

# **Voicing Resistance, Sharing Struggle: African American Feminism and American Indian Decolonization**

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The traditional, pre-contact oral teachings of a number of American Indian nations including the Lakota, Oneida, and Anishinabeg tell of a time long ago when the various races of human beings lived harmoniously alongside one another. Special and unique gifts were bestowed upon each of the races at the time of our creation and the fruit of these gifts were shared between groups enhancing our interdependence upon each other. At some point in our history, however, the races divided and separated to live apart from one another. While the details of this teaching vary with each nation, for some, the division of the races came about after the peace between the groups turned to discord. Today, this time of peace and the division that followed is remembered in the sacred medicine wheel. In this sacred teaching symbol, the races of all humans are represented by four colors on the wheel—red, yellow, black, and white. In the ancient prophecies of the nations that continue to pass along this teaching, we are told of a time to come when the four races of all human beings will reunite to live in peace, sharing our gifts, as we once did. Thus, it is the duty and obligation of those who carry this teaching, to do all we can to bring about this time of renewed peace.

## **Intersections & Resistance**

As American Indian people continue to resist colonial domination and the loss of our traditional cultures in the twenty-first century, we must recognize the contributions of scholars of color, particularly African American women writers and activists working for political and social change. Scholars such as Angela Davis, June Jordan, Audrey Lorde, bell hooks, Adrienne Rich, Patricia Hill Collins, and many others have challenged and aided us in our intellectual understanding of Western patriarchal capitalist imperialism. African American feminists have helped us understand the impact of colonization today as it linked to history and as it continues to devastate our communities and families. Patricia Hill Collins

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describes black feminism as an activist response to resist black women's intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation. What is unique about black feminism then, according to Collins, is the nature of the oppression experienced by African American women—oppression exists on multiple levels and, therefore, requires oppositional knowledges and empowerment strategies (202). African American feminists writing and speaking about their own experiences of colonization have expanded our understanding of oppressive power structures that operate upon and are justified by the construction of abject Otherness. In their explorations of internalized oppression, African American feminism helps American Indians better understand the presence of this phenomenon in our own communities. And in their brave attempts to transform academic structures from within, African American women scholars paved a path for American Indian scholars to follow in our own cultural traditions. Unfortunately, American Indian scholars and activists rarely acknowledge the contributions of those African American feminists and other women of color who work for change from within the academy. Instead, it is more common to find American Indian scholars critical of our peers who borrow from the liberating traditions of women writers of color. These scholars fail to see the interconnectedness of all who are impacted by colonization. While American Indian efforts to decolonize, or resist Euro-American institutions of domination, are unique from the struggles of other groups in that our challenges include the political and legal sovereign status of our governments and land base, there is much that is gained from the knowledge and history of the resistance of other marginalized groups.

#### **Women of Color Challenging White Feminism**

In a challenge to Western structures of domination and oppression, women writers of color, particularly African American feminists writing for over three decades, have drawn from Euro-American feminism. One of the primary feminist tenets influencing African American and other women writers of color is the critique of Western phallogocentric discourse. This critique is grounded upon the assertion that women are socially constructed according to male sexual desire through historically denying, discounting, and defeating women's voices. Feminism poses a challenge to structures of Western oppression by calling for women to create and re-create our selves by expressing personal experiences, bodily sensations, and all that is subjective. Often referred to as feminist standpoint theory, the influence of this theoretical tradition upon African American women writers is clear. African American women writers challenge Western power structures through the creation of their own images, exposing the dominant culture's racist, sexist constructs which oppress and dominate, calling for the construction of self identity in ways that decolonize.

In her original and now classic text *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*,

Patricia Hill Collins articulates an Afrocentric feminist epistemology and explores knowledge claims originating in the concrete everyday life experiences of African American women. Collins stresses the importance of challenging Western stereotypical images and constructions of African American women through the production of black women's self-definitions. These images, she asserts, resist the "dehumanization essential to systems of domination" and rejects internalized psychological oppression (39-40). Similarly, Adrienne Rich contends that women's subjectivity can only be constructed through an articulation of personal life experiences. She states, "Only the willingness to share private and sometimes painful experience can enable women to create a collective description of the world that is truly ours" (16). Similarly, bell hooks calls for African American women to represent their reality from a feminist standpoint, through writing. She maintains, "More than any other genre of writing, the production of honest confessional narratives by black women who are struggling to be self-actualized and to become radical subjects are needed as guidelines, as texts that affirm our fellowship with one another" (59). Thus, borrowing from white feminists who encourage women to create our own subjectivity through writing, African American women writers of color also problematize Western power that relies on constructions of abject difference. However, African American women and other women writers of color have expanded upon the feminist theoretical tradition to further challenge the exclusion of marginalized groups from constructions and formations of knowledge and incorporate communication forms outside of the dominant codes. As hooks contends, it is difficult for African Americans to speak the horror in their lives because there is no language or means in which to describe it. She argues that African Americans must break away from the dominant culture's ways of thinking and writing and create new mediums for expressing experiences. She writes:

Without a way to name our pain, we are also without the words to articulate our pleasure. Indeed, a fundamental task of black critical thinkers has been the struggle to break with the hegemonic modes of seeing, thinking, and being that block our capacity to see ourselves oppositionally, to imagine, describe and invent ourselves in ways that are liberatory. Without this, how can we challenge and invite-nonblack allies and friends to date to look at us differently, to dare to break their colonizing gaze? (2)

African American women use various forms subverting the dominant subject position through fiction, autobiography, personal narratives, poetry, and writing in one's native language as a means of self-definition and self-representation.

Author and poet Audre Lorde emphasizes the significance of poetry in the creation of African American women's self-representations and insists that "poetry is not a luxury" but, rather, "It is a vital

necessity. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action" (37). Poetry, as Lorde explains, is the foundation for change for, through it, we can name and reveal personal experiences that society has deemed inappropriate or too "intolerable or incomprehensible and frightening" for articulation. She describes the subversive and empowering forces of poetry:

For living within structures defined by profit, by linear power, by institutional dehumanization, our feelings were not meant to survive. Kept around as unavoidable adjuncts or pleasant pastimes, feelings were expected to kneel to thought as women were expected to kneel to men. But women have survived. As poets. And there are no new pains. We have felt them all already. We have hidden that fact in the same place where they have hidden our power. They surface in our dreams, and it is our dreams that point the way to freedom. Those dreams are made realized through our poems that give us the strength and courage to see, to feel, to speak and to dare. (39)

Like Lorde, hooks discusses the significance of poetry, describing it as a convergence place for feminist concerns about subjectivity and the emergence of marginalized voices as an act of resistance. Challenges to Western power structures, such as those described by Lorde and hooks, are becoming more widely published as evidenced in the work of contemporary women poets of color including Joy Harjo, Crystos, Mitsuye Yamada, Cherríe Moraga, and Adrienne Rich.

The written words of marginalized groups in forms such as those described here are a critical factor in affecting the patriarchal power structure for all marginalized groups, as they are located in the material situations of the individuals writing them and challenge Western claims to a universal experience and knowledge. Narrative texts, including autobiographical and poetic pieces, which directly serve as a documentation of the political struggles of marginalized groups are often referred to as resistance literature. One type of resistance literature produced by indigenous writers from Mexico, Central, and South America is aptly termed *testimonio/a* or "testimonial narrative" because such works bear witness to experiences of domination and subjugation. More specifically, *testimonio/a* originates in opposition to Western economic and political imperialism and the conditions of cultural genocide. According to John Beverly, *testimonio/a* is described as "an urgency to communicate, a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival, implicated in the act of narration itself" (94). Like other personal accounts produced by members of marginalized groups, *testimonio/a* challenges Western constructions of Other and positions the writer within the text, creating a voice of one's own, exposing the falsehood of Western universal singular "Truth." Like the narratives, autobiographies and poetry of women

of color, *testimonio/a* do not always adhere to Western literary traditions. Thus, as Barbara Harlow explains, *testimonio/a* “propose alternative parameters for the definition and articulation of literary convention” (510). Often the intent of such writing is to challenge universalized Western demands of “proper” form and style. Examples of writing and expressing one’s concrete life experience as a challenge to patriarchy outside Western edicts of rhetoric can be found in the work of Gloria Anzaldúa, who writes in both Spanish and English, alternating between prose and poetry within a single text. Similarly, Margaret Montoya blends together narrative, poetry and legal scholarship in an effort to “challenge conventional paradigms within the legal academy and subvert the dominant discourse” (185).

While African American women and other women writers of color have drawn upon the challenges posed by Euro-American feminists, women writers of color have also posed important critical challenges to feminism and Women’s Studies academic programs. These writers expand upon both feminist and postmodern traditions to incorporate the diverse experiences of women located in race and class differences. In monumental works such as, *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, *This Bridge Called My Back and Making Face*, and *Making Soul/Haciendo Caras*, women of color contend that, like the totalization and elimination of women’s experiences found in Western, capitalist patriarchy, feminism reduces to unity the particulars of all women, regardless of the material differences produced by race and class constructs.

In response to the unitary representation of women often found in feminism, Collins states, “Theories advanced as being universally applicable to all women as a group on closer examination appear greatly limited by the white, middle-class origins of their proponents” (7). In a letter to white feminist Mary Daly, Audre Lorde discusses her personal pain regarding the exclusionary practices of white, middle-class feminists. She writes:

To dismiss our Black foremothers may well be to dismiss where European women learned to love. As an African American woman in white patriarchy, I am used to having my archetypal experience distorted and trivialized but it is terribly painful to feel it being done by a woman whose knowledge matches my own. As women-identified women, we cannot afford to repeat these same old destructive, wasteful errors of recognition. (67-68)

Similar to the charge that academic feminists have either ignored or unified the diverse experiences of all women, women writers of color further assert that such traditions subscribe to the intellectual elitism of Western reason that privileges rationality and theoretical propositions over other forms of knowledge. Academic feminists far too often write in ways that are inaccessible to others, especially to those who are less educated, poor and of color. Although feminist theorists critique Western phallogocentric discourse, they continue to adhere to its edicts of reason, abstraction, style and form. How

many of us have attempted to read some of these works only to throw them down in frustration, “failing” to understand them? How many of us have thought an author more “knowledgeable” because s/he writes in a way that is incomprehensible? The feminist practice of privileging language reifies the significance of the written word over other forms of voice and expression and excludes from its exchange those with restricted access. In support of these assertions, an increasing number of women of color and women from developing countries are disclosing our life experiences through film, writing and other mediums in an effort to challenge unitary representations of women and exclusion in Western discourse.

Women of color charge that feminist traditions privilege the male/female binary distinction over those of race (white/non-white) and class (wealthy/poor). This argument is leveled on the grounds that the objective of multiple subjectivities is to privilege no group over another. Thus, authors like hooks question why gender constructs appear to be more significant to white, middle-class feminists than issues of race or class. In *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, hooks writes, “Within feminist movements in the West [. . .] it is assumed that resisting patriarchal domination is a more legitimate feminist action than resisting racism and other forms of domination” (19-20). Instead, she calls for feminist thinkers to “continually emphasize the importance of sex, race and class as factors which together determine the social construction of femaleness” (23).

Thus, African American women scholars demand those writing about Western domination and the oppression of Others to recognize and examine more closely the multiplicity of concrete experiences produced by race and class. For it is argued, although all people feel oppression within our culture, experiences of oppression vary greatly given individual historical and cultural circumstances.

Western feminism is further exclusionary, limiting itself to the liberatory practices and possibilities available to white women as it fails to refer to women *expressing* our bodies and instead almost solely call for “writing” our bodies, or as many of the French feminists including Helene Cixous and Catherine Clement (63-64) refer to this act as “écriture feminine.” Here the necessity of speech is not differentiated from written expression and speaking one’s life becomes synonymous with the act of writing one’s life. The distinction between speaking and writing is central to women writers of color because communicating our lives including the pain, ecstasy, terror, joy, hope, and broken dreams, occurs most often through speaking the words of these experiences. For women writers of color the assumption that expressing one’s life experiences is analogous to writing those experiences is exclusionary as it ignores the most marginalized members of society—those who cannot read and write in the tradition of the dominant culture. In the U.S., the lowest rates of literacy occur among people of color in impoverished urban and rural areas including: inner cities; ghettos; barrios; and American Indian reservations. Feminist references to writing and “writing the body” restricts voice to those who are privileged with reading and writing abilities and excludes from discussion

women most marginalized within society: those who are poor and of color.

The ability to read and write is not the only problematic assumption made when expression is equated with the written word, for physical time and space are also assumed. Women alone in our society are responsible for the great majority of work that is performed and having the time and space to write assumes a great privilege. Women work both inside and outside of the home, we raise and care for our families. An individual woman may be all of the following: mother; father; teacher; playmate; nurse; cook; and maid. Put quite simply, most women do not have the time to sit with pen and paper and compose, for we are socialized and expected to be caregivers with little or no time to our selves. In challenging colonial domination, expression through speaking is an important conduit of voice and is differentiated from writing: for vocalization is something that women practice daily. Speaking is the medium of expression, which is generally most accessible to women. We can use our voices to tell our lives; our bodies at anytime and any place; to our children as we ride the bus across town; to sisters and mothers as we prepare dinner; to other women in the laundromat and to neighbors across front porches. For the physically or vocally impaired individual who cannot speak to express life experiences—as with all women—communication must occur through whichever means she finds most appropriate. The crucial point is that no form of voice be privileged or prioritized over others, for to do so is to dominating and repressive.

Thus, we have learned from the work and assertions of women writers of color that as Others come to voice all individuals concerned with challenging Western systems of domination and addressing the power inequities within our society must listen to the voices of marginalized people. We must hear each others stories, especially when those stories represent truths that are different than our own. White men must learn to listen to Others in the way that white women must learn to listen to each other and to the voices of women of color. Marginalized individuals must not silence the voices of Others with our own unwillingness to listen for those stories, like our own, which have also been ignored or repressed.

### **Connecting to American Indian Oral Traditions**

The critical assessment of feminism posed by African American women writers is particularly important for American Indian people whose culture is rooted in the oral tradition where it is often culturally unacceptable to record certain forms of information in the written form. To do so constitutes a further separation from the teachings of our ancestors.

Since our origin, American Indian people rely upon storytelling and oral histories to relay culture, beliefs, and spiritual practices through the generations. In fact, it is somewhat contradictory to define the oral tradition using written language. But for the sake of the reader, it is helpful to understand the oral tradition not only as

a formal means of transmitting culture but also as an informal undertaking of daily life. Thus, the oral tradition in American Indian communities today includes casual conversations and visiting, songs, dances, jokes, and teasing, storytelling, speechmaking, prayers, and discussions. Women in traditional tribal culture play an important role in the oral tradition, as in some communities women—particularly Elder women—share the responsibility for preserving and transmitting particular stories, songs and prayers central to the tribal world. In spite of continued Euro-American invasion and the genocide of American Indian nations, our communities persist in the oral tradition, where the spoken word remains sacred. Even today one does not have to sit long among Indian friends or relatives before stories and lives are shared and retold.

It is crucial that American Indian women continue to preserve and practice our oral traditions in their ancient form. This is especially true for women from those tribal communities most devastated by colonization where traditional tribal culture has diminished substantially. American Indian women must continue to retell the stories passed down to us in an effort to preserve what remains of our traditions for future generations and also to challenge the dominant society that devastated the traditional life ways of our ancestors.

Decolonization can take place through the sharing with others our own life stories, struggles, and endeavors as indigenous by drawing upon our own cultural traditions and when appropriate, borrowing from in the ways shared with us by feminists of color. However, too often American Indian people, particularly indigenous women ourselves, dismiss and reject the claims and assertions situated by feminists—even feminists of color.

The rejection of feminism by American Indian people occurs for a number of reasons. Among these reasons, American Indian people—like members of the dominant culture—lack an understanding of the various forms feminism and have almost no exposure to critical feminism. Frequently, feminists and feminist ideologies are reduced and stereotyped whereby the most prevalent image that emerges is that of the raging man-hater vying for her fair share of patriarchal power—the “me-too feminist.” For American Indian women, to buy into a Western worldview such as “me-too feminism” further alienates Indian men and buys into the ways of the white wo/man.

American Indian people reject feminism for other reasons as well. In traditional, precontact tribal communities, American Indian women held valued roles and positions within tribal life. Today the status of women persists within tribal communities as indigenous women lead resistance movements and hold key positions as tribal leaders. With an awareness of the traditional beliefs regarding the primacy of women, many tribal people do find value in the critical ideologies and contemporary assertions emerging from outside of the tribal world. It is as if tribal people are saying, “Those ideas about feminism don’t come from our people, so we don’t need them. We have our own way of honoring women.”



However, to refuse the interconnections between indigenous worldview and critical feminism is to deny the devastating impact that colonization and assimilation has had on our women. While we may embrace our traditional values, we must also acknowledge that our traditional values have eroded drastically. As evidence of this, we have only to look at national statistics for indigenous women underscoring high rates of poverty and victimization, low educational attainment, unemployment, and the likelihood to head households as single mothers.

Further, even within the academy, feminism among American Indian scholars is not well-received. American Indian women scholars are critical of feminists of color, even indigenous feminists, charging them with some of the same criticisms feminists of color have posited against white feminists. For example, in *Indigenous American Women: Decolonization, Empowerment, Activism*, rather than building upon their overlapping assertions regarding the traditional status of indigenous women, Choctaw scholar Devon Mihesuah chastises Laguna scholar Paula Gunn Allen's discussion of gender and sexuality in traditional tribal communities, indicating that Allen's work was not grounded in American Indian experiences but fashioned to prove white feminist assertions about gender equality and sexual expression.

While a lack of understanding of critical feminism and a denial of the current status of indigenous women help us to understand some American Indian rejection of feminism, it is likely that much of this rejection lies in the extent to which we buy into and recreate Western structures of racism, sexism, and homophobia judging and rejecting Others in the way the dominant culture dominates and oppresses us. Thus, decolonization efforts must include challenging our own sexism and the internalized racism of other oppressed groups.

American Indian people who choose to resist Western systems of domination to take steps toward decolonization can borrow from the work of our sisters of color as they call for all members of marginalized groups within society to articulate our lives through whichever vehicle is most available to us. As indigenous people, we must draw from the teachings and practices of our Elders and revitalize the oral traditions. In this way, our resistance takes many forms including learning our traditions by spending time in the community with our Elders, learning our traditional language, learning both the sacred and secular stories of our communities, and participating in ceremonial life.

### **Understanding Internal Oppression**

The work of African American and other women writers of color further assisting American Indian people in understanding the ways colonial structures of patriarchal capitalist imperialism continue to create and exacerbate social problems plaguing our communities and families. Like other communities of color, today American Indian rural and urban communities experience low rates of

educational attainment and high rates of unemployment, poverty, crime, domestic violence, and chemical dependency. Today, American Indian youth have the highest rates of suicide in the U.S. Our children are also increasingly using inhalants and abusing other substances. The despair of tribal communities was brought to national attention on March 21, 2005 when a sixteen year-old Anishinabe boy shot his grandfather and then went to school where he randomly shot eight others including classmates and teachers before killing himself at Red Lake tribal high school. It is clear that after five-hundred years of colonial domination, American Indian people continue to suffer greatly and it is most evident in the pain, rage, and hopelessness of our children.

In order for American Indian people to begin addressing the many social problems in our communities today, an understanding of internalized oppression is useful in providing insight into the link between colonialism and violence in our own homes and communities. African American writers have explored the link between internalized oppression and social problems in their communities although, internalized oppression and its expressions are not limited to African Americans. American Indians, Latino/as and other colonized racial and cultural groups experience some degree of internalized oppression and express it in a multiplicity of ways. These writers have challenged us to explore the ways in which our participation in Western institutions and ideologies perpetuates and recreate structures of domination within our own homes. As African American legal scholar Patricia Williams explains, "What links child abuse, the mistreatment of women, and racism is the massive intrusion in the psyche that dominating powers impose to keep the self from ever fully seeing itself. Since the self's power resides in another, little faith is placed in [ . . . ] one's own experiential knowledge" (63).

While marginalized groups may be in danger of never fully realizing our own individual, cultural representations as Williams suggests, the imposition of Western codes do not completely eradicate our identities and definitions formed from our knowledges, experiences, and relationships with one another. For, oppressed people never completely or passively accept our subordination. History is replete with examples of individual and group struggles against domination. Instead, both subjectivities often exist simultaneously—both accepting our constructed inferiority and rejecting it as false and oppressive. And as members of marginalized groups both accept and reject dominant culture definitions we may ultimately internalize some of these constructs falsely defining and limiting us. Thus, when Western constructs of difference are internalized, we view the individual self and members of our own marginalized group[s] in ways that reflect the definitions of the dominant culture. As Western constructions of abject difference are both forced upon and accepted, we define ourselves through these constructions and, subsequently, participate in the reproduction of these codes. Therefore, internalized oppression is the extent to which members of oppressed groups accept and participate in the

reproduction of constructions of difference that perpetuate and maintain patriarchal power relations. When we internalize oppression, we hold our selves and our marginalized group[s] responsible for our disempowerment. One blames the self and/or one's own group for political, economic, and social disempowerment rather than the patriarchal power structure that created and sustains negative constructs in order to facilitate and justify domination and subordination. When we internalize the dominant culture's subjective position, we may attribute our unemployment, poverty, incarceration, or victimization to our essential laziness, stupidity and subordination. As African American author Gloria Yamato describes internal oppression:

Members of the target group are emotionally, physically and spiritually battered to the point that they begin to believe their oppression is deserved, is their lot in life, is natural and right, and doesn't even exist. The oppression begins to feel comfortable, familiar enough that when ol' Massa lay down de whip, we's got to pick up and whack ourselves and each others. (20)

As such, when we internalize oppression we understand and interpret our experiences and our disempowerment through the lens of the Western universal "Truth."

Further, when oppression is internalized, we experience our socially constructed abjection as self-hatred and/or hatred for the group[s] with which we identify. In their book *Native American Postcolonial Psychology*, Eduardo and Bonnie Duran explore this level of internalization within tribal groups. They contend, "the self-worth of the individual and/or group has sunk to a level of despair tantamount to self-hatred" (29). When internalized oppression and the loathing of one's self and one's group[s] exists simultaneously with a rejection of the dominant culture's false constructs, a deep sense of pain is often felt at the intense harms inflicted upon us by the groups. For, although we may have internalized some degree of our oppression, we may not completely accept the dominant subject position and feel we are oppressed unjustly. It is here that we feel the pain of the harms inflicted upon us because of our differences, and where we may experience an intense rage toward the dominant culture for enforcing these afflictions.

This rage and pain that marginalized people experience is never validated by the dominant culture. Our subjective knowledges, experiences, and stories of historical suffering are denied, ignored, and repressed. Our disempowerment is framed as resulting from our own inferior differences. As the dominant culture invalidates our multiple subjectivities, they also deny us means for expressing our pains and our rage[s]. If we do express or speak our alternative truths, we are often systematically silenced for doing so. Denied validation of and outlets for our pain and rage, these intense responses are sometimes expressed inwardly in the forms of self-hatred and self-destruction or outwardly toward members of our own groups, as we mirror the dominant culture's subject position.

African American women and men and other women of writers of color were among the first to explore and identify the impact of internalized oppression and the hatred carried for self and for one another. The internal oppression of women of color is particularly painful as we experience and internalize both gender and racial inferiority. Audre Lorde describes the dominant culture's hatred that African American women bear for themselves and for each other. She writes:

Hatred, that societal deathwish directed against us from the moment we were born Black and female in America. From that moment on we have been steeped in hatred—for our color, for our sex, for our effrontery in daring that we had any right to live. As children, we absorbed that hatred, passed it through ourselves [. . .] Echoes of it return as cruelty and anger in our dealings with each other. For each of us bears the face that hatred seeks, and we have each learned to be at home with cruelty because we have survived so much of it within our own lives. (146)

Similarly, in an exploration of internal racial and gender oppression, Aleticia Tijerina reveals her own self-hatred that is also directed at other women of color.

The knowledge of racism is not enough. Because I am still bound by my own self-hatred, *I am oppressor onto myself* (emphasis in original). I ask myself, 'How does a Brown sister, a Black sister, free herself?' Knowing I am oppressed, I must know that I participate in this oppression. I must realize that I and all my darker sisters take the instruments of our oppression and use them on ourselves. Our tools come in many forms. We take from the oppressor the instrument of hatred and sharpen it on our bodies and souls. The internalization of 'spic' or 'nigger' begins at birth. (170)

In his writings on the processes of colonization, Franz Fanon openly describes the extent to which disempowered groups outwardly express our abject status against members of our own groups. This anger is expressed and released in what Fanon calls a "collective autodestruction." He writes,

The colonized man will first manifest his aggressiveness which has been deposited in his bones against his own people [. . .] This is the period when the niggers beat each other up [. . .] The settler keeps alive in the native an anger which he deprives of outlet; the native is trapped in the tight links of the chains of domination [. . .]. (52-54)

Like Fanon, Cornell West reveals that internalized oppression and the outward expression of pain and rage has devastated African American families, communities and individuals.

[. . .] black existential angst derives from the lived experience of ontological wounds and emotional scars inflicted by white supremacist beliefs and images permeating U.S. society and culture. These beliefs and images attack intelligence, black ability, black beauty, and black character daily in subtle and not-so-subtle ways [. . .] The accumulated effect of the black wounds and scars suffered in a white-dominated society is a deep-seated anger, a boiling sense of rage, and a passionate pessimism regarding America's will to justice [. . .] Sadly, the combination of the market way of life, poverty-ridden conditions, black existential angst, and the lessening of fear of white authorities has directed most of the anger, rage, and despair toward fellow black citizens, especially toward black women [. . .]. (17)

The rage, angst and hatred explored in the works of African America writers like Fanon, Lorde, Yamato, and West is often described as "black rage." Here, African Americans' rage at the dominant culture is directed internally toward the self in drug and alcohol abuse and externally toward African American families in violence against women and children as well as toward African American communities in street-level violence. The outward expression of internalized oppression experienced by African American males is exemplified in the devastatingly high rates of "black-on-black crime." African American men act out their feared and violent construction and—rather than directing rage toward their oppressors—turn it upon one another within their own families and neighborhoods. This expression of internal oppression reinforces the dominant construction of African American males as feared, predatory, brutal, and criminal and, in turn, justifies power hierarchies by "prov[ing]" to the dominant culture "that these men are not human beings" (Fanon 54). In effect, then, the expression of internalized oppression often reifies subordinate constructions and perpetuates white power structures.

Male violence against women and children in the home is further explored by African American women writers, including Michele Wallace, Patricia Hill Collins, Angela Davis, bell hooks, and Melba Wilson, who describe male violence as the exertion of patriarchal power—power that has been denied African American men at all other levels of society. As hooks explains:

Black males, utterly disenfranchised in almost every arena of life in the United States, often find that the assertion of sexist domination is their only expressive access to the patriarchal power they are told all men should possess as their birthright. Hence, it should not surprise or shock that many black men support and celebrate "rape culture." (110)

As described in the work on black rage, oppressed people often express our internal oppression in accordance with the dominant culture's false definitions of our group. Thus, explorations of black rage provide other communities of color with an understanding of

the widespread presence of many social problems in our communities. Just as African American men may express oppression outwardly onto family and community in accordance with dominant culture definitions deeming them aggressive, violent, and superior to women and children, so too may other men of color including American Indian men and Latinos. Similarly, women of color across racial groups may also express internal oppression in this way or may be more likely to turn oppression inward harming themselves. Here, inward expressions correspond with social constructs defining women as passive, self-sacrificing, nurturing to others (not self), and inferior to men. Thus, women and children may more likely express oppression inwardly in substance abuse, depression, anxiety, mental illness, and eating disorders.

African American women writers have further explored the nature of male violence exposing the pervasiveness of silence surrounding sexism and physical and sexual abuse in their homes and communities. These women writers explain that African American male violence against women and children is silenced as it is justified and rationalized by the historical and continued disempowerment of African American men under patriarchy. Michele Wallace contends:

The American black woman is haunted by the mythology that surrounds the American black man. It is a mythology based upon the real persecution of black men: castrated black men hanging by their necks from trees; the carcasses of black men floating face down in the Mississippi; black men with their bleeding genitals jammed down their teeth; black men shining shoes; black men being turned down for jobs time and time again; black men watching helplessly as their women go to work to support the family; black men behind bars, persecuted by prison guards and police; black men on the street corners, with needles in their arms [. . .] these ghosts, rendered all the more gruesome by their increasing absence of detail, are couched in the black woman's brain. Every time she starts to wonder about her own misery, to think about reconstructing her life, to shake off her devotion and feeling of responsibility to everyone but herself, the ghosts pounce. She is stopped cold. The ghosts talk to her. 'You crippled the black man. You worked against him. You betrayed him. You laughed at him. You scorned him. You and the white man.' (15-16)

Similarly, Wilson describes black familial and community silence surrounding father-daughter rape:

It seems that the taboo against fucking or fucking over little girls outweighed (in some people's minds, at least) by a careful consideration of the constraints that racism imposes on black men. This reasoning suggests that black men have been denied much, because of racism. There is no doubting this. My point, however, is that an even bigger injustice and inequity arises when this is used as an attempt to apologise [sic] away or to rationalize the equally grievous outrage of incest. According

to this reasoning, if respect for black men doesn't come from outside, then it damn well better come from inside their homes and communities. (21-22)

These African American women writers bravely disclose that physical, sexual, and emotional abuse in their families and communities is silenced in order to protect perpetrators from public culture censure and the fulfillment of the dominant culture's negative constructions of their own racial group.

The lived experiences described by African American feminists writing their own experiences as subversive practice are key to other marginalized groups including American Indian people who are also shrouded in a pervasive silence shielding perpetrators. This silence in American Indian communities is further confounded in ways not experienced by other racial groups. For example, in tribal communities the refusal to take action against offenders sometimes extends into the local tribal governing structure on the reservation. In these situations, tribal police, judges, attorneys, social workers, and prosecutors may also participate in the official inaction and denial of harm when it occurs. Tribal communities are often small and densely populated whereby families and tribal members have lived with one another for generations. It is common in a tribal community to have family and clan relations to many tribal members and know many if not all the people living in the community. Tribal officials are often related to or have social relationships to community members and may act within this shroud of silence, protecting their kin and friends from prosecution. Thus, American Indian victims and the families of victims are further reluctant to disclose crime not only when it exposes individual perpetrators to public censure, but also when there is little hope for formal response from the tribal officials. The failure of tribal justice systems is a subject rarely discussed outside of tribal communities primarily because this would expose the failures of our (sovereign) tribal governing structures. However, these tribal governing structures are most often *not* the traditional precontact justice systems of the nations, but instead Western structures imposed upon tribal communities and mirroring the inequity and ineffectiveness of the American judicial system. Thus, silence in American Indian communities operates to protect individual perpetrators as a response to the failure of contemporary tribal justice systems and also serving to shield tribal governing structures from outside scrutiny.

Understanding the complex and multiple reasons for the social problems prevalent in communities of color and challenging the violence that is facilitated by Western power structures are critical steps in challenging and resisting Western imperialism. They are crucial and necessary steps that must take place to foster healing in our homes and neighborhoods. Challenging and ending the silence of the harms experienced under continued colonialism must also occur. When our oppression is internalized we become alienated from self and those around us, disassociating from the suffering we experience. This disconnected part of ourselves is hidden and denied in silence. Estranged from ourselves, we control the terror,

abuse, and exploitation inflicted upon us by denying our emotional and physical responses to these pains, and in doing so, we denounce our very own humanly existence.

When we do not speak out about our lives we live isolated from the shared experiences of Others, internalize our oppression, exhibit a subaltern guise, denounce our existence. As a result, society as a whole remains unaware of the totality of harm experienced under patriarchy and continues to support the exploitation of marginalized groups rather than challenging political, social, and economic imperialism. In turn, our access to forums of communication is further blocked, ensuring powerlessness. In decolonizing, silence must be broken on all fronts: within ourselves; privately with those close to us; and publicly for all.

### Decolonizing the Academy

In our efforts to challenge Western structures of domination and oppression, marginalized groups have benefited from the work of African American feminist scholars discussed throughout this chapter. Contemporary challenges to Western imperialism written by and for American Indian people are emerging from the academy in the tradition of African American feminism. In particular, young American Indian scholars are producing both philosophical and hand-on tools to assist tribal people in decolonizing efforts. The pivotal work of Kahnawa:ke Mohawk scholar Taiaiake Alfred is an intellectual call for Onkwehonwe (all First People) to resist participation in all Western structures and ideologies while drawing upon our traditional cultures. In contrast, *For Indigenous Eyes Only: A Decolonization Handbook* edited by Dakota scholar Waziyatawin Angela Wilson as well as Sahnish (Arikara) and Hidatsa scholar Michael Yellowbird, is a workbook designed to assist indigenous people in resistance efforts that range from decolonizing aspects of our daily lives to resistance through language revitalization and oral traditional storytelling.

While American Indians in the academy are working to create useful guidelines and tools to assist tribal people decolonizing efforts, we must not assume that the academy lends itself to these attempts. The subversive and transformative effects of anti-colonial scholarship on the social order are so eminent that institutions of education continue to repudiate their creation and proliferation. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire contends that educational systems “minimize or annul the students’ creative power” in order to “stimulate their credulity,” which ultimately “serves the interests of the oppressors, who care neither to have the world revealed nor see it transformed” (60). Thus, Western institutions of higher education have long deemed the subversive and subjective writing of scholars of color as inferior forms of scholarship, those lacking rigor and sophistication. Regularly, I receive e-mail connecting American Indian scholars through various internet list-services calling us into action each time a highly regarded indigenous scholar is denied tenure, harassed in the workplace, or has their work denied, ignored, or



minimized by Western academic standards. The marginalization of American Indians in the academy is not something new to tribal people. The rejection of the knowledge claims and experiences of all colonized groups is deeply embedded within the Western structures of education at all levels from preschool through higher education. This is particularly true for American Indians who, for five-hundred years, have suffered systematic cultural genocide under the racist and paternalistic educational practices of white society. The legacy of oppressing American Indians reaches far into colonial history beginning with early European missionary education efforts and continuing in 1870s, with the United States federal Indian boarding schools. Throughout our history, American Indian children were forcibly removed from their homes and placed in Western schools that served as prisons incapacitating our youth while assimilating them into Euro-American ideologies and ways of life. These schools strictly forbade the speaking of native languages and the practices of traditional American Indian culture and spirituality. Widespread emotional, spiritual, physical, and sexual abuse was common throughout boarding schools both in Canada and the U.S.

Contemporary American institutions of education continue to practice policies of assimilation and cultural genocide upon American Indians on several fronts: through its failure to retain American Indian students; through compulsory enrollment in classes that teach the language, history, and sciences of the Western world; through compulsory instruction that privileges the learning style of the dominant society over those of other cultures; through the exclusion of American Indian oral teaching and learning traditions; and through the exclusion of American Indian forms of knowledge.

It is in the imperialist exclusion from academic discourse where another shared location of resistance emerges between American Indians struggling to decolonize and African American feminism. Patricia Hill Collins argues that contemporary economic, political and ideological structures within U.S. society operate to subordinate African American women and that institutions of higher learning reinforce this systematic oppression and further promote the interests of the dominant culture. The exclusion of African American women from the academic production of knowledge is embedded within U.S. history as Collins contends:

The vast majority of African-American women were brought to the United States to work as slaves. The initial condition shaped all subsequent relationships that Black women had within African-American families and communities, with employers, and among each other, and created the political context for Black women's intellectual work [. . .]. Taken together, the seamless web of economy, polity, and ideology function as a highly effective system of social control designed to keep African-American women in an assigned, subordinate place. This larger system of oppression works to suppress the ideas of Black women intellectuals and to protect white male interests. (6-7)

The exclusion of the knowledge claims and perspectives of American Indians and African American women is, in fact, intellectual imperialism supporting and perpetuating the dominant, white male social and political structure through the assertion of universalizing knowledge claims.

The challenges posed by African American women writers intersect with the work of American Indians teaching and working within in the academy. Like American Indians, African American women scholars have had their subjective knowledge claims and lived experiences denied and rejected the in white male controlled academic structure. Drawing from deconstructive epistemologies like critical and postmodern feminism, African American feminists like Collins challenge assumptions of truth, knowledge, power, the self, and language as they serve to legitimate the social structure within Western culture. Here, truth is never an undisputed absolute but a form of scientific discourse created by white males and the institutions they control. Truth, and the production of knowledge is then generated and conveyed under the exclusive control of social institutions including academia and the media, whereby the power of these institutions determines and mitigates accepted and legitimate knowledge (Foucault 131). Thus, African American women, like other marginalized groups, seek out alternative sites inside the academy for the production of knowledge and self-definition through art, music, film, and literature (Collins 202). However, these alternative sites are continually invalidated by the academy that sets personnel review, tenure decisions, and credential standards based upon criteria established by white men. How, if at all, does the academy serve marginalized groups if our subjective experiences and knowledges are invalidated? Perhaps, (as Taiaiake Alfred suggests for indigenous people) in our efforts to decolonize, we should refuse to participate in Western hierarchical institutions like higher education and reject positions and roles as students, staff, and faculty when these institutions are not liberatory. Or perhaps we can continue to both challenge and use the academy to our benefit through the production of activist scholarship, community organizing, and decolonizing efforts in our communities.

American Indian scholars and students in the academy today are at a critical point where we are asking ourselves important questions about whether or not educational institutions serve our resistance efforts. When we will find that these institutions prevent decolonization we are deciding whether to refuse participation in them or find news ways to subvert and transform them from within. Transformation from within takes place as traditional American Indian knowledge and epistemology is centered within the academy. American Indian traditional methods of teaching and learning, with its emphasis on the oral tradition and Elder wisdom provide an important challenge to Western educational structures and the production of knowledge. Here, the subjective sacred and secular stories, worldviews, songs, ceremonies, oral histories, and lived experiences of tribal communities and our people are the foundation for teaching curriculum, indigenous scholarship, and activism.

The work of indigenous historian and activist scholar, Waziyatawin Angela Wilson, provides us with an example of the centering of American Indian oral history and lived experience within the academy. Waziyatawin is the great-great granddaughter of Maza Okiye Win who witnessed U.S. soldiers murder her grandmother during the genocidal march of the Dakota people in November of 1862. Waziyatawin writes about this removal and the role of the oral tradition in tribal history in "Grandmother to Granddaughter: Generations of Oral History in a Dakota Family." This account documents genocide that is otherwise silenced in U.S. history books and classes. Waziyatawin is also instrumental in organizing the Dakota Commemorative Marches to teach citizens about this history and to promote healing among tribal people dealing with unresolved historical grief. The Dakota Commemorative Marches are documented in her edited work *The Footsteps of Our Ancestors: Dakota Commemorative Marches of the Twenty-First Century*. The work of Waziyatawin and other scholars like her remind us of the importance of telling our lives as a challenge to the dominant culture structures of domination and oppression.

As we have learned from women writers of color, speaking our lives must go beyond a private demand, for in order to challenge oppressive power structures we must also raise a public discourse. When our stories and lives are shared with our friends, sisters, mothers, lovers, and neighbors, an even more difficult task is gaining access to and utilizing public mediums through which our stories can be shared as societal critiques and heard by all. Writers including bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins contend that for generations African American women have been talking their lives privately with one another as an act of resistance; however, their access to public forums that challenge the dominant power structures remain blocked. As hooks states, "Our speech, 'the right speech of womanhood' was often the soliloquy, the talking into thin air, the talking into ears that did not hear you—the talk that is simply not listened to" (6).

Those most marginalized within the patriarchal structure are those with severely restricted economic, social, and political opportunities. They are the most powerless members of society, and because they are powerless, their access to the media, to positions of public office, to systems of higher education and all other forums of articulation, remains obstructed. Thus, it is crucial that disenfranchised groups attain proportionate access to economic opportunities, political positions, and other sites of social power for only then will they gain access to other public arenas of speech where their words can further expose, contest, and obstruct patriarchal oppression. American Indians struggling to decolonize can learn from the work of our sisters and brothers of color and the places where our resistance intersects—in our fight against imperialism, globalization, and in the struggle to retain our cultures and save our communities. When we strain to find the points of intersection, we have only to look back upon the sacred medicine wheel teachings where all of the races meet in the center.

As I close this chapter, I am struggling to finish. From my home office, I have been distracted since the morning by the sounds of two Oneida children playing in my backyard. They cannot give me the space I need to write because they have come here for some space of their own. They tell me "our father is drunk as a skunk" since yesterday. So I offer them ice cream, a swing set, and physical place to be six and nine-year-olds for a little while on a Sunday afternoon. As I hear them playing, I am reminded of why I am writing this chapter. Much healing must take place in tribal communities in order to create a world for our children. I am going to stop writing now and go outside to play with my little Oneida friends and try to mitigate our colonized lives for a while.

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