family as not only normative, but also as a marker of being civilized (Allen, 1992). Lorenzo notes that these deliberate and concerted shifts restructured Indigenous communities politically, economically, socially, and culturally. However, despite the institutionalization of Spanish laws (in the case of the Pueblos), Lorenzo maintains that Pueblo people continue to hold profound ties to *the feminine*:

Many sacred deities and sacred places and landscapes are known by feminine names to Pueblo peoples, and appear in publications on Pueblo peoples. In our Laguna Keres language, words used to describe “our land” or “territory” are the words for “Our Mother.” The female is venerated as giver of life and symbolized as such in the Pueblo world. (2017, p. 65)

We add that if the struggle for Indigenous rights across distinct communities prioritizes Indigenous self-determination, which is reliant upon the centrality of our relationships with our earth and her cycles, that we as organic beings of earth and stardust must recognize our connection to *the feminine* as inherent. It is this connection that must be reconciled in any discussion of how we will understand and transform our present and future.

Indigenous women writing

Inside every body, every single body, and particularly the girl bodies is our old old old ancient memory. You get your brains from your mother, but you also get this ancient lineage memory that goes back to the beginning of time...We began first with our relationship to the earth, and then the relationship to the sky world and then the relationship to the plant world and then the relationship to the animal world and

then the relationship to each other. (Maracle, 2012)³

As Quechua and Tewa women, we do not speak on behalf of our communities or for other Indigenous peoples. We cannot say if Indigenous self-determination will be reached for such and such people through renewed consideration of women's issues, and we cannot say if dominant societies will become just based on acknowledgement and action taken to redress pervasive and persistent colonial brutality against Indigenous and minoritized peoples. We can say that we fear for our most vulnerable populations, which include our own and other peoples' children, and for the earth's plants and animals who also have their own languages, communities, and responsibilities, which Lee Maracle reminds us of in terms of *relationships*. As such, we continue to think about why we do research, how we engage others, and who research serves and to what ends. As Indigenous women researchers and allies, we think carefully about our audience/s—Do we write for the academy? Do we write to make convincing arguments to the public? Do we write for Indigenous-serving institutions, allies, policymakers? Do we write for ourselves, for each other, for our own and other Indigenous peoples? In truth, Indigenous women researchers, whether affiliated with the academy or not, may speak to all of these groups at one time or another.

This special issue is an attempt to reach multiple audiences with research that centers Indigenous peoples. We issued a call for submissions to this special issue in order to attract those who would highlight the relationship between Indigenous women's research, rights discourses, and socially transformative community-centered work across diverse contexts. We were not looking for self-identified Indigenous feminist theorists or human rights and human rights education (HRE) experts, but we believe that through Indigenous women's work and research, we have something to say about the intersection between what we wish for our communities and

³ Posted to YouTube on August 28, 2012: <https://intercontinentalcry.org/lee-maracle-connection-between-violence-against-the-earth-and-violence-against-women/>.

tools of social transformation, like HRE, that we can help shape. For example, Tessie's lifelong work as a Tewa language teacher, Indigenous languages advocate, and Pueblo scholar has prioritized collective sense of place, collective practice of values, and co-building spaces for Pueblo people's literature, history, agriculture, education, and women's studies. Similarly, we asked authors rooted in their own research and worldviews to rethink rights, research processes, gender, notions of community, and education. We were interested in submissions that explored, among other major themes, women's reflections on self-determination and human rights, theory as healing (hooks, 1991), decolonial freedom and Indigenous well-being, identities transcending race and class (Mihehual, 1996), and culturally-based notions of femininity (Allen, 1992).

As Indigenous women working with our own communities, we were also interested in the mechanics of research related to Indigenous self-determination, including exploring rights issues and work that was directly related to researcher positionalities. We were also interested in research methodologies and methods in relation to Indigenous community/ies, and perhaps most importantly, discussions of healing, strengths-based work and interventions, ultimately adding to the ways in which transformative human rights education (Bajaj, 2011, 2017; Sumida Huaman, 2017, 2018) is pushing the field of HRE.

In building this special issue, we sought connections where local research could be seen as in dialogue with Indigenous contexts elsewhere, creating a sense of fellowship across researchers. We are honored to have worked with researcher-practitioner-scholars who are intimately connected to Indigenous places and peoples. What they have produced is the result of their histories, identities, values, and hopes—inherited, forged, maintained, and rekindled over time. To this special issue, each contributor brings perspectives that speak to their understandings of life across generations, disciplines, and contexts. We therefore frame this special issue as *conversations*—among authors, in dialogue with the Indigenous communities and institutions that constitute the sites of our research, and with you, the readers, whoever you may be and wherever you are.

Danelle Cooper (Hopi, Tewa, Diné, Mvskoke Creek), Treena Delormier (Kanien'kehá:ka), and Maile Tauali'i (Kanaka Maoli) begin the conversation with research focusing on Indigenous sacred sites, including Mauna Kea and Nuvatukya'ovi. Their work articulates the essential relationship between sacred places and Indigenous physical, mental, and spiritual health. Underlying their research is lead author Danelle's protocol of honoring participants at all stages of the research, including ensuring that their words are carefully represented in her first peer-reviewed publication. Furthermore, the article exemplifies the vital and compassionate relationship between Danelle and her Indigenous women scholar mentors, Treena and Maile. Extending the conversation on land is June Lorenzo's (Laguna Pueblo/Diné) work, which combines a lifetime of observations of family and community interfaces with the Jackpile uranium mine with her local and international human rights work and decades of community environmental and sacred place advocacy, qualitative, and quantitative data collection. June explores the social, cultural, political, and economic impacts of uranium mining in Laguna through a gendered lens that ultimately expands our understanding of gender beyond human limitations by pointing us towards profoundly cultural conceptualizations of "the feminine."

As Indigenous places and sacred spaces are central to Indigenous people's lives and identities, so too is language. Patricia Fjellgren (Sami) and Leena Huss (Sweden Finnish) offer us a strikingly beautiful narration of their collaborative work on Sami language revitalization in Sweden. They recount testimonies of language loss and reclamation, and they introduce an innovative and joyful program of language learning and sharing through the Gielečirkuš/Language Circus method developed by Patricia and in cooperation with Giron Sámi Teáhter. Their work reminds us of the hope and creativity that is present across all our research, even as we move with Indigenous community members through the sorrow of loss.

Also engaging hopefulness and innovation is Tiffanie Hardbarger's (Cherokee) work with Cherokee youth in Oklahoma. Utilizing participatory action research and visual research methods, Tiffanie's research seeks to include often overlooked youth perspectives on community development,

and in this case, their own decolonizing educational experiences. She introduces IPAR (Indigenous participatory action research) as a research method particularly effective with Indigenous youth and shares the ways in which IPAR has been iteratively shaped with youth and through their interpretations of Indigenous-centered theoretical frameworks that rethink Indigenous rights through centering Indigenous knowledge systems.

Indigenous women's connections to their communities and knowledge systems are highlighted through the critical research presented with Indigenous women educational leaders by Robin Zape-tah-hol-ah Starr Minthorn (Kiowa/Apache/Nez Perce/Umatilla/Apache) and Heather Shotton (Wichita/Kiowa/Cheyenne). Robin and Heather share testimonies of contemporary Indigenous women and their reflections on their leadership trajectories, which offer important considerations for nurturing Indigenous women in leadership positions beyond calls for diversity and inclusion. Similarly utilizing testimonies is the work of Elizabeth Sumida Huaman (Wanka/Quechua) who offers preliminary considerations through an Indigenous community-based participatory project with Quechua women in Peru. She examines the history of gendered and racialized oppression through Spanish colonialism and focuses on the experiences of the grandmother generation of domestic servants.

Our "notes from the field" section is extensive because it includes our category of "community-based commentaries," which are reflections from Indigenous community members, practitioners, or leaders who wish to directly address their own and other Indigenous communities, as well as Indigenous-serving or other institutions. Notes from the field typically offer research considerations relevant to the field but do not have to include research methods and empirical data. We ask readers to note that the journal has combined community-based commentaries under the notes from the field category, but we delineate the categories here.

Starting our notes from the field is the moving educational reflection by Konai Helu Thaman (Tongan), which outlines her observations of the trajectory of colonial systems of schooling in the Pacific. Her reflection is made even more powerful by the use of her own poetry, which eloquently captures moments and feelings across time and contexts. Next, as scholar-

educators and Indigenous women transforming pedagogy through critical theory, Flori Boj Lopez (Kiche Maya) and Sandy Grande (Quechua) offer reflections on their experiences with Hacer Escuela/Inventing School, their fellowship with other educators transforming educational design and practice, and they call for a reconsideration of rights as state-sponsored recognition frameworks. Flori and Sandy ask us to rethink education as a right due to its implications as a means of upward economic mobility and citizen production. Without addressing settler colonialism and anti-immigrant policies, they ask how education can be transformative and thus offer their own insights and critical teaching strategies.

Beginning our community-based commentaries section through their description of arts-focused pedagogy and content at Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) is Cheryl Crazy Bull (Sicangu Lakota), Colleen “Co” Carew (Mescalero Apache), and Bridget Skenadore’s (Diné) celebration of Native arts linked with cultural shifts and historical traumas that continue to impact Indigenous women today. They highlight the relationship between traditional and contemporary arts and gender, and they demonstrate how Indigenous peoples are naming, resisting, and healing from violent colonial acts still manifesting, such as the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls and Queer and Trans community members (MMIWGQT).

Focusing on Indigenous women and vulnerable populations in Indigenous communities who remain unprotected through tribal policy is the work of attorney and scholar Peggy Bird (Kewa). Peggy offers a heartfelt reflection of her own journey as an advocate for Indigenous women’s issues locally, nationally, and internationally. She pays homage to Indigenous women mentors, and based on her observations and decades of work with tribal communities, she carefully outlines recommendations for bringing Indigenous women into policy construction to address their safety as she explores culturally-based notions of well-being and the idea that “practice” is something we can all consider.

The notion of Indigenous well-being is also elegantly addressed by three Māori women scholar-practitioners, Glenis Mark, Amohia Boulton, and Donna Kerridge. Writing from Aotearoa/New Zealand, they examine

the commercialization and mainstreaming of Rongoā Māori, community-based healing practice inextricable from Māori knowledge systems. They offer key principles for the protection of Rongoā Māori that call for Indigenous rights-based frameworks that must do better. As they are practitioners of Rongoā Māori, we hold these women in high regard, and we make special note here that for all of our authors, the Western label of scholar is likely too small and limited to describe their rich knowledges and experiences.

In this special issue, we are also pleased to offer book reviews by two young Indigenous women researchers, Blythe George (Yurok) and Anna Reed (Chickasaw), and we celebrate with them their desires to engage the world of ideas through their analysis and writing.

As a collection of writing that unapologetically utilizes an academic venue for dissemination of our research, critiques, and ideas, in all instances, authors have aimed to speak from within and not from above. In so many ways, then, this special issue is recognition, gratitude, and celebration of Indigenous communities, peoples, places, and the ways in which we can contribute to human rights education discourses. In kind, we are pleased to share the cover artwork by 3rd grade children from Kha'p'o Owingeh (Santa Clara Pueblo), which is Tessie's home community in Pueblo Indian Country, what is now northern New Mexico territory in the U.S. Each child contributed a drawing, which was then compiled by brilliant artist and Kha'po'o Community School art teacher, Eliza Naranjo Morse, who also graciously facilitated the children's discussion to craft their artist statement together:

The sun is rising, and people are dancing and people are watching. Rain is coming down; people are eating and the dancers are making the rain come. It's a big celebration and everyone is wearing beautiful costumes. One person is studying. There are dancers and drummers and hearts. The sun is giving light. (Artists Kailynn Archuleta, Anthony Munu Chavarria, Julián Chavarria, John Tonka Dominguez, Kylan Fragua, Illena Suazo-Garcia, Katherine Willow, 2019)

The work of these children offers us inspiration beyond words, and the images they have shared serve as a reminder of why we as Indigenous women and allies do the work we do—so that our world’s children enjoy the freedom to observe, learn, participate, and to do and be what makes them happy.

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