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**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

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**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8pk3m740>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 42(4)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

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**Publication Date**

2018-09-01

**DOI**

10.17953/aicrj.42.4.starblanket

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# Complex Accountabilities: Deconstructing “the Community” and Engaging Indigenous Feminist Research Methods

*Gina Starblanket*

During the last three decades, scholars of Indigenous studies and Indigenous politics have increasingly been called upon to take account of gender and sexuality in their analyses of settler colonialism. These calls have not been in vain, as academics across the disciplines have begun to direct greater attention to the ways in which patriarchy, misogyny, and cis-heteronormativity intersect with other power relations to form the broad terrain of colonialism. However, despite growing theoretical recognition that decolonizing and Indigenous nation-building projects must address questions of gender and sexuality, attempts to translate this awareness to practice remain limited in a number of ways. While academics and researchers are increasingly mandated to cultivate ethical and accountable partnerships *with* relevant Indigenous communities, how researchers may need to be accountable to the myriad power relations that exist *within and outside of* Indigenous communities has not been sufficiently analyzed.

This article critically examines the call for researchers’ “accountability to community,” not to discredit this imperative, but rather to identify the challenges and exclusions that arise when the drive to remain accountable is informed by conceptions of Indigenous people as belonging to homogenous groups with singular thoughts and experiences. The extensive influence of colonial heteropatriarchy indicates more specific analysis is needed of the power relations that manifest within Indigenous communities in terms of gender and sexuality, and, especially, how these power relations can be willfully or inadvertently reproduced by academic and research initiatives.

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In particular, I argue that to date, efforts to remain accountable to Indigenous peoples through the inclusion of Indigenous women, girls, and LGBTQ2 voices within representative units and through token consideration of matters of perceived importance to marginalized people are not substantive enough to alter the foundations of patriarchal and heteronormative structures. In order to bring forward deeper understandings of responsibility and accountability, Indigenous researchers and researchers working with Indigenous peoples need to reevaluate their methods, objectives, and analytic foundations from the outset of their work. This involves attention to the enclosures that are sustained by bounded constructions and representations of Indigeneity along with the resultant forms of silencing and exclusion. As those who for many years have lived the effects of reified notions of community firsthand, I propose a turn to Indigenous feminist and Indigenous women's methodologies to guide critical analysis of questions of accountability, claims to representation and inclusion, and researcher positionality.

### *Relational Accountability and "the Indigenous Community"*

"Accountability to community" has in recent years become a familiar motto guiding the work of institutions, corporations, and organizations engaging or partnering with Indigenous peoples. In a range of contexts, it represents an institutionalized imperative that often is caught up in demands for practical knowledge mobilization, corporate social responsibility, community-university engagement, and public-private partnerships. Within academia, "accountability to community" is a central concern for scholars and administrators committed to decolonizing or Indigenizing institutional policies and processes.

In seeking to understand what accountability means in Indigenous contexts, many scholars look to relational worldviews and epistemologies to guide research partnerships. Often contrasted with individualist conceptions of knowledge production, relational approaches follow from the notion that Indigenous epistemologies, which situate human beings as interdependent with all of creation, can inform ethical frameworks that recognize knowledge as co-constituted by these complex networks of relationship. As Shawn Wilson writes, "the major difference between dominant paradigms and an indigenous paradigm is that those dominant paradigms are built on the fundamental belief that knowledge is an individual entity: The researcher is an individual in search of knowledge, knowledge is something that is gained and therefore knowledge may be owned by an individual."<sup>1</sup> A relational approach to accountability thus should capture the full spectrum of relationships to which Indigenous peoples hold both rights and responsibilities. Nevertheless, dominant conceptions of accountability tend to privilege one relationship above all others: that is, the relationship with "the community."

In the initial phases of research, the notion of relational accountability manifests as the drive to remain accountable to Indigenous community partners through the conception of projects that are community-driven and stand to substantively benefit Indigenous people.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the project, researchers are to take every effort to be responsible for their choices and to engage in respectful, culturally grounded,

and transparent research that is useful to participating communities.<sup>3</sup> They must employ methods that are relevant and important to community members and that make adequate, ongoing space for community input and guidance on the direction of research.<sup>4</sup> In addition to the selection of research foci, practices of accountability should guide methods of data collection, forms of analysis, and the ways in which researchers present information.<sup>5</sup> Relational accountability also involves putting measures in place that protect culturally specific knowledge and that maintain Indigenous communities' control over what knowledge is shared and how it is framed.<sup>6</sup> These general principles aim to create a process whereby researchers are held accountable to all relations in every realm and stage of work. Even more broadly, relational accountability is mindful of the harms that western science and research have historically committed against Indigenous peoples, as well as how these systems continue to marginalize many of us.<sup>7</sup> This structural awareness directs scholars to make careful and thoughtful decisions in undertaking Indigenous research projects and to recognize that their decisions have the potential to either challenge or reproduce these extractive, assimilative, or exclusionary patterns.<sup>8</sup> The concept of relational accountability, therefore, is not only a central component of protocols and processes for conducting research grounded upon Indigenous paradigms, but is also the basis for a critique of forms of knowledge production and mobilization that have traditionally characterized institutional engagements with Indigenous communities.

Yet when relational accountability is mobilized in ways that homogenize Indigenous peoples as a singular unit, its powers of critique and transformation can be stymied. Although the discourse on relational accountability has emphasized the need for research to be driven by and for Indigenous collectives, in general it has been unaccompanied by critical strategies geared towards exploring the particular experiences of colonial violence and oppression felt by Indigenous women, girls, and LGBTQ2 people. Many treatments of "the community interest" take the existence of a collective Indigenous voice and vision for granted, oversimplifying and universalizing the different objectives and priorities of Indigenous people within the collective. Nor has this discourse adequately grappled with the need to deconstruct the power relations underlying the construction and representation of the collective interest. The discursive privileging of "the Indigenous community" has thus given rise to the creation of methodological frameworks that account primarily for researcher responsibilities to those in positions of leadership and with powers of representation and voice within collectives. Furthermore, it overlooks questions of accountability to those whose existence belies bounded notions of the Indigenous community. Taken together, these tendencies run the risk of reinforcing normative orders and the assumptions they entail, while also containing or marginalizing difference within communities.

As a consequence of this strong emphasis on "the community," the body of work on relational accountability has focused primarily on the need for researchers to maintain good relationships with collective entities as a whole which, in practice, often amounts to researcher deference to a purportedly common or shared Indigenous understanding or experience. Even when scholars integrate questions of gender and sexuality as considerations in their work, they often neglect to consider the ways in which their

simultaneous reliance on the construction of “the Indigenous community” privileges dominant voices and priorities, while absenting those lying outside of or silenced within the collective. Thus, there is an ongoing need for researchers to develop practices of accountability that are not wedded to notions of “the Indigenous community,” but focus instead on the web of varied, overlapping relationships of which Indigenous people are a part.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s influential contribution to Indigenous research methods argues that in order to enact change in the academy, researchers must extend their responsibilities beyond normative understandings of “accountability” and continually work towards broadening the meaning of the concept.<sup>9</sup> This involves utilizing processes that are reflective of Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies which are themselves premised upon the interconnectedness of the self and other beings, including those in the physical, dream, and spirit worlds.<sup>10</sup> As Aileen Moreton-Robinson notes, the significance of Indigenous worldviews and principles of relationality extend well beyond the development of Indigenous research frameworks. She writes that Indigenous peoples “are engaged in an epistemic battle that requires more than defining our research methodologies and conducting research with and for our communities. We have to sustain an Indigenous social research paradigm with its own standards, rules of engagement and epistemological field.”<sup>11</sup> Significantly, Moreton-Robinson argues not only for responsible methods that bring Indigenous ways of knowing and being into institutional worlds, but suggests that Indigenous academics, scholars, and those working with Indigenous people focus on what it means to exist in worlds that employ entirely different or new ways of creating, understanding, and maintaining knowledge.

Here researchers are prompted to reflect upon how we might mobilize and advance Indigenous ways of knowing and being, beyond Indigenous participation in, or integration with, predominantly Western frames of reference. This requires critical and in-depth consideration of the ways in which Indigenous people are discursively constructed and represented within both academic and community contexts, each potentially confining in their own ways. In this regard, Chandra Mohanty’s important analysis of reductive discourse on third world women is helpful in that it calls on researchers and academics to “examine the *political* implications of [particular] *analytic* strategies and principles.”<sup>12</sup> Mohanty’s argument that simplistic discursive formulations based on a singular identity marker are both reductive and ineffectual holds true in the construction of cultural groups as well as for her category of analysis, “women.” In particular, her discussion of the limitations of collectivist representations offers insight into the ways that the characterization of Indigenous communities as groups with coherent needs, priorities, and visions can reinforce hegemonic notions of Indigeneity that overlook differences in gender, sexuality, socioeconomic location, age, and ability. For instance, the assumption that all Indigenous people in a band, nation, or tribe share the same position on issues such as governance, membership, natural resources, economic development, or other topics of interest can have the effect of falsely collapsing the distinctness of various Indigenous people as a result of their community affiliation.

Merely to recognize that Indigenous peoples inhabit multiple identity categories simultaneously and that their relationships also overlap with other vectors is not sufficient. As Mohanty eloquently demonstrates, researchers need to employ a multi-dimensional understanding of identity and relationship in order for their approaches and practices to avoid perpetuating distinct forms of homogenization and erasure of differences.

The tendency to privilege collective Indigenous relations above others, along with the perception that “the community” is the primary locus of Indigeneity, may be a consequence of the institutionalized emphasis on accountability described above. Indeed, community relationships are alternately invoked either as a way of evidencing authenticity, or of offering Indigenous support for a proposed project or partnership. Yet “the community” frame can also threaten to deny internal differences, marginalize dissenting voices, and disarm critique in the name of decolonial unity or commitment.

To be clear, the discourse on relational accountability has recognized that no predetermined epistemic frameworks or standardized models will suit the singularity of each research context and every relationship and has highlighted the need for specific research paradigms to be developed that are unique to the cultural differences that exist *between* communities. For instance, many Indigenous people and groups have created research protocols, frameworks, and agreements that are grounded in their own methods of seeking and protecting knowledge, such as Cree, Blackfoot, Ojibwe, Haudenosaunee, Pueblo, and Navajo ways of knowing. Nonetheless, the normative framing of “the community” can privilege collective cultural identity or affiliation at the expense of intragroup differences. Not only does this effectively attribute greater agency and voice to those who subscribe to dominant perspectives, but also reifies selective conceptualizations of precisely what, and whose perspectives, constitute “the community.” The following section of this paper explores the discursive construction of “the Indigenous community” as a locus of consideration in Indigenous research and scholarship, calling for a conception of relational accountability that takes into account the complex and varying relations that Indigenous peoples inhabit, both inside and outside of the collectives we belong to.

### *Deconstructing “the Community”*

The definition of the term *community* has long been the subject of debate in historical and contemporary discourse. To many Indigenous peoples, a community refers to a network of relations in which diverse living beings coexist and interact. Prior to the imposition of the Indian Act in Canada (1876), Indigenous peoples’ lives were characterized by various overlapping networks of relationships that carried associated rights and responsibilities. The notion of the “Indigenous community” was not fixed or bounded. Groups of families came together, split into factions, and created relationships with other groups when necessary. Over time, Indigenous peoples’ own understandings of community have been shaped by imposed structures and other measures designed to restrict and control our mobility and our ability to organize socially and politically. As Emma LaRocque observes, the notion of “‘collectivity’ was in

many ways invented through the creation of reserves and a legalized collective identity via the Indian Act.”<sup>13</sup>

Critical examination of the origins of present-day Indian Act communities points us to the colonial power relations that the design of these communities was intended to uphold. It also demonstrates their constructed and strategic nature. With longstanding forms of restriction on Indigenous peoples’ forms of association and mobility, the notion of “the Indigenous community” has increasingly been tied to particular bases of land: notably, Indian reserves. The territorialization of “the Indigenous community” through the reserve system continues to result in the marginalization and dispossession of countless Indigenous peoples from the issues that impact their lives and those of their relations.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the “geographical proximity” dimension of community also reproduces many gendered assumptions that implicate women in particular ways. In some respects, for example, representations of Indigenous women serve to domesticate and consign them to the territorial bounds of “the community,” such as when they are seen as the “keepers of culture” or as those who embody the primary responsibility for maintaining relationships with particular territories. Yet, at the same time, colonial notions of domesticity based on patriarchal understandings of marriage and family have also produced the conditions for Indigenous women’s removal and relocation away from their ancestral lands, such as those reproduced for many years under the Indian Act’s “marrying-out” restrictions.<sup>15</sup>

In an associated consequence of the Indian Act, many Indigenous peoples in Canada have come to understand “community” as band affiliation as it has been imposed and recorded by the Canadian government. This has resulted in a unidimensional understanding of community that privileges select markers of identity over our multiple, complex associations and responsibilities as living beings. As Edward Said has written, “No one today is purely one thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind. . . . No one can deny the persisting continuities of long traditions, sustained habitations, national languages, and cultural geographies, but there seems no reason except fear and prejudice to keep insisting on their separation and distinctiveness, as if that was all human life was about.”<sup>16</sup> Said’s critique of essentialist understandings of identity raises important considerations surrounding the political significance of constructed, contingent, and performed nature of communities. In efforts to strategically navigate liberal forms of political inclusion or representation, Indigenous peoples have often found ourselves advancing our collective voice as a constellation of shared interests in order to present a sense of cohesion among individual objectives, priorities, and protocols. While collective boundaries are certainly reified from sources external to Indigenous communities, I am particularly interested in the ways in which these boundaries are constituted and reinforced from within.

Indigenous communities can and should be understood as more than collectives of individual bodies who share a similar geography or cultural identity, instead representing a network of relationships between people and places interacting not only in the present, but also the past and future. Following Mishuana Goeman’s discussion of

the body “as a meeting place,” an alternative to homogenized treatments of community might be imagined by thinking about relationships beyond singular sources of identity or a shared physical location. Rather, we might think of our very existence as a hub where multiple overlapping relationships of time and place intersect and regenerate.<sup>17</sup> Past and present relationships between human bodies and bodies of land and water are layered one upon another, alongside relationships between both our ancestral ways of knowing and being and the future possibilities that they might offer. It is when the breadth and significance of these relationships is selectively invoked that the possibilities for ethical and accountable relationships narrow. Constructions of “the Indigenous community” as a hegemonic entity with unity among the political priorities, interests, and analyses of its constituent members have often either relegated the voices and concerns of Indigenous women and LGBTQ2 people to the back seat, or have subsumed them within claims to overarching representation by broader collectives.

A long-standing example of how this has taken place in the Canadian context can be seen in the ongoing struggle of the Native Women’s Association of Canada (NWAC) to exercise its voice in federal political matters. This pattern of gender-based exclusion was particularly apparent during the era of constitutional negotiations, when Indigenous representative organizations either blended the needs of men and women into a pan-Indigenous discourse of Aboriginal and Treaty rights, or ignored the needs of women entirely. “Malestream” Indigenous organizations blocked Indigenous women from having their own representation during constitutional talks, concerned that it would erode their political power and complicate their political agenda. Indigenous women who insisted on a mechanism for their voices to be considered in negotiations faced especially strong hostility from the national organizations representing status Indians.<sup>18</sup>

Indigenous feminist analysis demonstrated that much of the power held by Indigenous governments emerged from the consolidation and defense of patriarchal power and privilege, rather than the exercise of representative authority. A number of Indigenous women drew attention to the ways in which legacies of colonialism had resulted in the concretization of patriarchal systems of band government and male privilege within Indigenous communities. These women challenged the culturalist claims that some communities invoked to legitimate exclusionary and oppressive policies and discredited the prioritization of self-government over women’s rights and interests. Indigenous feminist interventions represent some of the first public invitations for Indigenous governments to confront conditions of patriarchy within their communities and to consider the ways that homogenous constructions of Indigenous identity, far from remedying the oppression faced by Indigenous peoples, were in some cases contributing to or amplifying that suffering, particularly in relation to women.

Over time, Indigenous women continued to engage in various forms of critical activism and analysis in order to contest patriarchal and heteronormative constructions of a universal Indigeneity. Indigenous feminists in particular have taken great care to demonstrate that there are not only explicit distinctions in Indigenous peoples’ experiences of colonization, but that there are also important differences in the forms of oppression faced by Indigenous women and LGBTQ2 people. While voicing our



concerns, Indigenous feminists continually have had to explain that we are in solidarity with the “broader” political issues, be it the treaty table, the land question, or self-government.

While more and more Indigenous people broaden our attention beyond the ordinary debates that gave rise to the need to critically engage with questions of gender, sexuality, and representation in Indigenous communities, an important opportunity exists to build on these conversations and ensure that the revitalization of Indigenous ways of knowing and being remains attentive to the variety of Indigenous peoples’ experiences and aspirations. While homogenous and essentialist constructions of Indigeneity may have been understood by some to be a useful strategy for collectives to mobilize politically in the era of rights and recognition, this imagined cohesion should not overshadow the particular political priorities of Indigenous women and LGBTQ2 people that may not be represented by broader collective bodies.

It is also important to note that these patterns of exclusion are not merely historical phenomena, but continue to occur in contemporary Indigenous politics. From 2016 to 2017, NWAC was excluded from the national table in First Ministers meetings surrounding human rights, climate change, renewal of the national health accord, and a “high-level” meeting on reconciliation with the prime minister’s office.<sup>19</sup> As NWAC has indicated, this “sex-based discrimination continues to minimize the voice of Indigenous women and the voices of our grassroots organizations,” leaving out those who do not feel “adequately represented by other national Indigenous organizations.”<sup>20</sup> In response to NWAC’s exclusion from these conversations, National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations Perry Bellegarde speculated that the prime minister’s office may have invited those to the table whom he saw as having a stake in questions of “rights and title,” also noting that his organization strives to represent all Indigenous peoples, including women, youth and elders.<sup>21</sup> This suggestion illustrates the ongoing ways in which many Indigenous peoples’ voices can become subsumed by overarching claims to collective representation, while simultaneously constructed as distinct from and secondary to the supposedly “collective” political issues.

The marginalization of Indigenous women is reproduced when matters of concern to Indigenous women are distinguished from “broader” questions that are said to reside within the representative mandates of Indigenous male leadership, such as those relating to land, collective rights, and title. Claims of inclusion of Indigenous women’s voices within overarching claims to representation by mainstream organizations neither address the particular concerns of Indigenous women and LGBTQ2 people, nor do they adequately grapple with problems of patriarchy and heteronormativity within Indigenous and non-Indigenous contexts. When “Indigenous women’s issues” are taken up by malestream governments, they are often incorporated as after-the-fact considerations or reflections tacked on to preestablished frameworks. For instance, when dominant collectives and organizations invoke violence against Indigenous women, girls, and LGBTQ2 people as evidence of the colonial oppression and marginalization faced by Indigenous peoples in Canada, but analyses of the heteronormative patriarchy in which this violence occurs are absent, the suffering of Indigenous women can become a form of political capital used to advance purportedly “broader” Indigenous political

agendas. Such is the case when the discourse surrounding violence against Indigenous LGBTQ2 people gets built into overarching critiques of the Canadian state's failure to respect Indigenous rights. Further, the causal relationship between heteronormative patriarchy and violence against Indigenous women, girls, and LGBTQ2 people is also minimized by efforts to incorporate these matters into conversations surrounding how colonial violence impacts Indigenous peoples universally. This occurs when the gendered and sexualized nature of colonial violence is not recognized as worthy of consideration in and of itself, as though the very existence of such gendered inquiries inherently takes away from the ability to engage in analyses of colonial violence against Indigenous men, when this quite obviously is not the case.

There are multiple ways in which representational claims can themselves function to reproduce the further silencing and erasure of Indigenous peoples. For instance, Sarah Hunt has written on the ways that local and territorial organizations can consciously or inadvertently leave out the voices of the constituencies they claim to represent. This is particularly the case with groups whose mandates and membership are organized on the basis of binary constructions of gender. As Hunt writes, "The Assembly of First Nations, NWAC, and local organizations and individuals calling for women and girls to have political, economic, and social power and the restoration of traditional roles must begin to ask themselves how non-binary traditional and contemporary realities are being addressed in these efforts. Without this, the violence of colonial erasure is further advanced."<sup>22</sup> Indeed, Indigenous queer theorists and other Indigenous scholars have highlighted the need for attention to the ways in which gendered and cis-heteronormative assumptions and values are reproduced within mainstream Indigenous social and political movements to the exclusion of women, girls, and LGBTQ2 people.

When complex power relations are subsumed within struggles aimed at addressing colonial violence generally, an ostensible boundary is erected between the broad terrain of colonial power structures and the ways in which these coalesce with other systems of power and oppression to result in particular experiences for women, girls, and LGBTQ2 people. This boundary is maintained through the suggestion that colonialism represents the overarching evil, and that questions of gendered and sexualized violence are merely distractions that should be subsumed within universal decolonial mandates. In practice, this boundary guards against critical inquiry into the myriad ways that gendered and sexualized forms of violence are reproduced by Indigenous peoples within our own engagements and works, whether political, academic, activist, or otherwise.

Leanne Simpson observes a tendency in Indigenous academia to regard Indigenous gender and sexuality as an afterthought, writing that "if we have to worry that we don't have enough queer voices on the panel or enough queer voices in the book, then we've already failed because we've constructed Indigenous worlds where [two-spirit and queer people] have to come in because anti-queerness placed [them] outside."<sup>23</sup> In her view, the political, ethical, and social organization of Indigenous peoples should be grounded upon respect for and accountability to our varied relationships, through the "practice of benevolent relationships" towards all those with whom we share our

lives.<sup>24</sup> Both Hunt and Simpson highlight the ways in which binary constructions of gender and other forms of conceptual containment can foreclose on the potential for imagining more open, diverse, and inclusive forms of social and political organization. Importantly, they also demonstrate how efforts aimed at bringing forward greater accountability through strategies of representation and inclusion can ultimately reproduce the forms of violence and erasure that they intend to address if foundational organizational or analytical premises are not revisited in a substantial way.

These analyses elucidate the vital need to create ongoing space for critical dialogue surrounding the ways in which nationalist or collective political identities attempt to manage difference through techniques of incorporation, such as those that rely upon strategic references to culture or tradition.<sup>25</sup> As J. Kēhaulani Kauanui notes in her discussion of the role of gender and sexuality within Hawaiian sovereignty movements, determinations of the “community” or “nation” as the overarching measure of identification can represent a form of political containment which functions to incorporate difference. Analyzing 1990s same-sex marriage cases in Hawaii, Kauanui demonstrates just how easily gender and sexual diversity can become subsumed by representations of culture and tradition.<sup>26</sup> Rather than disowning LGBTQ2 Hawaiians as non-Hawaiian due to their sexuality, various political leaders acknowledged them as part of the “national community” by claiming gender and sexual diversity as part of the group’s traditional culture, and thus under its overarching jurisdiction. In the process of extending this universal cultural recognition, such leaders not only asserted representational powers over LGBTQ2 people within the nation, but also implied that there was no need for distinct protections for LGBTQ2 Kanaka Maoli.

These conversations illuminate how the bounds of recognition operate to dampen or disarm critique by invoking tradition to either contain difference within the boundaries of the nation, or to evidence how progressive and tolerant the nation is. Such strategies of incorporative traditionalism take place in many contexts beyond that described by Kauanui, also occurring, for instance, when claims are made that Indigenous women’s central role in governance is traditional with the specific aim of incorporating Indigenous women’s voices within that of the collective or to shield against critiques of patriarchal violence within the Indigenous community. As Kauanui points out, mere recognition of the traditional appreciation for difference does not prevent against the suppression of critical discussions of internal forms of oppression faced by LGBTQ2 Hawaiians.<sup>27</sup> It is therefore crucial to move away from simply recognizing and accepting “difference as tradition” towards critically engaging the power relations within communities. Incorporative traditionalism can result in the hardening of national boundaries, the misrecognition and under-theorization of suffering, and the extension of voices already centered within communities, thus consolidating their power and jurisdiction. It can also obscure the need for space to critically evaluate the processes through which some continue to find themselves marginalized by the very communities claiming to honor them.

Ultimately, claims to identity and tradition point to the need for critical inquiry into the meanings of nationalist belonging, and how gender and sexuality intersect with forms of identification based on cultural traditions. This section has argued that

bounded notions of “the Indigenous community” as it has historically been formulated, reproduced, and reinforced can give rise to multiple forms of containment that limit the potential for the implementation of ethical and accountable relationships in contemporary contexts. Such analyses highlight the question of whether the injunction around ethical and accountable relationships with communities can itself be problematic. What does it mean to always rely upon community-level relationships, and accountability, as normative frames in understanding our roles and responsibilities as academics? It is worth considering that the drive to engage with Indigenous peoples as collectives, or even the demand for accountability itself, may result in a form of disciplining that can foreclose dialogue and critique, while also empowering those who seek to harden community boundaries. The complex nature of this conversation points to the need to continually imagine new ways of enacting our responsibilities to the many relations that we all inhabit.

In light of these considerations, it is necessary for academics and activists who are working with Indigenous peoples to think about accountability beyond “the community” as a cohesive group of individuals with shared objectives, priorities, and protocols. This need is particularly salient where research processes and goals are grounded in cultural traditions, which can function to challenge Western notions of knowledge production, but when employed in homogenizing and essentialist ways can also have repressive or exclusionary effects. The following section explores some of the diverse analytical strategies employed by Indigenous feminists and women and how these might contribute to developing processes geared towards challenging various intersecting forces of oppression within knowledge production and mobilization, creating a framework of relational accountability in research that makes space for a greater range of voices and experiences.

### *Indigenous Feminist Work: Complicating the Collective Will*

Although considerations of gender and sexuality are increasingly finding their way into analyses of colonialism, Indigenous studies scholars are only beginning to recognize the potential of Indigenous feminist methodologies to critically analyze processes of knowledge production. As Mishuana Goeman has noted, “many fields of inquiry have yet to engage with, much less exhaust, the rich contributions of Indigenous feminisms.”<sup>28</sup> Goeman argues that integrating Indigenous feminist methodologies into a multitude of rigorous conversations, and “moving beyond an additive or lip-service model of Native feminist inclusion into multiple fields,” can help “new questions and methods arise that restructure questions around the political, cultural, and social.”<sup>29</sup> Her analysis suggests that Indigenous studies research should integrate feminist methodological tools and considerations from the outset so that rather than an afterthought, gender and sexuality become part of the design of our central questions, terms and theoretical premises.

As an activist and scholarly framework that strives to attend to various intersections of power, Indigenous feminism has long been tasked with moving beyond mere recognition of Indigenous women’s distinctiveness and inclusion of their voices. Rather,

Indigenous feminists have challenged non-Indigenous feminist analytical frameworks to fundamentally alter their methods and objectives in order to address the particular structures of oppression faced by Indigenous women, and also have much to offer to the reconfiguration of Indigenous research methodologies in this respect.

As this essay has discussed, and Indigenous women and feminists know all too well, institutional, historical, and cultural constructions of “the community” can reproduce relations of exclusion, dominance, and subordination. The concept of relational accountability emphasizes the need to remain accountable to Indigenous community partners, but a nuanced and critical understanding of accountability necessitates attention to the power relations underlying the construction and representation of “the community” as well as the identification and representation of community imperatives. Engaging in this work requires a commitment to critical thought in the service of change. Indigenous feminisms can provide important inspiration here, as we are willing to inquire into issues that may result in a critique of community boundaries while also recognizing the importance of collective organizing and coalition building.

In Indigenous politics, Indigenous women’s issues have long been cast aside as “individual issues” in favor of “collective” ones. Even when issues of importance to women and LGBTQ2 people are acknowledged at a community level, they often do not garner the same scale of political response as the purportedly “collective” political matters. Indigenous women’s issues are particularly at risk of being overlooked within methods of accountability that regard the needs of the community as paramount and as inviolable. In addition, because relational accountability is often framed in contrast to the individualism of Western forms of knowledge production, it may unintentionally reproduce binary thinking about individual and collective interests, which may limit researcher accountability to diverse subjectivities within Indigenous communities even further.

Indigenous feminists have challenged the perceived boundary between individual and collective issues, demonstrating that there are no political issues, priorities, or objectives that are strictly community or individual matters, nor can they be tiered or compartmentalized.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, Indigenous feminists contest the notion that patriarchy and colonialism are mutually exclusive phenomena, showing instead that these are co-constitutive and must be addressed in concert. In the discourse on Indigenous research methodologies, “the community” is revered so highly that it can be seen as taking precedence above all else in the research relationship, removing community boundaries, priorities, objectives, and processes from scrutiny. Academia places a high premium on community-based research and as a result, researchers may be motivated to overlook oppressive practices within their own work and within communities in order to maintain good relations and protect their own status or position. There is thus an ongoing need for scholars to actively resist the tendency to uncritically defer to the construct of “the community,” and to challenge the forms of silence that might be expected in fulfillment of a perceived duty to community partners. Rather than seeing the consideration of diverse perspectives and experiences as a threat, Indigenous feminism can provide strategies to deconstruct and interrogate what it is we understand to be a community imperative. Indigenous feminist modes of analysis can also

prompt researchers to nuance and complicate not only *community*, but also terms such as *tradition* and *culture*, and to interrogate the possibilities, limitations, tensions, and consequences of these concepts.

While diverse in their own approaches and manifestations, works by Indigenous feminist theorists and scholarly/activist works show that it is possible to respectfully engage in conversations that are neither politically sanctioned nor that align with community conventions. Incrementally, Indigenous women and feminists have carved out space to engage in critical dialogue around issues that were once thought to be politically unspeakable. For instance, Indigenous women's concerns have been seen, both in the past and present, as too affective or emotionally driven to occupy space in public discourse; even in the private sphere it has been difficult at times to raise concerns about violence, abuse, and exclusion. Yet, as Dian Million explains, women's writings and dialogue surrounding the power relations in their communities have made it possible for others to speak about the conditions affecting them and their children. Million describes Indigenous women's insurrected knowledges and experiences as "felt" knowledge; that is, knowledge that is felt by those whose have experienced it. Million's articulation of felt theory elucidates the ways in which Indigenous feminists and women's embodied insights into the gendered nature of colonial violence have shifted the space and frames through which Indigenous inquiry is approached and knowledge is understood.<sup>31</sup>

Felt theory specifically challenges forms of traditionalist incorporation or claims to collective representation. In explaining how women's first-person and experiential narratives are much more emancipatory as they change the actual conditions of what can be said in public spaces, Million writes that because a felt analysis "is one that creates a context for a more complex "telling," the conditions under which women speak are transformative in and of themselves. If Indigenous women's accounts were previously seen as too affective, then their inclusion meant that the disciplinary space guarding the notion of objectivity had to be ruptured. Rather than concealing it, Indigenous women have embraced the need to harness their pain and anger as central to their accounts. In other words, they have given felt knowledge credibility by entering it into the public record and by not letting the discourse on Indigenous peoples be defined exclusively by those claiming powers of authorship and representation.

Indeed, the process of creating felt theory is just as significant as the outcome, as it challenges hegemonic power structures as processes that are sustained through silence: "Hegemony is not prior to, but is a result of the process that seeks to reconcile the *agon*, all the divergent elements present when different claims are constituted as "truth."<sup>32</sup> Further, Million notes, all accounts, including those that have been silenced or those that contradict dominant positions, shape the configurations of scholarly work and research. Thus, Indigenous women's embodied and gendered interventions have enormous potential for broadening Indigenous research paradigms as they can help reconstitute which questions are being asked, who is being asked, and what we understand to be true. Having reevaluated how researchers "see and understand their proper subjects," Indigenous feminist modes of analysis are helpful in confronting and

challenging the exclusion or token inclusion of women's experiences from research relationships.<sup>33</sup>

Million writes that Indigenous women's conceptualizations of a more expansive and inclusive notion of relationality transform notions of the polity completely:

They worked toward an Indigenous symbolic that does not see the polity organized around a white male subject or a female Indigenous one. They moved to transform the order. Indigenous women articulate a polity imagined in Indigenous terms, a polity where everyone—genders, sexualities, differently expressed life forms, the animals and plants, the mountains—are already included as the subjects of the polity. They are already empowered, not having to argue for any “right” to recognition; they form that which is the polity, that which is respected and in relation.<sup>34</sup>

Their understanding of social and political organization is a contribution that invites us to think beyond bounded notions of “the community” towards a more open and inclusive understanding of responsibility to other living beings. At the same time, it also helps us to recognize that we all have a role in decolonization; as Million reminds us, decolonization does not mean the gatekeeping of community boundaries, it means “to understand as fully as possible the forms colonialism takes in our own times.”<sup>35</sup> Her commitment to countering and intervening in the many forms and forces that colonial heteropatriarchy can take exemplifies a conceptual mobility unbounded by static or dichotomous thinking.

These and other strategies can help broaden how we understand accountability in research methodologies. Further, we can challenge the expectations of our own institutions and funding organizations, demonstrating the reasons why it is important to ensure that diverse persons are given adequate space even if they are not members of a particular community or organization. Academics and researchers working in Indigenous contexts have an enormous role to play in this project, as we have the power to bring to light the political significance of marginalized perspectives, not only those of actors who hold powers of definition and representation within their communities. Such a mandate means that researchers must take conscious steps to resist the tendency to privilege relationships with elected political leadership or formal representatives of communities.

Although a collective focus is changing how researchers conduct themselves in many important ways, positioning the “community” as a central category of analysis within discussions surrounding scholarly and institutional responsibilities towards Indigenous peoples can have a range of restrictive impacts. These include the proliferation of oversimplified representations of Indigenous aspirations, to the lack of awareness or engagement with various (particularly marginalized) knowledges, to the construction of binaries between the individual/collective in a way that presumes their mutual exclusivity. This results in a failure to engage with the multiple, overlapping, and often dynamic subjectivities of living beings, but also the many diverse relationships that weave in, out, through, and often transgress bounded notions of the “community.”

## *Conclusion: Accounting for Our Relations into the Future*

Indigenous feminist methodologies aim to ensure that marginalized voices are properly accounted for while working within a relational framework. The development of Indigenous research practices that are grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing and being and that are responsive to the varying needs and experiences of individuals can be advanced in many ways through reference to Indigenous feminist and Indigenous women's works, with their attention to marginalized subjectivities, their willingness to resist hegemonic and dichotomous ways of thinking, along with their experience redefining issues, acknowledging the diversity of individual experience, enlarging disciplinary boundaries, and negotiating disparate worldviews. Indeed, the feminist method of beginning "from the problems of the marginalized, who are often disadvantaged by gender as well as other factors" can help effect a shift in how researchers and scholars even begin to put together research projects, bringing forward greater participation from grassroots levels and accounting for the day-to-day material violence individuals face within and outside of their communities.<sup>36</sup> Each of these can help guide some of the paradigm shifts necessary to think within and work through an expansive understanding of responsibility and accountability.

A more robust understanding of relational accountability requires researchers to be attentive to their own role in processes of knowledge production in order to remain mindful of the potential for their research to legitimize or further obscure forms of violence or exclusion.<sup>37</sup> As Alison Jaggar writes, "most feminist scholars recognize that research is more than the disinterested pursuit of 'objective' knowledge, that investigations and outcomes are always value-laden and never morally or politically neutral."<sup>38</sup> Indigenous feminists' commitment to self-reflexivity invites researchers or academics to engage in critical reflection about their own subjectivities relative to those they may be working with. Such awareness requires consideration of the ways in which questions are posed and knowledge is used in the aim of disrupting taken-for-granted assumptions and power relations within and external to communities. The capacity to critically reflect upon processes of accountability requires reconceptualization of the relation between the self and others as a continuous commitment to openly and honestly engage in dialogue surrounding whether we are remaining accountable to our many overlapping layers of relationships. Indigenous feminism calls upon individuals to be willing to evaluate and take ownership of their role in the reproduction of oppressive social forces; to confront dualisms, highlight intersections, and prompt substantive changes to processes of knowledge production.

Earlier in this article, I described an alternative to homogenized community, conceptualizing human existence as embedded in complex networks of relationship with various living beings in different time periods. Such a conception of relationality enables a much deeper understanding of accountability to our nonhuman kin and those in the spirit world, as well as our responsibilities to the past, present, and future. This involves engaging in dialogue and decisions today that may be geared not just towards present imperatives, but towards creating better conditions for those who follow. When organizing around contemporary issues, Indigenous feminists



reflect upon how we might remain accountable to future generations and create conditions whereby they too can realize their own ideas of freedom and wellness without preempting those choices through our actions today. This critical self-awareness and forward-looking orientation culminate in a process of working towards decolonization that has the potential to be truly transformative, as the process itself embodies the philosophies that we are seeking to revitalize.

These transformations do not happen seamlessly, but involve changes to a number of established institutions that may upset their gatekeepers and beneficiaries. As Joyce Green writes, transformative work in the academy “happens at some expense. It’s hard, painful, and dangerous to take on consolidated power relations.”<sup>39</sup> When constructed boundaries are collapsed, patriarchal and heteronormative assumptions are brought to light; when the traditions that are represented as universal knowledge and experience are destabilized, conflict can inevitably arise. As Creese and Frisby note in their study of the central methodological dilemmas in community-based research, “every layer of these relationships is saturated with differences in power, access to resources, and control over meaning making.”<sup>40</sup> They call on researchers to unpack central terms such as community, reciprocity, and reflexivity, among others, and ask what the limitations, tensions and (un)intended consequences are for individuals trying to live up to the ideals associated with these terms.

Despite the challenges inherent in this work, it creates significant opportunities. Entrenched ways of thinking can drastically inhibit our ability to imagine new social and political arrangements in the world; by continually challenging established norms and assumptions, Indigenous feminists open up space to move beyond these constraints. The contested nature of Indigenous feminist and Indigenous women’s perspectives and experiences means that the work we do is necessarily impacting established power structures and elucidating the ways in which these prefigure knowledge production. As Green writes, “to the extent that we contest what knowledge is, how it is evaluated, and what the power relations are that configure it, we instigate academic excellence and social transformation.”<sup>41</sup> Additionally, we get to work, often in solidarity, and form relationships with those who are committed to critical and emancipatory forms of scholarship, who want to see change happen in the everyday, who adopt critical approaches towards power in its many manifestations, who refuse to commodify or homogenize Indigeneity and who want to continually push the boundaries of scholarly fields of inquiry.

I have argued that in working towards a more expansive conception of relational accountability, Indigenous feminism provides an important reminder that scholars and activists working with Indigenous peoples must account for the many power relations that exist between institutions and communities, but also within communities themselves. When accountability is conceptualized beyond the bounds of the community, it can invite the recognition and appreciation of diverse perspectives and experiences, the negotiation of conflicting and seemingly irreconcilable epistemologies and world-views, and the rejection of hegemonic and dichotomous ways of thinking. However, when relational accountability is taken up through the primary referent point of relations with, rather than relations that exist within and beyond Indigenous collectives,

accountability can quickly become reduced to a standardized set of items on a checklist prescribed by an institutional or funding body. Often, it becomes a question of the degree to which the presumably consensual and representative collective will has been honored or upheld.

Let me be clear that a commitment to critique the normative framing of accountability or of “the community” does not translate to needless and gratuitous scrutiny. Rather, it suggests that working with Indigenous peoples does not require unilateral deference to a collective for the sake of maintaining the partnership. Researchers and academics can certainly exercise respect and responsibility to Indigenous partners while also being committed to ensure that they do not reproduce violent, repressive or exclusionary practices within their own work whether through their own methodological approach or through turning a blind eye to power relations and dynamics that exist internally. In fact, this makes for a much more symmetrical relationship, as parties conduct themselves with the values they each see as important, rather than having one’s work guided by the priorities and aspirations outlined by funding bodies.

The call to continually expand understandings of accountability serves an important emancipatory function as it works towards the contemporary mobilization of Indigenous knowledge within ethical and epistemological fields that are not configured by the terrain of colonial heteropatriarchy. Collective values and aspirations are important and relevant considerations, yet to build on these foci we must recognize the ongoing need for rethinking how researchers might remain accountable to Indigenous peoples in light of the myriad relations we inhabit and the multiple forms of power we seek to navigate on a daily basis. Through these contested terrains, greater space can be carved out for the multiplicity of Indigenous peoples’ contributions and voices to be taken seriously on their own merits, not only on their collective associations. To continuously create new forms of critical inquiry and conversation surrounding questions of accountability can help all of us to become increasingly cognizant of the various and often overlapping responsibilities that we hold within the relationships we inhabit with living beings in the past, present, and future.

### *Acknowledgments*

I am indebted to Chief Lynn Acoose of the Zagime First Nations for prompting me to think about what accountability means outside of a Western frame, and how that frame operates both within and outside of Indigenous communities. I acknowledge and thank Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark and Joyce Green for the many conversations and exchanges that ultimately culminated in this paper and for offering important feedback that assisted in its creation. I would also like to thank the three *AICRJ* reviewers whose excellent and thought-provoking comments were invaluable to the development of this paper.

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