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## Native Women: Decolonization and Transcendence of Identity

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This article exposes the experiences of two Native women, describing their acts of resistance against and questioning of the establishments in which they work. The Native women in this article redefine themselves outside of the dominant society's socialization, especially the boundaries of the institutions to which they belong. Through this redefinition, it becomes clear that the women have begun to decolonize the oppressive borders with which society and academia have tried to surround them. These Native women have defined the concept of transcending identities.

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As a Native woman in the academy, the feeling of isolation was ever present within my experiences. Everywhere I looked, I was an odd woman—the only Native woman pursuing a graduate degree in the college of education and the first to graduate with a doctorate from the college of education. Being the first, and the only, Native woman doctorate student in the college was lonely. How was my experience as a Native woman similar to or different from that of other Native female students in the country? When I looked for articles, books, or any kind of writings to affirm my experience, I came up empty. Little has been done regarding the personal experiences of Native people in higher education (Brayboy, 2005). Now as a professor, I see my Native students struggle as they negotiate through the labyrinth of higher education without the guidance of those who have gone before them. It has become my passion to provide the needed research to fill the void of Native women experiences in academia.

In this study, I examine the experiences of two Native women, full professors at Big Ten universities, and describe their acts of resistance against, and questioning of, the establishments in which they work. Each has established a well-defined area of research in American Indian and women's studies, art, and critical theory. Additionally, both women have supported Native students through the process of academic life, knowing these students are their nation's future.

This essay is unique in that the women's experiences are contextualized in the discourse of decolonization. I believe it is crucial to hear the voices of Native women academics and their experiences pursuing a career in a largely White, male-dominated profession. It is through the words of the women that each one of the two has transcended internalized oppression and colonization to define herself and her commitment to being Native through her many acts of resistance throughout her life.

### **Decolonization**

I would argue that decolonization is a living concept we have only begun to understand. We indigenous people live every day in the realization that colonization is ever present in our communities, educational systems, and public policies. The academy, as an example, perpetuates the notion that our stories, identity, culture, and experiences are not valid resources for knowledge; what we value most is dismissed as illegitimate and "uncivilized." It is the contention of this essay to re-establish the importance of the discourse surrounding decolonization by way of the words and lives of Native women professors in the academy.

Understanding the theory of decolonization through the writings of a Native woman provides a clearer perspective on the concept. Farris (2003) makes the claim that Native people must take action:

Native Americans cannot continue to allow others to define their identity as artists or as Native American. It is up to persons of Native American descent to decide how we are to define ourselves racially and what aspect(s) of our heritage we wish to emphasize. (p. 160)

Farris points out that Native people need to break free from constantly allowing non-Natives to define Native people. The power affording outsiders to define Native people becomes harmful to the well-being of Native cultures, communities, and people.

When the colonized take the opportunity to define themselves both internally and externally, the process of decolonization begins. Paulo Freire (1997) claimed that freedom from internal controls and psychological obstacles of colonization liberates the people. Following this freedom, the oppressed achieve by themselves from within their own group. It is through this liberation that the oppressed become conscious of the internalized colonization which they have endured and make the choice to liberate themselves or to continue the cycle of oppression. It is a continual process, especially given the hegemonic nature of our society and the academy (Rios, 2007). Even when the oppressed feel liberated, they must be vigilant of being lulled back into colonized identities.

Theories of decolonization—reclaiming power through sovereignty, self-determination, self-identification, and self-education (Brayboy, 2006)—are central to this discussion. Decolonization is the stripping of what detains us, holds us,

and prevents us from negotiating our own destiny and allows us to transcend to a place of balance and peace (Mohanty, 2003; Smith, 1999). Naming the acts; stripping, detaining, and oppressing, are not new terms in feminist theory by women of color, in Native epistemology, and in cultural studies. Further their identification and pursuit of oppositional strategies have been established in the structure of Native identity development and, for my purposes, Native women's definition of self and identity.

In the process of decolonizing one's identity, there are often moments of realization and change. It is through these moments of realization that the individuals come to identify their oppression, at which point they make one of two decisions about the way in which they will proceed: (1) acknowledging the oppression yet doing nothing or (2) questioning and resisting the oppression to the eventual point that they begin to become liberated. This has been summarized as a "formulation of decolonization in which autonomy and self-determination are central to the process of liberation and can only be achieved through a self-reflective collective practice" (Mohanty, 2003, p. 8). The process of decolonization, like any transformation of self, must come from a reflective evaluation of one's own person. That is, it requires "...self-reflexive collective practice in the transformation of the self, reconceptualization of identity, and political mobilization as necessary elements of the practice of decolonization" (Mohanty, 2003, p. 8). When decolonization is accepted as a fate by the person, they then reconsider the perspective of the dominant group's ideologies on issues such as the heterosexual, patriarchal, colonial, racial, and capitalist influences in their own daily lives and the world around them (Mohanty, 2003). When individuals begin to question the way society accepts stereotypes, negative or inaccurate generalizations, and deliberate lies about marginalized groups as "norms," they come to the point of interrupting the cycle of socialization (Harro, 2000) and begin the journey toward decolonization of self.

### **Lily and Peggy**

Throughout the interviews with Peggy and Lily, a light bulb kept coming on in my head when they talked about identification of tribal ties and shared stories about their experiences as children and adults, especially in higher education. This light bulb flashed with words such as self-determination, definition, and freedom to decide. It is these words that brought me to ask how the women in my project define being a Native person. What kind of conscious decisions do they make regarding their work, family, and personal growth? How do they define themselves?

The activism the women have displayed throughout their lives has come in several forms; it derives from the resistance to acceptance of the oppressive institution to which they belong. Peggy and Lily explained that their resistance is through acts of questioning the authority of administration when told they could not move forward in their careers for reasons unfounded or unclear, acts of

engaging students to create an environment to think critically as well as consciously, and acts of defining themselves as scholars and teachers without the fear of acceptance and promotion but with the pursuit of what they believed to be right and just. Peggy and Lily have both redefined themselves outside the confines of the socialization of the dominant society, especially outside the boundaries of the institutions to which they belong. Through this redefinition, it became clear to me, these women have blurred the oppressive borders with which society and academia have tried to surround them. Both women in this study have expressed the need to make a difference through their mentoring of students and faculty, academic work (published artwork and writings), involvement in the Native community, and personal life with family. Providing space for Native women to express themselves and contribute to the growing literature base of self-identification and self-determination becomes essential to our understanding of decolonization.

Resistance to the degradation of power and sovereignty of Native people challenges the consciousness of colonization through many indigenous lenses (Brayboy, 2006); the ingrained notion of colonization continues within society, specifically in education at all levels. Eurocentric perspectives of civilizing American Indian people are still present in the persistent efforts at assimilation directed at Lily and Peggy in the form of racism, questioning of identity, and devaluation of their work unveiling oppression within the academy. Decentralizing the objective of the academy and its assimilation tactics are some of the ways that these Native women have pushed back with their questions of self-determination and self-identification.

Themes such as the women's personal definitions of being Native and their self-perceptions developed through culture, community, and family expectations were extracted from the analysis of the data I collected through interviews, email dialogues, and their published writings to illustrate the participant/collaborators' understandings and experiences (Jaime, 2005). I used portraiture and narrative inquiry as my methods of data collection, which allow for the participant/collaborators to tell their story and the researcher to create space for this to occur.

Peggy and Lily have worked to interrupt the cycle of colonization, negotiated their decolonized roles within the academy, created and maintained balance in their lives, and demonstrated, for me, the concept of a transcending identity. Peggy and Lily are incredible women, scholars, mentors, and role models. Lily is a full professor and chair of a department at an upper Great Lakes university. Her work focuses on the injustices of Native women and children within Indigenous communities. Peggy is a full professor at a mid-western university and has served as department chair for various programs on campus. Prior to completing her dissertation she served as a professional within the school system on the East Coast. Both women have invested their lives in the vision of making the world a better place for Native women and men through their mentorship and teaching.

## Definition of Self

Peggy and Lily have faced situations in their lives that have forced them to decide whether someone else has the authority to determine their culture and identity. During the interview process, I asked each woman a number of questions related to how she would describe or define being a Native woman: What defines being a Native woman? How do you define yourself as a Native woman? What defines you as a Native woman? In response to these questions, Peggy explained her understanding of being a Native woman in this way:

I think the culture is so important; if you're cut off from that, it's kind of hard to be Native American—unless they make an effort to let you know who your family was or your tribal connections. If you're adopted and just totally outside of where you come from, you're not Indian really in a sense. I mean you may look it and be perceived by the outside world, but you don't know anything about your own background—you can't live like one. Any minority who is adopted has that same kind of trouble, so I think with any group your culture is so important. And trying to maintain that, you still have to assimilate to survive, but you try to maintain something you can hold onto. And it can be kind of lonely trying to hold on to something and there's not that much support.

Peggy believes that having strong cultural and community ties is an essential piece to being Native. In these ties are binding relationships that offer access to ceremonies and others who are also Native peoples. In this definition, Peggy appears to be pointing to the fact that identity is often constructed by others within that community; it goes deeper than an individual's genetic make-up or how others in the community define you. Identification by members of the community, according to Peggy, is an important part of being a Native person. Yet Peggy's definition is not the only way in which Native peoples address these questions. Lily offers a very different kind of answer by noting:

I think that that's something only we as individual Native women can answer. I mean, there may be a Native woman that lives in an urban area who doesn't practice tradition and is struggling to make ends meet or whatever her experience is, and she's a Native woman. And [a] Native woman being raised on a reservation or living there, working for BIA and not practicing tradition—she's a Native woman. That's something that is, for me in my mind, is self-defining. Of course, there are driving definitions and cultural definitions that are imposed upon us in some way, and those are the things that become really difficult, I think, to have, but I suppose on some level we judge ourselves by those standards or those images.

Lily believes we should define ourselves. She told me in the interview that she works hard every day to be true to herself and her Native identity. Even though she does not live on or near her reservation and has no contact with her family, Lily identifies herself as Native. Her connection to the Woodlands Native people is strong, not only through her son who is part of this Nation but also

through her scholarly works. Even with these strong connections to the Woodlands Native people, she is still true to her own heritage; true in the sense that Lily is part of a Woodlands Native community without forgetting who her tribal people are and where she grew up. Lily explained the reality of belonging to one group and working and living with another.

I work in a Woodlands Native community [but I am Native]. I by no means make any assumptions about that. I don't assume that I should be invited to Long House. I have never gone to Long House. And I probably won't because I am not [from this tribe]. It's not my community. I live here and I work here and my son is [from this Nation], but I'm not. I'm very clear about that with myself and with other people and with the members of the Native community that I work with. I don't pretend to belong to [tribe], I'm out of my territory. This isn't my place. This isn't my community. And so being urban, an urban Indian and I think I still struggle. What does it mean to be a Native woman? Because I used to think that I had to be living right on the reservation or have those connections to that particular community where I'm enrolled and as I'm getting older I'm seeing that maybe that's not necessary for me and it never was. I make a choice not to be there.

Lily feels that tribal enrollment is less important than the state of mind of knowing that she is Native and feels at peace; no enrollment number or tribal card can define that for her. It is through this constant reflection of self that each one of the women in my study negotiated what she believed to be her definition of self amid the environment of the academy, which constantly pushes for conformity of its members toward the dominant culture. This negotiation led me to ask the women how they do it. More specifically, I asked how they negotiate their decolonized identities and survive the world of academia.

### **The Negotiation of a Decolonized Identity**

Resistance and questioning the establishment were consistent themes that both Native women expressed through their interviews with me and in their own written works. The ways in which these two Native women have defined their identity within their institutions have caused them to negotiate how they will handle situations with others who feel that they have the authority to define Peggy and Lily rather than allow the women to define themselves. I asked each woman how she has redefined what it means to be a Native in the academy. I asked about the circumstances surrounding the times when they have displayed acts of self-definition in the academy. How has being professors and being Native women worked for them or against them? In what ways has their Native culture influenced their academic work as professors? These questions were important to me in understanding the struggles and challenges that these women have faced within their careers.

In response to the questions concerning the academy and its acceptance of self-identification, Peggy responded with much candor, as she did throughout

the interviews. Peggy explained, "I encounter a lot of racism here at Mid-Western University with the undergrads, I really do." She continued to explain that the undergraduate students at Mid-Western are suspicious of her perceived agenda, an agenda aimed at making them feel guilty about being White or non-Native. Her teaching evaluations reflect this sentiment regarding her and her constant pursuant plan. Peggy believes she is viewed with suspicion from the moment she walks in the door on the first day of class, before even speaking to the students.

[Negotiating is] something you're doing all the time. You never can forget who you are. They won't let you forget it, even if you want to forget it. So it's always part of your job, just like you're called on to do something when you encounter students who may have difficulty because of your race or administration or even clerical staff. A couple of times I even accuse[d] people of being racist, and I was told that that's not true, it's my imagination, or I'm being oversensitive, or the person didn't know what they were doing. I mean, I always have to defend myself—becoming almost the oppressor rather than the victim.

How does one defend oneself against the accusation of being "too sensitive" or the statement that the others did not really hear the person make a racist remark? For Peggy it becomes a clear statement that those around her are not willing to engage in the process of thinking through their own racist behavior. The students' immediate response to the teacher pointing out that their comment was racist is that isn't what they meant. There is a constant justification from the dominant group that accompanies the exposure of racism.

In addition to the resistance that Peggy faces from her students, she also faces much resistance when she leaves the confines of her university campus to observe student teachers.

I supervise student teachers who are going to be art teachers, so I am out in the school systems. I will go and observe them [at the schools in the classrooms]. Some of them are placed in isolated rural areas [of her state]. I will walk in the building and the teachers and kids are staring at me that go to the school, [even] the principal, I mean everybody, it's just a weird experience.

Ways in which people react to her based on the color of her skin have determined the way in which people approach Peggy. Instances like Peggy's experiences with college students and public school employees are not isolated.

Lily shared that in her experience resistance comes from the older generation of faculty rather than from students.

When I came six years ago, those [old White] guys were just starting to leave, and I could feel the first year, maybe the second year, that negativity: their sexism, their racism, their disdain for my discipline [American Indian and Women Studies]. On some levels, [it was] very apparent and they were also cautious. They did do things that were nasty at review time and all those kinds of things; so those things did happen.

It's a place that is changing, and the people that came before me sort of beat those guys down a little bit and said [ethnic studies] is here and it's here to stay.

Even though there was resistance from senior faculty in the beginning of Lily's career at Woodlands College, the activists for a more diverse curriculum within the college fought for the right to have disciplines like ethnic studies. Lily was a part of this wave of new faculty. In negotiating what she believed to be the right course of action toward a more-inclusive discourse of study, she helped to redefine the structure of the university.

Unlike Peggy, Lily speaks highly of the students that she has had in her classes. She justifies this positive experience with undergraduate students by explaining their backgrounds.

Our students are first-generation college students; they come from the working class. They're largely from the area near Woodlands College. Their parents have worked in the mills—the paper mills—their whole lives. So although on the one hand they have not seen a lot of the world outside of the northeastern part of the state, I have to give them a lot of credit; they're hard working. They work full time, 40-hour-a-week jobs, and they go to school full time, so they work really hard. Because of their economic background[s], they're able to make the jump from looking at and critiquing power structures on an economic level, and that's usually where I start for them. From there, they're able to make the leap to talk[ing] about issues of race and power structure and to talk[ing] about issues of gender.

Throughout the interviews, Lily never once spoke negatively of the students that she has come in contact with through her teaching or mentoring. She, however, was in the minority or was the exception in this situation. Women faculty of color from across the country report negative interactions with disgruntled college students at the end of academic semesters yearly (Jaime, 2005). It is refreshing to hear of a woman of color having positive teaching experiences with predominately White students.

Peggy and Lily both made decisions regarding their scholarly work and commitment to the Native community (both their own and the larger community). Individually, they shared both positive and negative stories about their dissertation work, articles they wrote, and their research agenda over the length of their careers.

Lily's dissertation work was not only difficult for her to write but also difficult to read. The details of her childhood experiences embedded in the theoretical text of internalized oppression provide the reader with horrifying vignettes of her life. The work she did during her graduate years was risky, yet it was supported by her faculty.

After, I guess, five years in the doctoral program, and with the help of wonderful people in women's studies, [I] decided that what I was going to write about [in my dissertation] is the oppression of women and children

and Native people and how these oppressive power structures, they're not separate, they're all related—internalized oppression in native homes. In other words, how we as Native people have internalized oppressive power structures and now we create those levels of violence within our own homes.

The mere fact that Lily was supported in her choice to write her dissertation on the painful and horrifying experiences that she had as a child is testimony to the strength she shows as an academic negotiating her own destiny, seeking support from those who value her work, and exposing her raw experiences of abuse during her adolescence to allow others to feel less alone or isolated in their own life events.

Between the two Native women, Lily addressed the issue of negotiating academic work the most during her interview. It was through reading her transcripts that I realized how often the negotiation of research occurs. She addressed much more than Peggy the support that she receives not only from her colleagues but also from the Woodlands Native community.

I haven't had to [negotiate my work]; I've always done the research, the scholarship that I wanted to do. And part of that again was finding committee members who would support the work that I did. [when I applied to the university I work at now I sent a part of my dissertation.] They knew who they were hiring. They knew the kind of work that I did.

Lily acknowledges the support she received from non-Native allies. Decolonization, in Lily's case, becomes a tool to explain why people do what they do and to locate it historically. Peggy also iterates the freedom to write and publish the work that most interests her. Being raised by a strong and intelligent mother has done well for Peggy: she speaks her mind and is not afraid to express herself. She told me during the interview how she views her academic work:

Almost every article I have written has dealt with Native culture to some extent, so I use my culture for my research on Native artist[s] and contemporary culture. My research, when I write for my presentations, is all tied to my culture. I feel like I'm helping the dominant culture understand my culture rather than helping people of my own culture. You know what I mean: I'm not really doing [Native people] any favors; I'm more helping people at Mid-Western or other universities understand [Native people], but I don't feel like I'm giving a contribution back to my [culture] in the way I would like to, in a sense, as much.

I believe that if Peggy is contributing to maintain academic knowledge by way of offering positive knowledge of Native people, then in doing so she is contributing to her own community and the larger community of Native people. Although it is not the contribution that a teacher or doctor makes, who can see the effects of their contribution, reflected through the thankful eyes of a child learning a new song in music class, earning a high score on the math test, or feeling better after

an illness has been treated. Nonetheless women whom I interviewed are making significant contributions to both the Native and non-Native communities.

Having interviewed Peggy and Lily and then having read through their transcripts several times, I began to realize that although they may not directly address the issue of being an activist, both women do work to improve the world around them for the benefit of their students, colleagues, family, and community. The women in this study actively produce research shedding light on the injustices of our society: oppression, racism, and sexism. It is through this activism that Peggy and Lily are living the definition of decolonization of Native women in academia as well as breaking the cycle of socialization for themselves and others who are affected by their movements—but they are also transcending colonization.

### **The Balance of a Decolonized Identity**

Peggy and Lily have voiced their experiences on the meaning of defining self as a Native woman, the negotiation of a decolonized identity, and now the balancing of these two issues. These two Native women have expressed the importance of having a balance in their lives. How does this contribute to the definition of self and a decolonized identity? How does this play a role in the transcendence of identity? In defining and creating balance in their lives through the support of family, community, and friends, these women have redefined the meaning of Native for themselves in a way untold by others who describe Native identity. Peggy answered the question of whether or not she is supported as a faculty of color at Mid-Western University:

I don't need any support at Mid-Western. In fact, I don't really care. I get enough support externally. I don't really care about having support that much [by the university community]. A lot of people here have decent salaries. That's where I'm at now. I have a good network outside of here, academically. So that's enough to sustain me.

The family support that Peggy receives sustains her in her career endeavors in addition to support from the network of academics she has outside of Mid-Western. It is through this balance that Peggy is able to survive in her work environment.

I think when you really get down to it, your family is really the main thing because you can be academically successful but if you really have no family to go home to, and you don't have a life, then tenure is easy. A lot of people in academia get so caught up in tenure and publishing and being this big success. They don't have really a personal life. I think that you still have to maintain that family connection. You can't let [tenure] override everything, where you just become obsessed with a scholarship and you kind of cut off from real people. So I think trying to have that balance is being successful—balancing your career and your family. I think both are highly important.

Peggy and Lily provide me with a clearer understanding of what it means not to see the world in terms of what it can give me or do for me, but rather to ask what my purpose is and how I can help. The work that they have produced and the mentoring that they have provided have been invaluable to Native women like me.

Making a difference is a significant factor in why I chose to be a professor. Yet, while I do this, it is also important that I am able to balance the choices I make and balance them in a way that is beneficial to those I love and who support me. Lily shared some words of wisdom given to her about the balance and its meaning to her.

Well I know the things that my elders talk about are living a life that's balanced. I think that when I was younger and I think a lot of people in the dominant culture wonder what the meaning of life is. And the summer I was working in a Woodlands tribal community at an American Indian studies institute with teachers, one of our elders was talking, "In Indian communities we don't wonder, we didn't in the past wonder what the meaning of life was. We knew. The meaning of life was [to] be good to each other. Be good to yourselves. Be good to other people and be good to all beings. Treat other beings kindly; not only humans, but all [living] things. And that's the meaning of life." And to me, that's living a balanced life, and if you're able to do that, to be good, to be kind to yourself and all the beings. It's a hard thing to be [Native] and live a balanced life when I embrace the dominant culture as much as I do. The material culture with those things are a part, a part of every day, so I guess the best answer that I have is that I try. Certainly not success as the dominant culture defines it, but in my mind I try. I try to live a balanced life.

These are heartfelt words from Lily about being true to herself and struggling to walk a balanced life. These words were not easy to share. As I watched her struggle to speak about things that she was less than proud of or had no answer for, I began to think of the impact her words have had on me and the benefit that her struggle to walk a balanced life has had on my own struggle. Peggy and Lily have both enlightened me in one way or another to see the lives of Native women and their challenges. By the mere fact that my experiences are affirmed in their words I become a better educator to my Native women students and all students, knowing I am not alone in the constant vigilance as one of the few women of color and one of less than five Native women in the university. Peggy and Lily have also taught me that balance in my life and career is essential to the ideology of being healthy. I have learned from my aunties, Peggy and Lily, that family, friends, communities of support, and my health are the only ways I can achieve and sustain the identity in which I will call my own. These challenges are the ingredients that make up the concept of a transcending identity from internalized oppression, racism, sexism, and colonization.

## Transition to Transcending

Transcending the colonization of the institutions as my participant/collaborators have, these women have proven to me that the oppressive system of academia can be redefined. Peggy and Lily have shown me that I can survive and make a difference in the lives of others by choosing to define who I am for myself and my community, and by negotiating and establishing my self-defined identity through my scholarship and research. They have demonstrated that I can transcend and break the cycle of imbalance between career, community, and family. It is their words that have influenced the very way in which I strive to create an environment for critical thinkers and mentor Native students at the university. Yet, above all their words have influenced me positively in the way I mother my children and affirm them as Native people.

Those within the institution must liberate themselves with the consciousness that they will be released from the binding of institutionalized oppression; only then can a collective and collaborative group of people begin to shift the paradigm of thought within the system toward indigenization of the academy. Lily and Peggy have illustrated this concept through their efforts to decolonize themselves, yet they are only two in a sea of many others, others who continue to perpetuate hegemony which Native women scholars must reject in order to achieve determination and true sovereignty for Native people (Alfred, 2005).

Seeing Native women from a positive perspective has been my objective from the beginning. In early conversations with my colleagues, I was adamant that this project present my participant/collaborators as successful Native women. There has been an overabundance of research portraying Native women from a deficit perspective. Therefore, I made it my goal to prove that Native women can be successful; however, I came to see how my work pointed to resistance and definition of self. Peggy and Lily shared, taught, and provided evidence of defining who they are in ways that are oppositional to the dominant culture and oppositional to the boundaries set by the institutions to which they belong. Additionally, these two women have mentored and advocated for Native students as well as challenged the assumptions and prejudiced ideology of the academy. Peggy and Lily have successfully transcended.

The mere fact that Peggy and Lily pursued degrees in higher education and achieved the level of education needed to become professors in institutions of higher education sends a message to other Native women, like me, that they have walked against the tide and fought the odds to reach the positions of respect they hold today. With so few Native women succeeding in completing their dissertations and earning their Ph.D.'s, it becomes even more important to know how they have done it and to celebrate their accomplishments. In this way, we see the trends of decolonization working in and through them.

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