

# Transforming and Grappling with Concepts of Activism and Feminism with Indigenous Women Artists

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## **Abstract**

This essay reflects on the multiple relations between the socially constructed terms of activism, feminism and Indigenous artists and whether such reflections connect to a larger discussion surrounding colonization, hegemonic western art practices and the lack of female Indigenous artists in the mainstream art world.

## **Résumé**

Cet article est une réflexion sur les multiples relations entre les termes construits socialement d'activisme, de féminisme et d'artistes indigènes et si ce genre de réflexions se relie à une plus grande discussion sur la colonisation, les pratiques d'art occidentales hégémoniques et le manque de femmes artistes indigènes dans le monde d'art conventionnel.

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Tensions and contradictions exist between the social locations of feminism and activism among Indigenous women artists. A dialogue needs to be created to grapple with these concepts in an Indigenous context, one that would engage with the relationship between Indigenous women and the cultural politics of their art practices and provide discourse surrounding feminism and activism in the context of the artistic practices of the original inhabitants of Turtle Island. To that end, this essay reflects on the complex relations between the socially constructed terms of activism, feminism and Indigenous artists and whether such reflections connect to a larger discussion surrounding colonization, hegemonic western art practices and the lack of female Indigenous artists in the mainstream art world.

Indigenous struggles rooted in decolonization and self-determination historically have a distorted relationship to the terms activism and feminism and while Indigenous thinkers and scholars advocate for self-determination and decolonization, these terms are situated in different frameworks. Decolonization is an internal and external process, which allows the colonized to oppose or change the "conquest and control of [their] people's land and goods" (Loomba 2005, 8). Self-determination is rooted in Aboriginal peoples governing their own nations and the devolution of their social and political welfare. Grace Ouellette argues that, "the concepts of racism and Eurocentrism have not been adequately addressed by feminist writers analyzing the status of Indigenous women in the global community" (2002, 12) and her point is a valid one because until

recently feminist writers did not deal with the concepts of racism and colonization. However, in the last two decades, a whole new generation of feminist theorists have focused on anti-racist, Indigenous and women of color feminist issues and theory. As examples we can look to the work of Chandra Mohanty, Gloria Anzaldúa, Lee Maracle, Joyce Green, Christine Welsh and Shirley Bear.

In the past and the present there have been numerous difficulties when Indigenous people commit to feminist politics. This happens because there is a disconnection in the understanding of feminism, caused when Indigenous people assume that feminism does not take up issues of Indigenous sovereignty, self-determination and self-government. The tension between Indigenous issues and feminism exists when people want to separate these embodiment practices. As Devon Mihesuah, an American Indigenous scholar argues, not all Indigenous women reject "white" feminism and "when they [Indigenous] identify themselves as 'feminists,' they often mean they are 'Native Activists,' concerned with more than female marginalization. Indeed, they fight for fishing, land, water, and treaty rights and at the same time, they have no desire to be called inferior by anyone because they are women" (Mihesuah 2003, 162). The concepts behind activism and the use of the term as a vehicle to end oppression and create social change is enabling people to bypass the politics of feminism. This is highly problematic because it proposes that feminists are not activists or that Indigenous people who use and identify with feminism are not really feminists at all; they are Native activists. The concept of activist in my work has been re-named "social change agent" (I use this term in order to find a different ideology that is not embedded in social constructions of the frontline radical activist) and I developed it out of my understanding that the role of an activist, feminist, social change agent and, I would add, artist, is to transform dominant racist, sexist and

colonial Canadian (or any) society by providing individuals with tools to resist in local struggles. Devon Mihesuah's use of the term activist and her argument that other women who identify with feminist politics are activists rather than feminists, perpetuate distorted views of feminism (2003). This is an injustice to the feminist movement, including those feminist activists who are struggling to end all oppressions and who are engaged in decolonizing practices. Yet women such as Ouellette and Mihesuah also support feminist issues, including the environment, land, childcare, education, health care and so on. Ouellette and Mihesuah's writings focus on these concerns which are haunting Indigenous women in our present day realities of social dislocations and oppression. The struggle for Indigenous women to find a location in feminism is difficult because, as these writers indicate, there are complications for Indigenous people to identify themselves as feminist. However, as both writers argue, it is acceptable to be an activist but not an advocate for feminism because they face less criticism from other Indigenous people in naming themselves "activists" instead of "feminists." This is an extremely problematic stance as both terms were created out of a Eurocentric framework and need to be discussed further. This is a concern which will be addressed later in this paper.

The past works of Rosanna Deerchild, an Indigenous writer, and Lita Fontaine, an Indigenous artist, both deal with "approaching feminism with a cultural lens" (Deerchild 2003, 100). Fontaine defines herself and her work as "tribal first because first and foremost my Aboriginality is important, but feminist because I have adopted some of their ideals" (Deerchild 2003, 100) and she has borrowed the term tribal feminism from the Paula Gunn Allen from her book *The Sacred Hoop* that also deals with feminist ideology through a "cultural lens." Deerchild states, "Tribal feminism argues that matriarchy gave way to patriarchy within our business, community and governing structures, and women lost

their status and their leadership roles" (Allen 1986, 101). This kind of thinking is what complicates past understandings of feminism and the effects colonization have had on Indigenous women's gender roles within their own communities. It is courageous of Fontaine and Deerchild to demand a redefinition of past constructions of white/middle-class feminism and at the same time they ask for a re-examination of Indigenous women's role in their own communities and Canadian society in general. Fontaine argues that it is not only Euro-Canadian society that needs re-examining; she "began to discover that these 'isms' also exist in Aboriginal societies and traditions" (Deerchild 2003, 100). An example of such an encounter in Aboriginal society would be the experience of women's place around the drum.

Fontaine has created artwork that brings to light the very issue of a woman's place around the drum. One of her earlier pieces of artwork, *The Women's Drum*, has four images of the upper female torso in the four directions, surrounded by a large drum in the center. At each corner of the drum there are feathers and stones sitting in each direction. The creation of this project was intended to challenge some of the gender divisions in her community and in Aboriginal ways of doing. Fontaine states that she began to "confront what she sees as patriarchy that has seeped into these long-held beliefs, ceremonies and gender roles" (Deerchild 2003, 100). This is a significant shift in thinking for Aboriginal women about a contentious issue, with many Aboriginal theorists arguing that Aboriginal men's struggle for a better place in Canadian society is similar to that of Aboriginal women. However, it is important to note the imbalance of power within Aboriginal communities for women as a result of colonization. Therefore, it is crucial to re-evaluate how and why this imbalance exists and, instead of separating themselves from feminism, Fontaine and Deerchild are demanding redefinition. If more Indigenous women can find power in what Fontaine and

Deerchild are attempting to do, then there can be coalition building, and many Aboriginal people can find a place within the feminist movement, feminist art and its accompanying theoretical body of knowledge.

Fontaine's most recent work, *The Sacred Feminine*, deals with various issues and complexities related to the beauty of the body and its gendered experiences. She has combined ideas of land, body, beauty and energy into a marvelous piece of artwork. At the same time there is a sense of interplay that exists which relates to the idea of the feminine. This work begins to grapple with the existing tensions between art/beauty and the embodiment knowledge of being an Aboriginal woman. Fontaine states, "The one thing about *The Sacred Feminine* was to honour my own femininity within myself and to bring out the beauty in our culture" (*Manitoban Online* 93.22). This kind of honour needs to be at the forefront of feminist movements and embraced by Aboriginal peoples who know women form the backbone of their communities, nations and families. Therefore, the struggle to resist dominant ideologies of the feminine stems from western education and colonization. This is where art is not created just for aesthetic or avant-garde purposes; it has social and political context for Aboriginal people. This does not mean a total rejection of avant-garde or aesthetic practices for Aboriginal artists, since there are artists who focus on these forms of expression. However, there are different implications for Aboriginal artists because their artwork is always locked into a political position or stance because of the historical implications of a white settler colony. As Fontaine states, "I always felt like I was battling the system. For me, there wasn't very much Aboriginal art. I had to fight my way and talk myself and talk to the people. It was almost like I had to prove to myself and the faculty that [Aboriginal] art was just as valid as whatever I was studying" (*Manitoban Online* 93.22). The constant struggle to affirm Indigenous art as a fine art and its importance proves

that there is little room for Indigenous women artists. As a result of trying to balance the relational power between genders, Aboriginal women's relationship to feminism and activism becomes complicated. However, this does not diminish the importance of underscoring that there are few female Indigenous artists who are recognized or discussed in art history or the mainstream art world.

Artist Colleen Cutschall considers herself and her work rooted in feminism, activism and tribalism. She describes her work and her life philosophies as being built on these theories, which for her includes Indigenous knowledge. As Jackson Rushing states, Cutschall "is a teacher, writer, lecturer, and activist. Furthermore, like so many artists working today - Native or otherwise - her modes of production are flexible and situational...and is often highly conscious of, if not driven by, a variety of textual fields, including aesthetics, anthropology, feminism, the natural sciences, and the politics of cultural identity (Rushing 1999, 103). Cutschall empathizes with the myriad concerns facing Indigenous women who commit themselves to feminist politics. However, her artwork is based on the above principles and ideologies, furthering my argument that Indigenous women artists can subscribe to some type of political movement within feminism. At the same time, though, Cutschall appreciates the complexities in making that decision. She states that, "feminism has been built into my work pretty much all along...and let me say I don't know where I wouldn't be a feminist" (Cutschall interview 2005). Cutschall makes a strong statement, as do other Indigenous artists, writers and activists, such as Bear, Brant and Maracle. These women encourage the dialogue to take place within Indigenous circles, sparking a bush fire in critical thinking around the concept of feminism. Therefore, Indigenous women can continue to ask for re-definition of feminism that is rooted in decolonizing, Indigenous knowledge and lifestyle.

Cutschall's artwork grounds feminism in the current social political concerns of Indigenous people. She continues to raise the issue of intellectual property and the rights to cultural knowledge as an Indigenous artist. As Cutschall stated in an interview, "I think of myself as a social activist instead of a political activist. I think that is the position I have always taken with my work. I am not trying to beat politics into people's head. Unless I can change those politics, I'm not going to speak about them often. What I try to do is change it through the content of my work" (Cutschall interview 2005). Cutschall's artwork includes: *dies again*; *Spirit Warriors*; *Sister Wolf in Her Moon*; and *House Made of Stars*. She states that sometimes creating artwork can be extremely frustrating because of the struggle to define herself as an Indigenous woman with intellectual rights within a vast amount of cultural knowledge. Part of her forward political stance within feminism is what makes her art interesting and challenges the Eurocentric norms of the mainstream art world.

Cutschall's strong feminist stance, however, is not shared by all Indigenous artists, such as Margaret Dumas and Cathy Mattes. Both of these women have been engaged in an internal struggle with the western model of feminism and activism. They both face complications when they themselves as Indigenous women identify with feminism and activism. As Dumas states, "I have some feminist viewpoints but I am not totally feminist because we [Indigenous people] see the importance of having a balance, each man and woman have a role" (Dumas interview 2005). Dumas discusses here the potential loss of this balance and why she can accept only some feminist views. Therefore, we must ask what needs to shift in order to convince Dumas to have a stronger commitment to the feminist discourse? Is there a moment in time that will trigger a change in Dumas's thought process as there was in *I Am Woman*, by Lee Maracle? In this book Maracle spins a story of remorse and regret

in a speech she addressed to a mass of women which included Indigenous women, and stated, "that it mattered not that I was a woman" (Maracle 1988, 15), but rather a person trying to create change. It was not until after the early 1980s that Maracle found strength and power in being a woman and committing to feminism. How did feminism appeal to Maracle and not to Dumas or Mattes twenty-five years later? Both Dumas and Mattes have grasped the layered politics and nuances within colonization and are very aware that there are imbalances in Indigenous circles. Dumas stated that she is frustrated with Indigenous politics being spearheaded primarily by men and noted that it is frowned upon for women to enter the political arena. However, the larger issue at hand is that Indigenous men do not walk in balance with rest of Canadian society and are struggling with, and connected to, concerns equivalent to those of Indigenous women. Perhaps, if we continue to write, speak and act on this issue and if we continue to push this agenda in feminist struggles, theory, and art, then this imbalance will be addressed, thus allowing for more Indigenous people to commit to Indigenous issues within feminism.

This imbalance that Indigenous people face is rooted in colonization and the Eurocentric framing of gender relationships. A major issue Cathy Mattes has with feminism is based on a story about a strong woman in her family who thought "I never had much need for feminists because I am a strong woman and when it really matters, in my family, the women make the decisions, not the men. Feminists from the outside were to look at my family. They would see the men in control" (Mattes interview 2005). As Mattes describes her problems with feminism, her viewpoint lacks the ability to see feminists as strong women who have existing strengths that enable them to survive poverty, abuse and racism. However, Mattes's statement speaks to the colonial attitudes that were embedded in the feminist. The current generation of feminist

scholars is trying to decolonize and change these kinds of Eurocentric attitudes. It is the values and beliefs of feminism that require a transformation in people's minds. When a woman like Mattes states that, "I contribute to feminism. I don't feel a connection and I do not embody myself in feminist theory because of where it comes from. I think it is a lot better than anything else we have, but my work is to challenge it" (Mattes interview 2005), she is making a strong argument about her relationship to feminism. The major issue facing feminism in the twenty-first century is its foundational inception by western white middle-class women, who directly benefited from it, when the rest of women, whether they were Indigenous, poor, disabled, queer, or women of color, often did not. There has to be a vital shift in this kind of thinking, while still bearing in mind that feminism was a starting point or the beginning of a process to end oppression for all people. If one can visualize feminism in this way, then the process of taking ownership over the movement can begin, whether it is to be critical of it or rejecting it all together. As Beth Brant argues,

And I think it's time we realize that feminism is not just about white women, it is about all of us. Writers like Lee Maracle, Betty Bell, Kate Shanley, argue for feminism that encompasses sovereignty, children, Earth, class, sexuality, and all the varied and exciting aspects that make community possible. We are changing the face of feminism. It is no longer a middle-class, white movement for acknowledgement and better pay - it is about uranium in our drinking water, fetal alcohol syndrome, family violence, a life for the generations to come. We are writing about this in passionate and poetic language. (Brant 1994, 39)

This is a courageous statement because Brant and the other Indigenous

writers are taking ownership of various aspects of feminism and creating a space that belongs to Indigenous women. Continued learning in and contribution of ideas and thoughts from Indigenous women to the feminist movement could result in others joining or envisioning the positive aspects with a critical lens. This state of feminist justice depends on people working together with similar outcomes in mind in order to fight oppressive systems and the colonial machine, which is affecting Indigenous people in communities all over the world. These oppressive regimes and politically right-wing thinking elites benefit from our divisions and have been dividing and conquering our Turtle Island since it was "discovered."

The Indigenous artist's struggle in the mainstream art world, as Mattes argues, "is about culture not for different cultures" (Mattes interview 2005). Indigenous artists work in two worlds, always being aware of the social, economic, political and cultural ties to Indigenous traditions, situations and communities. The huge responsibility of dealing with these issues is what makes Indigenous art exciting and transforms it into socially engaged art. As stated by Agard, an Indigenous artist is not focused solely on the individual but is strongly connected to community. The huge sense of responsibility does not lie on the backs of most artists because they are working within the mainstream community, and have little connection to Indigenous issues. Artists such as Cutchall, Fontaine, Dumas, Deerchild and Mattes deal with the "political" and the "social" because that is their lived experience, which has impact on their families, communities, nations and themselves. Therefore there is no choice. This is similar for male Indigenous artists, which complicates gendered relationships. As Gerald McMaster states in a discussion about Indigenous artists Robert Houle and Rebecca Belmore (and I would add is equally relevant to the artists discussed throughout the paper), "Each of these artists asserts a kind of sovereignty, which is

exercised in their art and practice, placing them in strategic attitudinal situations, unlike our impoverished ancestors who were heavily controlled by legislation. Contemporary aboriginal artists can make choices and they are essential in the articulation of aboriginal people's consciousness of self-determination" (Rushing 1999, 92). This kind of artistic practice and process cannot be compared to other non-Indigenous artists. This is not intended to discredit work by people of color or artwork that expresses oppression; however, Indigenous art holds a different kind of responsibility.

The artists discussed throughout this paper understand the importance of pedagogy and how this affects peoples' ability to become enrolled in the educational and creative process, which can provide people with tools to resist, making communities stronger. Additionally, they understand first hand the different barriers that people face when trying to access certain sectors of our society and the importance of conducting artwork that is community-based, participatory and creative because the knowledge generated from these areas aids in the struggle to self-determination, decolonization and stronger communities. By working through concepts of activism and feminism, these artists contribute to the social context, intergenerational impact and community input of their families, communities and nations. These Indigenous women artists are setting trends and inspiring young artists like myself. I hope they continue on that difficult journey.

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