Liberation Theologies in the United States

An Introduction

EDITED BY

Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas

and Anthony B. Pinn

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7

Native Feminist Theology

ANDREA SMITH

Historical Backdrop

While liberation theologies rooted in diverse communities of color have proliferated, the development of Native liberation theology, particularly Native women's theology, has been a slow process.[1] Nonetheless, Native women's perspectives on spirituality and social justice have much to contribute to the field of liberation theology.

There are a number of reasons for the reluctance of many Native religious scholars to embrace theology. First, theology's generally traditional emphasis on proscribing proper doctrines and beliefs often runs counter to indigenous spiritual practices. Jace Weaver argues that theology is inconsonant with indigenous worldviews, which hold that systematic study of God is both presumptuous and impossible. "Traditional Native religions are integrated totally into daily activity," Weaver argues. "They are ways of life and not sets of principles or creedal formulation. . . . Native 'religion' does not concern itself—does not try to know or explain—'what happens in the other world.'"[2]

Vine Deloria Jr., whose work became the foundation for almost all Native scholars in the field of religion or theology, argues that even liberation theology is grounded on a western European epistemological framework that is no less oppressive to Native communities than is mainstream theology. "Liberation theology," Deloria cynically contends, "was an absolute necessity if the establishment was going to continue to control the minds of minorities. If a person of a minority group had not invented it, the liberal establishment most certainly would have created it."[3] According to Deloria, Native liberation must be grounded in indigenous epistemologies—epistemologies that are inconsistent with western epistemologies, of which liberation theology is a part: "If we are then to talk seriously about the necessity of liberation, we are talking about the destruction of the whole complex of Western theories of knowledge and the construction of a new and more comprehensive synthesis of human knowledge and experience."[4] Even if we distinguish the "liberation" church from mainstream churches, the challenge brought forth by Native scholars and activists to other liberation theologians would be, Can a "liberation" church escape complicity in Christian imperialism? Deloria in particular raises the challenge that Christianity, because it is a temporally rather than a spatially based tradition (that is, it is not tied to a particular landbase but can seek converts from any landbase), is necessarily a religion tied to imperialism because it will never be content to remain within a particular place or community: "Once religion becomes specific to a group, its nature also appears to change, being directed to the internal mechanics of the group, not to grandiose schemes of world conquest."[5] Hence, all Christian theology, even liberation theology, remains complicit in the missionization and genocide of Native peoples in the Americas.

Despite the fact that Deloria disavowed the usefulness of a Native liberation theological project, his work has been foundational for the development of Native theology. In his work, he posited an absolute difference between Native spirituality and Christianity. While many Native Christians may clearly disagree with this dichotomy, they have had to respond to Deloria's challenge of how seemingly incommensurate epistemologies can be harmonized. They have also had to fundamentally address the complicity of Christianization in the genocide of Native peoples.

Robert Warrior's germinal essay, "Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians," furthers Deloria's analysis by again troubling liberatory potential in many of the theological assumptions of liberation theology. In this essay, Warrior argues that the Bible is not a liberatory text for Native peoples, especially considering the fact that the liberation motif commonly adopted by liberation theologians—the Exodus—is premised on the genocide of the indigenous people occupying the Promised Land: the Canaanites. Warrior does not argue for the historical veracity of the conquest of the Canaanites. Rather, the Exodus operates as a narrative of conquest, a narrative that was foundational to the European conquest of the Americas. Warrior's essay points not only to the problems with the Exodus motif but also to liberation theology's conceptualization of a God of deliverance. He contends that "as long as people believe in the Yahweh of deliverance, the world will not be safe from Yahweh the conqueror." That is, by conceptualizing ourselves as oppressed peoples who are to be delivered at all costs, we necessarily become complicit in oppressing those who stand in the way of our deliverance. Instead, Warrior argues, we need to reconceptualize ourselves as "a society of people delivered from oppression who are not so afraid of becoming victims again that they become oppressors themselves."[6]

Other theologians take a less oppositional view toward Christianity. George Tinker's *Missionary Conquest*, for instance, takes up Deloria's charge to center genocide in his analysis of the missionization of Native peoples. He argues that, despite even the best of intentions of some Christian missionaries, the overall effect of their work was to facilitate the cultural, spiritual, and physical genocide of Native peoples. He argues that this genocide happened because missionaries could not separate out the gospel message from European culture. Hence, Tinker takes a different stance from Deloria, who contends that the gospel message itself is already tied into an epistemology of conquest by suggesting that a liberating gospel can be separated from the colonial culture that promotes it. In his later work, Tinker continues to maintain that the problem with Christianity is not Jesus but the religious tradition itself. He rereads biblical scripture to critique colonial concepts within Christianity, such as the "kingdom of God." He also harmonizes some Native traditions with Christian narratives. For instance, he draws parallels between the Cherokee story of Corn Mother with that of Jesus. One could argue that this approach—similar to that of theologian Steve Charleston arguing that Native traditions are the Native "Old Testament" of the Gospel—does not allow Native traditions to stand on their own apart from Christianity. However, Tinker is careful to argue that Native traditions have "inherent spiritual power."[7] He also concludes that, while it may be possible to harmonize Native spiritualities with Christianity to some extent, it may be the case that for many Native peoples, Christianity will continue to be irredeemable in light of its complicity in genocide.

Description

Since Tinker, in chapter 8 in this volume, focuses on the development of Native theologies, here I provide a brief context mentioning only a few pivotal thinkers in order to set the context for Native feminist theologies.

Suffice to say, if Native liberation theology is less developed as a field compared with other theologies, then it is perhaps not a surprise that Native feminist theology is almost nonexistent. The previously described thinkers do not stress a gender analysis in their work (as of yet). Both Jace Weaver and James Treat have edited anthologies on Native peoples and Christianity, which feature Native women authors,[8] but almost none of those selections engage the academic field of theology per se.

The development of Native women's theology has also been hindered by a lack of feminist analysis in Native studies generally speaking. One of the most prominent writings on Native American women and feminism is Annette Jaimes (Guerrero) and Theresa Halsey's (Hunkpapa Lakota) early 1990s article, "American Indian Women: At the Center of Indigenous Resistance in North America." Here they argue that Native women activists, except those who are "assimilated," do not consider themselves feminists. Feminism, according to Jaimes and Halsey, is an imperial project that assumes the givenness of a U.S. colonial stranglehold on indigenous nations. Thus, to support sovereignty, Native women activists reject feminist politics:

> Those who have most openly identified themselves [as feminists] have tended to be among the more assimilated of Indian women activists, generally accepting of the colonialist ideology that indigenous nations are now legitimate sub-parts of the U.S. geopolitical corpus rather than separate nations, that Indian people are now a minority with the overall population rather than the citizenry of their own distinct nations. Such Indian women activists are therefore usually more devoted to "civil rights" than to liberation per se. . . . Native American women who are more genuinely sovereigntist in their outlook have proven themselves far more dubious about the potentials offered by feminist politics and alliances.[9]

According to Jaimes and Halsey, all Native women reject feminist analysis, as typified by these quotations from one of the founders of Women of All Red Nations (WARN), Lorelei DeCora Means:

> We are *American Indian* women, in that order. We are oppressed, first and foremost, as American Indians, as peoples colonized by the United States of America, *not* as women. As Indians, we can never forget that. Our survival, the survival of every one of us—man, woman and child—*as Indians* depends on it. Decolonization is the agenda, the whole agenda, and until it is accomplished, it is the *only* agenda that counts for American Indians. . . . You start to get the idea maybe all this feminism business is just another extension of the same old racist, colonialist mentality.[10]

The critique and rejection of the label of feminism made by Jaimes and Halsey is important and shared by many Native women activists. However, it has also been uncritically cited as the Native stance on the issue of feminism. (In addition, scholars have failed to notice that Jaimes herself has shifted in her analysis.) The mantra "Native women can't be feminist" has occluded the work of Native women activists and scholars who do see themselves as feminists. Native women activists' theories about feminism, about the struggle against sexism within both Native communities and the society at large, and about the importance of working in coalition with non-Native women, are complex and varied. These theories are not monolithic and cannot simply be reduced to the dichotomy of feminist versus nonfeminist. Furthermore, there is not necessarily a relationship between the extent to which Native women call themselves feminists, the extent to which they work in coalition with non-Native feminists or value those coalitions, whether they are urban or reservation-based, and the extent to which they are "genuinely sovereigntist." In addition, the very simplified manner in which Native women's activism is theorized straightjackets Native women from articulating political projects that both address sexism and promote indigenous sovereignty simultaneously.

Thus, given the reluctance of most scholars to combine an analysis of Native studies with feminist thought or to engage the field of theology from the vantage point of Native studies, it becomes challenging to locate scholars who would describe themselves as Native feminist theologians.

The scholar who most closely fits this bill would be Michelene Pesantubbee, who recently published *Choctaw Women in a Chaotic World.* In it, she challenges previously held notions that Choctaw women did not hold positions of power in precolonial Choctaw society through a process of creative historiography. She notes that Choctaws have been subjected to a double missionization process, so the written historical record is not a trustworthy account of Choctaw women's status. Based on what we know about Choctaw spiritual traditions, she argues that it is quite likely that Choctaw women did hold positions of power, positions that become eroded through colonialism. She further investigates how the church was not simply a site of assimilation but also a site of resistance to cultural genocide whereby Choctaw spiritual practices, particularly those under the domain of women, could continue under the unsuspecting eye of missionaries.[11] Her creative imagining as a tool for feminist historiography is certainly a helpful model for those who would want to do Native feminist theology.

Sources

Rather than replacing totalizing traditional systematic theologies with equally totalizing liberation theologies that trap Native peoples within a primitivist politic of cultural essentialism, our task becomes to identify resources within the context of communal struggle. However, given the shortage of Native women who would explicitly define themselves as liberation theologians, it becomes necessary to be creative in developing Native feminist theologies. The perspective on source material found in womanist and mujerista theologies offers possibilities for uncovering Native women's perspectives on liberation theology. Feminist theologians often focus on the experiences of women as a starting point for theology.

To get at the voices of women in their communities, many womanist and mujerista theologians use stories to represent Black and Latina women's voices. Because enslaved Africans were not allowed to read the Bible and learned it by word of mouth, Black communities have tended to experience the Bible through the flexibility of an aural culture. According to womanist biblical scholar Renita Weems, the protean nature of oral tradition has given Black communities the freedom to modify and retell stories from the Bible to suit their changing needs. Womanist theologian Delores Williams, for example, uses this freedom to tell the story of Hagar in a manner she thinks will speak to African American women today. But storytelling is not limited to biblical stories. M. Shawn Copeland uses slave narratives to analyze Black women's experiences of suffering. Katie Cannon claims that Black women's literature is a crucial link to the oral traditions of the past as a mode of ethical instruction and cultural dissemination.

Like African American culture, Native cultures are orally based. Consequently, storytelling is a critical resource for uncovering Native women's experiences. The burgeoning literary tradition of Native women provides a window into how story maintains community. Such literature is generally more accessible and more likely to be written with Native people in mind, unlike theological texts, which are written for a non-Indian audience. Consequently, Native women's literature, as well as the more academic writings of Native women, even by women who are not professional theologians, can be a helpful theological resource.

However, while feminist, womanist, or mujerista theologians often use a variety of resources to give voice to the communities they represent, they often do not emphasize the perspectives of activists and organizers in their work. The problem that this approach presents for a theology of liberation is that most people, even most women, are not activists or organizers for social change. Therefore, to identify Native women's liberation theology, it is also important to highlight the spiritual and political perspectives of Native women activists specifically. Based on these sources, one can detect some central themes emergent in Native women's theology. These themes may not be based on standard Christian theological terms. First, to address Deloria's charge that Christianity is implicated in genocide against Native peoples, it is important to center indigenous beliefs and practices rather than Christian doctrines in theological formations. In addition, because Native religions, like Native cultures in general, are orally based, they are quite flexible. Indians give less weight to orthodoxy of religious belief than to spiritual centeredness and ethical behavior—what Native people call "walking in balance." Second, Indian spiritualities tend to be more centered on practice than on belief; that is, what makes one Indian is not simply holding the proper set of core beliefs but how one relates to one's community through concrete praxis. Of course, this should not be taken to mean either that Indian religions have no content or that anyone gets to be an Indian who "decides" to "behave like one." These points suggest that in looking at Native women's activism as a source for liberation theology, standard theological categories may have less relevance than they do for other communities.

If we understand that Native spiritualities are fundamentally communal, then it makes sense to locate sources for a Native women's liberation theology within the context of communal struggle. Thus, while there is a shortage of Native feminist theologians, there is no shortage of Native women who engage in praxis of liberation from a spiritually grounded framework. Native women involved in liberation struggles often do so from a sense of divine purpose. Whether or not they call themselves Christian, they are theologizing because they are articulating what they perceive to be the relationship between spirituality, liberation, and the vision of the world they hope to co-create. Their theologies may not be concerned with definitive statements about faith and belief but, rather, with exploring the possibilities about thinking about spirituality in light of our current political context.

Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

If we expand our understanding of theology beyond that of an academic discipline, then we can identify some of the theoretical and methodological considerations for developing Native women's theology both inside and outside academia.

Biblical scholar Justine Smith's work on indigenous biblical criticism suggests that our approach to developing a Native feminist theology should rely on a framework of performativity. Smith critiques the prevalent project within Native studies of replacing western epistemologies and knowledges with indigenous epistemologies as a project unwittingly implicated in a pro-capitalist and western hegemonic framework. She argues that the framework of "epistemology" is based on the notion that knowledge can be separated from context and praxis and can thus be fixed. She contends that a preferable approach is to look at indigenous studies through the framework of performativity: that is, indigenous studies focused on Native communities as bounded by practices that are always in excess but ultimately constitutive of the very being of Native peoples themselves.[12] The framework of performativity is not static and resists any essentializing discourse about Native peoples because performances by definition are never static.

Today, much of Native studies is content-driven, which leads to essentialized notions of "what are Native knowledges" or "what is Native identity, and the like.[13] This approach contributes to the previously mentioned problem of scholars always directing their energy toward "knowing" more about Native peoples. Furthermore, as anthropologist Micaela di Leonardo argues: there is a tendency among academics to study "Native people" as a means for those in the dominant culture to learn more about themselves. Either Native communities have "ancient wisdom" to bestow on others, or they represent the "savage," which proves the superiority of the dominant society: "Primitives are ourselves, or our worse or best selves, or our former selves, undressed: human nature in the buff."[14] A framework of performativity intervenes in this primitivist discourse, argues Smith, because it demonstrates that Native nations are distinguished less by an essential essence and more by what she refers to as "ontopraxy." That is, Native peoples are fundamentally constituted by relationality and praxis.[15]

As the proliferation of Black, womanist, mujerista, Asian, and other theologies indicate, liberation theologians in the United States have often relied on a politics of representation. That is, these theologies seek to represent the theological concerns of the communities from which theologians emerge. As theologian Kwok Pui Lan argues, this strategy is not without its merits in a context where peoples from oppressed communities are denied a voice within mainstream theological discourse.[16] Unfortunately, however, this representational strategy can lend itself to totalizing and essentializing discourses about the communities theologians seek to represent. As theologian Namsoon Kang argues, this "trap of essentialized identity" discursively restricts our political imaginary.[17] This politics of recognition does not allow us to look at tensions and oppressive dynamics within communities, particularly homophobia, sexism, ableism, and class oppression. We also often create litmus tests for cultural authenticity that restrict the kinds of intellectual and political creativity we need to challenge the status quo. In Native struggles, this can be exemplified by the oft-stated mantras, "Traditional Native peoples cannot be Christian" and "Native women can't be feminists."

As biblical scholar Elizabeth Povinelli notes, this politics of representation relies on assertions of absolute cultural difference in order to gain recognition from the liberal multicultural state. Thus, we see some of the negative consequences of Deloria's work that dichotomizes Native spirituality from Christianity. In order to gain recognition as a true "Native," one must always demonstrate her or his complete rejection of all things European or Christian. But since, of course, all Native peoples have been affected by colonialism, Native peoples are trapped in performances that necessarily fail. These failed performances then disqualify almost all Native peoples from gaining recognition. For instance, in almost all land rights struggles, white people accuse the Native peoples in question of not being "really" Native, and hence not deserving of land rights.

What goes unquestioned, as political theorist Glen Coulthard points out, is why we are seeking recognition in the first place, whether from the state or from academia. How does liberation come to mean having one's political, legal, social, or cultural claims recognized by a white settler society?[18] As Povinelli demonstrates, assertions of cultural difference unwittingly recapitulate capitalist and colonial imperatives. The liberal state depends on a politics of multicultural recognition that includes "social difference without social consequence." She further argues: "These state, public, and capital multicultural discourses, apparatuses, and imaginaries defuse struggles for liberation waged against the modern liberal state and recuperate these struggles as moments in which the future of the nation and its core institutions and values are ensured rather than shaken."[19] Kwok similarly notes that multiculturalist rhetoric is used to erase the structures of domination within U.S. society.[20] Theologian Fumitaka Matsuoka sheds further light onto this problem. He notes that the important struggle to be fought is not cultural validation. The dominant culture is prepared to accommodate a little "multiculturalism"—a pow-wow here, a pipe ceremony there—as long as the structures of power are not challenged. Matsuoka states: "The central problems . . . have to do, ultimately, not with ethnic groupings or the distinctness of our cultural heritages as such, but with racism and its manifestations in American economic policy, social rule and class relations."[21]

Thus, we can be entrapped into the project of doing theological work primarily for academic recognition rather than through the praxis of actual liberation struggles. In our efforts to have our theological contributions recognized within the context of academia, we often do not question the political effects of this recognition. Louis Althusser argued that educational systems are an "ideological state apparatus" by which the capitalist system reproduces itself ideologically. "Education" is not innocent or neutral; it is designed to teach peoples to be subject to colonial and capitalist structures.[22] Similarly, as Pierre Bourdieu elaborates, dominating classes assure their position through domination not only over economic capital but also over cultural capital, a form of domination that enables them to secure the terms of discourse and knowledge to their benefit.

The educational system is particularly important in the reproduction of symbolic capital under capitalism. The standardization of academic qualifications—a given amount of labor and time in academic apprenticeship is exchanged for a given amount of cultural capital, the degree—enables a differentiation in power ascribed to permanent positions in society and hence to the biological agents who inhabit these positions.[23] Such standardization encourages a system of power and domination between institutions through "socially guaranteed qualifications and sociologically defined positions" rather than directly through individuals.[24] Thus, according to Bourdieu, what is significant about the educational system is not just the set of ideologies that it promotes but the set of tacitly unequal institutional power relations it ensures through the fiction of equal access to education.[25] Good intentions on the part of academics do not render them innocent of reinscribing prevailing power relations in society.

Thus, racism and sexism in universities are not products of racist or sexist individuals in the system; they are endemic to the system itself. Our work of legitimating liberation theologies within academia can have the unintended effect of simply multiculturalizing the political and economic status quo and distracting us from engaging in actual liberation struggles. If we develop liberation theologies not grounded in politics of representation and recognition, we do not have to follow Deloria's mandate to represent the distinctness of indigenous spiritualities in our theologizing. Rather, we can focus on the material conditions of white supremacy, capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism under which Native women live and theologically reflect from this space of struggle against these conditions. Thus, it is important to turn to some of the issues of concern in the development of Native feminist theology as they relate to Native women's struggles for social justice.

Ongoing Issues

Christianity and Native Traditions

Native activists often engage in what they call "cowboys and Indians coalitions." That is, in order to secure political goals, they have had to develop political coalitions in contexts where the only available coalition partners were those who did not support Native sovereignty struggles. The irony here is that rural-based Native women activists initiated some of the most successful organizing campaigns against multinational corporations by developing coalitions with urban-based non-Native people whose politics otherwise reflected an anti-Indian bias. This model of rearticulation allows us to complicate views of religious and political identity that may presume a simple and unchanging relationship between religion and politics, and it enables us to see new possibilities for alliance-building for social change. If we have a capitalist system in which 5% of the population controls 90% of the wealth, then it is clear that most people would benefit from a change in the system and hence are our political allies. And as one Native activist puts it, "When you have an us versus them attitude, you united them against you."

To create new alliances, however, we need to be more flexible in how we understand religious and political configurations and how they could potentially operate. As feminist theologian Catherine Keller notes, liberation theologies offer equally rigid models of liberation as does Christian orthodoxy. As theologian Itumeleng Mosala argues, the Bible and other forms of theological discourse are never fixed and are always subject to contestation: "It is not enough to recognize text as ideology. Interpretations of texts do alter the texts . . . texts are signifying practices and therefore they exist ideologically and permanently problematically."[26] Mosala's approach suggests that theological discourse is never simply liberatory or oppressive but that oppressed groups can shift theological discourse to further liberatory struggles.

Justine Smith's work demonstrates that indigenous peoples have engaged the biblical text in complicated ways that go beyond a simple paradigm of "assimilation." Her essay demonstrates that when the Bible is translated into different languages (in this case, Cherokee), the very meanings of the texts change. Hence, the Cherokee Bible (which was translated directly from the Greek and Hebrew) can be read as a counternarrative to the English text rather than simply a mimicry of it. We cannot assume that indigenous peoples have the same reading strategies as do those of the dominant culture. Smith demonstrates how indigenous reading strategies and performances disrupt the colonial narrative of the Bible. As anthropologist Dorinne Kondo notes, assimilation is always unfinished business: "Even when colonized peoples imitate the colonizer, the mimesis is never complete, for the specter of the 'not quite, not white' haunts the colonizer, a dis-ease that always contains an implicit threat to the colonizer's hegemony."[27] In other words, groups that seemingly attempt to replicate the dominant culture or religious practice never fully do so, and the very act of mimesis challenges the hegemonic claims of colonizers. In any case, oppositional practices are never free from reinscribing that which they contest. Thus, rather than simply arguing that Christianity is either oppressive or liberatory, theologians might be able to think about (1) what areas of resistance are possible in any site and (2) how all of these options for resistance continue to reinscribe colonial paradigms.

Native feminists critique the manner in which Native traditions can also be used as a weapon to maintain systems of domination. In *Gender Trouble,* Judith Butler critiques theorists such as Jacques Lacan, Luce Irigaray, and Monique Wittig, who posit a naturalized prediscursive sexed body as the foundation by which to critique contemporary heteropatriarchal practices. She argues that theorizing a prediscursive body necessarily means that the body cannot be prediscursive and hence its account cannot be made outside of prevailing power relations within its discursive economy. But positing it as prediscursive allows the theorist to disavow her or his political investments because the theorist is supposedly rendering an account of the body prior to power relations. Butler's critique could then be more broadly applied to a critique of "origin stories." That is, when we critique a contemporary context through an appeal to a prior state before "the fall," we are necessarily masking power relations through the evocation of lost origins. Within the context of theology, Mary McClintock Fulkerson notes that feminist appeals to feminist origins within Christianity (i.e., Jesus was a feminist) rest on a "natural, prediscursive reality" which becomes the basis for a feminist politic that cannot be interrogated for its complicity in prevailing power relations.[28] Within Native feminist theologies, this analysis is helpful in interrogating how "tradition" often serves as the origin story that buttresses heteropatriarchy and other forms of oppression with Native communities while disavowing its political investments. That is, Native women are often told (even by other Native women) that Native feminism is not "traditional." This mantra speaks to the politics of who defines what is tradition. As Native rights activist Lakota Harden describes:

In trying to piece together our history, and our stories, and our legends, it seems that much of what we remember has actually been tainted and changed by colonization. We do not actually remember what happened before colonization because we were not there. So we have to ask ourselves, how much of what we think is tradition was really originally ours; and how much of it is Christian-influenced? Knowing how powerful Native women are now, how could we have ever accepted anything less then? How could we have let ourselves be ignored or degraded? I'm not saying that I know, because I don't. But those questions have brought me to wonder how much of the tradition is really ours, and how much does that even matter?

I remember at our school, all of us were preparing a sweat lodge in our backyard. Our backyard was huge, the plains. And I remember one of the boys saying, "Women can never carry the pipe." "Women never used to do this or that." (Now I realize that all comes from Christianity.) And I remember feeling very devastated because I was very young then. I was trying to learn these traditions. I was quite the drama queen and going to the trailer and my aunt was making bread or something. "Auntie, this is what they're saying!" She said, "Well you know, tradition, we talk about being traditional. What we're doing now is different. When we talk about trying to follow the traditions of say our ancestors from 100 years ago, it's probably different from 300 years ago. If when the horses came, what would have happened had we said, "Oh we don't ride the four-legged, they are our brother. We respect them; we don't ride them?" Where would we be? Hey man, we found those horses and we became the best horse riders there ever were, and we were having good winters. So tradition is keeping those principles, the original principles about honoring life all around you. Walk in beauty is another interpretation. Respecting everything around you. Leave the place better than you found it. Those were the kind of traditions that we followed. But they change as we go along."

And in a few minutes [after talking to my Auntie], then I went back to the room. Now, being a pipe carrier means that you don't drink alcohol, you don't smoke marijuana, you don't take drugs, you don't fight with people, and you don't abuse anyone. And I was really trying to follow that because that's what my uncle taught me. So I went to the middle of the room, and I said to the guys in the room, "I want everybody here who is following the tradition, who has given up the things I just named to stand here in the circle with me." And no one did. I said that until this circle is filled with men, when it's filled with men, I'll do something else like learn

> to cook. But until then, there has to be someone standing here doing this, and if you're not going to do it, I will. And no one ever said anything to me, or anything about women not doing these things ever, at least from that group.[29]

Navajo scholar Jennifer Denetdale's work deconstructs tradition as origin story, going so far as to argue that Native communities reproduce a heteronormative, Christian Right agenda in the name of "tradition." She also critically interrogates the gendered politics of remembering "tradition" in her germinal analysis of the office of Miss Navajo Nation. Denetdale notes that this office is strictly monitored by the Navajo nation to ensure that Miss Navajo models "'traditional' Navajo women's purity, mothering and nurturing qualities, and morality which are evoked by the Navajo Nation to extol Navajo honor and are claimed on behalf of the modernizing project of nationalism." Denetdale notes that "when Miss Navajo Nation does not conform to the dictates of ideal Navajo womanhood, she is subjected to harsh criticism intended to reinforce cultural boundaries. Her body literally becomes a site of surveillance that symbolically conveys notions about racial purity, morality, and chastity." Meanwhile, male leaders, who may be guilty of everything from domestic violence to embezzlement, are rarely brought before any tribal committees. She argues that the ideals that Navajo women are supposed to represent are not simply "traditional" Navajo values but unacknowledged European Victorian ideals of womanhood. She asserts that Navajo leaders, who are primarily men, reproduce Navajo nationalist ideology to reinscribe gender roles based on Western concepts even as they claim that they operate under traditional Navajo philosophy.[30]

At the same time, as theologian Katherine Tanner notes, "tradition" can also be a weapon against oppression. At the 2005 World Liberation Theology Forum held in Porto Alegre, Brazil, indigenous peoples from Bolivia stated that they know another world is possible because they see that world whenever they do their ceremonies. Native ceremonies can be a place where the present, past, and future become co-present, thereby allowing us to engage in what Native Hawaiian scholar Manu Meyer calls a racial remembering of the future. Before colonization, Native communities were not structured on the basis of hierarchy, oppression, or patriarchy. We will not re-create these communities as they existed before colonization because Native nations are and always have been nations that change and adapt to the surrounding circumstances. However, our understanding that it was possible to order society without structures of oppression in the past tells us that our current political and economic system is anything but natural and inevitable. If we lived differently before, we can live differently in the future. Thus, the past can serve as a radical critique of the present. Armed with a feminist analysis, many indigenous groups are using the past in a critical way to denaturalize the present, to show that different ways of living are possible.

Heteropatriarchy and the Nation-State

Native feminist theologies fundamentally challenge the givenness of the United States as empire and the nation-state form of governance. They further theologize possibilities of alternative forms of governance for the world. This theologizing also challenges male-dominated sovereignty and racial justice struggles because they demonstrate that the building block of the nation-state is the heteropatriarchal family.

That is, social justice activists as well as the U.S.-based liberation theologians often criticize U.S. policies, but they do not critically interrogate the contradictions between the United States articulating itself as a democratic country on one hand, while simultaneously founding itself on the past and current genocide of Native peoples on the other. Even progressives tend to articulate racism as a policy to be addressed within the constraints of the U.S. nation-state rather than understanding racism and genocide as constitutive of the United States. However, since the United States could not exist without the genocide of Native peoples, Native feminist interventions call us to question why we should presume the givenness of the United States in our long-range vision of social justice. These interventions provide a starting point for theological reflection on what exactly is a just form of governance, not only for Native peoples but also for the rest of the world. Native women activists have begun articulating spiritually based visions of nation and sovereignty that are separate from nation-states. Whereas nation-states are governed through domination and coercion, indigenous sovereignty and nationhood is predicated on interrelatedness and responsibility. As Native activist Crystal Ecohawk states: "Sovereignty is an active, living process. From that knot of relationships is born our histories, our identity, the traditional ways in which we govern ourselves, our beliefs, our relationship to the land, and how we feed, clothe, house and take care of our families, communities and Nations."[31] These models of sovereignty are not based on a narrow definition of nation that would entail a closely bounded community and ethnic cleansing.

In turn, spiritually based alternative visions of sovereignty challenge the heteronormative basis of nation building. That is, patriarchy is the logic that naturalizes social hierarchy. Under patriarchy, just as men are supposed to naturally dominate women on the basis of biology, so, too, should the social elites of a society naturally rule everyone else through a nation-state form of governance that is constructed through domination, violence, and control. Patriarchy, in turn, presumes a heteronormative gender binary system. Thus, as Christian Right scholar Ann Burlein argues in *Lift High the Cross*, it may be a mistake to argue that the goal of Christian Right politics is to create a theocracy in the United States. Rather, Christian Right politics work through private family (which is coded as white, patriarchal, and middle class) to create a "Christian America." She notes that the investment in the private family makes it difficult for people to invest in more public forms of social connection. In addition, investment in the suburban private family serves to mask the public disinvestment in urban areas that makes the suburban lifestyle possible. The social decay in urban areas that results from this disinvestment is then construed as the result of deviance from the Christian family ideal rather than as the result of political and economic forces. As former head of the Christian Coalition Ralph Reed states: "The only true solution to crime is to restore the family," and "Family break-up causes poverty."[32] Concludes Burlein: "'The family' is no mere metaphor but a crucial technology by which modern power is produced and exercised."[33]

Unfortunately, as Denetdale points out, the Native response to a heteronormative white, Christian America is often an equally heteronormative Native nationalism. In her critique of the Navajo tribal council's passage of a ban on same-sex marriage, Denetdale argues that Native nations are furthering a Christian Right agenda in the name of "Indian tradition." This trend is also equally apparent within racial justice struggles in other communities of color. As political scientist Cathy Cohen contends, heteronormative sovereignty or racial justice struggles will maintain rather than challenge colonialism and white supremacy because they are premised on a politics of secondary marginalization whereby the most elite class of these groups further their aspiration on the backs of those most marginalized within the community.[34] Through this process of secondary marginalization, the national or racial justice struggle takes on either implicitly or explicitly a nation-state model as the end point of its struggle: a model of governance in which the elites govern the rest through violence and domination, as well as exclude those that are not members of "the nation." However, as the articulations of Native women suggest, there are other models of nationhood we can envision, nations that are not based on exclusion and which are not based on secondary marginalization—nations that do not have the heteronormative, patriarchal nuclear family as their building block.

These issues and concerns are only a few that could be discussed within the context of Native feminist theology. If we take seriously the "liberation" within liberation theology, then our first concern must be theological approaches that further social justice, not academic legitimacy or recognition. But because the terrain of struggle constantly changes, our theoretical formulations must be in a constant state of flux. At the same time that we humbly work together, sharing our successes and our failures, we are also armed with a vision of a past that demonstrates it is possible to structure a society *not* based on the logics of white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, or colonialism. These past visions must always be interrogated in the present; they do not offer a simple blueprint for liberation, but they do show us that another world is indeed possible.

NOTES

1. Doing theology, thinking theologically, is a decidedly non-Indian thing to do. When I talk about Native American theology to many of my Indian friends, most of them just smile and act as if I hadn't said anything. And I am pretty sure that, as far as they are concerned, I truly hadn't said anything.

2. Jace Weaver, *That the People Might Live* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), vii.

3. Vine Deloria Jr., *For This Land* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 100.

4. Ibid., 106.

5. Vine Deloria Jr., *God Is Red* (Golden, CO: North American, 1992), 296–297.

6. Robert Warrior, "Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians," in *Natives and Christians*, ed. James Treat (New York: Routledge, 1996), 99.

7. George Tinker, *Missionary Conquest* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 153.

8. James Treat, ed., *Native and Christian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); and Jace Weaver, ed., *Native American Religious Identity: Unforgotten Gods* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998).

9. M. Annette Jaimes and Theresa Halsey, "American Indian Women: At the Center of Indigenous Resistance in North America," in *State of Native American*, ed. M. Annette Jaimes (Boston: South End, 1992), 330–331.

10. Ibid., 314, 332. Women of All Red Nations was established in 1974 as a sister organization to the American Indian Movement.

11. Michelene Pesantubbee, *Choctaw Women in a Chaotic World* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005).

12. Justine Smith, "Indigenous Performance and Aporetic Texts," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 59, no. 1–2 (2005): 114–124.

13. Dale Turner, *This Is Not a Peace Pipe* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006).

14. Micaela di Leonardo, *Exotics at Home* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 147.

15. Smith, "Indigenous Performance and Aporetic Texts," 117.

16. Kwok Pui Lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 36.

17. Namsoon Kang, "Who/What Is Asian?" in *Postcolonial Theologies*, ed. Catherine Keller, Michael Nasuner, and Mayra Rivera (St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 2004), 104.

18. Glen Coulthard, "Indigenous Peoples and the 'Politics of Recognition' in Colonial Contexts," paper presented at the Cultural Studies Now Conference, University of East London, London, England, July 22, 2007.

19. Elizabeth Povinelli, *The Cunning of Recognition* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 16.

20. Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 42.

21. Fumitaka Matsuoka, *Out of Silence* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1995), 93.

22. Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review, 1971).

23. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 187.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. Itumeleng Mosala, "Why Apartheid Was Right about the Unliberated Bible," *Voices from the Third World* 17, no. 1 (1994): 158.

27. Dorinne Kondo, *About Face* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 10.

28. Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Changing the Subject* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 129.

29. Quoted in Andrea Smith, "Bible, Gender and Nationalism in American Indian and Christian Right Activism," Ph.D. diss., University of California—Santa Cruz, 2002, 303.

30. Jennifer Denetdale, "Chairmen, Presidents, and Princesses: The Navajo Nation, Gender, and the Politics of Tradition," *Wicazo Sa Review* 20 (Spring 2006): 18.

31. Crystal Echohawk, "Reflections on Sovereignty," *Indigenous Woman* 3, no. 1 (1999): 21–22.

32. Ralph Reed, *After the Revolution* (Dallas: Word, 1990), 231.

33. Ann Burlein, *Lift High the Cross* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 190.

34. Cathy Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

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