

Womanism to Indigenism: Identities and Experiences

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Introduction

American Indian women have often been difficult to locate within the discourse of U. S. feminisms. Although several Asian American and African American women, as well as Latina and Chicana scholars have reframed feminism within the intersections of race, gender, and class, American Indian women are still conspicuously silent. This article explores this silence through the lens of Alice Walker's definition of "womanism." Womanism is a movement that embraces African American women not as separate or in opposition to African American men, but as partners who work together from the location of shared community and the shared experiences of countering racist, economic, and cultural oppressions.

Understanding American Indian women's roles is complex because of the diversity of gender systems among the diverse American Indian nations. This article will discuss a "radical indigenous womanism" by drawing upon the examples of Eva Marie Garrouette's notion of "radical indigeneity" as its own epistemology that converges with Patricia Hill Collins' insistence that black women's experience is an epistemology in and of itself.

Specifically, this article will: 1) exemplify how Alice Walker's notion of womanism provides connectivity for understanding indigenous womanism; 2) illustrate how indigenous womanism is constructed as an epistemology in and of itself; 3) discuss the stakes or risks that distinguish a radical indigenous womanism. The development of this paper will begin with context which provides socio-historical information regarding similarities and differences between African American and American Indian women's experiences over the last 250 years.

Context: African American and American Indian Women's Experiences

Our identities, as women and men of color, were not formed or created by outsiders and dependent upon written records. Trask aptly describes our stance as people of color "Before there existed

WORKS AND DAYS 47/48, Vol. 24, Nos. 1&2, 2006

an England, an English language, or an Anglo-Saxon people, our Native culture[s] was [were] forming. And it was as antithetical to the European developments of Christianity, capitalism, and predatory individualism as any society could have been" (4). Thus, our ancestral heritages have provided and still do provide us with knowledge about our identities, our history, and our spirituality.

When European Nations began massive scale colonization of people of color around the world, their intent was to erase the cultures and languages of people of color through genocide, removal, and displacement. This immoral assault harmed them in various ways and to varying degrees, yet wholesome and holistic attributes and attitudes of people of color remain, even as they adapted to major changing events. Despite the upheavals and trauma imposed upon them by colonizers, African American and American Indian people have strong families and cohesive communities that have sustained and continue to sustain them. Communities and families of people of color include both women and men as equals working together as in Maggie Lena Walker's analysis: "[. . .] family is community and community is family [. . .] male/female relationships in the community as a whole [. . .] Just as all family members' resources were needed for the family to be well and strong, so they were needed for a healthy community/family" (Brown 214).

Whether or not people of color, especially women of color, are mentioned in historical annals, women's studies, ethnic studies, or any literary production, the Euro-Western emphasis on literacy has no bearing on how they, as people of color, see themselves or how they understand their identities. In their own egalitarian places and spaces, people of color have always been visible, vibrant, and worthy.

Context: African American Women's Experiences

The experiences of African Americans have been tragic and traumatic ever since they were inhumanely transported to the North American continent as slaves. They have suffered and continue to do so at the hands of the dominant white society in the United States, who perceive[d] differences as inferior and intolerable. Despite the atrocious treatment at the hands of whites, they have made admirable advances for themselves in every aspect of society. As early as the late 1800s and early 1900s, their work in economic development, the political arena, and education solidified their communities. To their credit, people of color who are not African Americans have benefited and detrimental attitudes towards people of color are continuing to change through important legislation that African American leaders have spearheaded. Their adversaries, however, have appeared and continue to do so from unlikely sources throughout time. One such source are suffragists of the 18th century who took credit for correcting injustices in American society while ignoring the malice of racism. Their efforts were focused on changing their oppressive situations but supporting the oppression of women of color. The ideology of the early suffragists

continues today as the “whitestream” feminist movement (Grande 330) whose majority followers are either reluctant to admit or outright deny the unjust experiences of women of color.

Whitestream feminism (Grande 330) in the United States has had many forms. The divisions and classifications have stemmed from intellectual differences and differences in experience. Even so, white feminism is united in purpose: “Throughout its plurality, feminism has one obvious, simple and overarching goal—to end men’s systematic domination of women” (Mansbridge and Okin 269). An ideological convergence between white feminist and women of color cannot and will not be possible until the critical scope of the present white feminist thought extends beyond the critique of patriarchy alone.

Most white women participated in the inequities wrought upon African Americans throughout the centuries. They enjoyed their power, privilege, and comforts made possible through the inhumane drudgery of African Americans for the convenience of white society. They have been exploited in despicable ways so that white women can be perceived as an innocent and “pure.” The experiences of African American women, however, have been mostly ignored from whitestream feminism. It does however, allow “[. . .] black women to make history as women or as Negroes but not as ‘Negro women.’ What they fail to consider is that women’s issues may be race issues, and race issues may be women’s issues” (Brown 208). Until they can recognize that race and class are all women’s issues, whitestream feminism (Grande 344-46) cannot be considered an ally to African American women and their experiences.

Context: American Indian Experiences

As indigenous peoples to this land, American Indian Nations have experienced colossal invasion from European powers, genocide, and indoctrination through reorganization of their communities and personal lives. American Indian Nations, today, maintain their identities and hold on to their sovereignty. Rennard Strickland, an American Indian professor of law, defines and describes American Indian sovereignty:

Tribal sovereignty on this continent long predates the U.S. Constitution or even the arrival of the European in the Americas. . . . The roots of Native Americans’ sovereignty and the laws of her sovereign nations stretch back long before the black robes or the blue coats came and built their courthouses and guardhouses. Law, in the context of Native American society, cannot be separated from the life and life ways of Indian people. [. . .] Thus law is to Native Americans a part of a larger world view, an embodiment of a relationship of Earth and her people, a command from the spirit world. It continues to be so to this day. [. . .] Tribal powers of self-government today are recognized by the Constitution, legislation, treaties, judicial decisions, and administrative practice. (251)

American Indian scholars, Wilkins and Lomawaima clearly describe the unique status of Americans as sovereign nations:

We hold that America's indigenous nations occupy a distinctive political/legal status within the United States as separate sovereigns. Tribal rights are based in the doctrine of inherent sovereignty, affirmed in hundreds of ratified treaties and agreements, acknowledged in the commerce clause of the U.S. Constitution, and recognized in ample federal legislation and case law. (9)

Unlike any group in the United States, American Indians, as sovereign nations, have a government-to-government relationship with the United States.

It is this "government-to-government" relationship that distinguishes Native American questions from those of other ethnic or minority groups. The rights and obligations of Native Americans [. . .] derive from a legal status as members or descendants of a sovereign Indian tribe, not from race (Strickland 248). Legal scholars have studied and continue to study this unique and complex relationship.

Since the early 1700s, American Indian people have experienced much uncertainty and anxiety from the vacillating federal policies governing them. An important reason for this is

[. . .] federal policies and practices toward Indian tribes and peoples have proceeded from many sources: from congressional laws, executive orders, bureaucratic regulations of agencies such as the Office or Bureau of Indian Affairs and other divisions of the Department of the Interior, the Department of Education, or the Department of Agriculture; and court decisions and interpretations. Because all these streams are tributary to the river of what has been collectively termed "Indian policy," the course of Indian policy has not been consistent. [. . .] The federal government has been unable, or unwilling, to maintain a consistent policy orientation—some policies and practices over the years have favored the breakup of tribes and the assimilation of Indians, while others respect tribal sovereignty. (Wilkins & Lomawaima 10)

The United States Congress's self-proclaimed plenary power also places American Indian people in a vulnerable position. Strickland writes, "The courts have powers of life and death proportion over tribal existence [. . .] [T]he nature of U.S. constitutional law and public policy is such that legal issues loom large in even the smallest details of Native American cultural, economic, and political life" (252). While conducting research in an American Indian community in New Mexico in 1997, Peshkin reflected on an American Indian participant's feelings about life in the United States. Peshkin states, "Never before had I met anyone who referred seriously to survival as a contemporary, ongoing, vitally personal issue. Haunted by the horrors of cultural extinction, Indian people live with survival as an enduring condition of their lives" (22). Mihesuah confirms this for

Indian women: "Traditional Indian women have been more concerned about tribal or community survival than either gender oppression or individual advancement in economics, academia, or other facets of society" (40).

History books and other types of written records about American Indian people have excluded essential aspects of their lives since the European invasion. American Indians desperately fought to keep their lands and their societies. Loewen explains "Our history is full of wars with Native American nations. But not our history textbooks" (116). American Indian people did not passively acquiesce to the immoral act euphemistically labeled "Manifest Destiny." Loewen writes:

Back when white Americans were doing the dispossessing, justifications were shrill. They denounced Native cultures as primitive, savage, and nomadic. Often writers invoked the hand or blessings of God. [. . .] Now that the dispossessing is done, our histories can see more virtue in the conquered cultures. But they still picture Indians as tragically different, unable or unwilling to acculturate. (129)

American Indian people remain an enigma after two-hundred and fifty years of the United States government's attempts at ethnic cleansing.

More Euro-Westerners have written about American Indian people and began doing so since the early 1500s. "More than 30,000 manuscripts have been published about American Indians, and more than 90 percents of that literature has been written by non-Indians" (Fixico 86). The theoretical basis of these manuscripts about American Indians has more often been Social Darwinism, in particular the civilization-savagism paradigm. In Social Darwinism theorists assume that white Euro-Westerners have achieved the highest level of evolution and that American Indians inhabit the lowest level of human evolution known as savagery. Theorists justified the eradication of American Indian languages, religion and culture as a means for the American Indian's achievement to a higher level of evolution. Thus, Social Darwinism has been the impetus for actual removal of Indian people from their ancestral lands as justification for their greed and also for the "reeducating" and indoctrination of Indian children.

Another theoretical framework, the deficit theory, is embedded throughout many manuscripts. In this theory that is similar to Social Darwinism, Indian children and their home environment are the blame for their underachievement in American schooling. The United States government in the 1819 Civilization Act provided the first ever educational funding for Indian children. The title of this act describes how white Euro-Westerners in the United States have perceived Indian people, as both savage and inferior. As recently as 2002, Jester wrote about a school system similar to other school systems throughout the United States in which the civilization-savagism paradigm, based on Social Darwinism and the deficit theory, still drives the curriculum and pedagogy (14-17).

Relying on the theories mentioned, Euro-Western writers have constructed and distorted the identity of "American Indian people and especially American Indian women." American Indian women have either been perceived as inferior with derogatory names such as "squaw" or they have been deemed exotic sexual creatures. Walt Disney has even secured a Pocahontas image for young children that will undoubtedly remain for years to come. Pewewardy, an American Indian musician, educator, and author, gives a frank assessment of the movie, which he refers to as the "Barbie Doll Pocahontas":

But perhaps the most obvious manifestations of the racism in Pocahontas is in the movie's use of terms such as "savages," "heathens," "pagans," "devils," and "primitive." These terms reflect something wild and inferior, and their use implies a value judgment of white superiority. By negatively describing Native lifestyle and basing the movie on a "we-they" format, there is a subtle justification of the subjugation of Indian tribes by so-called "advanced" cultures in the name of progress. (61)

Pocahontas is only one of many Disney movies that are problematic. Mass media and its powerful messages, as bell hooks reminds us, promulgates racism:

Looking at the impact of mass media on the self-esteem of black children/children of color is important because they encounter a pedagogy of race and racism long before they enter any classroom settings. [. . .] Without a counter-narrative children of color, black children internalize the belief that they are inferior. If they do not internalize the belief fully they may be consumed by doubt and fear. (95-96)

Until more indigenous people write and tell their stories, misrepresentations of American Indian people will continue. "Representations of indigenous peoples by indigenous people is about countering the dominant society's image of indigenous peoples, their life styles, and belief systems" (Smith 151).

More recently, indigenous women writers have provided excellent information about themselves in short stories and poetry. An excellent collection of short stories and poetry is *Reinventing the Enemy's Language, Contemporary Native Women's Writings of North America* (Harjo and Bird). In another genre, Allen in her book, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*, defines Pueblo Keres women through Corn Mother, the mother goddess of the Keres. Corn Mother is the breath of life to the Keres and conveys the power of earth to the people. Corn Mother and her representatives, are the primary powers of the universe (17).

The published works mentioned above provide information that is specific to each indigenous woman's experience, which reflects

her particular tribal group. Thus, the notion that American Indian women can be expressed from one perspective is not viable. Regrettably, all too often scholars, including women of color, perceive American Indian women as a homogenous group.

Women of Color and Schooling

Many similarities exist between the experiences of African American and American Indian women because they have had to both contend with power issues from white Americans. Lisa Delpit, an African American educator, writes in *Other People's Children* about her research in African American, Papua New Guinea, and American Indian and Alaskan Native communities. She found that miscommunication and alienation caused by the culture of power prevented dialogue from occurring in and outside of the classroom among students and among teachers. This "silenced dialogue" existed and continues to do so because:

1. Issues of power are enacted in classrooms.
2. There are codes or rules for participating in power; that is, there is a "culture of power."
3. The rules of the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power.
4. If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier.
5. Those with power are frequently least aware of—or at least willing to acknowledge—its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence. (Delpit 24)

Power, enacted in American schools, resides with the dominant white society. Teachers of color as student teachers and later as veteran teachers have experienced overwhelming frustrations as expressed in the following interviews:

When you're talking to white people they still want it to be their way. You can try to talk to them and give them examples, but they're so headstrong. They think they know what's best for *everybody*, for *everybody's* children. They won't listen; white folks are going to do what they want to do *anyway*.

If you try to suggest that's not quite the way it is, they get defensive, then you get defensive, then they'll start reciting research. I try to give them my experiences, to explain. They just look and nod. The more I try to explain, they just look and nod. They don't really hear me. [. . .] It becomes futile because they think they know everything about everybody. What you have to say about your life, your children, doesn't mean anything. They don't really want to hear what you have to say. They only want to go on research they've read that other white people have written. It just doesn't make any sense to keep talking to them. (Delpit 21-22, emphasis in original)

Although similarities unite African Americans and American Indians in many areas, differences exist which, unfortunately, have separated them in the past. One of the major differences in contemporary society between the two groups is their experience with and perception of education and schooling.

African Americans: Perceptions of Schooling

Euro-centric education and schooling as described above by Delpit, has created a context for African American's and American Indian's continued oppression. It is the very institution that is perceived as strategy for "race uplift" that opposes people of color. "Working for race uplift and education became intertwined. [. . .] Educated black women traditionally were brought up to see their education as something gained not just for their own development but for the purpose of race uplift" (Collins 149). Education and schooling is still an important institution in African American society: "While race uplift was the expected objective of all educated African-Americans, after the Civil War the implementation of this philosophy primarily fell to black women" (Perkins qtd in Collins 149).

Black women mentioned above valiantly and efficiently conducted their mission for "race uplift." In her autobiography, *Bone Black, Memories of Girlhood*, bell hooks speaks about her early schooling in the segregated South. During her elementary school years her teachers were all African American. They came from her neighborhood and were truly caring and authentically interested in motivating her and her peers to succeed. In her high school years after desegregation occurred, her teachers were not from her community and were mainly white. School became an alienating and lonely experience. The point of hook's story is not to advocate segregated schools because these schools existed to support apartheid. Instead, she illustrated how powerful and meaningful education can be when teachers truly understand and care about their children. "Caring educators open the mind, allowing students to embrace a world of knowing that is always subject to change and challenge" (92).

Hooks points out that equal access to schools for children of color does not create conditions for equality. She clarifies her opinion: "Such thinking denies the role that devaluation and degradation, or all strategies of shaming, play in maintaining racial subordination, especially in the arena of education" (94). It is the understanding and caring, which hooks mentions and is still missing in schools, where most teachers are white women and middle class. Despite all the glowing achievements for African Americans such as their model colleges, statistics for academic achievement of their youth tell a different story. This different story confirms and reinforces the reality of racism in schools throughout the United States.

American Indians: Perceptions of Schooling

American Indian children became the target of the government's deadly assault on American Indian Nations. Education and schooling

were and continue to be a colonizing project in the United States by erasing the identity of American Indian peoples through the eradication of their languages and cultures. This erasure was effectively orchestrated during the developmental years of Indian youth who were severely punished for speaking their Native languages and practicing their customs while attending boarding schools. American education and schooling promote one citizenship, one language and one way of life based on white middle-class American society.

To transform them out of their “Indianess” (Szasz 9), the United States government forced American Indian children to attend boarding schools far away from home. They were removed at tender young ages, some as early as three years old (Child 110-15), from their tribal communities to be raised in cold impersonal institutions which employed militaristic methods. Unfortunately, boarding schools for Indian children still exist today so that disruption of Indian families continues.

In North America between 1754-1759, Eleazar Wheelock established the first boarding school for Indian children, the Moors Charity School in Lebanon, Connecticut (Altenbaugh 18; De Jong 31). Wheelock had two missionary goals which were “to save the Indian from themselves and to save the Indian from the English” (Axtell qtd. in Altenbaugh 18). Boys were trained to be preachers, teachers, and interpreters of the English way. Both boys and girls were trained to be “agents of civilization” (Altenbaugh 18). To become agents for Euro-Western civilization, Indian boys and girls became alienated agents of their own communities. They had to forget their own heritages and identities. The relentless cycles of language shift and poignant marginalization of Indian youth began before the United States government was formed. In 1819 through the enactment of the Civilization Act, the United States government, ignoring their own stance against church interference, provided government funding to churches to “educate” Indian children.

To compliance with treaties made with Indian Nations, the government became directly involved in Indian education. In 1879, the Carlisle School in Pennsylvania opened its doors and its infamous motto, “Kill the Indian and Save the Man,” expressed the attitudes of white America toward American Indians. In government boarding schools, Indian children were trained in blue-collar service jobs, where boys were taught trades and girls were taught to be housewives. Abusive treatment of Indian children at the many schools—both boarding and public schools—was documented in the 1938 Meriam Report (De Jong 133-59; Szasz 3, 21) and later in the 1970 Kennedy Report (De Jong 195-227; Szasz 3, 141-55).

One of the appalling practices in schooling of American Indian children was the practice of “kid catching.” In a 1929 Senate subcommittee hearing Dana Coolidge described this horrendous practice in her statement on, “Kid Catching on the Navajo Reservation”:

I am making a brief statement of my experience with what I consider the greatest shame of the Indian Service—the rounding up of Indian children to be sent

away to government boarding schools. This business of “kid catching,” as it is called, is rarely discussed with outsiders [. . .] In the fall the government stockmen, farmers, and other employees go out into the back country with trucks and bring in the children [. . .] The children are caught, often roped like cattle, and taken away from their parents, many times never to return. They are transferred from school to school, given white people’s names, forbidden to speak their own tongue, and when sent to distant schools are not taken home for three years [. . .] It is a question, therefore, whether the benefits of this compulsory education justify the separation of little children from their mothers at the tender age of six or seven. (De Jong 118)

It seems that the shameful practice of “kid catching” was an accepted means that the government utilized for recruiting children to attend boarding schools. In the Ramah Navajo area in New Mexico, Diné elders vividly recall that Jesse Johnson, a white rancher rode by horseback to catch children. The elders “could not recall by whose authority Jesse Johnson went into their community to gather children” (Manuelito, “Self-Determination” 85). Families hid their children from these underhanded recruiters. Frank Sam Pino recalled those events, “Whenever the person that represented the school came to our place, my parents would hide me by rolling me up in in sheep pelts. The person that represented the school was Jesse Johnson” (Tsá’ Ászi’ 114). In *Katie Henio, Navajo Sheepherder*, Katie relates how she escaped being taken to boarding school, “But when the white people came to the hogan to take me to school, I wasn’t there. My parents had told me to run far and hide and not to come back until I saw they’d gone” (Thomson 22). Punishment for these unscrupulous actions by recruiters seems not to have occurred because records of these actions do not mention any legal action taken against them. These events demonstrate the powerlessness that Diné people have felt through the often cruel colonizing methods to assimilate Diné children into the American society.

Thus, in contrast to the African American’s perception that education and schooling is a means for “race uplift,” American Indian people feared education and the taking of their children. American Indian identity has been and is still being compromised by the intergenerational colonizing impact of boarding schools and Euro-Western schooling. The compromise of Indian identity is most evident in the language shift of existing American Indian languages and the disappearance of many American Indian languages.

At the same time that American Indian Nations continue to remain as colonized people who are at the mercy of governing federal policies, they and especially their college-age youth strongly express the desire to maintain their tribal sovereignty, cultures, and languages through formal education (Tierney 119; Brayboy 127). Since the passage of the 1975 Self-Determination Act, many American Indian people have considered formal education to be a primary force in their survival. Since this legislation a considerable

number of tribal and community based schools as well as thirty-three tribal colleges have been established. However, these important institutions have become at risk for recycling assimilationist curriculum and pedagogy. Instruction in these institutions, especially those who have partnered with universities, is mainly conducted by non-Indian people who are neither sensitive nor recognize the importance of infusing American Indian teachings into their instruction. Although important milestones have been met, American Indian people still have many problems in academia. Like African American youth, this is reflected in statistics for American Indian children who are considered to be underachieving and dropping-out in middle school: very few of these students graduate from college or have advanced degrees.

The assault on the American Indian people's identity through schooling has been and continues to be a direct assault on indigenous womanism. "Foremothers" of today's teachers, who taught in the "Wild West" and in the "virgin" territory of Australia, are still being praised (Coffey and Dellamont 105). The choice of rhetoric implicates a stance toward indigenous people as savages and as non-people who lived in the "Wild West" or in "virgin territory." Grande notes, "[. . .] reformists [which included white women] worked together with the BIA to enact a social reform program that identified the American Indian family as ground zero in the cold war against 'Indian savages.' In these efforts, reformists served as the principal agents in the reeducation of American Indian women" (129).

Jaimes describes American Indian women's response: "[. . .] some Indian women hold white feminist disdain because they view them as constituents of the white supremacy and colonialism that oppresses Indians" (qtd. in Mihesuah 40).

As with African American experiences, whitestream feminism does not recognize the impact of colonization on American Indian women, who have been the mainstay of American Indian culture.

In contrast to dominant modes of feminist critique that locate women's oppression in the structures of patriarchy, the project of decolonization begins with the understanding that the collective oppression of indigenous women results primarily from colonialism—a multidimensional force underwritten by Western Christianity, defined by white supremacy, and fueled by global capitalism (Grande 329).

The previous sections have provided background information for the development of this article. Although much more information is available and could have been included, the synopsis portrayed a sufficient glimpse of the two societies of color.

Intersections of Womanism

Alice Walker's "womanism" provides connectivity for the understanding of indigenous womanism. Indigenous epistemology, specifically American Indian epistemology, informs the development and construction of indigenous womanism. Battiste and Henderson, indigenous scholars, identify indigenous epistemology:

Indigenous ways of knowing share the following structure: (1) knowledge of and belief in unseen powers in the ecosystem; (2) knowledge that all things in the ecosystem are dependent on each other; (3) knowledge that reality is structured according to most of the linguistic concepts by which Indigenous describe it; (4) knowledge that personal relationships reinforce the bond between persons, communities, and ecosystems; (5) knowledge that sacred traditions and persons who know these traditions are responsible for teaching “morals” and “ethics” to practitioners who are then given responsibility for this specialized knowledge and its dissemination; and (6) knowledge that an extended kinship passes on teaching and social practices from generation to generation. (42)

From another perspective, Cajete, a Tewa Indian from New Mexico, describes indigenous epistemology:

Environmental relationship, myth, visionary traditions, traditional arts, Tribal community, and Nature centered spirituality have traditionally formed the foundations in American Indian life for discovering one’s true face (character, potential, identity), one’s heart (soul, creative self, true passion), and one’s foundation (true work, vocation), all of which lead to the expression of a complete life. (23)

The development of the argument that Walker’s “womanism” provides connectivity for the understanding of indigenous womanism; that indigenous epistemology informs the development and construction of indigenous womanism and what the stakes or risks are for distinguishing indigenous womanism will be explained in three sections: 1) Walker’s *womanism*, (2) theorizing indigenous womanism, and 3) the stake/risks of indigenous womanism.

Women of color have selected the term *womanism* instead of feminism to describe women’s consciousness which includes women’s issue, race/nationalist issues, and class issues. “Both Alice Walker and Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi defined womanism as a consciousness that incorporates racial, cultural, sexual, national, economic, and political considerations” (Brown 209). Ogunyemi further states: “Its [womanism] ideal is for black unity where every black person has a modicum of power and so can be a ‘brother’ or ‘sister’ or a ‘father’ or a ‘mother’ to the other [. . .] [I]ts aims is the dynamism of wholeness and self-healing” (Brown 209).

From another perspective on Walker’s usage of womanism in her work, Montelaro states: “By foregrounding maternal subjectivities in her novel, Walker creates a prose fiction that conforms to her definition of womanist: it represents not only African-American women’s dependence on and support for each other, but also their commitment to self-esteem and their resistance to obstacles that would deny them a meaningful role in the creation of their culture” (16). Furthermore, Montelaro writes “[. . .] she [Walker] similarly challenges patriarchal and racist values as they are transmitted through the practices of institutionalized religion” (16).

In this article Walker's concept of womanism, taken from the various perspectives above, frames the concept of indigenous womanism. Her concept of womanism provides scaffolding but the particulars that make up indigenous womanism are distinct.

Walker's Womanism

Womanism, as Walker features throughout her poetry and novels, can be summarized in an overarching concept that enigmatically includes both strength and compassion, strength for survival and compassion towards all humanity. "Alice Walker's preference for the term 'womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender,' addresses this notion of the solidarity of humanity" (Collins 38).

Women in the popular novel, *The Color Purple*, brilliantly portrayed strength when they contended with abusive husbands and strength was their shield as they served in households as "outsiders within" negotiating their safety and maintaining their dignity. In Walker's literary work, strength in *womanism* was exhibited in the face of Jim Crow laws that dehumanized and separated people. Strength was displayed by all who stood up for their rights, including Walker herself, during the Civil Rights Movement and is an essential characteristic of activists today in their stance for egalitarianism. Strength in *womanism* continues today for all people of color who are confronted by prejudice and intolerance in gender, class, and race.

Compassion that is expressed by Alice Walker's *womanism*, embraces respect for all humanity and nature. Walker's compassion for women is brilliantly portrayed but is no less emphasized for men as she poignantly expressed:

I have known black men in my life who are flexible like the grass and sheltering like the tree. But many black men have themselves forgotten they can be this way. It is their own nature that they miss. [. . .] As I see it, black men have a deep desire to relearn their own loveliness [. . .] I send a prayer to my brothers: that you continue to open to each other and to bless yourselves. Continue to let go of fear. Continue to insist on truth and trust. Our time is short on this earth, but that it can be rich and joyous in spite of oppression, white madness, and black confusion is undeniable. Be each other's 'hand on the brow.' (112)

Walker equally focuses on fathers in one of her latest novels, *By the Light of My Father's Smile*. In this novel, she explores and analyzes the father-daughter relationship. The father's role to validate and support his daughter sexuality represents Walker's perspective on spirituality and the recognition of sexuality as a vital component of spirituality.

The intersections between Walker's definition of womanism described above and American Indian epistemology occur in the recognition and honoring of women as Mother, Other Mothers/Sisters, Grandmother/Ancestors, and Mother as Spiritual Leader.

From time immemorial American Indian people have honored Mother Earth and Father Sky. "Mother Earth is a being, a source of life that gives birth to all living creatures and sustains the life of her children by providing them with food and protection" (Cajete 185). American Indian people's belief in Mother Earth is the foundation for how they relate to all things in this universe, animate and inanimate. This belief system is the lens through which they view life and live accordingly; it is their worldview.

Walker's understanding of Mother Earth is similar to American Indian people's veneration of Mother Earth. Walker's usage of *Mother* extends from the Euro-Western definition of mother as female parent to a far greater realm of understanding Mother as Mother Earth for all humanity. In *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*, she enjoys immensely being a parent, "I have loved being Rebecca's mom" (76) and clearly defines women's relationship to Mother Earth: "We are the daughters of Mother Earth: it is in our naturalness and joy in who and what we are that we offer our gratitude, our worship, and our praise" (107). Walker goes on to describe mankind's responsibility: "I speak of defending the Earth, our Mother God. I speak of defending and loving the Earth's children: All of Us" (196). Like American Indians, Walker perceives Mother Earth neither as a metaphor nor a symbol, but as a true being.

Another intersection between Walker and American Indian epistemology is the understanding of Othermothers. Troester defines Othermothers as "[. . .] women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities—traditionally have been central to the institution of black motherhood" (qtd. in Collins 119). Othermothering was highlighted in *The Color Purple*. Othermothering and sisterhood are intertwined throughout this and other novels and in her poetry, and are also integral in indigenous societies. For example, in the Diné (Navajo) kinship system, sisters are mothers to all their children who would in the Euro-Western kinship system be considered "cousins" to one another.

Like American Indian people, Walker holds grandmothers and ancestors in high esteem. She honors grandmothers and ancestors in her treasuring of quilts that they had made and passed down to their children. Their private lives and hardships are cherished memories that are represented by the fragments of personal clothing and patches sewn together to make quilts. In "Everyday Use," Walker reminds her readers that grandmothers and ancestors do not represent a passé history. Quilts and other implements should not reside in museums and represent a static history of a people. Similarly, American Indian people treasure their regalia and everyday cooking and hunting implements as having life. Their lives captured in ethnographic reports, stereotypical images as seen in sports, and their material culture on display in museums denigrate the essence of the living and dynamic cultures of American Indian people.

Walker points out the beloved relationship of Grandmothers and ancestors who transcend time to support their families. "Grandmother" as a spiritual guide is expressed in her recent novel, *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart*. This notion is similar

to American Indian people's recognition of Grandmothers whom they venerate as being mystical and transmitters of wisdom.

Alice Walker's notion of womanism provides connectivity to the constructions of indigenous womanism. The intersections described above between Walker and American Indian people demonstrate important similarities that pave the way for understanding concepts from another worldview such as the indigenous worldviews. These similarities, however, are only that. Divergence in the understanding of these concepts of Mother/Othermother/Grandmother/Ancestor and Spiritual Guide will become apparent in the sections that follow. This divergence does not alienate African American womanism from American Indian women's experiences and identity. Instead, *womanism*, as Walker utilizes the concept, provides a basic framework of the experiences of woman of color including indigenous women.

Theorizing Indigenous Womanism

Social scientists have studied the indigenous Indian people of the Americas more than any other group in the world (Smith 3) and have theorized about every aspect of their lives such as child and adolescent development, learning styles, sexuality, addictions, kinship systems, witchcraft, taboos, and so forth. Until recently, theoretical constructs in research, originating in Euro-Western patriarchal thought and conducted in indigenous communities, were not suspect. Scholars (Cannella and Manuelito; Duran and Duran 25; Grande 3, 154-56; Manuelito, "The Role" 84; Mutua and Swadener 13, 21; Smith 2, 28-29, 38-39) now strongly recommend that theories framing research studies in indigenous communities be grounded in the worldview of the indigenous communities to insure the authenticity, reliability, and validity of conclusions. Worldview provides a point of reference for all events, methods, and analysis in research.

The importance of identifying worldview in indigenous research begins with the basic question: What is the point of reference for the interpretation of data? Duran and Duran state that even when academicians pretend to study cultures different from their own, most dare not ask this question (25). Because indigenous people have tremendous tribal diversity, even indigenous scholars must be careful in drawing conclusions about one another. Theorizing, to be correct and appropriate, must be centered on the worldview of the people being theorized.

Indigenous philosophy and epistemology provides theory of women/womanism for each indigenous group. Indigenous philosophy and epistemology defines the development and positioning of American Indian womanism. Of the more than three-hundred tribal groups in the United States, each tribal group has its perception of womanism. Thus, the tremendous diversity between tribes regarding gender systems generates complexities and an essentialized perspective of indigenous womanism is most inappropriate. Mihesuah emphasizes this: "There was and is no such thing as a monolithic, essential Indian woman" (37).

To avert essentialism in the construction of an indigenous womanism, I will discuss only one indigenous group's construction of and theory of "womanism." I have selected Diné (Navajo) womanism, a consciousness I was born into and have been raised, which will allow me to illustrate contextually how Diné epistemology and philosophy informs the positioning of the Diné "woman."

The total American Indian/Alaska Native population is approximately 2.5 million (U.S. Census Bureau 2001a; 2001b). Of this number the Diné are one of two largest tribes in the United States. The population of the Diné is approximately two-hundred and fifty-thousand. The Diné Reservation extends through the states of Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. The Diné were colonized by the Spaniards first, the Mexicans, and then the Americans (Iverson). The Spanish and Mexican colonizers left their legacy by imposing their names so that many Diné today have Spanish surnames such as Manuelito, Garcia, Alonzo, and so forth.

Hwéeldi (The Long Walk) in 1864-1868 is a time marker in Diné history and Hwéeldi in the Diné language denotes a time of great suffering. During Hwéeldi, the Diné were marched at gun point to a concentration camp approximately four-hundred miles from their homeland to Fort Sumner, New Mexico (Iverson 51). After four years of incarceration, only a small percentage of the nine-thousand Diné who originally left returned (Iverson 51). The Diné were traumatized by genocide, removal, and incarceration.

An important aspect of Diné society is their government which is headquartered in Window Rock, Arizona. There are eighty-eight council delegates from the one-hundred and ten communities that are represented in the Diné (Navajo) Nation Council. Each of the one-hundred and ten communities is governed by a local government, the Chapter.

In 1934 the Indian Reorganization Act dictated who should be leaders in Diné (Navajo) society when government men hand-picked Diné (Navajo) men in each community. Women were not even considered and most handpicked leaders were not considered as such in their own community, yet they were selected to facilitate oil and gas agreements. Today, leaders at the chapter and council level are selected through elections which have a greater turnout because these elections are more meaningful to the Diné than the United States or state elections. Many Diné women are elected as officers at the Chapter level of government and as Council Delegates to the greater Council level. In recent years, the Diné Nation government has exercised self-governance despite the United States patronizing interference.

Mission and government boarding schools (Bureau of Indian Affairs or BIA) played and still play a major role in Diné society. Most Diné children, however, now attend public schools, on and off the reservation. More Diné live in urban areas than on the reservation. Outmigration from Dinétah (Navajoland) is due mainly to the few jobs available in their home communities. Despite the distance from their home community, urban Diné regularly visit and return to their communities for ceremonies and social events such

as the Navajo Nation Fair in September. Some of the large urban areas that many Diné live in are Phoenix, Arizona; Dallas, Texas; Los Angeles, California; Denver, Colorado; Chicago, Illinois and Albuquerque, New Mexico. During tribal elections, ballots from these areas are sent in to be counted reflecting the involvement of urban Diné in their tribal government.

The strength of Diné women and womanism remains strong despite the fact that colonization has manipulated and has tried to stamp out the Diné (Navajo) identity. In the complex and beautiful Creation Stories of the Diné, Asdzaan Nadleehí (Changing Woman) provides the ultimate distinguished space for women. Asdzaan Nadleehí (Changing Woman) provides a socio-cultural framework for Diné society where women are in a pivotal position from which knowledge, life, and nurturance emanates and from which proper interactions are determined. Mother/Grandmother/Othermother/Spiritual leader, and Matriarch/Warrior are archetypes of Diné womanism. These archetypes are similar to some indigenous groups such as the various Apache bands, and Cherokee (Allen 36) who have warrior women. A major difference exists between Diné womanism and African American womanism and some indigenous groups regarding the last two archetypes. The last two archetypes, Matriarch and Warrior are essential in understanding Diné womanism.

“What happened in Changing Woman’s life, [. . .] set examples that are seriously considered to be fundamental to Navajo identity and culture today” (Beck, Walters, and Francisco 76). Her puberty ceremony, the birth of her twins, her interactions with the Diyin Dine’é (Holy People), and her interactions throughout her time with the Diné provide a model for women. “[. . .] White Shell Woman’s (aka Changing Woman’s) basic character, and what she did in her childhood, to womanhood and motherhood, sets an example of what a Diné female will personally experience” (268).

In the Diné worldview Asdzaan Nadleehí (Changing Woman, White Shell Woman, Mother Earth) provides an epistemology for Diné womanism. Diné womanism represents benevolent, compassionate, wise, strong, fearless women who are involved with the welfare of their children, family, and community. An excellent prototype of contemporary Diné womanism is described in words and photographs of the life of a Diné grandmother/greatgrandmother in Thomson’s, *Katie Henio, Navajo Shepherd*. Diné womanism is characterized by the archetypes of Mother, Grandmother, Other-mother, Spiritual leader, Matriarch, and Warrior. Asdzaan Nadleehí (Changing Woman) is the quintessence of all the archetypes. She provides a theoretical framework for Diné Womanism and also prescribes praxis. Praxis is evident when Diné Nation legislations regarding clans and kinship are employed, when Kinaaldá ceremonies are performed, when adults and children introduce themselves the Diné way, through their clans, when Beauty Way prayers are given, and when ceremonies are conducted. Jennifer Nez Denetdale summarizes the strong emotions that Diné women maintain: “I will continue to be appreciative of and awed at the integrity and courage of my ancestors. Because of their love

and bravery, their faith in the Navajo way, we survive as a people“ (Iverson 274).

Asdzaan Nadleehí (Changing Woman) is Mother to the Diné because she provided the all important clan system in Diné society. She rubbed the first four basic clans from her body and thus the first Diné people as members of a clan were created. Membership in a clan means belonging to one's mother's lineage and ultimately to Asdzaan Nadleehí (Changing Woman). This is the most important aspect of being Diné. Asdzaan Nadleehí (Changing Woman) is the source of life for the Diné and she sustains her children throughout their lifetime.

The Diné belong to one's mother's family for generations previous and time immemorial. These clans are classified in family groups. There are more than one-hundred clans in the Diné world. Each clan is part of a group of related clans. Clans are not based on biological relationships and they have individual history and stories. Clans, like communities, extend over hundreds of miles throughout Dinétah (Navajo country). A Diné learns the concept of K'e [respect] by knowing one's place clan-wise as well as knowing the relations and accompanying expectations. One is always a sibling, parent, grandparent, and cousin in the clan family of Nihima (our mother) known as Asdzaan Nadleehí (Changing Woman) and Mother Earth. Behavior and interactions are guided by who one is as a member of one's clans throughout life.

Changing Woman has various names in Diné society as noted above. She is White Shell Woman, Earth Woman, and Mother Earth. She provided food and other forms of protection throughout the Diné's journey through the previous worlds before their emergence to this world and continues to do so today. To the Diné, Mother Earth is not a metaphor, she is a true being. Diné woman authors describe her powers: “By most traditional Navajo elders, she is seen and remembered in the change of seasons, for this is what she is [. . .]” (Beck, Walters, and Francisco 76). The emotional or affective tie between the Navajo and the earth is strong and intense “[. . .] the earth is a mother, a true kinswoman” (Witherspoon 20).

The strongest bond in the Diné society is the Mother-Child bond. “The relationship of Changing Woman to her children (Diné) provides the major conceptual framework . . .” (Witherspoon 16). As Diné, the intense Mother-Child bond that we have with Asdzaan Nadleehí (Changing Woman/Mother Earth) specifies our relationship to all animate beings and the inanimate universe. As children of Asdzaan Nadleehí (Changing Woman/Mother Earth) we are all equal to one another. Asdzaan Nadleehí (Changing Woman) has personality and is devoted to the Diné. She is more than a colossal mystery as Walker and other writers allude to in their statements about Mother/God/Changing Woman. Asdzaan Nadleehí (Changing Woman) is a daily example for the Diné through stories, Beauty Way prayers, and in various ceremonies conducted continually throughout Dinétah.

A significant and visible example of Asdzaan Nadleehí (Changing Woman)'s powerful presence in Diné life today is the

Kinaaldá, the puberty ceremony for young girls. Kinaaldá was first performed by the Diiyin Dine'é (Holy People) when Adszaan Nadleehí (Changing Woman) reached puberty. The four day ceremony which is conducted twice several months apart follows the guidelines and prescriptions of the Diiyin Dine'é (Holy People) as in Adszaan Nadleehí's first puberty ceremony. Unfortunately, mandatory education through mission and boarding schools attendance interrupted to a significant extent this essential tradition for many Diné girls. Kinaaldá ceremonies are widely held in Dinétah (Navajoland).

From early childhood, each young Diné girl is prepared for the all important ceremony of Kinaaldá. The extended family, friends, and clan relatives assist in the preparation of this momentous occasion when the young girl who has reached puberty actually becomes Asdzaan Nadleehí (Changing Woman) for the duration of the ceremony. At the conclusion of the ceremony, everyone including men, women, and children, line up to be touched and blessed by the young lady who is known as the Kinaaldá. A Diné man expressed his opinion which reflects the general attitude toward Diné girls and puberty: "Today we believe that when a girl has her first period there is nothing wrong with that. It is something sacred to us" (Beck, Walters, and Francisco 223). Diné girls and women are held in high esteem and are not shunned or put out of the community or family circle when they have their period like in some indigenous groups in the United States. Unlike the attitude of the dominant Euro-Western society toward menses as being shameful and private, Diné attitudes toward menses is respect through the enactment of the community ceremony of Kinaaldá.

Another example of Asdzaan Nadleehí (Changing Woman)'s powerful presence in Diné society today is Diné Nation's language and educational legislation. In schools across Dinétah (Navajo Reservation) and as a Diné Nation mandate known as Title IX, Diné language usage is enforced. In both revival and immersion bilingual programs in Diné schools, children are taught first and foremost how to introduce themselves in the Diné language by their four clans, their mother's and father's, and their maternal and paternal grandfather's clans.

Another Diné Nation legislation involving clans prescribes suitable marriage partners. The Diné Nation counsel passed legislation that prohibits marriage between individuals with the same or from a related clan group. The Euro-Western perspective of clans pales in comparison to how Diné honor and maintain *clans* and kinship which inform their identities as foremost being womanist and communal.

The matriarch archetype is illustrated today in the Diné mother's /grandmother's ownership of property and when mothers/grandmothers are requested to be spokespeople and leaders. The impact of the capitalistic, colonizing American society has strained traditions but the Diné Nation continues much like it did a century ago as described in the *Santa Fe Gazette* in 1853:

They [Diné] treat their women with great respect, and the modern doctrine of 'women's rights,' seems to be fully carried out in practice among the tribes. The women own all the sheep, and the men dare not sell them without permission—nor do they ever make an important trade without consulting [them]. They admit women to their councils, who participate in their deliberations, and often control them [. . .] they worship the women, as their Great Spirit [. . .] (Correl 33; qtd. in Toledo-Benalli 30)

The concept of the Diné matriarch is unlike the Euro-Western concept of perhaps a female despot who manipulates and orders people. Diné matriarchs “fluidly” extend their influence in and around the home which includes the care of livestock.

When families were being relocated in the 1980s, a Diné woman expressed her feelings about losing her livestock. She said it was “like cutting off one of our arms” (Iverson 298). Iverson mentioned that relocation especially adversely affected women. After being relocated with her family, a woman stated: “I have not been feeling well in the past few months. I miss my land, my home, my livestock. I am very lonely [. . .] I had sheep, now I don't and it is really hard on me. There is nothing for me to do. It is like being buried alive” (298). For Diné women, the life of a matriarch isn't a pampered one. It is hard work that is expected for the welfare of the family.

Diné share the matriarch archetype with other indigenous groups such as the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) (Wagner 82-8; Allen 32), Cherokee, and Muskogee (Allen 32). Like the Diné, matriarchs in these societies play pivotal roles as leaders, mediators, providers, caregivers, and nurturers. Even today, Diné women hold important positions such as judges in their communities on the reservation while Seneca women (Haudenosaunee) make major decisions in their courts as well as in their tribal government.

The matriarch role of Diné womanism presents a major point of difference with some women of color. Collins argues against a matriarchal archetype: “Black women's centrality in Black family networks should not be confused with matriarchal or female-dominated family units” (Collins 1989). “[. . .] African-Americans' relationship to the slave political economy made it unlikely that either patriarchal or matriarchal domination could take root” (Collins 52). The matriarch image for Collins represents a “bad” black mother and the source of the matriarch's failure is her inability to model appropriate gender behavior (74-5). The matriarch image, like the mammy image, is perceived to be an outcome of racial oppression and poverty in African American society. If the matriarch image reflects racial oppression in the African American society, the matriarch image for Diné women portrays womanism most favorably in the Diné worldview.

Another archetype describing Diné womanism that is uncomfortable for some women of color is the Warrior archetype. Diné women are warrior women. From a patriarchal Euro-Western worldview, warrior women are considered misfits. In the Diné worldview, they

have had to struggle to survive as in their Creation Stories when they traversed the previous worlds. For Diné women, Asdzaan Nadleehí, (Changing Woman) provided the leading example by sheltering and protecting her children at all costs. Thus, in Diné society, women have warrior names. Today, most women have Diné (Navajo) names as well as their English names. The Diné women's names have the suffix *ba'* indicating war and the whole name describes how one endured or returned from war. The woman warrior image is still present in today's Diné society.

Diné mothers and grandmothers are vanguards protecting their communities. In 1986 they were at the forefront in protest marches against relocation of their families and actual standoffs with law enforcement who were physically forcing them off their land. Warrior women as grandmothers still carry rifles as they herd their sheep to protect them from coyotes (Thomson 10). For Diné women, the *Diyiin Dine'é* (Holy people) provide special blessings to women on being a warrior with special strength in mind, body, and soul.

Stakes and Risks of Diné Womanism

Colonization and essentialism create stakes and risks for Diné Womanism and indigenous womanism. Each of these areas will be examined briefly in this section. Colonization is expressed through whitestream feminism and the Euro-Western worldview. Colonization is contained and preserved in the English language, written records and literacy, and is demonstrated in blatant and covert ways.

Until recently, the voices of American Indian women have been mostly silent in the discourse of U.S. feminisms. The main reason for this silence is that whitestream feminism, a threat to indigenous womanism, still dominates. Embedded in whitestream discourse are these central questions driving their ideology: "How did male domination arise? Why was it so widely accepted? And what are its consequences? How, until recently, have men managed with a semblance of legitimacy to exclude women from formal politics in almost every tribe, state and civilization on the globe?" (Mansbridge and Okin 271) These questions assume that the point of reference or the basis and condition of *women* asking these questions is the same. As discussed earlier in this article, experiences of African American and Diné women greatly differ from white feminists and have been excluded from their discourse. Furthermore, white women and white feminists have participated in the colonizing projects of this country which have dehumanized and debased women of color.

The stakes for indigenous womanism are extremely high because indigenous womanism is based upon various worldviews distinct from the monolithic powerful Euro-Western worldview. The monolithic Euro-Western worldview originates from male philosophers (i.e. Rousseau, Kant, Socrates, Newton, etc.) whose ideas of male supremacy as the only true perspective filter through every area of contemporary science and humanities. These ideas mold young

minds with ethnocentric thought generation after generation. Indigenous thought systems are based on different principles of classification and different ways of perceiving the world which have been categorized as inferior by Euro-centric societies. As discussed in the article, Social Darwinism, civilization-savagism paradigm, and the deficit theory provide theoretical constructs for perceiving indigenous womanism as less than, inferior, and primitive. Thus, Euro-Western worldview established in academia as described in this article poses risks for indigenous womanism and Diné womanism.

Euro-Western worldview becomes a threat when it becomes intertwined with emotions in the political arena. Euro-centrism, an emotional expression of the Euro-Western worldview, is masked in nation building and has become a catalyst for paranoia and anything “un-American.” In the United States today, intolerance toward anything “un-American” and “un-Euro-Western” dominates even more so since September 11 when the World Trade Center was attacked and thousands of American people died. Thus, indigenous womanism in the United States adds to the paranoia and this creates greater risks for Diné womanism and indigenous womanism.

Colonization is contained and expressed in the usage of the English language as a dominant language in the United States. Legislation in the United States government has recently been considered to declare English as the national language of the country. In Arizona as with several other states, legislation has been already passed where “English Only” is the ruling for public schools and public agencies. Speaking only in English and understanding concepts encoded in English prevents authentic understanding of indigenous womanism which is more accurately constructed in the indigenous language. “Among English speakers, language itself encodes the message of male as norm and female as other” (Mansbridge and Okin 278).

The English language is an expression of the Euro-Western world view and its inauspicious characteristic is that it is:

The language of excessive individualism and competitiveness [which] serves to make social inequality invisible, promoting an indifference to human misery, exploitation and suffering. Moreover, it suggests that the language of excellence and individualism when abstracted from considerations of equality and social justice serves to restrict rather than animate the possibilities of democratic public life. (Giroux 333)

The threat of colonization manifested in the English language is insidious to indigenous womanism and American Indian people in general, who have through the centuries been prohibited from using their language in boarding schools. The outlook is ominous with the ever increasing indigenous language shift and acrimonious legislations such as the “English Only” mandates.

Colonization is preserved and promoted through written records and literacy. Records and manuscripts have disseminated misinformation about indigenous people. Disparaging information

about American Indian people is maintained and contained as Lomawaima points out. She states that Native experiences in federal and mission boarding schools in studies prior to the 1980s tended to focus on the social, cultural, psychological, or intellectual pathologies of Indian students or the pathologies of the environment (Lomawaima 335). Spicer, a non-indigenous researcher, has provided an explanation for the Euro-centric/ethnocentric assessments: “[. . .] again and again, what purports to be record of the native viewpoint is actually what the European writers thought the natives were thinking” (21). Constructed from a worldview alien to indigenous groups, American Indian people, including indigenous womanism, have had to contend with distortions describing them and this is a serious risk to indigenous womanism.

Colonization has wielded its power in many ways both blatant and covert. Power, getting others to do something through the threat of sanction or through force, has threatened the very existence of indigenous womanism. Blatant power was apparent when the United States removed children from their homes to attend school and transform them from their “Indianness.” This blatant power continues even today when Diné women struggle for their very survival. An example of contemporary indigenous women’s efforts to survive is the vehement protests by Diné grandmothers twenty years ago in 1987. Diné grandmothers protested the evils of forceful removal from all that they cherished when they and their families were relocated to unknown lands. Today, many of them are hopelessly existing and living out their lives in total despair. The assault on their lives and livelihood is hushed in the media, in the work place, and in higher education.

Colonization continues covertly in the guise of schooling and education today. Schooling and education continues to assimilate children of color through instruction that is centered on Euro-Western philosophies. With standards based instruction and testing driven by the No Child Left Behind Legislation, schooling and education will force youth to conform to Euro-Western thought and life.

Another grave risk and stake for indigenous womanism is essentialism. Essentialism is supported when “American Indian women” is constructed as a homogenous category as previously discussed in this article. Essentialism erases the uniqueness of indigenous womanism which has plurality. The fact that each indigenous group has its own language and culture and understanding of womanism is lost when essentialism is allowed to continue. American Indian people have even contributed to essentialism by supporting Pan-Indianism. Pan-Indianism is assimilation of American Indian tribes into one homogenous category.

Essentialism that has been unintentional and practiced by well-meaning people towards American Indians has occurred through the power of written work. For example, in Walker’s “Letter to the International Indian Treaty Council” on 29 November 1989, she begins her letter: “I am writing to let you know that I believe your custom of segregating menstruating women from others during religious (and other) ceremonies is wrong, hurtful to solidarity, and

historically unsound. (*Anything We Love* 166) The Diné, one of two largest Indian Nations, do not practice this. In fact, women are considered sacred and special during menses; such statements slander the Diné.

In another example, Anzaldúa makes a statement concerning cultural tyranny. She states that culture is made by those in power—men. She writes that culture keeps women in rigidly defined roles. After her discourse on tribal rights (of indigenous people in the world) over those of the individual she states: “Much of what the culture condemns focuses on kinship relationships” (40). This statement, too, is disparaging to the Diné. It is our kinship system based on matrilineal clans that identify who we are and guides our behavior. It is our kinship system that unites us in our efforts to survive and maintain our sovereignty as a nation.

In the last example of essentialism, Perdue writes in the Introduction of her book, *Cherokee Women*: “Native American women exist in the historical shadows. We know little about their lives, how historical events affected them, and the cultural changes that reshaped their world” (3). The first argument countering this idea cannot be understated; homogenous American Indian women do not exist. The second argument is against the perception of indigenous women existing in historical shadows. This was countered by Trask in the beginning of this article where she quotes “Before there existed an England, an English language, or an Anglo-Saxon people, our Native culture[s] was[were] forming” (4). Womanism and the construction of indigenous women such as the Diné woman have been already established giving women an honorable place. As an American Indian womanist, I would like to remind the public that we do not exist in historical shadows. We, representing unique cultures and languages, have historically always been visible, vibrant, and valuable in our world.

Conclusion

This article derives from my experience as a Diné woman. I am Nakai Dine'é born for the Kin Lichiinii clan. My Diné name is Dáábaa'—a name signifying that I am a warrior. I am a mother, grandmother, and othermother (aunt) in my biological family as well as to my numerous clan relatives across the vast expanse of Dinétah (Navajoland). Although I live and work in an urban area, I am tied to land and Mother Earth between the four Sacred Mountains and to a specific area, ancestral land bequeathed to me. I cherish my Diné language which I speak and write not only as an important force to counter colonization and essentialism, but to understand Diné stories and teachings.

I included information about boarding schools because I too, lived a lonely life separated from the warmth and nurture of home and lived eleven years in an institutional setting of a rigid and detached mission boarding school. In my mission boarding school I learned to detach when we were called “heathens” and “pagans” and allowed people to tell me that my heritage and who I am was

inferior and evil. In boarding school I had no caring adult or even my indigenous epistemology to arm me with counter-narratives. I didn't learn my cultural teachings until I became an adult.

I included information on "kid catching" because my father, Clarence Toledo, at the tender age of five was kidnapped, put in the back of a large government truck, and spent the next three years in a government boarding school in another state. For many years I dreaded the telling of this story in our home because I could not bear the tears and sadness in its retelling. It was until I was an adult that I read an oral history account taken from my late aunt, Mary Sandoval, who told how my grandparents sought desperately for months and years to find their child. The oral history project was funded by Title VII in the Torreon community of the Navajo Reservation.

I included information on the powerful impact of assimilationist education on children of color. Throughout my professional life I have worked in academia and encountered threats to my indigenous womanist identity.

I have spent my professional years as a "border crosser" mediating and negotiating indigenous values and thought in classroom instruction so that American education can still promote indigenous identity for all indigenous people. In closing, I would like to reiterate a portion of "And ain't I a woman" by Sojourner Truth in a speech in 1851 when she stated,

That man over there says women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could help me! And ain't I a woman? [. . .] when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman? (qtd. in Collins 15)

Truth reminds us that "woman" and "womanism" is a construction from culture. Thus, Diné womanist consciousness emanates from Diné culture, its teachings and language. Unfortunately for too long, Diné women identity has been constructed by outsiders around materials such as traditional dress, turquoise, and even mutton stew and fry bread. Diné womanist consciousness has even been blurred by Diné, themselves, internalizing Euro-Western standards and criteria and then denigrating themselves as being less than and unequal to men.

Diné womanist consciousness can [re]develop when we learn about the all encompassing philosophy of Sa'ah Nahai Bik'e Hozhoon, the specific teachings of Asdzaan Nadleehí (Changing Woman), and the Diné language. Diné womanist consciousness as Mother/Grandmother/ Other Mother/Spiritual Leader/ Matriarch/ Warrior can be a part of any contemporary identity such as lawyer, doctor, nurse, professor, teacher, scientist, homemakers, and so forth. With the indigenous womanist consciousness, Diné women will never forget or take for granted the hard life that Diné woman

have lived and are still living. They will not forget the hardships of raising a family in stressful economic times on the reservations, or raising sheep and other livestock. They will not forget to conduct Kinaaldá or speak their language. All of this is Diné womanism and one aspect of indigenous womanism, and it is beautiful. But most important and precious to Diné are our prayers with which I will conclude this essay:

Let there be blessing before me
 Let there be blessing behind me
 Let there be blessing below me
 Let there be blessing all around me
 Let there be blessing through the Words I speak
 I have become one with the Spirit. (Sa'áh Naghái Bik'e Hózhó Nishlídoo)
 I am what the Great Spirit wants of me.
 Let there be blessing. (A Beauty Way prayer)

Notes

¹ Influenced by Eva Marie Garroutte's concept of radical indigeneity, "radical indigenous womanism" was conceptualized in a conversation with Karen Leong and Myla Vicenti Carpio.

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