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 **Learning across Differences: Native and Ethnic Studies Feminisms**

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**Learning across Differences:  
Native and Ethnic Studies Feminisms**

*Renya K. Ramirez (bio)*

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Some colleagues—who are members of Native studies departments—tell me I occupy a precarious and vexed position as part of the project and field of American studies. They argue that my living and breathing within an interdisciplinary space weakens my ability to theorize Native studies from uniquely indigenous perspectives. They tell me the goal of American studies is inconsistent with the objectives of Native American studies, because indigenous peoples occupy such an exceptional position vis-à-vis the U.S. nation-state. While I definitely agree that I must highlight our specificity by remaining in conversation with other indigenous feminists, at the same time my involvement in American studies has encouraged me to read other feminist scholars of color, contributing to my elaboration of Native feminisms. Even more important, I have grown as a Native feminist by interacting with other ethnic studies feminists at UC Santa Cruz and as part of my participation in the Gender and Cultural Citizenship Working Group.

Because American studies is an interdisciplinary project that stimulates discussion across various disciplines and different ethnic studies concentrations, I am open to reading the writings of women of color feminists in order to help me theorize Native feminist theory and praxis. Understanding why some African American women choose not to identify as feminists has helped me appreciate the similar choices of many indigenous women.<sup>1</sup> Like some African American women, some Native women have considered sexism to be racially disruptive and divisive. Indeed, they sometimes assume that a feminist consciousness will automatically create tension between themselves and indigenous men. The sexism common in the American Indian Movement (AIM)—which is similar to the sexism in other people of color movements—could also influence how indigenous women relate to feminism. Native women frequently occupied subordinate positions within the movement, and were expected to satisfy and fulfill the sexual desires of AIM's male leaders. Native women were, therefore, encouraged to believe that indigenous men should be in power.<sup>2</sup> Native American women were taught in this sexist environment to support an indigenous nationalism that disregarded their own antisexist priorities. **[End Page 303]**

Reading Patricia Zavella's work about the importance of recognizing the diversity of the Chicana community in order to theorize Chicana feminisms encouraged me to think about the diversity of the indigenous community.<sup>3</sup> Indigenous women come from divergent tribal nations and maintain different relations to their particular settler nation-states. Many reside on reserves in Canada, reservations in the United States, or villages in Mexico, and many others dwell away from their indigenous lands in rural or urban areas. In the United States, some are struggling to become federally acknowledged while others are already members of acknowledged tribes. These diverse circumstances shape how we as indigenous women relate to the world and make decisions about our needs. In fact, how we name ourselves differs in relationship to country of origin, geography, and tribal nation. In the United States, we often identify as "Native American" or "American Indian." In Canada, indigenous women claim the terms "First Nations" or "aboriginal," while in Mexico they identify as "indigenous." Many other Native women name themselves only by tribal nation and reject using any of the above terms. I utilize the word *Native* in the term *Native feminisms* in order to concentrate on our similar experiences as indigenous women all over the Americas.<sup>4</sup> But whether one utilizes "a tribal name," "indigenous," "Native," "First Nations," or another term, highlighting our heterogeneity is essential for appreciating our varied experiences as indigenous women.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, similar to other women of color feminists, this diversity encourages me to argue for the development of *multiple* feminisms rather than a *singular* feminism.

In contrast, other indigenous women scholars do not engage with women of color feminists and, unfortunately, conflate feminism with white feminism. For example, in 1996 Haunani-Kay Trask argued that since feminism relates only to gender issues, it is not relevant to a Hawaiian nationalist struggle and is ultimately a white notion.<sup>6</sup> She assumes *feminism* and *white feminism* are interchangeable terms, not discussing or recognizing feminist theory created by women of color...

## Learning across Differences: Native and Ethnic Studies Feminisms

*Renya K. Ramirez*

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