

Joanne Barker (editor)

Critically Sovereign: Indigenous Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies

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Reviewed by Jamaica Osorio, 2019

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Quote: The authors push us beyond the promises of civil rights and essentialist promises of authenticity while also encouraging us to refuse the rupturing of our disciplines.

Joanne Barker's edited volume, *Critically Sovereign: Indigenous Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies*, joins the ranks of other contemporary edited collections such as *Queer Indigenous Studies* and *Sovereign Erotics*, both published by the University of Arizona Press in 2011. Others have also worked toward indigenizing the fields of gender, sexuality, and feminist studies while also calling for Indigenous studies to reconnect more seriously with the issues and questions brought forward by these fields.

Most impressive in this collection is perhaps Barker's introduction, which seems to insist on historically and geographically situating this text within a constellation of movements, both political and scholarly. In fact, Barker's introduction is so thorough that I imagine it could become standard reading within Indigenous studies and feminist studies classes as a way to map these fields for both emerging and established students.

Importantly, the collection is concerned with the many bodies and faces of US and Canadian imperialism and colonization. In Barker's words, this collection draws "attention to the unique yet related ethics and responsibilities of gendered and sexed land-based epistemologies, cultural protocols and practices, governance histories and laws, and sociocultural relationships" (5). The collection succeeds in that it offers a mo'olelo (story, history, genealogy) whose theoretical and epistemological frameworks are as varied as its geographies and genealogies. All of the contributors carefully articulate the greater stakes of their work along with their tribal and theoretical foundations. Writers bring with them scholarly and Indigenous languages and vocabularies to tell a mo'olelo about "territorially specific engagements with Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination," or what Barker calls "[t]he polity of the Indigenous" (5).

As you could expect, the collection as a whole pushes readers to challenge traditional notions of rights ideologies that have ultimately enabled further legitimacy to be exercised by the settler state. The authors push us beyond the promises of civil rights and essentialist promises of authenticity while also encouraging us to refuse the rupturing of our disciplines. Importantly, Barker also addresses the appropriative elephant in the room when she reminds

us of the politics of positionality, voice, and Indigeneity. That these mo'olelo are told by Indigenous scholars rooted in their own lands, languages, and knowledges matters deeply. She reminds us that kuleana (responsibility, privilege, and authority) matters just as much as the theoretical gifts we offer, and that by "[i]dentifying or being identified as Indigenous inextricably ties a person to the jurisdictional and territorial struggles of Indigenous peoples against the social forces of imperialism and colonialism" (10).

In this way and others, *Critically Sovereign: Indigenous Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies* is a deeply personal text. It asks its authors and readers to grapple with the personal and intimate nature of our politics, histories, and stories. Barker also invites readers to begin this journey by re-imagining our traditional notions of feminisms' "evolutions." Barker argues, quite successfully, that the overreliance on the feminist "wave" analogies have done great harm and have erased the many and varied "intellectual and political genealogies within Indigenous communities that need to be remembered, not for the sake of feminism, but for the sake of Indigenous knowledge and the relationships and responsibilities it defines" (11). As our communities continue to struggle through these questions, Barker asserts that the retelling of these "'wave' histories, of course, obfuscate the work of gender, sexuality, and feminism as categories of analysis and political coalition." This oversimplification of feminisms' histories, she argues, ultimately obscures and erases the critical engagement of Indigenous feminists who have struggled for decades, and prioritizes white experiences in what one might call "early wave" feminism (12). With Barker's assistance, we can reconnect with the reality of feminisms' many faces, bodies, and genealogies as a way to decenter white-stream feminist histories. Untangling these histories allows for a far more varied understanding across the lines of gender and sexuality in our communities.

Ultimately, Barker's rigorous and extensive introduction prepares the reader for the many stories that unfold as we move through the collection. Although perhaps many of us working and living in the intersections of Indigenous, queer, and feminist studies might be familiar with many of the theoretical backdrops of these contributions, the collection as a whole also works to tell a different story altogether by narrowing in on three main concerns: "(1) the terms and debates that constitute critical Indigenous gender, sexuality, and feminist studies; (2) the nation-based and often territorially specifically centrality of Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination; and (3) the structure and operation of U.S. and Canadian imperialism and colonialism as related but unique state formations" (32).

Barker has organized and imagined the collection in three major parts, although these are not explicitly delineated as such. In the first two chapters, J. Kēhaulani Kauanui and Jennifer Nez Denetdale take the three concerns outlined above head-on. The next two essays, by Mishuana R. Goeman and Jessica Brissett Parea, provide a "critical Indigenous feminist analysis of Nation-based and territorially specific assertions of Indigenous sovereignty, considering how those assertions are undermined within U.S. and Canadian colonial state formations" (33). The third section, with chapters by Mark Ryfkin and Jodi Byrd, "engage[s] critical Indigenous gender, sexuality, and feminist analyses in very different modalities to interrogate U.S. and Canadian law as a gendered and sexed apparatus of imperial-colonial formations, imaginaries, and desires" (32). Each of these chapters is thoughtful, original, and provides an essential reimagining of our nations and our relationships with one another and the settler state. For a diverse and wide-ranging conversation, the reader should indulge in each essay for the stories that unfold before us.

For the purpose of this review, however, I will speak to the first section briefly before going into a more detailed discussion of the final chapter, "Getting Dirty: The EcoEroticism of Women in Indigenous Oral literatures" by Melissa K. Nelson.

In "Indigenous Hawaiian Sexuality and the Politics of Nationalist Decolonization," Kauanui charts the changing landscape of gender and sexuality in Hawai'i through an examination of the same-sex marriage debates in 2013. Kauanui gives a legal history of the conversation beginning in the early 1990s and tracks a "history of BLGTM recognition as it relates to Hawaiian sovereignty and an examination of some of the forms of cultural and political acknowledgment within the nationalist movement" (48). In doing so, Kauanui provides a contemporary history of gender and sexuality in Hawai'i. She ultimately concludes that the eventual passing of the same-sex marriage bill is "a form of settler-colonial continuity," and reminds us that decolonizing Hawai'i's relationship to gender and sexuality will ultimately take place outside of the legislature. Kauanui's chapter offers an important reminder as we in Hawai'i continue to struggle to assert our Indigenous genders and sexualities under the overreaching jurisdiction of the settler state. As a Kanaka Maoli scholar, I found myself wishing she could have engaged in a deeper history of gender and sexuality through our language and mo'olelo (literature) in our islands. I would have loved to see what her fiercely analytical mind could do with that additional, and important, layer to this conversation.

In "Return to the Uprising at Beautiful Mountain in 1913: Marriage and Sexuality in the Making of the Modern Navajo Nation," Denetdale takes a historical approach to unpacking the institution of marriage and its violence in the Dine Navajo communities. Ultimately, she demonstrates the ways that the Dine have come to weave nationhood with the institutions of marriage and family in ways that ultimately accept and normalize heteropatriarchy.

Barker says it best herself: as a collection "the essays show how the politics of gender and sexuality are central to sorting out, from the context of Indigenous epistemologies, the challenges to Indigeneity and Indigenous rights posed within an imperial and colonial social formation" (32). And although the chapters take on this important work from different territories, epistemologies, languages, and frameworks, perhaps the most remarkable and titillating is the mo'olelo woven for us by Melissa K. Nelson, in the final chapter, when she takes us on a sensual journey toward unpacking what an Indigenous environmental sexuality study could look like, and the potential worlds it could create.

Nelson's "Getting Dirty: The EcoEroticism of Women in Indigenous Oral literatures," is a deeply compelling, sexy, and transformative work of both critical and creative literature. As a Kanaka Maoli scholar working at the intersections of sex, desire, intimacy, and nationhood, I found her exploration of the EcoErotic not only to be deeply pleasurable but also extremely instructive. She reminds us of the erotic nature of our love for our lands (or as we say in Hawai'i, our aloha 'āina) and pushes the reader to find the sacred (and erotic) in the mundane. Nelson writes, "walking barefoot on the earth; drinking a cold glass of water; eating a fresh summer peach; breathing in warm air—these basic, often unconscious daily acts are not in fact mundane but are sublime and sensuous eco-erotic connections to the more-than-human world. If we truly felt this, in our guts, in our cells, would we continue to poison our soils and water? Mine our mountains? Genetically alter our seeds? I think not" (235). In this way, remembering and practicing these relations is not only pleasurable, but also environmentally and politically essential to the survival of our communities and our lands.

What I found most compelling was Nelson's expert weaving of her own mo'olelo and the calabash of mo'olelo she offered from both her tribe's and others' collective memory. In her chapter we are meant to reconnect with the many shape-shifting bodies of sex and pleasure, as intimacy, as treaty, as agency, and even as violence.

Of course, these stories are not just about our relations with the nonhuman world, but how critical insight into those forgotten and shamed relations actually bind us "humans" in a wholly different kind of relational matrix. In her expert weaving of mo'olelo, Nelson achieves what every great storyteller hopes to do: she conjured in me my own mo'olelo, languages, and most important my own 'āina (land, that which feeds). In asking us not just to see our lands as ancestors, but rather as lovers, she opens a generative space to make deep and intimate theoretical, political, and pleasurable connections. Her work also conjures in me an even greater appreciation for emerging scholars from my own 'āina, such as Kahala Johnson, Mahealani Ahia, No'u Revilla, and Kalani Young, who too are wading into these muliwai (brackish waters) of pleasure and possibility, and beckoning us all ever so seductively to join them.

In the contemporary call to build and create Indigenous structures and institutions, this work of embracing our "eco-erotic nature" is essential in that it "helps us recognize the generosity of creation, and our part in it, so we can truly embody an ethic of kinship" (255). In the end, we are left with a call to re-Indigenize our senses. Nelson urges us to relearn how to listen, smell, feel, speak, taste, and ultimately please the human and nonhuman among us. In doing so, we cultivate and embody pilina (intimacy) with our world(s) built on pleasure, accountability, and consent. This is the work of "getting dirty" and becoming "fully human."

So, let us take up Nelson's call to get dirty, to, as my ancestors would say, Huli ka lima i lalo, turn our hands down to the soil. To make love, aloha 'āina, and make a future that cannot be imagined or told within the structures of the settler state. Let us begin with a different mo'olelo, so we might end with one that is transformative and deeply pleasurable.