

Indigenous Feminism:
An Intersectional Approach to a Marginalized Population

Annelise Price
45761153
FNIS 100, Dr. David Gaertner
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The feminist movement, formally beginning in the 19th century, has become one of the most diverse yet misunderstood political movements in contemporary times. Today, feminism is working towards being more inclusive, with Indigenous and intersectional feminism being two of the most critical branches leading the way. Indigenous feminism is a growing field with an incredibly significant and unique decolonizing message, and uses intersectional feminism – or intersectionality – as a centering concept to the varying levels of oppression faced by Indigenous women in a settler colonial nation-state such as Canada. Intersectionality is defined in many ways, but its grounding message is the recognition of diversity when analyzing oppressive systems and their effects on varying groups of people. The Indigenous women of the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver can be used as one of the most prudent examples of these effects, and require the application of an intersectional methodology when properly analyzing their marginalization. So much of the feminist movement has been largely focussed on white, Western feminism which not only fails to acknowledge the magnified oppression that Indigenous women face in comparison to themselves, but also dominates the conversation so that Indigenous women are left without a voice. Indigenous feminism therefore works to use intersectionality as a way to distinguish itself from the harm of white feminism, with some of the most painful and explicit examples of the violent products of these intersections being seen among the Indigenous women of the Downtown Eastside.

A term coined by scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality is one of the pinnacles of third wave or postmodern feminism, and certainly Indigenous feminism. It is a way of nuancing oppression amongst marginalized groups of people by acknowledging a cross-section of multiple levels of discrimination, and understands that while different systems of oppression

operate on distinct levels, they inevitably intersect to create a multiplied effect of discrimination on certain individuals who are marginalized by each system (Crenshaw, 1991). Crenshaw uses the analogy of a car crash in the center of a four-way intersection, in which it is not always apparent or conceivable to know the direction the impact originated from or which impact caused the greatest trauma (Crenshaw, 2016). This metaphorically represents the idea that when a person is oppressed by multiple institutions, the origin of discrimination is not always entirely clear – but rather is simply the product of the intersection at which they all meet. Thus, intersectionality acknowledges that discrimination and systematic oppression are experienced very differently depending on one’s gender, race, ethnicity, class, ability, religion, age, and sexuality.

The intersections that Indigenous women in Canada face are not limited to gender and race, as many are part of the LGBTQIA community, live under the poverty line, rely on sex work as their main source of income, or suffer from mental illness and drug addiction. In the Downtown Eastside specifically, women are “marked as ‘outsider’ by a society that shuns sex workers, substance users, the poor, and the homeless, among many others” (Hunt, 2013). Indigenous women in Canada face a disproportionate amount of marginalization across nearly every category; in terms of education, they are 14% less likely than non-Indigenous women to have a postsecondary qualification and have lower literacy and numeracy scores than their non-Indigenous counterparts (Stats Can, 2011). Indigenous women also endure higher unemployment rates, lower median incomes, and are more likely to be diagnosed with at least one chronic condition and have unmet health care needs compared to non-Indigenous women (Stats Can, 2011). In addition, Indigenous women 18 years or older are 10% more likely to have

had suicidal thoughts than their non-Indigenous counterparts (Stats Can, 2011) and are up to five times more likely to die of violence (Suzack et al., 2010), adding onto the multiple layers of stigmatization and discrimination. All of these intersections, however, are not simply products of chance or a naturalized way of being – but rather multiple oppressive institutions which function to systematically push these women, along with other oppressed people, into the margins of society where their position is more than likely to be maintained by the same systems.

The four main oppressive systems which affect Indigenous women to the greatest degree are colonialism, patriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalism. Colonialism and white supremacy often work interchangeably, as white supremacy can be defined as a “complex social phenomenon... that was created to make Europe’s efforts to colonize and conquer the world seem like a ‘natural’ process wherein ‘superior’ white races would dominate ‘inferior’ non-whites” (DeVega, 2014). During the colonization of Canada, Indigenous women were constructed as “sexually licentious savages” (Hunt, 2013) by the Europeans, which has been a dominant narrative that still stigmatizes Indigenous sex workers to this day. Colonialism is perhaps the most pernicious of any institution, as it encapsulates all others within its multifaceted oppression. Leanne Simpson argues that white supremacy and patriarchy are “powerful tools of colonialism, settler colonialism, and capitalism” (Simpson, 2014) in their systematic removal of Indigenous peoples from their land, agency, and identity. Colonialism is also responsible for imposing an “artificial gender binary” in some nations in which there was not such rigidly defined masculine and feminine roles (Simpson, 2014). The subordination of women in the heteronormative and patriarchal European culture was forced onto Indigenous

cultures through colonialism and assimilation, and has therefore created a legacy of inequality in which women are continuously deemed the inferior gender (Simpson, 2014). Colonial gender violence can then be seen as a tool to instill heteropatriarchy in a society which prospered without it, a threat to the “civilization” that colonialism aimed for. Finally, capitalism is another tool of the colonial state which further silences and oppresses Indigenous women. It can be argued that Indigenous women are “among the hardest hit by economic globalization” (Kuokkanen, 2008), and that it represents a “multifaceted attack on the very foundation of their existence” (Kuokkanen, 2008). The interlocking forces of colonialism, patriarchy and capitalism are heightened and informed by the market expansion, labour cheapening, and trade liberalization of globalization – all of which often result in environmental degradation and militarized violence that threaten Indigenous peoples’ self-determination – with women being particularly effected as the primary subsistence providers in most cases (Kuokkanen, 2008). While functioning separately, all of these systems face difficulty in being defined without the others, and frequently overlap to create levels of oppression which disproportionately effect some groups, such as Indigenous women, more than the rest.

One of the greatest foes of intersectionality is the feminism that is most often promoted in mass media and read about in history books – white, Western feminism. The first two of the Three Waves of Feminism, while all striving to achieve equality in some form, have been centered around the voices of white women and failed to acknowledge the inherently exclusive and discriminatory nature of their movements. The suffrage movement in the early 1900’s, for example, was the first big push in the feminist movement that was framed as a success when only white women were granted the right to vote in 1917 (Adamson, Briskin & McPhail, 1988).

Indigenous women, on the other hand, could not legally vote in Canada until 1960 – a staggering forty-three years after the suffragists’ celebrations (Strong-Boag, 2016). The second topic that the first wave focussed on was property rights, and the movement chose to ignore the oppressive policies Indigenous women faced under the Indian Act in terms of land claim and title, and instead focussed on their own agenda (Suzack et al., 2010). Only in the third wave (1990’s – present) does intersectionality get brought into the conversation, and even then the discussion is largely facilitated by the voices and opinions of white feminists. Mariana Ortega brings this issue to light in her definition of the “loving, knowing ignorance” that white feminists participate in, which is “an ignorance of the thought and experience of women of colour that is accompanied by both alleged love for and alleged knowledge about them” (Ortega, 2006). This is to say that even in the attempts to include intersectional methodology, they do so by dominating the conversation and speaking on behalf of the knowledge and experience of women of colour. This can be defined as “populist” feminism, in which the feminists claim to be speaking on behalf of all women, but end up only speaking on behalf of “white, middle-class, cis-gendered, able-bodied women” (Thompson, 2017). It could be argued that populist feminism can be more detrimental than patriarchy, considering while patriarchy is explicitly defined by male domination, feminism is a movement which is supposed to be “geared toward the political, economic, cultural advancement of, and personal and social rights for, women” (Thompson, 2017), yet results in a neutralization of diversity. This reduces the plight of women of colour, and Indigenous women in particular, to not any greater or lesser significance than the struggles white women face, and leaves many groups feeling “disconnected from today’s feminism” (Thompson, 2017).

Indigenous feminism has always had the difficult task of defining themselves outside of mainstream feminism and the term feminism itself, as their agenda is quite different from both white and any other woman of colour feminism. Their oppression is unique in its colonizing nature, and therefore have different approaches to the issues that only they face as well as the one's all women face. One of the most central issues to Indigenous feminism is the fact that colonization has "reordered gender relations to subordinate women, regardless of their pre-contact status" (Suzack et al., 2010). While the structure of European society had already functioned to subordinate its women for centuries, Indigenous women were forced to assimilate into a system and a culture that would make them inferior to their male counterparts, an alien concept in many Indigenous communities (Suzack et al., 2010). The fact that many Indigenous women had to become accustomed to being inferior makes their fight for liberation very unique, in having an idea of how a society could function with gender equality. Beyond simply gender relations, Indigenous feminists must also tackle topics such as land rights, decolonizing Indigenous female sexuality, and reclaiming Indigenous identity through strategies such as "using the courts and the media as tools of protest, articulating a collective identity that takes account of gender, and connecting struggles for gender justice to broader Indigenous quests for self-determination" (Suzack et al., 2010). The difficulty in promoting an Indigenous feminist message is the reality of the colonial nation-state under which Indigenous women are greatly marginalized. White populist feminism makes this battle even more difficult, and fails to aid the group of women that have suffered the most from their sustained privilege. The discussion of intersectionality seems only to be addressed when it is most convenient, or when it does not interfere with the white woman's agenda; this is inherently harmful to the

progression of Indigenous women's rights and equality, as "any feminism that does not address land rights, sovereignty, and the state's systematic erasure of the cultural practices of native peoples, or that defines native women's participation in these struggles as non-feminist, is limited in vision and exclusionary in practice" (Suzack et al., 2010).

Perhaps the most obvious and appalling example of the structural violence instituted by these oppressive systems that Indigenous feminists must tackle is the Indigenous women of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Not only are there extremely high rates of drug addiction, mental illness, and homelessness, but the Downtown Eastside tends to also be a hotbed for the rates of missing and murdered women (Culhane, 2003). British Columbia in general has both the highest number of missing and murdered cases, as well as the highest percentage of suspicious death cases, which are cases that "the police have declared natural or accidental but that family or community members consider suspicious" (NWAC, 2010). British Columbia is also responsible for 10% higher than the national average of unsolved cases at 49% (NWAC, 2010); with nearly half of all cases going unsolved, it is clear that these numbers are reflective of a larger systemic issue. The total number of missing or murdered Indigenous women in Canada between 1980 and 2012 is nearly 1,2000 – and Indigenous women represent 23% of all female homicide victims, despite only representing 4% of the Canadian population as a whole (CBC, 2015). These shocking statistics, which are reflective of the rates across British Columbia and Canada, are only heightened in the microcosm of the Downtown Eastside. Over half of the Downtown Eastside's missing women were Indigenous as of 2003, and as of 2000, 70% of street prostitutes working in the "most dangerous and lowest paying 'tracks' in the Downtown Eastside" were Indigenous women (Culhane, 2003). Non-Indigenous women in the sex trade in

Vancouver have typically dominated the safer and higher-paying communities such as the West End and areas of the Downtown Centre, yet again pushing Indigenous women to the impoverished and marginalized communities, making them particularly more vulnerable and susceptible to sexual exploitation, violence and murder (Culhane, 2003). Equally important to note, Indigenous women in this community also suffer higher rates of HIV/AIDS and drug and alcohol addiction than their non-Indigenous counterparts (Culhane, 2003), all contributing to a widespread and systemic subordination of an entire group of vulnerable women.

The disproportionate marginalization of Indigenous women in the Downtown Eastside can be largely attributed to the several systems of oppression mentioned earlier. The installation of European patriarchy in Indigenous culture displaced women of their original positions of respect within many communities, leaving many of them unable to function in their original societies and forcing them into impoverished communities such as the Downtown Eastside (Culhane, 2003). Similarly, colonial policies within government such as the Indian Act displaced many women geographically by revoking their status and therefore forcing them off reserves, leaving them without land and driving them towards poverty (Culhane, 2003). There are also disproportionately high rates of domestic violence and abuse in First Nations communities, which in many cases will result in women fleeing their home situation and becoming homeless (Culhane, 2003). Finally, capitalism has been argued to be one of the major causes of mass homelessness and drug addiction due to a lack of “psychosocial integration,” otherwise known as “dislocation” – a term defined by prolonged social suffering (Alexander, 2009) – which is seen in widespread proportions in the Indigenous community through traumatic colonial legacies. These institutions – patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism – have

not only neglected but actively discriminated against Indigenous women for centuries, and are still causing large-scale marginalization in society today. The violent effects of this discrimination is most actively apparent in the Downtown Eastside, and Indigenous women are clearly among the greatest sufferers.

Despite the pain, violence and suffering that Indigenous women endure on a daily basis, they still manage to conjure up the strength to push back against these institutions and engage in activism regularly. The Women's Memorial March held on Valentine's Day annually in the Downtown Eastside is an excellent example of the resilience and tenacity witnessed among the Indigenous female activist community, drawing thousands of people each year to commemorate the continuous epidemic of the missing and murdered Indigenous women (Howell, 2017). This event is one of the few settings in which Indigenous women have the platform to push themselves into the visibility of the public eye and have their voice be heard, with particular significance being in the choice to hold the event on Valentine's Day, an international holiday celebrating love. This is an excellent expression of the idea of "decolonial love," a profound love Indigenous women have of their families, land, and culture – a love which preserves Indigenous self-determination and autonomy, pushing back against colonial definitions of Indigenous identity (Nason, 2013). The fact that Indigenous women are able to centre their activism and resistance around a concept such as love is indicative of their selflessness, compassion, and strength as a group – for it is true that "the colonizer has always known that to counter the power of Indigenous womanhood, you need to make acceptable the practice of hating [Indigenous] women" (Nason, 2013). This type of activism is unlike any other

in its gracious, loving, and respectful nature, a feat to be endlessly admired in the wake of such horrific and neglectful violence.

The oppression that Indigenous women face on a daily basis is considerably unique in its systemic and traumatic nature, and undoubtedly requires an intersectional approach in order to properly analyze. The varying systems of oppression that all function differently yet oppress cohesively have an immense impact on the Indigenous women of Canada, subordinating them in nearly every aspect of their lives – with the Indigenous women of the Downtown Eastside representing a clear manifestation of the inherently violent effects that these structures produce. Working against these oppressive institutions, as well as the pervasiveness of white populist feminism, Indigenous feminists have an incredible burden to bear in making their voices be heard. Indigenous women’s involvement in the feminist movement has often been framed and interpreted in a way in which they are only to serve or teach the white woman when they are consulted, as the women’s movement itself has largely been “exclusionary at best, racist at worst” (Maracle, 1996). Despite these many obstacles, the determination and resilience seen among the Indigenous feminist community in terms of activism is nothing short of inspiring – and for many years to come, Indigenous feminists as well as their allies must join in solidarity to combat this large-scale marginalization of a most vulnerable yet compassionate group of women.

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