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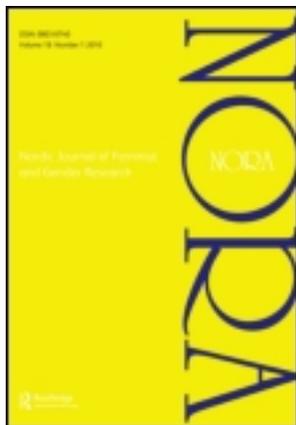
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BOOK REVIEW

Crossings of Indigenusness, Feminism, and Gender

Making Space for Indigenous Feminism

Joyce Green (Ed.)

Fernwood Publishing, Winnipeg & Zed Books, London, 2007, ISBN 978-1-84277-929-3
(254 pp.)

One of the intriguing questions for feminist researchers and feminism has been, “who is *left out* of research models?” (Hesse-Biber 2007: 8). At the same time feminist indigenous scholars have illustrated the challenges of combining indigenous and feminist struggles (e.g. Eikjok 2004: 57). *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism* (Fernwood Publishing & Zed Books, 2007), edited by Joyce Green, aims at illuminating “who is left out” by addressing intersections and crossings between indigenusness and feminism(s). The purpose of the book is to create space and to argue for the theoretical and political utility of feminist perspectives within indigenous studies. It is an interesting and important introduction to both feminist and indigenous studies as it offers a much-needed and up-to-date contribution to the ways in which gender, feminism, and indigenusness can be critically analysed, theorized, and discussed.

The origins of the book date back to the Aboriginal Feminist Symposium held in 2002. The contributors, all indigenous and primarily from Canada, but also from the US, Sápmi (Samiland), and New Zealand, are indigenous feminists, some of them participants in the symposium. Despite their similarities, the contributors represent a variety of scientific perspectives and understandings, both in terms of indigenusness and feminism.

This review focuses on how the book engages with discussions on gender and indigenusness. In the review I reflect on some insightful articles and parts of the book and ponder how it could have been developed further. My approach is closely connected to the focus of the book, but also to my personal research interest in Arctic gender questions. Hence, the review has a Northern (Sami) and, through that, an Arctic perspective.

The book contains sixteen chapters, divided into three parts. The first part of the book theorizes indigenous feminism, locating it historically, conceptually, and institutionally. The theoretical discussions in the first part are adaptable to a variety of research settings, indigenous and feminist, and include specific Nordic perspectives in the form of the Sami context. Verna St. Denis’s article “Feminism is for Everybody. Aboriginal women, feminism and diversity” and Rauna Kuokkanen’s

text “Myths and realities of Sami women. A post-colonial feminist analysis for the decolonization and transformation of Sami society” are good examples of this theoretical section. Denis’s dialogue between aboriginal critics of feminism and feminist responses to this critique is both extensive and interesting (pp. 36–42). Denis gathers together the arguments of many indigenous scholars and activists who reject a gender perspective as irrelevant to their lives and communities (this is explained by, e.g., the high status of women in indigenous societies or the existence of gender inequality being neither the only nor the most important form of oppression) and engages into a discussion with the critiques. In subtle ways the article negotiates whether, how, and where indigenous critiques and feminism could in the end find common ground and enrich each other. This approach is highly interesting in testing and stretching the spaces of both indigenous feminism and feminist discussions of difference. The reflective depiction of the existence of feminism in indigenous discussions at the beginning of Denis’s article (p. 33) is also poignant. Kuokkanen’s critical analysis of the construction and existence of the myth of strong indigenous (Sami) women is similarly well articulated and follows on well from previous chapters of the book by reinforcing the theoretical discussions with empirical analysis. Kuokkanen uses a post-colonial feminist approach to demonstrate how the notion of strong Sami women can be used “to dismiss issues and concerns critical and important to Sami women, to bash or trivialize women and their initiatives” (p. 86). Kuokkanen is referring to discussions of myths of powerful Sami women and matriarchal Sami society as being creations of the Sami ethnopolitical movement and employed to ignore the demands of Sami women and Sami women’s organizations. For example, questions of political participation, women’s role in traditional livelihoods, and sexual violence are discussed as areas of dismissal.

The second part of the book illuminates the “particular political areas and issues where indigenous feminism and feminists played a role” (p. 18) by analysing, for example, the role and meanings of gender in indigenous societies and indigenous women’s constitutional rights. Among these texts, Jorunn Eikjok’s, Makere Stewart-Harawira’s, and Joyce Green’s articles present interesting insights. Stewart-Harawira’s article, “Practicing indigenous feminism. Resistance to imperialism”, offers new view-points, whether one agrees or not with notions of linking women, nature, essentialism, and, for example, indigenous peoples’ claims to self-determination (pp. 127–128). According to Stewart-Harawira, post-structuralist/modern/colonial efforts to distance themselves from oppressive representations linking women and nature, and to deconstruct the category “free female”, can also have an impact on the claims for self-determination of indigenous peoples that are specifically based upon the relationship to the land. In contrast to the reinscription of indigenous women as passive and subordinate, relating to arguments connecting women and land, Stewart-Harawira argues that the detachment of indigeness, land, and women “evidences the on-going inscribing of colonial interpretation onto indigenous societies” (p. 128). Eikjok’s article “Gender, essentialism and feminism in Samiland” (translated by Gunhild Hoogensen) addresses, although rather briefly, questions of hegemonic masculinity in relation to gender and feminism (pp. 110–112). Green’s article, “Balancing strategies. Aboriginal women and constitutional rights in Canada”, effectively describes the two-fold strategies

of indigenous women activists and interest groups in “combating sex discrimination and colonial immiseration” (p. 154). In the Canadian case, constitutional and legal measures have been beneficial for arguments in favour of equality and democratic participation, but, as Green states, it has not “translated into equitable treatment or representation as Aboriginal women” (p. 154).

The third and the final part of the book provides an outlet for individual indigenous feminists to express their experiences of feminism and political struggles in the form of poems, interviews, reflective memoirs, and pictures. This section is a practical example of how different “knowledges” and ways of writing can be successfully included in one book. For example, the interviews at the end of the book are refreshing to read, both in terms of content and structure. They address topics such as violence against women and discrimination undermining indigenous women’s rights. Following feminist research aims, they also give voice to feminist indigenous activists working with these issues.

Taking into consideration the demanding nature of the task of discussing concepts of “feminism” or “indigenous(ness)” exhaustively in one book, let alone both concepts, for the most part the book redeems its promises. Discussing the theory of indigenous feminism, naming political areas, and providing information about indigenous feminist practices and individual experiences, the book succeeds in making space for and illustrating the viewpoints that appear in indigenous feminist discussions.

In terms of structure, the three parts outlined in the introduction of the book are rather hard to discern. Neither the articles nor the contents page make any references to this promised three-part structure. As a reviewer I was also hesitant about which articles to name to present, for example, the second part of the book (political areas and issues). Attempting to avoid rigid borders is understandable, but for a reader interested in only one of the book’s three parts the structure could be obscure. It could also be asked whether the structure itself reproduces a hierarchy between different epistemologies (academic versus indigenous, theory versus practice). In this book, practice follows theory and academic reflections. Could it have been possible to merge theory and practice, thus also enhancing dialogue between texts and different forms of knowledge? Furthermore, the book would have benefited from a stronger coherence between the articles. As it is, the book ends up being repetitious as the theoretical part provides a number of different basic definitions of feminism and critiques of feminism, by different writers (e.g. pp. 21, 34, 54). This also raises questions of the book’s content in relation to its readers. As presumably acknowledged by the writers as well, the non-monolithic ambition of the book entails challenges in naming potential or target readers, as it is not stated whom the book is meant for (students as study material, scholars from different fields?). For a feminist researcher, the basic introductions to feminism (e.g. p. 26) do not provide new information. However, it could be well utilized as a reader in multidisciplinary studies, which I have found when I have taught courses in gender dynamics in the Arctic.

The section on indigenous and feminist theorizing, the dialogue between them and bringing a theoretical perspective to empirical analysis, offers insights for both feminist and indigenous studies researchers. Some of the articles, however, have been published before, thus for researchers in the field parts of the content might already

be familiar. In relation to the target reader, I was also wondering about the role and meaning of “identity” speech (e.g. pp. 62, 135–136) in the book. I am referring to the parts of the text where there seems to be an emphasis on indigenous “us”, assuming a collective group of indigenous peoples, which partakes in identity construction (e.g. “we must maintain our freedoms”, “we face political problems”, “it is to those of us”, “this is our most urgent role, our most critical responsibility”). It is not to say that this style of writing is negative or undesirable, but it would have been beneficial to provide some reflections on it for the reader.

My reflections on the content of the book and the new openings it provides for discussions of gender and indigenouness are entangled with my interest in multidisciplinary Arctic studies. Although the field of Arctic studies could be even further enhanced by feminist research agendas, theories, and researchers, the gender perspective is more and more taken into account in various research settings. On the other hand, in the context of (Nordic) feminist research, the “North” could be discussed and disentangled further. Now, as it stands, the depicted understandings of the “North” and its differences do not provide space for discussions and questions of indigenous women and feminisms (of the North). Hence, even though it is clearly stated in the book that the aim is to argue for the utility of feminism among indigenous discussions, I would have also been interested in reading arguments for the reverse: What is the theoretical and political utility of (current) indigenous discussions among feminism(s)? How can feminist theorizing, concepts, discourses, and understandings be developed to better accommodate indigenous feminist perspectives and understandings? Hopefully, the writers can continue their reflection on the suitability of feminist discussions in indigenous studies analysis, ways and possibilities of applying theories, and critical analysis on the limitations and changes needed in order for the feminist theories to better meet the field of indigenous studies.

Overall, despite some reservations, I feel that the book gives a good insight into indigenous feminism and serves as a fruitful platform for a variety of discussions concerning feminism and indigenouness. Reflecting upon what I have gained from the book, I find that it initiated (once again) thoughts about political research writing. In her article Makere Stewart-Harawira (pp. 125–126) notes that it is no longer possible for indigenous women to “write or speak unthinkingly without being aware of the production of subjectivities that accompanies such activities” (p. 126). According to her, writing is a political act, and all of us who write (indigenous, non-indigenous, feminist, activist, academic, etc.), indigenous women more than others, need to think about as whom and for whom do we write. Maybe solidarity, in ways of writing and speaking, could be the key for the study of indigenous cultures and communities as non-indigenous.

To conclude, the book *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism* offers a delightful setting for new understandings of indigenous feminist discussions and sheds light onto the lived experiences of indigenous women. The feminist perspectives in the book are multilayered and multi-faceted. It presents critical views of feminism and indigenous feminism but also discusses the strengths and empowerment of indigenous feminism and indigenous women. As such, I can warmly recommend this

book to students and scholars of feminist studies who wish to broaden their horizons, for example, towards the North and the Arctic.

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