INDIGENOUS FEMINISM:
An Entry to Understanding an Indigenized Feminism

Diné Aesthetics x Chizhii Rez Girl Creations
A 2022 creation made with love, care, and hope to inspire joy and justice.

This book, zine, project, however you want to call it, was conceptualized and shaped within the ancestral homelands of the Cheyenne, Arapahoe, and Ute for a course focused on Indigenous feminism.

Much love and appreciation to my mother, my sister, and the Indigenous women, queer, and trans relatives in my life who have shared their knowledge with me through laughter, conversations, poetry, fiction, theory, and more that have informed my understanding and becoming as an Indigenous feminist.

- Charlie Amáyá Scott
  or
  Diné Aesthetic(s)
Artwork by

Amber B. Scott

or

CHIZHII REZ GIRL CREATIONS
DINÉ-MADE
KEY TERMS & DEFINITIONS

- **settler colonialism**: a system of technologies that regulates social relations to land and people predicated on intentions to displace, remove, and eliminate Indigenous Peoples, land, and presence (La Paperson, 2017; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Brayboy, 2006; Wolfe, 2006).

- **heteropatriarchy**: a social system “in which heterosexuality and patriarchy are perceived as normal and natural, and in which other configurations are perceived as abnormal, aberrant, and abhorrent” (p. 13)

- **decolonization**: Particularly within the US Empire, decolonization requires the involvement, centering, and support of Black and Indigenous Queer and Trans futures, and the return and the rematriation of land and Indigenous presence (Scott, 2021).

- **LGBTQ+**: An expansive acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, and plus. The plus is meant to reference other gender and sexual identities.

- **transgender**: an umbrella term for those whose "gender" identity does not align with the "gender" they were assigned at birth.

- **queer**: a broad umbrella term for those who are not heterosexual or whose "sexuality" deviates from colonial sexual expectations.

- **Two-Spirit**: an all-inclusive term unifying and describing various 'gender' and sexual identities unique to Indigenous communities. It was translated into English from an Anishinabe word and became popularized in the early 1990s.
"To be Two-Spirit/Indigiqueer, for me, is a celebration of the fluidity of gender, sex, sexuality, and identities, one that is firmly grounded within nehiyawewin (the Cree language) and nehiyaw world-views. I think of myself like I think of my home, manitowapow, the strait that isn’t straight, fluid as the water, as vicious as the rapids on my reservation, as vivacious as a pickerel scale. I come from a nation that has survived because of sex and sexuality, as post-contact nations that deploy sex ceremonially. My gender, sexuality, and my identities supersede Western categorizations of LGBTQ+ because Two-Spirit is a home-calling, it is a home-coming."

- Joshua Whitehead (Oji-Cree), Why I’m Withdrawing From My Lambda Literary Award Nomination
What is Indigenous feminism? Even after taking a class on this theoretical framework(s), I cannot provide you a singular definition, and let me tell you why.

Like many other movements of feminism, Indigenous feminism has changed and grow over the years since its conception, which has resulted in a contemporary, unique, and important theoretical framework(s) for understanding this colonizing world.

There is no definitive definition of Indigenous feminism, rather Indigenous feminism is an ongoing developing theoretical framework(s) whose focus understands, emphasizes, and addresses the intricate connections among settler colonialism, heteropatriarchy, sovereignty, and sexuality.

Over the decades, Indigenous women have theorized, established, and expanded our understanding of what Indigenous feminism is through critiquing mainstream feminism, the importance of land and sovereignty, and challenging colonial concepts of gender and sexuality. Their words, their stories, their experiences have pushed and pulled on what Indigenous feminism was, what it is, and what it could be.

This creation is one of many possible explanations of what Indigenous feminism currently is, especially rooted through my own articulation; an articulation that is queer and trans. I am also conceptualizing what Indigenous feminism COULD BE.

I hope what I share here encourages you to learn and grow, even if it is just a little.

Thank you.
There is “no one feminist theory [that] totalizes Native women’s thoughts.”

- Devon Abbott Mihesuah (Choctaw Nation),
A Few Cautions on the Merging of Feminist Studies with Indigenous Women’s Studies

"For me, Indigenous feminism is about creating a new world out of the best of the old."

- Kim Anderson (Metis),
Affirmations of an Indigenous Feminist

“Feminism is also a personal journey."

- Luana Ross (Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes),
From the "F" Word to Indigenous/Feminisms

"In developing my knowledge of a history of feminism, it became clear that defining feminism is an ongoing process involving responding to changing political and social context and issues.”

- Verna St. Denis (Beardy’s and Okemasis First Nation),
Feminism is for Everybody
Early writings by Indigenous women critiqued the limitations of mainstream (white) feminism with its focus on equality and/or civil rights. This did not align with early Indigenous feminists praxis and concerns.

Shanley (1984) argued that the movement of Indigenous feminism (at the time known as Indian feminism) concerned itself with the survival of Indigenous kinship systems and demands for sovereignty to maintain legal and spiritual connections to land. Both of which differed from the (white) women’s movement at the time. Another Native woman, Trask (1996) also argued that the concern for Native Hawaiian woman is that of self-determination and sovereignty. Trask (1996) argued that “sovereignty for our people is a larger goal than legal or educational or political equality with our men” (p. 914).

Both of these Indigenous women stressed the importance of sovereignty and explained Indigenous feminism's deviation from the (white) women’s movement and their feminist concerns.

Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill (2013) summarized these sentiments and stated that “Indigenous communities’ concerns are often not about achieving formal equality or civil rights within a nation-state, but instead achieving substantial independence from a western nation-state” (p. 10). For Indigenous feminisms, sovereignty, self-determination, and the survival of kinship systems and connections to land were of utmost importance. All of which was the basis and continues to be a foundation of what Indigenous feminism is, was, and could be.
"This graveyard here is my family plot. And the two most prominent figures in my upbringing were my grandmother's on both sides. When I transitioned from boy to girl, it was my grandparents, my grandmothers especially, who loved me above all else. They didn't care what I was wearing. They didn’t care what I looked like. They just cared that I was okay, and they care that I was going to be productive and they cared that I was going to find happiness in my life."

- Hinaleimoana Kwai Kong Wong-Kalu (Kānaka Maoli),
  
  *Kumu Hina*
ESSENTIALITY / CENTRALITY OF LAND

The concept of LAND is essential / central with the ways of knowing and being of Indigenous Peoples, and this essentiality / centrality is often targeted by the systemic forces of settler colonialism. Indigeneity is best described as a relationality. A relationality to LAND and life that formulates theory and praxis. It is through the LAND that Indigenous identities exist and persist.

The deterioration of LAND and relations has manifested in a variety of way, yet one dimension of this manifestation is through the privatization and transformation of LAND as property. Within their fourth challenge to feminism, Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill (2013) emphasized LAND, not as property, rather as “knowing and knowledge” (p. 21). This is important for people to understand because through the colonial transformation of LAND as property / commodity, relations to knowing and knowledge with and of LAND were and continue to be intentionally deteriorated.

Indigenous Peoples particular relationships to LAND convey unique cultural upbringings that cultivate distinct worldviews. Such relationships define what it means to be an Indigenous feminist and Indigenous feminism. The colonial transformation of LAND is and continues to be a direct attack on these relationships and the livelihoods of Indigenous communities.

It is through the essentiality / centrality of LAND that we understand the importance of such relationships, especially within Indigenous feminism. The essentiality / centrality of LAND cannot be fully emphasized enough. It is a necessity within Indigenous feminism and the lives of Indigenous Peoples.
"But for every traditional person or elder who might make a disparaging or ignorant remark there is also one who carries teachings, who accepts you as you are or who knows of another person you can visit to learn more about our past and our roles."

- Nancy Cooper (Chippewas of Rama First Nation),
  *Learning to Skin the Beaver*
The intimate and intricate relationship between heteropatriarchy and settler colonialism is exploitative and disruptive, especially on how we understand and define Native womanhood. One aspect of the settler colonial project is denying Native woman (cis and trans) access to “womanhood”. In her poetic article, Maracle (1996) highlights experiences of Native womanhood being non-existent because of settler-colonial heteropatriarchy and that this denial was an act of reduction and elimination of Indigenous Peoples. Heteropatriarchy affected the lives of Native woman and continues to impact our relationships to ourselves and to each other within our communities.

Earlier Indigenous feminist, such as Trask (1996), Shanely (1984), and Anderson (2011), emphasized that they and other Native woman did not want the rights as a woman, as dictated by a foreign federal government. Rather they demanded that their communities be allowed to practice their cultural ways of knowing and being, which is how “womanhood” was conceptualized within their community – through roles, responsibilities, and relations to one another.

Within Indigenous ontologies, we learn who we are in relation to one another. We learn what it means to be Native, to be Indigenous, to be part of a community through our mothers, fathers, cousins, uncles, aunties, grandparents, and so many others. There is an intergenerational way of becoming that is unique to how and who we, as Indigenous Peoples, know and understand ourselves. For Indigenous feminists, how we come to know who we are as woman is through roles, responsibilities, and relations to our communities, rather than demands for equality and civil rights.
"Of course, your mother is not only that woman whose womb formed and released you— the term refers in every individual case to an entire generation of women whose psychic, and consequently physical, "shape" made the psychic existence of the following generation possible."

- Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna Pueblo), The Sacred Hoop, p. 209
"Every orgasm can be an act of decolonization."

- Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee), *Fear of a Changeling Moon*
SEXUALITY + KINSHIP: A CONVERSATION

Sexuality is one of those taboo topics that one does not have within their family (as was the case with mine) and so understanding one's self as a sexual being, especially as a Native person, is quite the journey.

One of the targets of settler colonialism was that of our kinship systems and the Indigenous family system. Anderson (2011) argued that historically and traditionally, our communities were sustained by strong kin relations that were crucial for our survival and resilience. The direct attack on Indigenous families warped and twisted how we understand ourselves. The imposition of heterosexuality and the nuclear family through heteropatriarchy continues to affect us today, especially in the bedroom.

Finley (2011) adequately summarizes this colonial act and argued that "colonialism disciplines both Native people and non-Native people through sexuality" (p. 34). This discipline has both sexualized and de-sexuality Indigenous Peoples in ways that uphold the settler colonial project. Additionally, it affects our sexual relationship to ourselves and each other, especially with who and what we desire.

Queerness, as a site of sexual deviancy, was weaponized against Indigenous Peoples and used to justify colonial violence against those who are not viewed as heterosexual.

Within Indigenous feminism, there is a need to question and critique the effects and affects of heteropatriarchy and its relationship to settler colonialism, yet also its effects and affects on the personal and sexual aspect of our selves, our families, and our communities.
NOT A CONCLUSION, RATHER A CONTINUATION

Like many of the Indigenous scholars mentioned throughout this creation, I did not consider myself a feminist, yet recently, I was asked what feminism meant to me, and here is what I said.

"Feminism is more than just a buzzword or a trend.

Personally, it’s a way of knowing and understanding this world’s social systems of gendered violence while using that knowledge to challenge and critique colonial concepts of gender and gender roles and their impact on peoples’ marginalizing experiences."

- Charlie Amáyá Scott

In spite of this, I agree with Mihesuah (2000). There is no one feminist theory that totalizes who we are as Native women and our communities. As an Indigenous queer and trans femme, my conception of feminism is personal and unique because of my experiences navigating and surviving this colonizing world.

At the same time, I agree with Anderson (2011), Indigenous feminism is very much about creating new worlds, passing on the beauty, the power, and brilliance of what was shared before to the next generation of Indigenous feminists.

What I shared here is only the beginning for many of you, and for some, it's a continuation of growing and changing, and that is what I hope. This creation was not intended to define what Indigenous feminism is, rather further a conversation of what Indigenous feminism was, what it is, and what it could be.

Thank you.
"Excuse my beauty."

- Stephanie Yellowhair (Diné), Cops
REFERENCES

- Scott, C. A. [@dineaesthetics]. (2021, July 5). Also, these are some entry aspects of decolonization. #DinéAesthetics. TikTok. https://vm.tiktok.com/TTPdA1CCjF/