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Bloodland

A Holistic Approach to Contemporary Reclamation of Native Female Power

Anna Kendall

Prior to European interference in the New World, Native women held powerful roles in their communities as essential contributors to tribal economy and politics. The European explorers observed Native women working in the fields and holding sexual agency and assumed that Native men were “less masculine for failing to exert authority over the women in their tribes” (Slater 39). As scholars and the Western academic community studied Native femininity within Euro-American frameworks throughout the following centuries, similar Western gender constructs were imposed on Natives. Throughout recent decades, however, there has been a powerful shift in Native studies as scholars like Ruth Spack, Dorothea Susag, and Gary Sligh have sought to apply Indigenous concepts of gender roles to analysis surrounding Native femininity. As part of the change in conversation, scholars have analyzed the ways Native female writers such as Zitkala-Ša and Ella Deloria use storytelling to reclaim the traditional role of Native women as transporters of cultural values through the oral tradition. It is important to address the critical role of Native females as dispensers of traditions. However, these roles include more than powerful storytelling, since Native women have long been economically, politically, and sexually autonomous contributors to their communities. Contemporarily, Native women are reclaiming their femininity in holistic ways—that is, their roles

are not limited to one sphere of influence but have an interdisciplinary quality that encourages connection in all aspects of Native life. Through her short film *Bloodland*, released in 2011, Elle-Máíjá Tailfeathers (Blood Tribe, Blackfoot Confederacy and Sámi) uses metaphors of oil fracking, land use, and sexual violence to speak out on multiple Native issues. I argue that Tailfeathers's work in *Bloodland* represents a larger reclamation of femininity within Native societies, not only as oral educators but as sexually autonomous women who continue to be essential contributors to tribal economy and politics. Through this holistic approach to reclamation, Tailfeathers calls for Native women to assume the powerful roles that were originally theirs.

For centuries, Western society has continued a pattern of colonialism in physical dominance of lands and through interpretation of Native societies; however, recent decades have produced scholars seeking to correct this misstep. These academics discuss the ways Native writers have adapted the English language to continue a tradition of Native feminist power. Literary experts Ruth Spack and Dorothea Susag have both analyzed the ways Dakota Sioux Zitkala-Ša's publications describe feminine power. Spack's discussion focuses on the way Zitkala-Ša re-paints readers' perceptions of Dakotan women as she depicts childhood instruction at the feet of her mother, an economically empowered woman who passes on essential guidance to her daughter. Similarly, Susag argues that Zitkala-Ša's ability to use the English written word to dispense information "[fulfills] Beatrice Medicine's definition of a strong Lakota woman by maintaining her role as a 'carrier of culture' to future generations" (21). Both scholars identify the way Native women are reclaiming their traditional roles through literature. This recognition that Native women have long been cultural instructors and continue that practice today is of critical importance when discussing Native femininity. Professor Gary Sligh adds to this conversation by articulating how Native women have adapted their methods of cultural instruction. He writes, "These [Native] women did not adopt western forms of writing just to gain recognition, but refigured themselves as Native Americans in ways that allowed them to broaden their traditional storytelling and ceremonial knowledge to encompass western literary conventions" (107). Sligh believes that Native female writers continue feminine oral tradition through new means within Western culture, and that Western theory is currently at a place where such powerful storytelling can be recognized for its significance. While all of these scholars move beyond Western norms to

analyze Native female writers, their discussion stays within the realm of one discipline—literature—rather than moving into a holistic approach to Native femininity that includes economics, politics, and sexual autonomy. This change in conversation, while powerful, lacks the concept of connectedness so characteristic in Native culture because it only observes Native women through fragmented disciplines.

Despite a one-sided examination of Native femininity from Western scholars, Native women have long been recovering the complex roles they once possessed through activism like Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers's film *Bloodland*. Through the symbolic drilling of a woman's body, Tailfeathers speaks out against hydraulic fracturing on the Blood Tribe's lands and reclaims female voice in tribal economics. The dangerous practice of hydraulic fracturing, often referred to as fracking, includes forcing natural gas flow in wells through highly pressurized water, sand, and chemicals. This process involves risks including groundwater contamination, earthquakes, and various health issues. Despite these risks, many tribes in economic depravity see oil fracking as a chance to bring jobs to reservations. In the case of Tailfeathers's Blood Tribe in Canada, the tribe's chief and council did not confer with tribal members on the decision to contract reservation land for the use of oil fracking—a result of nepotism and corruption that the filmmaker roots in colonialism (Tailfeathers).

Bloodland stemmed from Tailfeathers's deep dissatisfaction with modern tribal systems that traced their roots to early explorers' bewilderment and subsequent application of their patriarchal lens in an attempt to understand Native women. Europeans like John Smith and Jamestown resident George Percy recorded their astonishment seeing women work in fields to produce the necessary agriculture. Coming from a patriarchal society, European men seeing Native men hunt (a leisure activity in the eyes of these Englishmen) while women provided the primary substance for consumption was interpreted as a failure of Native men to assert their masculinity and exercise control over their women. Writes Percy, "Their women doe all their drugerie [while] the men takes there pleasure in hunting and their warres, which they are in continually one Kingdome against another" (qtd. in Slater 40). Percy's use of words like "drugerie" versus "pleasure" makes it clear he disapproves of such a gender structure. This lack of understanding influenced a gradual change in Native gender roles as many tribal leaders adapted to a patriarchal organization. This change in structure may have come from Natives reflecting the organization they saw in Europeans, hoping to have clearer

communication between the two groups. Additionally, Europeans singled out male leaders as the ultimate power in a tribe, assuming that a chief was the equivalent of a king and disregarding any differences the concept of a leader carried in Native society. In the face of such changes, Native women began to lose independence.

Prior to this patriarchal repercussion, tribal economies were intertwined with the land—a relationship Tailfeathers emphasizes in *Bloodland* by connecting tribal economies and land to Native women through the literal drilling of a woman. Whereas hydraulic fracturing involves dangerous drilling of sacred land, the film depicts dangerous drilling into the stomach of a Native woman, held down by her captors. Tailfeathers's choice to use a woman as a representation of the land emphasizes Native women as integral to tribal economies and protests the lack of women heard in Native economic decisions. When asked about the choice to show a woman being drilled into, Tailfeathers explained, "Without our land, we're nothing . . . So essentially that place is our mother. And if you think about it, drilling into the earth, fracturing soil beds, injecting horrible chemical cocktails into the earth, is very violent and gruesome" (Chiu 10). Tailfeathers's protest is complemented by Native women throughout the world who increasingly speak out regarding tribal economics. Regarding issues such as the Dakota Access Pipeline, Native economist Winona LaDuke (Ojibwe) and others protested the decision to use Native lands for economic advancement at the risk of community health. Eriel Deranger (Dëne S'liné) speaks of destruction of lands with imagery similar to Tailfeathers's, explaining that such violent use of lands is like "someone ripping a part of who you are out of you. As Dëne S'liné women, people, we are the Delta, the river, the muskeg, the bears, the caribou, the bison, the peppermint, the rosebuds, all of it. When you destroy that, you are destroying who we are" (Kennedy). Deranger's metaphor of Native women to sacred land reinforces Tailfeathers's choice to show a woman being drilled in a graphic manner. Symbolically, this choice criticizes current male-dominated tribal economies and demands Native women have a greater voice in economic proceedings. Through such active engagements in tribal economies, Tailfeathers and others have begun reclamation of Native female economic roles.

Bloodland also serves as more than economic reclamation for Tailfeathers, as she demands women be heard in tribal politics and criticizes the way decisions are currently made in her local government. In February 2012,

independent news *Briarpatch Magazine* published an article written by Tailfeathers regarding the oil fracking issues *Bloodland* addresses. Regarding the decision to agree to hydraulic fracturing on Blood Tribe lands, Tailfeathers wrote:

The band council system is itself deeply flawed and in no way represents traditional Indigenous self-governance. In fact, many would argue that band councils are inherently designed to fail. After all, how could the federal government continue to benefit from the exploitation of Indigenous lands and resources if they had to negotiate on an even playing field with First Nations? This might mean that they would have to actually honour and uphold the original nation-to-nation relationship established in our historic treaties . . . In the case of the Blood Tribe chief and council, Aboriginal Affairs and the federal government have ignored the chief and council's blatant violation of our member population's basic rights. Ultimately, this perpetuates the vicious cycle of nepotism and corruption within the band council. ("Fractured Land")

Tailfeathers's assessment of Native tribal councils is that they lead to flawed political systems, where tribal members are not heard and Western norms of patriarchy and nepotism flourish. Her articulate analysis of current tribal politics in this quote is one way she participates politically as a Native woman. Additionally, Tailfeathers and other tribal members were dissatisfied with the information provided by tribal leadership regarding the effects of oil fracking and participated in a peaceful protest to delay the start of drilling. Tailfeathers and two other women were arrested on charges of intimidation and held in a jail cell overnight for their refusal to leave the site (O'Rourke). After her release from jail, Tailfeathers decided to make *Bloodland*, which brings attention to the oil fracking while also functioning as an opportunity for Tailfeathers to claim a political voice in the proceedings. Through *Bloodland*, she demands that tribal leaders face the damaging consequences of their haste for economic gain.

Tailfeathers is not the only Native woman to recover traditional Native femininity in politics. Throughout the last century, women like Ada Deer (Menominee), LaDonna Harris (Comanche), and Wilma Mankiller (Cherokee) have been crucial in establishing Native organizations and providing a voice for women in tribal political conversations. Regarding Western societies influence on tribal politics, Deranger said, "A lot of [communities]

were matriarchal or had very even-keeled structures of governance that were basically torn apart, ripped out. They were force-fed these colonial structures that really disempowered women as contributing members of society” (qtd. in Kennedy). Deranger’s recognition of pre-colonial Native femininity shows that female involvement in politics is not a result of the feminist movement within Euro-American societies but a reclamation of traditional Native female power. Native female activity in politics is not revolutionary: it harkens back to generations of Native women who possessed political respect within their communities prior to European contact.

Through *Bloodland*, Tailfeathers also raises a powerful female voice in matters of Native sexuality, referencing issues of sexual violence and exploitation among Native women over the centuries. The film begins with a lone Native woman in a field, rhythmic heartbeats flashing images of pooling blood as the story continues. Attacked by two men, the woman is carried to a darkly lit room and brutally tied down, referencing sexual assault and rape. By using such harsh imagery, Tailfeathers invokes discomfort in her audience, who must face parallel issues of economic and sexual exploitations among Native women. Her choice of setting and darkly lit frames force Natives and non-Natives alike to confront sexuality in a way that is uncomfortable for Western society. Although many Native women possessed sexual knowledge and autonomy prior to contact with Europeans, Western views of sexuality have sought to diminish this knowledge among Native populations. Commenting on European contact with Native peoples, Historian Sandra Slater writes, “[Explorers’] writings reflect ambivalence. Native women simultaneously embodied wanton sexual deviance and women in need of male protection. They controlled their own sexuality within native society through multiple suitors, husbands, and lovers” (40). As in all other instances, Europeans in America pushed Western understanding on Native sexuality, which led to the treatment of Native men and women within patriarchal patterns, where men were considered leaders and women were considered homemakers. Sexual autonomy was understood as sexual violation, and economic contribution was seen as forced servitude to husbands.

Adoption of the Anglo-Saxon world’s avoidance tactics in matters of sexuality—a product of Christian beliefs and Victorian reign—created an environment of fear among Natives regarding sexual issues, objectification of Native women, and sexual abuse that continues to have influence today. In her magazine article highlighting powerful contemporary female voices,

journalist Jennifer Kennedy explains how many scholars view Native sexual violence, writing that before colonial involvement “violence against women was uncommon . . . the process of colonization eroded traditional values and brought gender inequality to Indigenous communities” (“Voices of Resistance”). Kennedy’s summary suggests that gender equality was common among Native communities prior to Western influence, and that a healthy approach to sexual issues has gradually diminished as a result of such influence.

Tailfeathers and other Native female activists recognize that diminished sexual autonomy among Native populations continues to influence all realms of Native femininity and, more broadly, Native life. Jessica Danforth, advocate for Native women’s sexual health, explains, “The crux of our work is to decolonize from that [colonial] model. We call a lot of our work reclamation because we don’t think that we’re actually doing anything revolutionary. We always joke that we didn’t wait for Christopher Columbus to come teach us about sex” (120). Danforth recognizes Euro-American patriarchal influence on Native sexuality and centers her activism on reclamation of sexual knowledge among Native communities. Through this focus, she advocates a return to traditional Native femininity. She continues:

To place sexual health over here and land rights over there is a very colonial, imperial way of thinking. Environmental justice over here, reproductive justice over there. We have really paid the price for that. And our work seeks to indigenize by making full cycles tangible so that people can directly see the violence against the land and the violence against our bodies and the different roles we have to play . . . when we lose one area or one person or one gender in the gendered universe, it creates problems for other things. (121)

Like Tailfeathers, Danforth recognizes that healthy sexuality is related to all Native issues and points out that current gender inequality is linked to all aspects of tribal life. In advocating a return to sexual knowledge and autonomy, these women seek to end a period of sexual exploitation and violence among Native women. Ultimately, their call for sexual autonomy is but one piece in a larger movement to regain powerful roles for Native women.

Women like Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers are not singularities among Native populations, and each Native female activist plays a vital role in recovering Native femininity in its traditional, holistic form. Recent works by scholars have sought to address this recovery, primarily through literary analysis of Native women. However, due to the complete and whole nature of Native

femininity before Western societies' interference, there is need for a much broader conversation regarding Native women reclaiming essential roles. Tailfeathers's *Bloodland* powerfully addresses three roles of Native women: economic involvement, political voice, and sexual autonomy and knowledge. Her comprehensive analysis of these issues represents a much larger array of Native women actively campaigning for their lost roles in tribal societies. By recognizing the voices of Native female activists, whether they use the written word or mediums outside of the written word, Natives and non-Natives "repair the circle" of Native femininity that has been broken for centuries (Highway 26).

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