

# By, For, or About?: Shifting Directions in the Representations of Aboriginal Women

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## ABSTRACT

In the past fifteen years much has changed respecting the representation of Aboriginal women in feminist scholarship. The emergence of Aboriginal women's scholarship in law, education, and literature has had a major and much overdue impact on our understanding of their history and their scholarly and political agendas. A review of the literature by, for, and about Aboriginal women in the areas of history, law, education, health, and literature reveals new trends in interdisciplinarity within feminist studies of colonialism, representation, "voice," and issues of equality and empowerment.

## RÉSUMÉ

Au cours des quinze dernières années bien des choses ont changé en ce qui concerne la représentation des femmes autochtones dans le savoir féministe en. L'émergence du savoir des femmes autochtones en droit, en éducation, et en littérature a eu un impact important sinon tardif sur notre compréhension de leur histoire et de leur ordre du jour érudit et politique. Une revue de la littérature par, pour et au sujet des femmes autochtones dans le domaine de l'histoire, du droit, de l'éducation, de la santé et de la littérature révèle de nouvelles tendances interdisciplinaires à l'intérieur des études féministes sur le colonialisme, la représentation, la "voix", et les questions d'égalité et d'émancipation.

## INTRODUCTION

In 1983 Rayna Green produced a comprehensive annotated bibliography on Native Women of America. She found that while a great deal had been written about the indigenous women living in the United States and Canada, little had been published by them. Moreover, much that had been written about them was of questionable value: historic writings were often blatantly sexist and racist; ethnographic works were grounded in eurocentric theories that misrepresented them and their cultures; and medical, psychological, and social analyses all too often reverted to sexist and racist stereotypes. Despite the attention granted to Native women, very little was known about them and suprisingly little effort was spent in addressing their realities and social/political agendas. Green's survey also pointed to glaring gaps in the available literature: there were few articles focusing on issues of civil and criminal law in either country and virtually no studies addressing self-governance. Green called for a change in scholarly agendas and approaches that would pay attention to the right of Aboriginal women to a "personal definition apart

from the agenda and definition posited in the structures of overt power" (Green 1983, 16).

In the past fifteen years, much has changed respecting the presence of Aboriginal women's voice in feminist media. *Fireweed* (1986) and *Canadian Woman Studies/Les Cahiers de la Femme* (1989) have produced special issues by Aboriginal women and have regularly published their works in subsequent years, often highlighting their work in thematic issues, for example *Canadian Woman Studies/Les Cahiers de la Femme* "Women of the North" (1994). Feminist broadsheets and newspapers, notably *Kinesis* and *Network of Saskatchewan Women*, have provided regular coverage of social, economic, and political issues as well as timely reviews of their scholarship and creative works. Government news bulletins - *Vis-a-vis*, for example - have also been more open to Aboriginal women's contributions and have increased their coverage of Aboriginal issues. The Aboriginal press has also grown: *Windspeaker*, *Khatou*, and *Akwesane Notes* are just three of several newspapers available; Pemmican and Theytus are two Aboriginal-controlled publishing houses that produce a vast array of Aboriginal

scholars' works.

In compiling this disciplinary overview of scholarly literature about, by, and for Aboriginal women of Canada primarily published since 1984, I asked myself a series of questions: Have scholarly agendas paid attention to Aboriginal women's self-definitions and agendas? How have these agendas been expressed in scholarly studies? How have we who are non-Aboriginal scholars responded to Aboriginal women's critiques of feminist discourses and political agendas? How have Aboriginal women adopted or resisted feminism?

I focus on five disciplines: history, law, health, education, and literature. These have been chosen for several reasons. First, a review of over 200 scholarly articles and 100 news stories indicated that issues of law, health, and self-governance are of primary significance to Aboriginal women. Second, an education literature is emerging that challenges conventional pedagogy and curriculum at all levels. Third, there has been a rapid increase in the availability of Aboriginal women's creative writing. Finally, a study of 275 items in the disciplines of law, education, and literature revealed common themes of concern to both Aboriginal women and to non-Aboriginal scholars that will prove significant to historians seeking to link their work to contemporary issues of Aboriginal concern: colonialism, representation, "voice," and issues of equality and empowerment.

## HISTORY

Colonialism continues to oppress Aboriginal women in myriad ways that are distinct from the disadvantages and oppression experienced by women of the dominant society. Hence, feminist theory has been found to distort Aboriginal women's experiences through application of universalizing concepts that do not speak to their experiences. Feminist historians, therefore, are now turning to a critical assessment of their theories as well as to their subject of research (Strong 1996). They are paying heed to Aboriginal story telling and autobiographies that give meaning to lives fragmented in historical documents and ground their interpretation within the meaning women ascribe to their experiences and oral histories of their foremothers (Cruikshank 1990). As Aboriginal women's own understandings of their history

emerged (Dickason 1992) feminist historians turned to deconstructing archival texts to illuminate ways in which language is imbricated in the colonial legacy of racism and sexism (Smith 1996).

Sexual stereotypes that polarise women either by romanticising them as "princesses" or by denigrating them as sexually immoral and beasts of burden mark the cultural as well as political colonial legacy that continues to constrain their contemporary life choices through their treatment by such sites of power as the law and government (Barman 1997). Understanding the discursive formation of Aboriginal women's sexuality requires us to build on the early work of Sylvia Van Kirk (1980) and Jennifer Brown (1980) by placing Aboriginal women in the context of the expectations held of settler women and the consequent effacing of Aboriginal women's essential role in colonial society, particularly in frontier communities (Barman 1998; Carter 1993, 1997; Payment 1996). Deconstruction of text reveals ways in which Aboriginal sexuality has been historically and socially constructed and how these constructions of sexuality create Aboriginal women as criminal subjects and discredit them as credible victims of sexual violence (Barman 1998; Sangster 1999).

Deconstruction of text marks a shift in feminist focus away from ethnohistorical studies of the "status" of Aboriginal women in precontact and early contact periods. While analyses of status were predicated on a scholarly quest for the political and economic origins of sexual inferiority and the implications of conversion (Anderson 1991; Buffalohead 1983; Cooper 1993; Devens 1992; Fiske 1991; Leacock 1981), feminist deconstruction helps to understand the process by which Aboriginal women were defined as "other" in the oppressive regimes of settler society.

Contemporary responses of the criminal justice system to concepts of aboriginal justice give rise to an array of debates regarding Aboriginal women's social position in traditional society and the nature of social justice (LaRocque 1997; Nahanee 1993). These concerns suggest that, while the earlier ethnohistorical debates on the comparative status of women may provide only partial understandings of gendered social processes, nonetheless the need to understand women's past lives in relation to men and to settler women

persists. In concert with on-going critical reading of androcentric texts (Peers 1996b), careful documentation of the past roles of the state and settler society in marginalizing women is required to combat negative assumptions, vicious stereotypes, and disregard for Aboriginal women's involvement in socio-economic spheres (Carter 1996; Drees 1995). The move on behalf of Aboriginal peoples for a renewal of their traditional understandings also speaks to the need for further studies of the rhetoric and social mores that racialized their bodies and justified the gendered treatment of children in residential schools (Kelm 1999).

Such studies need to be placed in the context of understanding both past and contemporary lives of Aboriginal women for, as Betty Bastien (1996) reminds us, women are charged with the responsibility to sustain "tribal identity." Shifting our gaze forward from the early years of settlement to the twentieth century helps us to understand how Aboriginal women sustain their cultures in the face of adversity, bigotry, and the state's coercive efforts at assimilation (Payment 1996).

Efforts to assimilate Aboriginal women into the gendered world of Euro-Canadians have been investigated in studies of enforced schooling (Barman et al. 1986; Barman 1986; Fahmy-Eid 1996; Miller 1996; Milloy 1999). Aboriginal women have made explicit the complex legacy of colonial education, in particular the enduring personal suffering and cultural losses that afflict Aboriginal well being (Bull 1987; Hodgson 1990; Stevenson 1988). Enforced schooling was but one strategy of Christian missionaries to alter Aboriginal consciousness. However, Christian precepts are understood within Aboriginal cosmologies. Nonetheless, reconstruction of sacred meanings and practices solely from archival documents is problematic, as Laura Peers notes in her study of Marian devotions (1996a). Rarely can the ethnohistorian bound by established historical methods truly reflect Aboriginal women's sense of connection to their past. A move to more nuanced exegesis of the social construction of Aboriginal sexuality and spirituality has been taken by ethnohistorians whose concern with the conversion to Christianity is grounded in oral narratives and contemporary events. In 1996, Michael Harkin and

Sergei Kan edited a special volume of *Ethnohistory*, *Native Women's Responses to Christianity*. The articles in this collection represent an initial investigation into the Christian invasion into Aboriginal lives and point to ways in which Christian iconography and practice are appropriated by Aboriginal peoples to represent cultural-specific understandings of gender. These studies move beyond an earlier focus on the impact of Christianity on women's status to understanding women's own conceptions of conversion, syncretic beliefs, and relationships between Christian institutions and community life.

While conventional ethnohistory has sought to synthesize oral and written texts for the purposes of presenting a "real" story or more comprehensive account, the postmodern trend in literary studies promotes taking a rhetorical approach that subjects both oral and written narratives to textual analysis (Brown and Vibert 1996). This approach, as Winona Stevenson (1996) demonstrates, reveals new lines of questioning and illuminates more fully how distinct cognitive models rise from culturally specific social networks and relationships (Cruikshank 1998). Adoption of critical literary methods and postmodern assumptions of power mark a turning point in feminist theory and historiography. How these will shape our understandings of Aboriginal women's history is yet to be seen.

## LAW

Issues of constitutional and civil law exemplify the nature of current issues of social justice and encapsulate the politicization of writing and voice (Lindberg 1997; Monture 1992 & 1993; Ryan 1995; Sugar and Fox 1990; Turpel 1991 & 1993). Due to the colonial power of the Canadian state to define Aboriginal peoples as socio-legal groups, with First Nations (status Indian) having rights that Inuit, Métis, and "nonstatus" Indians do not, scholars and activists have focused attention on the legal struggles of status Indian women and their socio-economic position in First Nations reserve communities. Two discourses rise to the fore in the debates over women's entitlement under the Constitution, which offers both protection on the basis of sex and on the basis of existing Aboriginal rights: individual rights, framed in a liberal

discourse, and collective rights, framed in a discourse of citizenship and identity. Two decades of Aboriginal women's struggle for equality and justice have also been framed in a debate regarding feminism: Are feminist struggles for individual rights the antithesis to Aboriginal philosophy and socio-political organization (Greschner 1992; Johnson et al. 1993; Turpel 1993)? Can differing views of First Nations women's scholars be accurately conceptualized as feminist/anti-feminist polarities (Ginn 1998)?

The most written about and perhaps most pressing and divisive concern for First Nations women has been the struggle to amend the sexually discriminatory provisions of the Indian Act (Jamieson 1978 & 1986; Montour 1986; Moss 1990 & 1997; Nahanee 1997). Prior to 1985, section 12(1)(b) of the Act stipulated that an Indian woman be denied her legal status if she married anyone other than a status Indian, a regulation that did not apply to men. Further, the children born to a woman who had so married were also denied the benefits and protection guaranteed by the Act. In the 1970s this entailed (unsuccessful) court action in the hopes that section 12(1)(b) would be found to violate the equality provisions of the Canadian Bill of Rights (Bear et al. 1991; Blumer 1993; Jones 1984; Whyte 1974). The consequences were far reaching. The women found themselves not only in conflict with the Department of Indian Affairs, but also with male leadership at both the community and national level over issues of individual versus collective rights (Jamieson 1978).

In 1980 a successful appeal to protection of individual rights was made to the United Nations Human Rights Committee by Sandra Lovelace of the Tobique First Nation (Silman 1987; *Lovelace v. Canada [1981]*). Following Lovelace's hearing and the repatriation of the *Canadian Constitution* and *The Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, the sexually discriminating clauses regulating legal status were removed from the Indian Act. Women who had lost their status through intermarriage had their status and membership in First Nations communities reinstated, while their children were guaranteed status but not membership in any First Nation. Reforming the Indian Act did not, however, ameliorate First Nations women's political struggle. To the contrary, the new statute persisted in privileging paternal access to legal status and

created new problems (Chabot 1987; Green 1985; Jones 1985; Kirkness 1988; Krosenbrink-Gelissen 1996). First Nations were confronted with increased membership for whom they had numerous fiscal obligations: on-reserve housing, educational and health benefits, and social assistance obligations. While many First Nations grappled with meeting these obligations with limited resources, some Treaty 6 Nations sought to limit access to wealth arising from oil royalties. The Sawridge band led this unsuccessful struggle when they appealed to the courts to find women's right to reinstatement unconstitutional (*Sawridge Band v. Canada [1995]*).

The struggle against sexual discrimination in the Indian Act shaped political strategy for the next two decades. Discourses of conflicting rights initially marked this struggle as scholars, lawyers, and political leaders weighed the apparently conflicting vulnerability of women's individual rights against constitutional protection of collective rights (Isaac 1995; Jordan 1995; McIvor 1995; Turpel 1989). In the 1980s the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC), an umbrella association representing provincial and local Aboriginal women's organizations, took the lead in protesting state actions that disadvantaged Aboriginal women. After considerable conflict with leading male-dominated organizations, NWAC looked to discourses of traditional motherhood to resolve the impasse, seeking a stance on citizenship that the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) would find acceptable (Krosenbrink-Gelissen 1991). However, NWAC's discursive strategy failed when in 1992 they were excluded from the constitutional processes of the Charlottetown accord. They turned to the federal court for remedy and once again argued against the violation of their rights to sexual equality (Fiske 1996). In consequence the debate on conflicting rights resumed as NWAC was accused of pitting women's individual rights against the self-determination of First Nations. They were alleged to open the doors to individual contestation of First Nations membership policies and their general powers of self-governance, which is seen as fundamental to a return to traditional/customary legal orders (Mercredi and Turpel 1993). Fear that individual challenges could cripple the powers of First Nations governments was soon substantiated in the courts. In 1992 David Thomas of a Salish

First Nation successfully sought legal remedy to his alleged forced participation in the Somenos Long House spirit dance, arguing unlawful confinement (*Thomas v. Norris, British Columbia Supreme Court [1992]*).

The federal government's failure to address women's concerns for their rights continues. The most recent round of confrontation pertains to First Nations control over reserve land and property rights. In 1985 and 1986 the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that provincial marital property laws do not apply on reserve lands, leaving women living there without rights enjoyed by other women in Canada. (For a discussion of these cases, *Paul v. Paul; Derrickson v. Derickson*, see Bartlett 1986; Hughes 1983; Turpel 1991). In 1999 First Nations gained further autonomy with the passing of the Land Management Act (1999), which was contested by the British Columbia Native Women's Society, whose members worry that the bill will result in further hardship for women. Their legal protest has locked them once again in conflict with national and local First Nations leaders and subjected them to allegations that they have adopted a "white" feminist stance detrimental to First Nations collectivity. As Patty Ginn (1988) has pointed out, however, struggles against multiple powers of the state are complex; what unites the legal scholars is their common response to oppression as an assault on their everyday lives. This political stance mitigates the alleged contrary stances they are seen to take with respect to feminism.

The ongoing struggles over reforming the Indian Act are much broader than an alleged liberal feminist struggle for individual rights and equality as framed in the constitution. Rather, as several writers have attested, women's political goals need to be placed within Aboriginal ethnopolitical movements for nationhood and sovereignty (Jackson 1994; Marule 1984; Moss 1990) and understood as a consequence of the ways in which legal discourse ignores Aboriginal realities and silences Aboriginal women (Turpel 1991). For some the remedy is grounded in a quest for an Aboriginal charter of rights independent of the Canadian *Charter* (Isaac and Maloughney 1992; Turpel 1989); for others protection of the *Charter* is deemed necessary, as has been argued by two leaders in NWAC, Teressa Nahanee (1993) and Sharon McIvor (1995).

The constitutional struggle is inextricably tied to a movement toward Aboriginal justice systems grounded in customary laws and traditional values of community harmony and reconciliation (Greschner 1992; Monture 1993; Turpel 1989 & 1990). Like the struggle for women's civil protection, the move toward Aboriginal justice has been marked by theoretical and strategic differences. Employing discourses of socialist and liberal feminism, Teressa Nahanee (1993) has objected to greater autonomy for First Nations governance on the grounds that the oppressive patriarchy of colonial regimes has been internalized into patterns of First Nations socio-legal powers leaving women vulnerable to their own leaders as well as to an uncompromising state. Emma LaRocque is equally sceptical. She predicates her critique on a rejection of notions of reconciliation, arguing that rather than being an indigenous principle of justice and orderly government, reconciliation arises from a European ethos, notably Christianity. Pauktuuitit, the Inuit Women's Association of Canada, views lenient sentencing in cases of sexual assault as a denial of their *Charter* right to "equal benefit of the law." (Flaherty 1997)

Rather than placing an emphasis on cultural difference or rejecting appeals to the Canadian state as Mary Ellen Turpel does, Emma LaRocque calls for stronger state roles to correct a tendency in mainstream society to "abandon[...] the oppressed to the oppressed" (who are "Native victims of Native violence") through "wanton leniency" by the courts and "heroification" and "undeserved sympathy" for Aboriginal sex offenders" (LaRocque 1997 & 1993). She positions her argument in a critique of "circle sentencing," that is, community involvement in sentencing that favours diversion of offenders from incarceration to community sentencing programs designed to heal what others call "broken spirit relations." Emma LaRocque's concerns are supported by Charlene Levis (1998), Margo Nightingale (1991), and Mary Crnkovich (1993), all of whom studied the consequences of circle sentencing for female victims of violence. They see intracommunity power relations and judges' limited, often male-biased, understandings of custom as disempowering female victims and leaving them vulnerable to community pressures and repeated abuses.

Legal discourses also subjugate Aboriginal

legal discourses. Dominant legal discourses silence women and constitute Aboriginal women as racialized legal subjects predicated in patriarchal ideologies of motherhood and notions of "best interests of the child." Marlee Kline (1992 & 1993) and Carol Buenafe (1996) indicate how Aboriginal women's agendas are distorted and dismissed in consequence of the dominant discourse of law, which responds to established stereotypes while subordinating alternative discourses of Aboriginal women.

### HEALTH

Problematization of the consequences of colonial oppression is foregrounded in the intersection of criminal justice and health, in particular with regard to legacies of abuse in colonial education (Furniss 1995; Grant 1996; Haig-Brown 1988; Hodgson 1990; Jaine 1993; Knockwood 1992; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples [RCAP] 1996 Vol 1), child apprehension and adoption (Fournier and Crey 1997; Lomax 1997; Monture 1989), violence against women in their home communities (Canadian Council on Social Development [CCSD] 1991; Frank 1992; Ontario Native Women's Association [ONWA] 1989), apprehension of children (Fournier and Crey 1997); and incarceration of Aboriginal female offenders (LaPrairie 1987 & 1993; Sugar 1989; Sugar and Fox 1990). While Carol LaPrairie (1989) has identified structural inequality and the alienation of Aboriginal men from traditional roles as causal factors in interpersonal violence, others have posited that trauma and its consequential post-traumatic syndromes (e.g., "residential school syndrome") lead to suicide, violence, depression, and community anomie (AFN 1994). The latter precepts have given rise to discourses of "healing" the "wounded spirit" and "broken spirit relations" and posit traditional values and psychological therapy as the remedy for wide-spread violence and social dysfunction (AFN 1994; Fournier and Crey 1997), an approach rejected by Chrisjohn and Young (1997) and Chrisjohn and Belleau et al. (1991). They argue that it psychopathologizes individual subjects, constitutes "psychological imperialism," and masks the cultural genocide inherent in colonial practices. Others address the

ways in which clinical encounters in the mainstream health systems are guided by and reproduce stereotypes of Aboriginal women, placing barriers to their access to health services (Band et al., 1992; Clarke 1997; Kaufert, 1990).

These articles reveal Aboriginal women's concerns that clinical practices result in stigmatization of themselves as having inappropriate sexual behaviours or lifestyles, which among other stereotypes give rise to "mother-blaming" (Sherley-Spiers 1989). Power relations have also been identified as problematic (Strickland et al. 1996), as have lack of knowledge about cancer screening procedures and lack of continuity of care in Aboriginal communities (Band et al., 1992). Disavowal and ignorance of traditional beliefs and practices are also identified as social determinants of health. Annette Browne (1993; 1995; 1997) pursues Aboriginal concepts of respect, and the ways these are denied by practitioners as a consequence of providers' biases and discriminatory attitudes toward Aboriginal people, to explain the invalidation of Aboriginal women as credible medical subjects.

Political economists place their analyses of the social determinants of Aboriginal women's health within frameworks of internal colonialism. O'Neil conceptualizes mainstream health systems as "powerful symbols of a recent colonial past" and addresses the profound separation of knowledge and power between Aboriginal people and western health providers. The recent Royal Commission on Aboriginal People (RCAP 1996, Vol. 4) reinforces the view that the analysis of patient/provider encounters should not overlook historical and political economy forces.

These premises, although expressed somewhat differently, underlie the "population health approach" advocated by the Canadian state, which calls for recognition "that a state of best health is not merely a function of physical capacity, but is also closely related to a whole set of personal and social resources." The precepts of political economy, respect, and the population health approach all locate women's well-being in health practices that uphold "the high esteem that Aboriginal women bestow upon human life and family," and contribute "to Aboriginal social stability and social integration, thereby creating a healthy living context for Aboriginal women,"

(Dion-Stout 1997, citing Standing Committee on Health 1995). Jean Cuthland Goodwill (1989; Hager 1996) sees a solution to cultural dissonance in health delivery by increasing the number of graduate Aboriginal health professionals.

Issues of personal well-being and self-esteem viewed in isolation fail to explicate socio-political power relations. Power politics emanating from the state and the racist culture of settler colonialism are addressed by Dara Culhane Speck (1987) and Bridget Moran (1990) in their studies of the deaths of young Aboriginal women from criminal negligence. Speck positions her analysis of the politics of medical care in the colonial legacy of state-directed processes, while Moran provides a disturbing account of how racism is played out in a coroner's inquest in a small village. Transfer of health services from the federal Medical Services Branch to First Nations governments has been initiated as a remedy to the problems identified by political leaders and political economists, but as Culhane Speck foresaw, this approach threatens the quality of services as the federal government seeks to reduce health costs and limit transfer payments.

Jurisdictional quagmires that deny health care and social opportunities to disabled Aboriginal women exacerbate their personal struggles. According to Doreen Demas (1993) more than forty per cent of residents in Aboriginal communities live with disabilities. She links these disabilities to issues of limited access to treatment and education, poverty, and violence. Inappropriate treatment is also problematic, as Susan Abbey (1993) demonstrates in her study of the need for appropriate, community-based treatment strategies for Inuit women under psychiatric care.

While scholars emphasize socio-political etiologies for personal and social afflictions, Aboriginal women turn to discourses of healing and survival to articulate the "strength of the female force" (Armstrong 1996) as the foundation for individual and collective remedies (CCSD 1991; Hebert & McCannel 1997; Paproski, 1997). Their testimonies to the need to "heal the family, heal the nation" and their vision of transforming prisons to "healing lodges" speak to the complexities inherent in the intersection between Aboriginal women's experiences and the socio-political oppression of their people.

The holistic web of spiritual practices are

captured in women's understandings of pregnancy (Malloch 1989; Sakokwenonkwas 1989; Sokoloski 1995), in their elders' teachings on healing and ceremony (Osenontion and Skonaganlehra 1989), in explications of the "power" of traditional medicine (Blondin 1990), and in the successes of community-based services for pregnant women (Glor 1987) - and are conspicuously absent in survey studies based on government generated data bases (Stewart and Steckle 1987). Discourses of holism and sacred ties to the land, seen as the gift of the Creator and the responsibility of humankind, give shape to Aboriginal women's perceptions of protecting "Mother Earth" and their subsequent struggles against environmental pollution caused by macro-level resource extraction (Hungry Wolf 1996; O'Neil et al. 1998; Poelzer and Poelzer 1986). Political struggles to protect the land and to regain Aboriginal entitlement reveal the intersection of legal and health discourses (Blondin 1990; Brown 1996; Churchill and La Duke 1986; Venne 1997) thereby implying the need for historical studies that will illuminate these connections and their socio-political potential for women's empowerment.

## EDUCATION

Analysis of power/knowledge relations marks the need for radical shifts in educational practices. Working from the premise that "[w]hatever else education is about it is also about power," Shari Buchan and Ingrid Johnson (1998) make the case for a transformative curriculum that embraces "teaching *within* rather than *about* the culture" in order to re-create educational institutions as "sites of empowerment." Their words evoke the visions and achievements of Aboriginal women educators, among them Jo-ann Archibald (White and Archibald 1992), Betty Bastien (1996), Marie Battiste (1995), Jean Graveline (1998), Verna Kirkness (Kirkness 1988; Hager 1996), and Emma LaRocque (1996). In a range of expressions these and other Aboriginal educators foreground the need for pedagogy based on traditional values of respect, reciprocity, and responsibility (Kirkness and Barnhardt 1991; White and Archibald 1992) and consonant with Aboriginal socialization practices. These must be coupled with new power relations that place Aboriginal women's education within the struggle for their self-determination (Jacobs 1989;

Fedorick 1989). Central to pedagogical models grounded in traditional values lies respect for and deep understandings of the meanings of story telling and Aboriginal language and the central role of Aboriginal women as the teachers of the next generations (Osenntion and Skonaganlehra 1989; Sterling 1992a; White and Archibald 1992).

A recurring theme in many of these pieces is the manner in which the polarization of "civilization" and indigenous knowledge discredits traditional women's wisdom. Aboriginal writers do not perceive education merely as institutionalized training and certification, but rather as a broad spectrum of daily experience linking literacy, job training, and bridging to traditional responsibilities for social well-being and community healing (Anderson 1989; Poelzer and Poelzer 1986). Bertha Blondin (1990) and the Dene Cultural Institute (1993) emphasize the need for detailed knowledge of the land and cultural systems in order to create meaningful teachings in the area of medicine and health (Dene Cultural Institute 1993). In a similar vein, Kayo Ohmagaari and Firket Berkes (1997) demonstrate how Cree women's indigenous knowledge and bush skills contribute to social health of James Bay communities, but are subordinated by the political economy of an educational hierarchy that, like law and health, retains the underpinnings of internal colonialism.

Patricia Monture addresses dimensions of power and knowledge in her critique of legal education and feminist ideologies. She contrasts feminism, as a construct arising from colonialism, to First Nations women's perceptions of equity, honour, and equality as caring (1986; 1995; Osenntion and Skonaganlehra 1989) to point to the "violence" of formal education that silences Aboriginal women and denies their reality through separation of gender and race. Jeannette Armstrong also challenges feminist conceptions of gender in her novel *Slash*, which challenges official history of colonial/gender relations, and thereby provides an educative role in the unlearning of colonial assumptions. Cecilia Haig-Brown (1992) has responded to these and other critiques by seeking new researcher relationships that allow her to reflect on her location in the power relations of ethnographic research.

Story telling and the oral traditions of Aboriginal peoples figure largely in discourses of

law, health, and education and provide a cornerstone for new directions in theorizing in the humanities and social sciences. Emerging discourses include the notions that storytelling "is an expression of power" and a forceful tool for transforming legal thinking (Dallam 1991; Venne 1997), pedagogy (Armstrong 1993; White and Archibald 1992), and health research (Adelson 1998). Jeannette Armstrong, for example, turns to collaborative ethnography in order to plumb the deeper meanings of Ellen White's narratives. Incorporation of storytelling challenges the academic canon by acknowledging cultural-specific voices and by recognizing the knowledge of Aboriginal women as an integral facet of the processes of decolonizing the mind.

## LITERATURE

The recurring themes found in legal, health, and education discourses are foregrounded in multiple ways in creative culture produced by Aboriginal women. Since the 1980s the writings of Aboriginal women have entered the print media/culture in a rising wave of production of life stories (Ahenakew and Wolfart 1992; Brass 1987; Flannery 1995; French 1976, 1992; Joe 1996; Lawrence 1996; Maracle 1990 [1973]; Moran and John 1988) anthologies of fiction, poetry and essays (Brant 1988; Fife 1993; *Fireweed* 1986; Harjo and Bird 1997; Perreault and Vance 1990; Petrone 1991); poetry collections (Armstrong 1991; Brant 1990; Chrystos 1988; Joe 1978; 1988; 1991), short stories, novels, essays, and fictionalized autobiographies (Armstrong 1985 & 1991; Brant 1991; Campbell 1983; Culleton, 1983 & 1992; Maracle 1990 [1973]; 1988; 1993; 1990; 1992; Robinson 1996; Slipperjack 1987; Sterling 1992b).

Critics have responded to Aboriginal women's writings in their own outpourings of analytical articles (Bowerbank and Wawaia 1994; Currie 1990; Fee 1990; Godard 1986; 1987; 1990; Grant 1990; Hoy 1993 & 1994; Murphy 1997; Rasporich 1996; Shaub 1995) and monographs (Emberley 1993; Horne 1999; Petrone 1990) that seek to categorize, interpret, and to locate the writings of Aboriginal women within mainstream feminist, postcolonial, and postmodernist theories, while the writers themselves articulate theory that arises within their stories and is integral to their



own, culturally-positioned narratives and narrative styles (Acoose 1995; Campbell et al. 1992; Gould 1995; LaRocque 1990; Maracle 1988).

"Resistant" and "protest" literature are perhaps the most common critical categories embraced by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal critics to describe the politicized activity of writing. Resistance literature emphasizes issues of social justice (Ruoff) and cultural and linguistic genocide. Themes within resistant and protest literature include victimization/survival, rage, grief, grievance, and personal and collective pain and anger arising from alienation (LaRocque 1990b). Just as legal scholars seek to decolonize minds through construction of innovative legal discourses grounded in the everyday reality and oral traditions of Aboriginal women - and educators deploy similar strategies to disrupt the established power/knowledge regimes of colonial pedagogy - creative writers see resistant literature as a "site of struggle" (Horne 1999). Emma LaRocque introduces the contributions to *Writing the Circle* as protest literature that speaks to the process of colonization, dispossession, objectivity, objectification, and marginalization.

The development of new narrative strategies has been explored by Horne, who goes beyond notions of cultural convergence or cultural synthesis (Rasporich) through analysis of the hybridity of narrative innovation and the powers of "subversive mimicry." With the exception of Freda Ahenakew, who offers a bilingual Cree/English text to capture the unmediated voices of storytellers (Ahenakew and Wolfart 1992), creative writers and biographers write in English. This carries its own dangers as Joy Harjo and Gloria Bird foreground in their title, *Reinventing the Enemy's Language* (1997). One danger is the appropriation of Aboriginal discourse by sites of power and New Age religiosity. A second is the risk of distorted meaning through translation of Aboriginal languages to English. A third is the imposition of dominant theories in such a manner as to misinterpret or distort the textual styles of resistance grounded in orality. Distortion of styles and genres denies claims to taking control over identity and disavows the writers' efforts to use culturally-distinct positions to challenge stereotypes (for an example, see Petrone 1990). As Aboriginal women's writings enter the academy a fourth danger

emerges: imposition of critical standards that create a "canon" of selected Aboriginal writers that absorb them into the dominant canon, thereby threatening to homogenize their diversity and to exclude the lesser known authors from critical appreciation (Harjo and Bird 1997; LaRocque 1990b).

In reclaiming the oral traditions of their ancestors, Aboriginal women writers reveal their culturally specific understandings of gender. Their works are replete with references to the feminine principle, the honour of women in traditional value systems, and the value of children. Their work stands as a challenge to dominant strains of feminism, in particular liberal feminism in disavowing individuality by reference to the complementarity of male and female and in posting an ethics of care predicated in respect, responsibility, and reciprocity. Representation of the feminine principle moves beyond that which is represented by the "maternal" feminism of the first wave of feminism to establish the wisdom of "grandmothers" and to create a "maternal lineage" of knowledge and power that challenges the foundations of Christian-patriarchy. Janice Acoose identifies "a gynocentric-circular harmonious way of life" as the principle influence that distinguishes Aboriginal writing from the dominant Canadian literary theory, while Sylvia Bowerbank and Dolores Nawagesic Wawia identify an "ethic of subsistence" that emerges in the stories of grandmothers to demarcate storytelling as a strategy of survival. The ethic of subsistence links storytelling to the strategies found in social activism that enjoins protection of ancestral lands to issues of social well being and personal health. Respect for storytelling as a source of knowledge now resonates in the social sciences and the humanities and has led to new directions in social science theorizing and interpretation, largely influenced by Julie Cruikshank's (1990) collaborative work with Angela Sidney, Kitty Smith, and Annie Ned. This new movement in oral history marks a concern for the social construction of gendered selves.

#### **CONCLUSION: FEMINIST SCHOLARSHIP AND ABORIGINAL WOMEN**

This disciplinary overview of writings by, for, and about Aboriginal women in Canada

suggests we are experiencing a turning point in feminist scholarship, one that is responding to Aboriginal women's goals as articulated by Rayna Green in 1983. Feminist historians are responding to Aboriginal women's concerns respecting representation, voice, and their right to and need for a self-defined political identity and agenda. Feminist and non-feminist scholarship in the five selected fields reveals a growing attention being paid to Aboriginal women's agendas. Nonetheless, three issues remain unresolved: the questions of appropriation, collaboration, and the implications of applying Eurocentric theory to Aboriginal culture and scholarship. While progress has been made in the past two decades, apart from literature, we still lack anthologies of Aboriginal women's work that can be used in our undergraduate and graduate classrooms.

Aboriginal legal scholars have been particularly influential in debates respecting notions of equality, individual rights, collective rights, and self-determination and in challenging foundations of feminist thought respecting questions of gender identity and gender politics. While health studies have been slow to respond to the call for respect and reciprocity between researchers and the

researched, those that do point to a shift from assumptions of "objectivity" as unbiased to acceptance of the "subjectivity" of storytelling as a legitimate foundation for cross-cultural research.

Finally, feminist historians and literary critics are increasingly turning to Aboriginal women's story telling as rich and authentic sources of knowledge - empirical and theoretical - that are essential to the outsiders' comprehension of difference, the politics of identity, and to the development of feminist praxis that embraces work "by, for, and about" Aboriginal women. This move opens new spaces for developing a self-reflexive stance on race, gender, and class in societies carrying the burden of colonialism, racialization and oppression.

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