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Decolonizing Feminism in the North: A Conversation with Rauna Kuokkanen

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Indigenous feminism is a theoretical intervention located at the intersection of Indigenous peoples’ political struggles for decolonization and self-determination, and Indigenous women’s engagement in issues of gender equality and social justice, in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous contexts. Indigenous feminists explore intersections of gender, race, and nation, particularly in relation to Indigenous women’s social positions (Green, 2007; Suzack, 2010). Sámi feminism has focused on an intersectional analysis of the complex ways through which colonialism and racism have shaped and continue to shape gender relations within the community, as well as the positions and social realities of Indigenous women in the Nordic countries today. As part of an on-going research project focusing on the narratives of Indigenous Sámi feminists in the Nordic countries, I was fortunate to meet with Dr Rauna Kuokkanen in Rovaniemi, Finland, in early January 2015 for a dialogue about her experiences and views in relation to feminism in general, Indigenous feminism more specifically, and Sámi feminist positions and perspectives in particular. The following conversation is a shortened version of a longer dialogue between Kuokkanen and myself with the aim of learning about and sharing (cf. Livholts, 2010) feminist analyses and experiences. Below, Kuokkanen talks about her research and illuminates some of the core questions within Indigenous and

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Sámi feminism. Another central topic evolving from her reflections is the position of Sámi feminism in the Nordic countries and in relation to other constructions of feminism.

Knobblock: Could you describe your current research project?

Kuokkanen: I am completing a comparative project on gender and Indigenous self-determination with a focus on Sápmi, Greenland, and Canada, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada. I am interested in how Indigenous self-government is gendered and how the political discourse on Indigenous self-determination is constructed at different levels. We hear about it at international venues like the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). But we do not know much about how so-called ordinary people conceive and understand self-determination. I have discovered that many of the Indigenous women I have interviewed do not necessarily understand or talk about it in the same way as it is discussed in international Indigenous politics. Although I've interviewed some men as well, I am particularly interested in the views of women who are not involved in politics directly but are active in their communities as, for instance, grassroots leaders or in women's organizations.

Knobblock: Do you see a gendered difference when it comes to understandings and conceptualizations of self-determination?

Kuokkanen: Absolutely. Women see it as much more localized and grounded in local practice. While some women do talk about it in terms of the common rhetoric, referring to the collective right of a people to determine their own affairs and decision-making, which is in line with the definition of self-determination in international law, more often they talk about self-determination as a relational concept; that is, in terms of relations and of re-structuring relations. First of all, they emphasize the importance of working at both an individual and a collective level. This means that self-determination is not only something collective but that it also includes women's individual autonomy and self-determination over their own bodies and reproduction, and the right to be free from violence. For Indigenous women, violence and self-determination are among the most pressing issues globally. That's how the project got started; it struck me that these two issues, self-determination and violence, that are so critical to the well-being and the sense of collective and individual survival of Indigenous women, are never addressed together. Yet the fundamental question is: how do you build Indigenous self-determination if women don't feel safe and free from violence in their own communities? In Canada there are 1500 missing and murdered Indigenous women. They are literally not surviving, they are being killed or going missing. This comes up in many of the interviews; what kind of nations are we building if we don't make sure that these issues are addressed hand in hand? And how do we build governance institutions and Indigenous government in a way that does not reproduce patriarchal relations that keep women subordinate and in fear of violence?

Knobblock: So, if I understand you correctly, can the tension between collective and individual autonomy be a dilemma for Indigenous women in the struggle for self-determination?

Kuokkanen: The dilemma, if there is one, has been created by others, not Indigenous women. Indigenous women have been accused of being divisive and of breaking the unity of the community if they push for rights specific to them, including gendered violence. The dilemma is in fact a form of false dichotomy in that it's not individual rights per se that are being opposed, but women's rights specifically. If you look at the UNDRIP, for instance, you can see how it combines individual and collective rights and recognizes how they are mutually reinforcing. In other words, there is a gendered fault-line, an opposition to a very specific type of individual rights of Indigenous women, not opposition to individual rights in general.

Knobblock: What would you say are the main issues for Sámi feminists today?

Kuokkanen: Looking at my own research material and interviews with Sámi women, it is very much about the extent of self-determination, such as building capacity in Sámi communities and starting to discuss in public and address violence against Sámi women, which is still largely considered a taboo. Family ties are strong, and the ostracism can be strong in your local community if you talk in public about violence you have experienced, or want to do something about it. As a result, people are generally reluctant to tackle the problem. The political institutions and Sámi representative bodies such as the Sámi Parliaments have not prioritized gendered violence as an issue until recently. In a recent statement, the president of the Sámi Parliament in Norway, Aili Keskitalo, emphasized the importance of addressing violence against Sámi women as part of Sámi nation-building and the well-being of individuals and communities. I think this is an important opening, and the other political institutions, including Sámi Parliaments in Sweden and Finland, need to follow suit. Another central issue is so-called care work and the significance of families and children. As part of implementing Sámi self-determination, Sámi women consider it very important that children are educated in the Sámi language; that kids have a strong and positive Sámi identity is very much part of the wider goal of capacity-building, community-building, and nation-building. The ability to pass on culture and language is very much a Sámi feminist issue.

Knobblock: As a feminist researcher, what have been the core issues for you?

Kuokkanen: Insisting on incorporating a critical examination of racism and colonialism as an inseparable part of all feminist theory and practice. As a Sámi feminist scholar, I see the need to expand greatly the predominant discourse of liberal feminism in the Nordic countries, which tends to focus exclusively on gender discrimination and gender equality and which constructs feminism generally in very narrow terms. The problem in the Nordic context, as elsewhere, has been the lack of recognition of Indigenous women's articulations and conceptualizations of feminism that do not focus solely on gender discrimination or gender equality,

especially in terms of participation in politics and/or the labour market. The implicit—and sometimes also explicit—message of mainstream feminists has often been that Indigenous feminism is not feminism—or that it is an inferior form of feminism—if it doesn't squarely address gender equality. There's a need to decolonize feminism in the Nordic countries. A common critique by Indigenous women of white liberal feminism is that the exclusive focus on gender discrimination neglects to address the impact of structural violence on women's lives. In the Nordic context, this means that when Sámi women talk about reindeer herding laws, global capital encroaching on their traditional territories, or the ability to teach the Sámi language to their children, these are not seen or understood as feminist concerns.

Knobblock: Talking about the critique of white liberal feminism, have you experienced any resistance within feminist academia or within feminist movements to Sámi perspectives?

Kuokkanen: I think the dismissiveness of white liberal feminism takes shape in the form of non-recognition, indifference, or plain ignorance. Nordic feminists don't openly resist Sámi perspectives on feminism, but they don't engage with them either. In fact, I'm not sure if they even know that such things may exist. A good example of ignoring and excluding Sámi feminists and/or Sámi women is conferences. When Nordic feminists organize conferences they tend or prefer to forget Sámi women unless somebody calls them on their omission. It is as though Sámi women do not even exist—or at least, that we don't have anything to offer to feminist discussions. The recent *NORA* Conference, Voices in Nordic Gender Research, in Roskilde, Denmark, in November 2014 is illustrative of this. They had not initially included any Sámi feminist scholars or Sámi women in the conference programme, yet they had chosen for their conference poster an image of a Swedish man dressed up as a Sámi woman. They were criticized for this highly problematic approach, and at the last minute they were looking for Sámi keynote speakers.

Knobblock: In your book *Reshaping the University: Responsibility, Indigenous Epistemes and the Logic of the Gift* (2007), you ask the academy to critically examine their own discourses and structures in relation to Indigenous peoples. I wonder whether you have considered what feminist academia, especially in the Nordic countries, would need to do to be more inclusive of Indigenous perspectives?

Kuokkanen: I think it's very basic. Although it appears to be difficult, in practice it would be to start conversing together, dialoguing and talking to each other on more equal terms, and to listen a great deal more, without arrogance or a sense of superiority. In fact, as a decolonizing process, such a dialogue would require talking on Indigenous—in this case, on Sámi—terms. I discuss academic arrogance a lot in the book, and I think colonial arrogance in terms of assumptions and analysis that leaves little room for other views or perspectives is a big part of the problem. There is also generally a minimal awareness of and often a refusal to recognize issues pertaining to the social positions and conditions of the Sámi. For

one thing, the Sámi are so few in numbers, which makes them easier to ignore. Secondly, there is little engagement by Nordic feminism with intersectional analysis of gender and indigeneity. This requires an understanding that they are not mutually exclusive categories but are lived and experienced simultaneously. Thirdly, and related, there is also little acceptance of the fact that, although there are critical differences between the Nordic countries and settler colonial states, the Nordic states are very much built upon exploiting the Sámi and dispossessing them of their traditional territories. Also, as in settler colonial states, a lot of the wealth in the Nordic countries comes from the Sámi territory. Colonialism is an existing structure in society, not a past event. You only have to look at Gállok [a region outside the municipality of Jokkmokk, Sweden, and a centre for Sámi resistance against exploration work by mining companies] or any other planned or proposed mine that is premised on the dispossession of Indigenous people of their land to the point where you cannot practise reindeer herding. Like elsewhere, but particularly in the Arctic, we are witnessing a growing pressure from accelerated resource extraction premised on the dispossession of Indigenous people of their land. Recent news has revealed that, especially in Sweden, young reindeer herders are committing suicide at a higher rate than in the Nordic countries on average. These issues are connected. Yet they are not talked about in terms of colonialism, even by the Sámi themselves. Sure, the Nordic countries are not settler colonial societies in the same way as Canada or the USA, New Zealand or Australia, but certainly there would be so much to learn about these kinds of colonial relations and that it's not about the past or how what happened in the past structures, but how it's on-going today in the form of interventions by the states and transnational corporations. That kind of intersectionality and anti-colonial thinking is largely missing in mainstream Nordic feminist discourse, which prevents the two feminist discourses, Sámi and Nordic, from engaging in a constructive dialogue.

Knoblock: I understand the tension between Nordic feminism and Sámi feminism. However, do you also see differences between post-colonial feminism and Indigenous feminist interventions?

Kuokkanen: There is a difference with regard to the question of nation and self-determination. Indigenous feminism recognizes the collective dimension of self-determination as well as nation-building as a feminist struggle in ways that post-colonial feminists do not consider. Post-colonial feminists do not attend to the question of building their own communities and including everybody in that process because they do not have the same need for nation-building. I do not mean nation-building in the sense of the Westphalian nation-state and independent statehood but nation-building in terms of Indigenous people's own ideas about rebuilding their societies and communities. Another critical piece that is missing in post-colonial feminist analysis, something which especially Indigenous feminists in North America have made very clear, is the fact that the founding violence of the nation-state is embedded in the oppression of Indigenous societies and Indigenous nations. These on-going structures of violence and relations of violence enable settler states in particular to exist because of not only the historical, but also the

continuing dispossession of Indigenous peoples of their land. We see the increased pressure of mineral extraction and the rush for resources everywhere in the world today, including Scandinavia. The significance of land and the question of land rights are not a central part, if they are a part at all, of post-colonial feminist analysis.

Knobblock: Finally, what does Sámi feminism mean to you?

Kuokkanen: I think the most cutting edge of Sámi feminism can be found among the younger generation of Sámi women, whether at the grassroots or within organizations, where the limits and possibilities of feminism are being pushed. I find that it is the younger generation of Sámi women who are coming up with the most inspiring initiatives that reflect a feminist ethos, even if they don't necessarily identify as feminists. This ethos manifests itself through forms of activism or humour such as in a recent TV series called *Njuoska bittut/Märät säpikkäät* ("Wet reindeer fur leggings") in Finland or through initiatives such as Chicks in Sápmi in Sweden, which focuses on leadership training. Young Sámi women are also very active in creating and strengthening the LGBT community in Sápmi, which is also very important in terms of addressing the question of structural gender violence. In the youth organization Sáminuorra, in Sweden, there are also some young women who want to do politics differently, through a consensus approach and challenge the status quo and conventional politics, which they consider counterproductive. Young Sámi women are also involved in grassroots activism that seeks to build alliances and solidarity with other networks such as Idle No More and the global climate movement 350.org to tackle the twin pressures of climate change and accelerated resource extraction in the Arctic. It is telling that some young Sámi women insist that they can feel more at home in the environmental movement, for instance, than in the general feminist movement and that they find post-modern feminist interventions critical of identity construction alienating. Sámi feminism is not only directed towards having equal representation in political bodies or talking about women's issues, it is also a grassroots engagement at the intersection of Indigeneity and gender, working towards social justice.

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