

INDIGENIZING AND DECOLONIZING FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY

From the Outside Looking In: One Woman's *Acimowin*¹

Lorraine Mayer

Department of Native Studies, Brandon University Faculty of Arts, Room 101 Clark Hall, 270 18th Street,
Brandon, Manitoba R7A 6A9, Canada

Corresponding author. Email: mayerl@brandonu.ca

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I struggle *mamere*
To bring
Your words
Into *nokum's*
Cabin
But the words
Are in battle
Competing
for my mind

I am a mixed-blood woman raised in Canada where my two ancestries have competing worldviews, from social, political, and religious ideology to ancient philosophies. These mixed ancestries also come with different social expectations. In the social-political world of Native Studies where I walk daily, my French grandmother, *mamere*, is argued as coming from a world of privilege because she was white-skinned, and my Cree grandmother, *nokum* is thought to come from a world of oppression because she was dark-skinned.² Yet both my grandmothers experienced abuse and prejudice. How and where the abuses originated may be different, but they did occur. I have a lot to learn from my grandmothers, but it has taken me many years of inner conflict, self-righteousness, and pain to get to this understanding. To acknowledge both grandmothers having been oppressed means I cannot continue to think of the world in simplistic, binary terms of colonizer/colonized. I must legitimize the equality of suffering in both cultures. Indeed, my worldviews had been turned upside down as I began to identify with the feminist movement, nonetheless it is *nokum's* world that was shattered, demeaned, and distorted, so it is her world I bring to you today with this story. Another day I may talk about my *mamere's* patriarchal world, but today is for *nokum*.

In Canada, thanks to Indian Affairs and the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the United States, legal definitions are replete with blood-quantum quotas, status and nonstatus memberships, and other classifications, which cause unjustifiable pain and division among communities and among and between individuals, but most heinous is the impact they have had on Indigenous women in North America.

Who were they to dictate who we were
 Tearing red roots from their soil,
 Forming with each generation a brand new breed.
 Each step up a bloodline down,
 Another statistic lost to the wind ... (Mayer 2001)

As I said above, the Canadian government manipulated *nokum's* rights through identity dissolution. Yet dissolution began even before my province became a part of Canada.

I searched that genealogy chart
 I searched and I search
 And I searched again.
 I found Cree woman
 Cree woman
 And Indian woman.
 But the men all had names.
 So, I left that genealogy chart
 It couldn't name my
 Nokum's and I
 already knew my grandfathers.

How depressing it was to discover only my grand-*Peres* and *Choums* had names.³ However having a given name or even surname for my *Choums* was only true after the late 1700s, prior to that they were also just Indian or half-breeds. At any rate, it was the dissolution of my mother's ancestry, which started me on this particular journey. I wanted to know "who this man was that owned her world." I found the culprit was not a man after all but a male-dominated system of colonialism. This system still controls my world. Feminism has made many inroads into the male patriarchy that dominated my *mamere's* world, but not so much for *nokum's* world.

For example, a few years back I attended my first feminist conference. To say I was nervous was an understatement since I had long rejected feminism from my Indigenous standpoint and I certainly rejected being categorized as feminist. Nonetheless, I began to wonder if feminism had something constructive to add to Indigenous conversations, so I decided to explore its options.

I attended the 2015 APA Committee on the Status of Women Diversity Conference. The theme was "Exploring Collaborative Contestations and Diversifying Philosophy" held at Villanova University in Philadelphia. I was scheduled to present my paper "From Being to Non-Being: Government Manipulation of Identity" at the Special FEAST Session: "Oppression and Responsibility."

Unfortunately, my funding did not come through until the last minute, which resulted in a last-minute flight at an exorbitant cost, so after two flights, including a tiring cross-country flight, and a particularly lengthy cab drive to Villanova University, I arrived. Completely exhausted, I just made it within an hour of my scheduled talk.

As we approached Villanova I began to worry about hotel accommodations as I could not see any around. The events that took place in seeking information to find the closest hotel led me to question the cultural and affective modes of respect that I would expect to find at a feminist philosophy conference. Needless to say, I did not feel welcomed at the conference as the organizers seemed to blame me, accusing me of disrespect for arriving late to the conference. You can only imagine my reaction. I

was hurt, humiliated and enraged. As a result, my introduction to a feminist conference was extremely negative which only served to reinforce my belief that diversifying philosophy had a long way to go and perhaps Indigenous women were not truly wanted.

When the time arrived for me to give my talk on "Government Manipulation of Identity," it became clear to me that the audience had no knowledge of the serious discrimination issues that Indigenous women in the north had experienced and still are experiencing.⁴ In particular, I was addressing how the Canadian government had created a policy designed to eliminate Indigenous women's identity and status in Canada. The success of this policy was dependent on the "marrying out" clause, whereby an Indigenous woman would lose her status by marrying anyone "not-status," including Indians from the United States, half-breed men, and non-status Indians. My government followed this disgrace with a further insult by creating policy that led to the unbelievably cruel act of bestowing Indian status to any nonnative woman marrying "in," that is, marrying a Native man. In a bizarre twist of manipulation, white women became Indians and Indians became white women. Then in a deviously masked attempt to end the gender discrimination, they created a new policy. In reality, however, it simply created a new way to reduce status Indian identity with ridiculous blood quantum statistical categories of 6(1) and 6(2).⁵

From the apparent shock of the audience, it became clear to me that most of the feminists (at that conference at least) had no idea of what was occurring in Canada to Indigenous women. Their lack of awareness was heartbreaking but not surprising. Even in my own country, most non-Indigenous women are unaware of our circumstances. Although my presentation was well received, the rest of the conference was uncomfortable. I witnessed many disagreements, to the point where a "white" privileged professor threatened the future tenure of an untenured professor of color, some scholars broke down in tears, and others held secret meetings. Talk about abuse of power at a conference where feminists espouse equality! Now I ask you, why would an indigenous philosopher be interested in any feminist conference after those experiences?

While my introduction to feminist conferences was negative and my immediate reaction was to return home there was a plus side, I met many wonderful women at the APA Committee on the Status of Women Diversity Conference from diverse backgrounds and areas of expertise whose welcome succeeded in erasing my humiliation. I had met some wonderful women philosophers, willing to challenge the status quo. These women invited me to attend the next Feminist Ethics and Social Theory conference, better known as FEAST, in the fall of 2015. Again, I was hesitant, but the conference theme was appealing: "Contested Terrains: Women of Color, Feminisms, and Geopolitics." I was invited to present the Graduate Student Award, which I gladly consented to do. Later I agreed to chair [session Q]: "Indigenous Voices and Feminism." This particular session led to its own controversy with Indigenous scholars. The source of conflict arose from the idea that a non-Indigenous panel could speak to Indigenous philosophy. An Indigenous scholar challenged the session's authority because the chair was herself an Indigenous woman with a PhD in philosophy yet non-Indigenous people were speaking for us. I probably knew more about Indigeneity from both a lived and an academic perspective than the panelists, which in most circumstances would have been a colossal insult to academic Indigenous scholars, since the only indigenous person in the panel was the chair. My late decision to attend this conference did not allow for a prepared presentation; therefore, I had not submitted a proposal but this was unknown to my colleague hence her irritation. Given the history of Indigenous peoples experience

with rejection and dismissal, my colleague's concerns were not unwarranted. I was able to clarify that this was not an attempt to disregard Indigenous philosophers, but an acceptance of papers from submitted proposals, none of which were from Indigenous scholars. I was fine with being asked to chair this session, particularly as I was able to clarify, contest, and support non-Indigenous scholars. Perhaps being chair was a better use of my knowledge after all. Although a conference theme of "contested terrains" was valuable, I felt the actions of the feminists were more revealing of existing and problematic terrains, which were among the feminists themselves. Clearly, we had a lot of work to do to reach any kind of positive relationship.

For many Indigenous peoples, experience holds great value; therefore, because of my previous experiences, I did not want to attend any more feminist conferences, but Dr. Celia Bardwell Jones (who had attended graduate school with me) had a role in organizing the 2017 conference. When she told me the theme being negotiated was *Indigenizing Philosophy*, I was encouraged and offered the names of two prominent Indigenous feminist scholars as possible keynote speakers.

I was later informed that the theme would have to change as most FEAST members would have no knowledge of Indigenous philosophy, therefore attendance would be limited. The theme the organizers finally came up with to spark interest was *Indigenizing and Decolonizing Feminist Philosophy*. I am well acquainted with people not knowing or having little interest in Indigenous philosophy, so I was not overly surprised. Nonetheless, I was thrilled when Mi'kmaw scholar Bonita Lawrence and Cree-Metis scholar Kim Anderson accepted our invitations to be the keynote speakers. Both women had a long history in feminism, were well acquainted with colonization, and had deep knowledge of Indigenous philosophy.

Given our conference theme, and two key Native speakers, I thought it would be a great opportunity to bring some Indigenous students to the conference. The students I invited had never been out of the country, and none had any training in Western philosophy. What they did bring to the conference, however, was a lived reality of Indigenous philosophy and an understanding of gender and gender equality. I selected my students based on their geographical location, from the north, middle and south region. Geographical location is important as it reflects their diverse experiences and understanding of indigenous philosophy. The first student invited was Beverly Young. Beverly is from the community/reserve of Opaskywiak at the 53rd parallel in Manitoba, and though it is recognized as more centrally located in the province, it is nonetheless considered a northern community. Beverly does not speak her Indigenous language, but she comes from a well-known family in the north and was well acquainted with Ininiwak (Cree) culture. Another student I invited was Glen McIvor, an Anishinabe from the more southern region of Portage La Prairie near Long Plains, although Glen originally comes from Sandy Bay. He is fluent in the Anishinabe (Ojibwa) language and came with deep knowledge of his culture. The third student was from what we call the far north, the remote fly-in community of Brochet. Grace is fluent in both her language and her culture. Initially I had wanted an all-female contingent and had invited another female student from Metis culture. Unfortunately, work commitments prevented her attendance. At the last minute, we convinced Glen that his knowledge of language and culture from his gendered perspective would be an asset at a feminist conference. This would be these three students' first conference experience.

My students were on a panel co-created by Dr. Shay Welch and I addressing Indigenous philosophy. In relation to decolonizing and indigenizing feminist

philosophy, we decided to talk about teaching Indigenous philosophy. In my own case, I use the circle and Moodle as a modern talking circle. Most classes follow a form of Socratic style (books are less important); the student's voice is of utmost importance, and so began our ceremony. We began this panel as most ceremonies do, with prayer and individual introductions following around a semi-circle.⁶ We took turns introducing ourselves in Indigenous fashion, name and community identified in a Native language where possible, and then the students each gave their stories. They spoke from the heart, not the head. They spoke of community, of a living philosophy. They were able to explain the lack of gendered terminology in our languages. They were able to articulate an egalitarian world and the inherent value of childbirth. They were able to bestow a native philosophy upon us that only speakers can know. In this sense, Indigenous philosophy cannot be taught or understood within models of western philosophy. As Indigenous students, they had more wealth of experience than our degrees in philosophy to teach us about Indigenous philosophy.

Shay and I took a back seat to the students, thereby demonstrating a symbolic recognition of the value of youth. Clearly, these students were adults, but their presence as students was symbolic of youth. At the same time, their knowledge was valued as equally significant as that of learned scholars, perhaps more so. Shay and I did participate during the question period, but mostly we encouraged the students. The experience we had with the audience was far different from my early experiences. This audience was genuinely interested and treated the students with equal respect, and they asked relevant questions. I was especially thankful for the lack of hostility and usual scholarly arguments. My students felt respected.

Kim Anderson's talk, "Affirmations of an Indigenous Feminist: Motherhood, Masculinities, Re-Queering, More" received the same respect. She brought her introduction right to the heart of Indigenous philosophy. Her personal introduction had nothing to do with self but acknowledged all our relations. However, she did it in a way that could be understood by the audience. Her grace and wisdom permeated the conference. There is much to be said about nonconfrontationist philosophy. Bonita was just as moving but in a different way. She is a woman of great heart, and her infectious laughter warms everyone around her. These women approach philosophy from a healing perspective. Ours is not to deconstruct but to reconstruct. Our goal is to build on and improve relations. Ours is not a philosophy easy to understand, but it deserves a place among other philosophical traditions, and I for one experienced this at the FEAST 2017 conference.⁷

My students enjoyed all their social interactions and were thrilled to be treated with respect and friendship. They told me how much they enjoyed the lectures and even participated with questions of their own. I too enjoyed all the social interaction and lectures.

Indeed, Grace herself told me she was so happy to see people understanding Cree philosophy the way it is meant to be understood. She spent a lot of time sharing with others and always came away feeling validated. Beverly said she was honored to be there among scholars and graduate students and was excited to learn from others. Glen was amazed at the generosity he encountered; in fact, we were all surprised and honored by the generosity and acceptance we received. Though I had a difficult experience in being introduced to feminist philosophy conferences, I learned that at the margins of feminist philosophy circles I found solace with women of color (and some white women) who I interpreted as living up to the values of feminist philosophical practice. I think about my Cree grandmother, as I walk in the worlds of feminist

philosophy conferences. These are familiar experiences, but different contexts and I think my *nokum* is walking with me, guiding me to find my pathways in feminist philosophy.

I am not claiming all interactions were perfect, but none caused serious dissension. For the first time I felt welcomed at a feminist conference, and I look forward to sharing more of our philosophy both in an academic sense and a lived one through my story.

Notes

1 In the Cree language “*acimowin*” means story

2 In old Cree we do not say “my” grandmother as we do in the English language; the word “my” is embedded in the word itself. Therefore, it would be silly to say “my *nokum*” as one would actually be saying “my grandmother.” It was also understood that *nokum* was not just mine.

3 In the Cree language, “*Choum*” is a great grandparent regardless of gender. In this story *Choum* is meant to specifically refer to my great-grandfathers just as grand *Pere* refers to my French great grandfather.

4 Unlike the United States where Blood Quantum is an identifier for status, in Canada we have an Indian Act through which Government makes decisions passing Bills with regard to Indian status. For example, a 6 (1) is the equivalent of full status and ability to pass on full status. and 6(2) would be equivalent of half status, (not to be confused with half-breeds). A 6(2) can only pass on status if the spouse is either a 6 (1) or 6(2). This means we are nothing more than statistics. If a 6(2) marries a non Indian (even Métis or a US Indian) their children will lose all status and not be recognized as Indians.

5 Lynn Gehl an Algonquin Anishinabe from the Turtle Clan, has spent 35 years of her life fighting against Canada’s sex discrimination recently sent out a message about a Pod cast where she discusses Bill S3. The implementation of all the provisions of Bill S 3, an Act to Amend the Indian Act, will hopefully eliminate all sex discrimination.

6 A full circle was impossible given the shape and pattern of seating. We did not use a table, however, and sat in a semi-circle. Our introductions flowed from left to right.

7 From the conferences I had attended to date I witnessed dismissal of scholars, disrespect for scholars, I saw scholars driven to tears, and others threatened and far too much infighting. Clearly contested terrains needs to address our interpersonal and cultural issues with less focus on patriarchy. Perhaps then we can actually do something about patriarchy.

References

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Lorraine Mayer is a full Professor and Métis mother with two sons and a daughter. She has been gifted with nine wonderful grandchildren, and counts herself fortunate to be a cultural grandmother to many more children. She has been a Professor in the Native Studies Department at Brandon University since 2004. She has long been committed to Indigenous philosophy and Indigenous rights from both philosophical and feminist approaches. (mayerl@brandonu.ca)

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