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De/Scribing Squ*w: Indigenous Women and Imperial Idioms in the United States

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Save a walleye, spear a pregnant squaw!
—Anti-spearfishing protesters in Wisconsin[1]

"Squaw" is not an English word. That's the bottom line.
—Marge Bruchac[2]

I am a woman, hear me roar. I am not a squaw.
—Avis Little Eagle[3]

In a recent electronic discussion of the significance of the word *squaw*, Ted Nawa asked a deceptively simple question: "Who would refer today, in English, to an Indian woman as a squaw, instead of as an Indian lady, or Indian woman?"[4] Although posed rhetorically to underscore the presumed absurdity of the term, it would surely disappoint Nawa and others to learn how many individuals and institutions continue to use the term with little or no reflection.

In March 2000, Stu Mackroon, a radio personality on KISS 94.5 in Maine, joked that the then recently introduced golden dollar coin bearing the visage of Sacagawea should be referred to as "the squaw buck," playing off "sawbuck," a popular slang term for a dollar bill.[5] Less than six months earlier, after a much debated intervention by the Justice Department, Erwin High School in Buncombe County, North Carolina, chose to drop Squaws as the name of its girls' sports team.[6] Even after the decision, the gym wall announced "Home of the Warriors and Squaws," and the sentiments of many community members

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echoed Bob O'Connor of the Erwin Booster Club, "The name should not be changed after so many years because a certain group is offended."[7]

As this essay goes to press, more than nine hundred place names contain some version of the term, as do numerous vernacular expressions. Significantly, all of these formulations have provoked intense opposition. Protesters in Maine picketed the radio station employing Mackroon, who subsequently apologized for any harm unintentionally done by his words. The defense of tradition at Erwin High School emerged only in direct response to public challenges. And countless grassroots movements have mobilized against derogatory place names: the states of Minnesota and Montana have voted to change all such toponyms, officials in South Dakota and Nebraska have discussed similar measures, and activists and legislators in Oregon, Wisconsin, and Arizona have called for renaming individual geographic features.

Journalists and conservative commentators have asserted that the concern over the use of *squaw* in place names, team names, and everyday speech marks yet another instance of political correctness. For example, they playfully invoke racist clichés to capture the public imagination, as in the article entitled "Indians on PC Warpath to ban use of 'Squaw,'" and invoke metaphors of excess, deviance, and transgression to formulate a more persuasive argument (as when an editorial in the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* dubbed the legal and political strategies marshaled against the term as "political correctness on crack").[8] Such accounts of the struggles over the term *squaw* misread their cultural and historical significance: Rather than efforts to police thought or censor free speech—as reactionary analysts would have it—these actions are anticolonial interventions that contest the ubiquitous, if largely unrecognized, privileges and practices animated by imperial idioms. They fit within a broader pattern of indigenous peoples demanding and asserting sovereignty in North America.[9] In fact, efforts to rename and reimagine indigenity have proven especially dynamic during the past quarter century, as First Peoples have sought to reestablish what Lyons dubs "rhetorical sovereignty," or the right of peoples to determine the objectives, forms, and languages of public discourse.[10]

The struggles over *squaw* direct attention to the colonial legacies and postcolonial predicaments of naming, representation, and language in the contemporary United States. They highlight the complex constellation of overlapping signifying practices that has constantly reiterated the conquest of North America and given material expression to the imagined communities, social relations, subjective pleasures, official claims, and racial privileges secured through the dispossession, deformation, and reinscription of the Native nations of North America.

The use of the word *squaw* has unfolded as one of many contexts "of contesting and contested stories attempting to account for, to recount, the asymmetry and inequality of relation between peoples, races, languages."[11] In contrast with many other anticolonial interventions ranging from the rerecognition of treaty discourse to the opposition to sport mascots,[12] the rearticulations of race and gender, or better said, of indigenity and femininity, are at the center of these struggles. Thus, they offer important lessons: on the

one hand, underscoring the significance of indigenous women as the ground, object, and oppositional subject of colonial discourse;[13] on the other, offering a more complex rendering of the contours of coloniality in American culture.[14]

This essay will examine the formation of *squaw*, charting the meanings that bind femininity, indigenity, and coloniality together in vernacular and official elaborations of the term and of more recent anticolonial interventions. After examining the diverse uses and understandings of *squaw*, I will focus on three prominent oppositional strategies asserting rhetorical sovereignty, inversion, erasure, and reclamation. The conclusion will discuss the significance of these patterns and practices.

A KEYWORD OF CONQUEST

Squaw, to many, signifies an American Indian woman or wife, but it has always meant much more. This seemingly innocuous term—common in popular jokes, folk stories, and everyday speech in the United States, and a familiar component of American place and plant names—is best understood as a keyword of conquest. That is, modifying Raymond Williams, the particular formations of meaning inscribed in and through *squaw* direct attention to the interpretations and experiences, "the explicit but as often implicit connections," that anchor American empire.[15] The word *squaw* entered European lexicons in the sixteenth century, and was continually elaborated and modified, inflected by shifting intersections and prevailing tensions among gender, race, and empire. Two theories have accounted for the origins of *squaw*. The dominant explanation, proffered by linguists, anthropologists, and etymologists, traces the term to an abbreviation of the Narragenset word, *eskwa*, meaning woman.[16] According to this theory, *squaw* was originally a descriptive term with no derogatory or offensive connotations. A second, largely vernacular, interpretation asserts that French trappers borrowed the Mohawk word for female genitals, *ge-squaw*, to refer to Native women and their sexualities,[17] giving *squaw* a vulgar and negative connotation.

Whatever its origins, a constellation of largely pejorative meanings has clustered around *squaw* in English, crystallizing it as a trope of extraordinary power and influence in American culture. The squaw of songs, stories, jokes, literature, and visual genres, according to Rayna Green, has been "the darker twin" of the Indian princess: "Squaws share the same vices attributed to Indian men—drunkenness, stupidity, thievery, venality of every kind."[18] They have been sexualized, doing "what White men want for money and lust," not love. At the same time, expressive culture has often glossed the squaw as a drudge, an ugly, fat, overburdened, and dependent creature, passively completing chores while her "buck" idles.

These racialized and sexualized images carry profound implications, as the three most common definitions of *squaw* clarify. First, *squaw* in popular usage has come to mean "a woman or wife."[19] For example, a man might say, "This is my squaw" or "How's the squaw?" This playful invocation of a racial category to mark gender difference has a more serious parallel in a second

definition of *squaw* as "an effeminate or weak person." More troubling, the third definiation of *squaw* as "a sexually promiscuous woman" has not only sexualized Native American women as prostitutes, but also derogated female sexuality more generally, as in the Second World War when American soldiers used *squaw* to refer to an ugly prostitute.[20]

For a more nuanced reading of the entanglements of gender and empire, let's review some of the terms that include or derive from *squaw*:[21]

squawed, married to a squaw

squaw ax, a small ax

squaw dance, a dance in which women choose their partners

squaw fighter, weak, effeminate, or peace-making warriors, as in "the proud Mohawks, afterwards called the Lenape, squaw-fighters, from the proverbial peace-making character of Indian females"[22]

squaw hitch, a simple lashing done with one hand

squaw horse, a poor specimen

squaw humper, see squaw man

squaw man, a white man married to an Indian woman or an Indian who does woman's work

squaw medicine, love powder

squaw side of a horse, the right side of a horse; the side from which Indians preferred to mount, in contrast with whites who mount from the left

squaw pony, a pony that carries a burden as opposed to a war pony

squaw talk, foolish, irrelevant, or untrue talk

squaw wind, a Chinook, or sudden, warm, westerly wind

squaw winter, an early cold spell just before or just after Indian summer

squaw wood, firewood that is easily gathered, also cow or buffalo chips

All of these words and phrases encode difference, twisting indigenity and femininity to assess transgressions and alternatives: they convey inferiority, inversion, weakness, simplicity, impoverishment, mysticism, opposition, and irrelevance. Consequently, in colonial discourse, *squaw* comes to modify the familiar and mundane, transvaluing and dismissing the (racial, cultural, feminine, or deviant) other.

Significantly, all of these elaborations do little to diminish the fundamental meanings associated with *squaw*. They play off and supplement the unmodified center, denigrating indigenous femininity. Indeed, *squaw* remains, as Bea Medicine reminds us, "a very derogatory term for Indian women. It equates them with sexuality and perpetuates the stereotype that Indian women are loose and promiscuous."[23] In the words of poet Wendy Rose, who for a time ironically described herself as an "academic squaw": "squaw is an offensive term regardless of its origin. It is now and has been for many, many years an offensive term much like 'nigger' or 'spic' and has been degrading not only in a fascist way, but in sexual ways as well because the image of the so-called 'squaw' is a racist and sexist image."[24]

Not surprisingly, given these patterns, the use of *squaw* reinscribes the violence and terror of conquest in small moments and intersubjective encounters. It endows (largely Euro-American) imperial agents with routinely unrecognized privilege, or worse with the power and pleasures associated with

dehumanizing others, while literally marking the lives and bodies of indigenous women. The most disturbing instances include racist epithets shouted at indigenous women ("dirty fucking squaw") or displayed on placards opposing the exercise of treaty rights ("Save a walleye, spear a pregnant squaw!"), sexual jokes told among friends about the supposed sexual proclivities of indigenous women, and the use of the term in sexual and physical assaults. Rebecca Sockbeson (Penobscot), for example, recalls a painful incident when she was eight in which a white classmate called her "a dirty squaw" and upset her lunch tray in the cafeteria.[25] Marge Bruchac relates another disturbing instance:

> A good friend, a revered New England Algonkian elder, gave her granddaughter a traditional name that ended in "-skwa" meaning "powerful littler woman." That poor girl came home from school in tears one day, asking why did you give me such a horrible name? All my teachers told me it's a dirty word." When our languages are perceived as dirty words, we are in grave danger of losing our self-respect.[26]

And to cite a third incident, in Erwin, North Carolina, "Home of the Warriors and Squaws," an indigenous woman was assaulted by two men, who repeatedly screamed "you dirty squaw" as they beat her.[27] Countless other instances might be recorded, but together they capture the dehumanizing use of the term in everyday life.

Undoubtedly, these invocations would unsettle many Americans; more troubling, however, are the less visible and socially more acceptable uses of the term. For instance, when I lived in Iowa during the 1990s it was not uncommon to hear beer drinkers refer to Leinenkugel (which has long used various version of an Indian princess to market some of its product) as "squaw piss."

MAPPING POWER

More important both for their persuasiveness and their significance are the intersections of language and land in place names. *Squaw* is far more than another racist and sexist term applied to subaltern peoples. The dehumanizing sign also provides an official inscription of imperial power. In the words of Pierre Bourdieu, "the monopoly of legitimate *naming*" in fixing *squaw* to the landscape not only gives geographic features and human experience explicit markers and public expressions, but imposes a "legitimate vision of the social world"—in this case, a vision saturated with sexist and racist connotations.[28]

The term *squaw*, in some form, is literally all over the map of the United States. Nine hundred thirty-eight geographic features in thirty-seven states bear the name *squaw*. The pervasive presence of this place name encompasses significant variations. Despite its origins in the native languages of the Northeastern United States, *squaw* is much more common as a toponym in the American West. The places so named range from famed locales such as Squaw Valley, California, location of the 1964 Winter Olympics, to more mundane sites that are nearly indistinguishable from the surrounding landscape. And although bays, buttes, canyons, flats, hills, hollows, lakes, ledges, passes,

and peaks have been paired with *squaw*, more creeks than any other geographic feature carry the name.

In addition to these seemingly innocent and implicitly racist place names, a series of explicitly sexualized and racialized conjugations dot the American West.

Squaw Humper Creek (South Dakota)
Squaw Humper Dam (South Dakota)
Squaw Teat (Montana and Wyoming)
Squawsteat (Texas)
Squaw Teat Butte (South Dakota)
Squaw Teat Creek (South Dakota)
Squawteat Peak (Texas)
Squaw Teats (Montana and Wyoming)
Squaw Tit (Arizona, California, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, and Nevada)
Squaw Tit Butte (Nebraska)
Squaw Tit Canyon (New Mexico)
Squaw Tits (Arizona)

These formulations dehumanize, injure, and embarrass. Perhaps this was the point. But they also entertain, instruct, and empower. Indeed, the perverse play in these toponyms, the sexual humor and differential excess demonstrate that the appropriated term *squaw* allows a hetero-masculine, historically homosocial public sphere to speak of subjects, desires, and pleasures not otherwise acceptable or authorized. To be sure, the imperial idioms in these and many more mundane place names hinge on conventional understandings of landscape. However, as I will argue below, an altogether different order of signs makes it possible and powerful to find places marked Squaw Tits or Squaw Humper Creek as unremarkable, and even laughable.

Euro-American observers have long read landscape and nature more generally in gendered terms, interpreting the virginal, uncultivated, and supposedly unoccupied land as feminine.[29] Accounts of Euro-American imperial agents (explorers, soldiers, administrators, settlers, and tourists) often extend this tradition to indigenous femininity, through which they secured a unique metaphorical hold over or purchase of the land.[30] The toponymic use of *squaw* confirms these patterns. To take one example, in 1910 archaeologist Omar Turney chose the name Squaw Peak for a mountain in Arizona, effacing the aboriginal Akimel O'Otham ("Iron Mountain" in Pima), because "When making topographic maps in the U.S. Geological Survey, the writer [Turney] gave names to several mountains, among them one on the north boundary of the valley which seem hardly large enough for a full-sized buck mountain."[31] And yet *squaw* inscribes far more than femininity onto the landscape. Far fewer places bear the less exotic gender markers: only 179 features bear the name "lady" and 16 the name "woman."

Squaw imprints both the inferiority read into the indigenous cultures by colonizers and the supplemental and sexual qualities ascribed to women in these cultural contexts. Indeed, whether in extreme instances such as Squaw Humper Creek or more mundane forms such as Squaw Valley, the use of the

term to name places reinforces the centrality of settler colonialism in the formation of the American landscape. The American settler state hinges on the appropriation of land and on the dispossession of First Nations.[32] Claiming land vacated through forced relocations, disease, and military campaigns has frequently demanded that Euro-Americans lay claim to indigenity (or least a reimagined version of it) as well.[33] Numerous places in the United States, including cities (Wichita, Omaha, and Des Moines), states (Iowa, Illinois, and Kansas), rivers (Mississippi, Ohio, and Mobile), and lakes (Ontario, Winnebago, and Klamath), bear witness to such imperial designs.[34] Commonly, as in the case of *squaw*, such formulations obscure origins, specificity, and namesake. They flatten local traditions, specific personalities and peoples, and individual languages as they fashion Indianness, creating indigenity as a comfortable space of identity and imagination. These projects and projections frequently manifest imperial nostalgia, that is, longings for what one destroys in and through colonization.[35]

Precisely as Euro-Americans laid claim to places through (inventions of) Indianness and words taken from indigenous languages, they sought to suppress these same languages. Conceiving of Native languages as inferior and barbaric—a collection of unintelligible sounds spoken by foreigners, and even barriers to understanding and integration—administrators, policy makers, educators, and missionaries throughout the nineteenth century increasingly emphasized teaching English as a strategy of assimilation. "They aimed, in effect, to 'kill the Indian' with words—English words—rather than seeking the actual physical death of Native Americans."[36] In the system of compulsory education established at the end of the nineteenth century, only English was to be taught; students were harshly punished for speaking their native tongues. A defense of the civilizing mission of federal Indian policy in the Commission on Indian Affairs Report of 1887 encapsulated the racist assumptions and genocidal impulses animating this approach:

> Is it cruelty to the Indian to force him to give up his scalping-knife and tomahawk? Is it cruelty to force him to abandon the vicious and barbarous sun dance, where he lacerates his flesh, and dances and tortures himself even unto death? Is it cruelty to the Indian to force him to have daughters educated and married under the laws of the land, instead of selling them at a tender age for a stipulated price into concubinage to gratify the brutal lusts of ignorance and barbarism?[37]

Today, perhaps only two-thirds of Native American languages are still spoken, and of these, fewer than fifty have more than one thousand speakers.[38] In this context, the use of *squaw* takes on new significance: on the one hand, Euro-Americans poach indigenous languages and appropriate select elements for use in alien contexts at their discretion, while on the other, they have sought to divest indigenous peoples of their languages and control over them. The official use of *squaw* to name places, then, has legitimated the deeply overlapped appropriation of indigenous lands and languages, no less than the vision of the social world anchored in such imperial endeavors.

UNSETTLING STRATEGIES

Until quite recently, the concerns of indigenous peoples in the United States over the uses of *squaw* remained marginalized, silenced by colonial "common sense." During the past quarter century, however, efforts to reassert rhetorical sovereignty have begun to interrupt the interplay of appropriation and dispossession that animate the inscription of *squaw*. An array of anticolonial projects, including protests, demands to change place names, legislation, efforts to redefine the term, and public commentary, have sought to decolonize Native America. In the context of a settler state, of course, such efforts do not focus on the return of land, but on reclaiming identity, language, and dignity in and through remappings of the American landscape. In essence, they unsettle the American empire and its animating idioms, striving, in the words of Pietrse and Parekh, to decolonize the imagination.[39] Anticolonial projects cluster around three fundamental strategies: inversion, erasure, and reclamation.

Many activists opposed to the continued use of *squaw* have used an "inversion strategy," twisting imperial idioms and encouraging audiences to read cultural signs in reverse. They replace the common, and for many unremarkable, term *squaw* with an English equivalent that stresses its offensive, hurtful, and denigrating connotations. The street theater and public statements of political groups advancing indigenous sovereignty, particularly the American Indian Movement, have relied upon this tactic in a range of anticolonial activities, including opposition to Native American mascots, as well as the continued use of *squaw*.[40] Many of these reversals have been fleeting, spontaneous expressions, difficult to record and recite. One notable exception is Debra Glidden's evocative editorial "Reflections on the word Squaw."[41] Echoing Ward Churchill's sarcastic essay, "Let's Spread the Fun Around,"[42] Glidden poses an unsettling question: "Why just disrespect American Indian women by naming places 'Squaw'?" She proceeds to offer a series of inversions. For full effect, I quote her at length:

> I propose we start with Squaw Valley, CA. How does this sound? "Ski Cunt Valley and explore the Penis Peaks with your children. A family oriented resort." I know this couldn't possibly be offending to anyone; since 'Squaw Valley' is acceptable the literal translation of it must be acceptable as well.
>
> Then we'll move to the eastern United States. How about changing Squaw Creek in St. Lawrence County, NY to "Twat Creek." That will give young boys and their fathers a topic to discuss while enjoying a nice leisurely day at a trout stream.
>
> And let's not forget the Squaw Creek National Wildlife Refuge in MO. Don't you think "Cunt Creek National Wildlife Refuge" would give a whole new meaning to their motto "the show me state"?
>
> And then, there's Squawberry, TN, a town with a population of 3,550. I think changing the their name to Pussyberry or Dickhead might increase tourism and revenue to a economically repressed area.[43]

Glidden then uses her caustic commentary to respond to a specific situation in Tucson, Arizona. There a woman living on East Squaw Peak Drive had commented, "even if it turned out that 'squaw' meant what it allegedly means, I would have no problem living on a street that had the word in its name." Translating the street name as East Cunt Peak Drive, Glidden is confident that the resident would indeed have no problem with it. She concludes by suggesting that all constituencies in the United States should have equal opportunity to be offended, exploited, and "honored" to that which indigenous women currently enjoy.

Clearly, Glidden seeks to shock her readers, disrupting the conditions that make it possible for the history and significance of sexism and racism to masquerade as acceptable, even honorable practices. Forcing readers to confront the ugly legacies and uncomfortable predicaments resulting from the conquest of North America, she endeavors to make the humiliation and oppression inscribed through the use of *squaw* tangible, meaningful, and indisputable. Glidden and others who invoke inversion as a counter-hegemonic strategy actively assert rhetorical sovereignty, not by emptying the word of its popular connotations, but by accentuating them and making its meanings apparent and visible. Although one might debate the utility of such interventions, struggles to clarify and redefine the significance of a keyword of conquest such as *squaw* through reversal, surely alerting audiences to what is at stake in the persistence of imperial idioms might raise the consciousness of individuals, and even foster opposition.

More commonly, individuals and organizations opposed to the lingering and hurtful presence of *squaw* across the American landscape and throughout American folk culture have called for eradicating state-sanctioned uses of the term. This "erasure strategy" began in Minnesota in 1994.[44] After learning of the historical origins of *squaw*, two Ojibwe adolescents, Angela Losh and Dawn Litzau, sought to remove the word from geographic features in the state.[45] They recognized the word as "unacceptable and embarrassing," a painful insult, best replaced in official inscriptions with words from local indigenous languages such as Ojibwe. After extensive public debate and legislative hearings, Losh and Litzau succeeded in passing a law banning the word.[46] Building on this momentum, in 1996 a grassroots movement began in Arizona to change place names in the state. A group of adolescent indigenous women, led by Delena Waddle, then a sophomore at Mesa High School, founded the American Indian Movement Youth Organization. As in Minnesota, pain, humiliation, and terror inspired Waddle: "It [squaw] makes you feel an inch tall. . . . You can hardly handle it, you know?" Although they encouraged a local church to change its name and provoked intense public debate, the young women did not achieve their objectives.[47] An unwillingness or inability to recognize the equality, autonomy, and dignity of indigenous peoples frustrated their efforts as they have those of state representative Jack Jackson, a Navajo (Diné) who has labored for the better part of a decade to change place names in Arizona. More recently, both Montana and Maine have passed legislation to remove this racist word from places and features in the state. Although in Montana, House Bill 412 passed with little debate or

opposition,[48] greater controversy accompanied the ultimately successful efforts of Passamaquoddy Representative Donald Soctomah in Maine.[49]

Although it originated in grassroots movements, erasure has emerged as the preferred response to official inscriptions of *squaw*. Proponents of this tactic highlight the imprint of imperial idioms in three important ways. First, they take as a premise that *squaw* insults and injures indigenous peoples, particularly indigenous women. Second, they argue that Euro-American individuals and institutions have appropriated the term, which lingers on the landscape as a reminder of the conquest and refashioning of North America. Yet its continued use remains of place, being more common in the trans-Mississippi West, where it's a foreign and invented sign—a mistranslation that lends itself too easily to dehumanizing practices. Here, the struggle for sovereignty hinges not on the recuperation of lost traditions, but on an insistence that Native peoples control the terms that define, describe, and debate who they are and, in turn, the place that they occupy within American society. Even though eradication secures rhetorical sovereignty, it fails either to engage popular, spontaneous, and arguably more pervasive uses and understandings of *squaw* or to adequately reconfigure power relations and signifying practices that legitimate coloniality in American culture.[50]

A handful of traditionalists and activists in the northeastern United States have recognized this shortcoming, insisting on a "reclamation strategy" for *squaw*, rather than its erasure. To give up the word, particularly for speakers of eastern Algonquin languages, is to acquiesce to the dominant, colonial culture and its definitions of Indianness: "Any word can hurt when used as a weapon, banning the word will not erase the past, and will only give the oppressors the power to define our language."[51] Indeed, these activists fear that what's really being erased are not the racist and sexist prejudices encoded in the term, but the history of first peoples and the significance of indigenous women. As the debate of place names in Maine unfolded, Marge Bruchac, an Abenaki storyteller, argued that geographic features such as White Squaw Island or Squaw Rock record the presence of Native Americans, bearing witness to both the ancestors and the survival of first peoples.[52] She suggested those remembered through such names were often women. Eradication thus promises to "erase one of the few markers we have of indigenous women."[53] Moreover, most of these places bear names bestowed on them by indigenous peoples; only later did Euro-Americans attach vulgar and objectionable meanings to them.

For indigenous women, advocates of reclamation insist, the stakes are even higher. Not only is their historic significance effaced, as the idioms of American empire limit their self-understanding and social location, but they will probably lose their names and their capacity to name themselves. For instance, Alice Nash notes that historically Wabanaki women's names have included *skw-, which when Christianized and Anglicized take a form such as Ouaouanouiouanskoue or Koussanskoue.[54] Erasure renders such historic naming practices impossible—literally unspeakable. Reclamation, in contrast, seeks to facilitate revival, continuing control, and remembrance. As Nash phrases it,

> For those of you who think it important to reclaim your Indian names and have faced disrespectful comments from people who say they can't pronounce or remember it, I ask you: how can eastern Algonquin speaking women reclaim their names if the only part people hear is the "squaw" ending? Clearly, the answer is education, not eradication.[55]

Reclamation, then, advocates re-recognition, pedagogy and communication, recollection and redefinition, recovery and respect. It fosters a reengagement with imperial idioms that stress new ways of being, doing, and hearing. Proponents of reclamation seek to reinscribe squaw not as an insult, but as a celebratory or honorific term:

> When I hear it spoken by Native peoples, in its proper context, I hear the voices of the ancestors. I am reminded of powerful grandmothers who nurtured our peoples and fed the strangers, of proud women chiefs who stood up against them, and of mothers and daughters and sisters who still stand here today. In their honor, I demand that our language, and our women, and our history, be treated with respect.[56]

Reclamation validates indigenous femininity, while countering coloniality, through an awareness and reverence for tradition.

Inversion, erasure, and reclamation question the complex interplay of signs, history, and power animating colonial culture in the contemporary United States. Demanding rhetorical sovereignty, these practices

> speak the language of power in a manner that disrupts its discursive address. At the same time, however, these tactics borrow the mode of signification appropriate to the powers they covet, contest, or condemn. Official signifiers represent visible, monumental powers that present themselves as fixed, stable, and immutable. Subaltern seizures of these signs in struggles for recognition involve practices of indentification that seek visibility.[57]

These decolonizing strategies position themselves, claim power, locate sovereignty, and conceive of femininity in distinct ways. Although inversion and erasure direct their energies largely at dismembering colonial culture, reclamation not only dismembers but also remembers as it stresses the continuing vitality of tradition. They also empower indigenous women and undermine the dominant culture quite differently: inversion focuses on shock and alienation; erasure seeks to create agency by stressing insult and injury;[58] and reclamation relies on tradition to consolidate authority and legitimacy. These anticolonial projects offer alternative visions of sovereignty. While erasure focuses on indigenous self-determination (principally through discourses of rights, possessive individualism, and legislation), reclamation invokes the past, culture, and tradition for its assertion of sovereignty. Finally, although inversion and erasure promote femininity as a universal category occupied by

all women, reclamation complicates such categorical assertions by stressing the cultural uniqueness of indigenous women.

The alternate techniques deployed within these anticolonial frameworks derive from the positions, histories, and conditions in which constituencies have mobilized them. As Nash nicely summarizes it,

> Out west it is a mark of racist violence directed toward visible Indian peoples and especially toward Indian women; in the northeast it is a mark of how communities have been invisibilized, their languages and cultures caricatured, so that women can't even give their daughters an Indian name without fear that it will bring shame instead of pride. It is not surprising that one side wants to erase the word while the other wants to reclaim it.[59]

The politics of location situating indigenous women in colonial America influence both their experiences of and responses to the term. Native American constituencies have sought to decolonize American culture through inversion, erasure, and reclamation: strategies through which they have understood, endured, engaged, interpreted, and opposed the inscriptions of *squaw* and the imperial idioms authorizing them.

CONCLUSION

Tracing the history of the term *squaw* offers insights into the positionings and politics of indigenous femininity in colonial America. Today, as throughout the colonization of Native America, imperial projects and projections have based themselves upon and imagined themselves through the lives, bodies, and images of indigenous women, situating these women as the ground, object, victim, and oppositional subject of coloniality in American culture. Although generally unrecognized, this situation underscores the differential impact of such projects and projections in four ways:

(1) The constricted space for elaborating indigenous femininity mapped in and through *squaw* limits the kind and quality of roles open to them;

(2) Colonial clichés such as *squaw* continue to focus the desires and disgust of Euro-Americans on the bodies of Native American women;

(3) The insult targets women, injuring their societies; and

(4) Issues of sexuality, race, culture, and history foster competing arguments for rights and tradition while fashioning identities (local, national, tribal, and pan-Indian).

The tensions between invisibility and visibility, between imagined and embodied Indians, have produced these gendered effects. The racist and sexist stereotypes given voice through *squaw*, no less than the official inscription of the term on the landscape, render embodied indigenous women invisible, overshadowed by the iconic insistence of the trope. The struggles over the term also highlight the prominent role that indigenous women have played in opposition to Euro-American imperial endeavors. They have taken leading roles in efforts to eradicate and reclaim the term, initiating movements across

the United States. Without their dynamic presence, neither the controversy nor the subsequent changes would have occurred in the past decade. Although the mediation of Native American women has always been crucial to the shape and significance of borderlands in North America, increasingly these women not only facilitate and frame, orchestrate and oppose colonial encounters, but actively dismember and decolonize the imperial imagination as well.

Ultimately, the continuing use of *squaw* in place names and folk culture, as well as the ongoing conflicts over the term, make plain the centrality of femininity to formulations of indigenity and (rhetorical) sovereignty in post-colonial America. Donald Soctomah, the Passamaquoddy state representative who sponsored legislation to change *squaw* place names, succinctly and poignantly elaborates the fundamental linkages:

> It is never an aggressive act for a people to exercise their right to self-determination. It is an intrinsic right woven into the fiber of values that this country was supposed to be founded upon. The following Cheyenne proverb summarizes the point of this bill concisely: 'A nation is never conquered, until the hearts of its women are on the ground.' Every time this term [*squaw*] is used the hearts of our women take another blow.[60]

Perhaps the struggles over *squaw* will encourage academics and activists alike to rethink the gendered meanings of the efforts of indigenous peoples in the United States so that they may define themselves, claim historical rights, and counter colonial power relations.

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