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RESEARCH ARTICLE

It's about all relations: Indigenous feminist theory of relational freedom

Rauna Kuokkanen

Arctic Indigenous Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Lapland, Rovaniemi, Finland
Email: Rauna.kuokkanen@ulapland.fi

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Abstract

This article theorises Indigenous feminist relational freedom that emphasises the ways in which relations and structures of domination disproportionately impact women and gender-diverse people, including through gender-based violence and environmental harm. The theory of relational freedom critiques both one-dimensional conceptions of Indigenous relationality and the conventional framing of Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination through the lens of non-interference, a concept rooted in political autonomy grounded in liberal thought. While non-interference correctly emphasises the need for Indigenous autonomy from state intervention, it falls short in addressing the deeper aspects of Indigenous freedom. Western interference has long impacted Indigenous life, which has led Indigenous self-determination discourses to focus on avoiding state intervention. However, while this emphasis on political autonomy is valid, it does not account for structural forms of domination, particularly underlying inequalities that perpetuate subordination within these structures. These structures range from state institutions that dispossess Indigenous communities to internal systems of gender-based domination that marginalise Indigenous women and LGBTQ+ individuals. The persistence of these structures significantly impedes the full realisation of Indigenous self-determination. The article ultimately theorises Indigenous feminist relational freedom within broader frameworks of feminist relational autonomy and citizenship and Indigenous gift relations, exploring practical approaches for applying the principles of relational freedom within Indigenous governance.

Keywords: gift relations; Indigenous feminist theory; Indigenous governance; Indigenous relationality; relational freedom; relations of domination

There is a growing trend in International Relations (IR) – and more broadly social sciences – of paying more attention to relationships and relationality of things. Relational thought, or relational cosmology, has contributed to previous 'turns' in International Relations – particularly post-colonial and feminist – that challenge the field's colonial frameworks. The 'relational turn in IR' is not so much of a new idea or theory but a way to improve how we think about relationships in IR. It facilitates engagement with contextual knowledge and profound relational dynamics within nature, society, human, and non-human communities. The idea behind the 'relational turn' is its potential to foster conversations across diverse perspectives globally and across various fields of study. An influential call for a relational approach within American International Relations came in the late 1990s from Patrick Jackson and Daniel Nexon, who advocated for a more process-oriented, relational perspective in IR. Their argument emphasised the importance of recognising the inherently relational nature of international processes and the state itself. They believed that by

acknowledging this aspect, the field of IR could fulfil its potential to provide in-depth analysis of international relations.[1]

Several other schools of thought have contributed to the IR's 'relational turn'. Constructivists have argued that our identities are shaped through our interactions with others, and therefore all knowledge should be seen as emerging from mutually constitutive relationships among social actors and their shared understandings.[2] Marxists have highlighted that an individualistic and atomistic ontology results in a profound misunderstanding of how we are formed within social and structural relationships.[3] Critical theorists have challenged the universalist assumptions embedded in the social sciences, particularly those related to capitalism, which assume that objects or subjects have inherent essences.[4] Feminist scholars have emphasised the socially constructed nature of gendered hierarchies, while post-colonial scholars have pointed out how the hegemony of universal narratives conceal the deeply relational nature of selves and others on a global scale.[5] These critical perspectives, particularly feminism and post-colonialism, have prompted the emergence of explicitly relational approaches with a more global focus in IR. Beyond Western thought, Buddhist and Daoist orientations, as well as Chinese and Confucian traditions, are recognised as central in the global shift towards relational thinking in IR.[6] A significant gap remains, however, in the so-called relational turn in International Relations: the persistent overlooking of Indigenous contributions. Too often, discussions on relationality in IR ignore the depth and insight of Indigenous worldviews, epistemologies, and the rich body of contemporary Indigenous scholarship that has long explored relationality.

Indigenous thought and scholarship has, in a way, always been relational, deeply rooted in the connections between land, community, culture, and history. Rather than viewing knowledge as something to be isolated or owned, Indigenous perspectives often emphasise the interdependence of all life forms and the responsibility of individuals to care for and sustain these relationships.[7] This relationality extends beyond human beings to include animals, plants, spirits, and ancestral lands, conceptualising, knowing, and being in the world as embedded in the lived experiences and reciprocal obligations of the community.[8] Indigenous relational knowing and being provide an

[1]Patrick Thaddeus Jackson and Daniel H. Nexon, 'Relations before states: Substance, process and the study of world oolitics', *European Journal of International Relations*, 5:3 (1999), https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066199005003002.

[2]For example, Emanuel Adler, 'Seizing the middle ground: Constructivism in world politics', *European Journal of International Relations*, 3:3 (1997), https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066197003003003; Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[3]For example, Robert W. Cox, 'Social forces, states and world orders: Beyond International Relations theory', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 10:2 (1981), https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298810100020501; Mark Rupert, *Producing Hegemony: The Politics of Mass Production and American Global Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

[4]For example, Stephen Gill, *Power and Resistance in the New World Order*, 2nd ed. (Springer, 2008); Andrew Linklater, *Beyond Realism and Marxism: Critical Theory and International Relations* (Springer, 1990).

[5]For example, Phillip Darby, *Postcolonizing the International: Working to Change the Way We Are* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006); Sankaran Krishna, *Globalization and Postcolonialism: Hegemony and Resistance in the Twenty-First Century* (Lanham, MD: Rowman &Littlefield Publishers, 2009); J. Ann Tickner, *Gender in International Relations: Feminist Perspectives on Achieving Global Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

[6]See Milja Kurki, 'Relational revolution and relationality in IR: New conversations', *Review of International Studies,* 48:5, 821–36 (2022), https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210521000127.

[7]Vine Deloria, Jr, *Spirit & Reason: The Vine Deloria, Jr., Reader*, ed. Barbara Deloria, Kristen Foehner, and Sam Scinta (Golden, CO: Fulcrum, 1999); Deborah McGregor, 'All our relations: Indigenous perspectives on environmental issues in Canada', in Gina Starblanket, David Long, and Olive Patricia Dickason (eds), *Visions of the Heart: Issues Involving Indigenous Peoples in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2019); Morgan Brigg, Mary Graham, and Martin Weber, 'Relational Indigenous systems: Aboriginal Australian political ordering and reconfiguring IR', *Review of International Studies*, 48:5, 891–909 (2022), https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210521000425; Aileen Moreton-Robinson, 'Relationality: A key presupposition of an Indigenous social research paradigm', in Chris Andersen and Jean M. O'Brien (eds), *Sources and Methods in Indigenous Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2017); Lauren Tynan, 'What is relationality? Indigenous knowledges, practices and responsibilities with kin', *Cultural Geographies,* 28:4, 69–77 (2021), https://doi.org/10.1177/14744740211029287.

[8]John Borrows, *Recovering Canada: The Resurgence of Indigenous Law* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002); Marisol de la Cadena, 'Indigenous cosmopolitics in the Andes: Conceptual reflections beyond "politics"', *Cultural Anthropology*, 25:2

alternative to paradigms that prioritise individualism and extraction, offering potentially transformative insights into contemporary issues like environmental conservation, community resilience, and social justice.[9] There is also a growing body of scholarship drawing on Indigenous feminist and queer studies seeking to reclaim specific Indigenous concepts and practices of relationality grounded in the land.[10] Some refer to this interconnectedness as 'interspecies relationality'.[11]

It is important to recognise that, alongside the more recent scholarship on Indigenous relationality, there exists a long-standing body of Indigenous political scholarship focused on the colonial relations of dispossession between Indigenous nations and states. This older body of work has critically examined how colonial policies, legal frameworks, and economic interests have historically undermined Indigenous sovereignty and autonomy, framing Indigenous–state relations as fundamentally adversarial. By addressing issues such as dispossession, coercive governance, and cultural erasure, this scholarship has highlighted the enduring impact of 'bad' relations imposed by the state.[12] Highlighting the need for a more just and relational approach in contemporary Indigenous–state interactions, these critiques have laid essential groundwork for the more recent scholarship.

In recent years, Indigenous scholarship has also witnessed a relational turn, with a growing emphasis on concepts like relational accountability and relational sovereignty. This shift has

(2010), https://doi.org/doi:10.1111/j.1548-1360.2010.01061.x; Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013); Deniss J. Martinez, Bruno Seraphin, and Tony Marks-Block, 'Indigenous fire futures: Anticolonial approaches to shifting fire relations in California', *Environment and Society*, 14:1 (1 September 2023), https://doi.org/10.3167/ares.2023.140109. On *anti*-colonial land relations, see the introduction in Max Liboiron, *Pollution Is Colonialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 1-17. For Liboiron, pollution represents an embodiment of the ongoing colonial relationship with the land (p. 6).

[9]Shawn Wilson, Andrea V. Breen, and Lindsay DuPré (eds), *Research and Reconciliation. Unsettling Ways of Knowing through Indigenous Relationships* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press, 2019); Jenanne Ferguson and Marissa Weaselboy, 'Indigenous sustainable relations: Considering land in language and language in land', *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, 43 (2020), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cosust.2019.11.006; Matt Wildcat and Daniel Voth, 'Indigenous relationality: Definitions and methods', *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 19:2 (2023), 475–83, https://doi.org/10.1177/11771801231168380; Elisabeth Miltenburg, Hannah Tait Neufeld, and Kim Anderson, 'Relationality, responsibility and reciprocity: Cultivating Indigenous food sovereignty within urban environments', *Nutrients*, 14:9 (2022), https://doi.org/10.3390/nu14091737.

[10]Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Sarah Nickel and Amanda Fehr (eds), *In Good Relation: History, Gender, and Kinship in Indigenous Feminisms* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2020); Jamaica Heolimeleikalani Osorio, *Remembering Our Intimacies: Mo'olelo, Aloha 'Āina, and Ea* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021); Gina Starblanket and Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark, 'Towards a relational paradigm. Four points for consideration: Knowledge, gender, land, and modernity', in Michael Asch, John Borrows, and James Tully (eds), *Resurgence and Reconciliation: Indigenous-Settler Relations and Earth Teachings* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018); Gina Starblanket (ed.), *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism*, 3rd ed. (Halifax: Fernwood, 2024), 154–71.

[11]Becca Dower and Jennifer Gaddis, 'Relative to the landscape: Producer cooperatives in native food sovereignty initiatives', *Journal of Co-operative Organization and Management*, 9:2 (2021), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcom.2021.100147.

[12]Vine Deloria, Jr, and Clifford Lytle, *The Nations Within: The Past and Future of American Indian Sovereignty* (New York: Pantheon, 1984); Joyce Green, 'Enacting reconciliation', in Gina Starblanket, David Long, and Olive Patricia Dickason (eds), *Visions of the Heart: Issues Involving Indigenous Peoples in Canada* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 236–53; Gina Starblanket, 'Crises of relationship: The role of treaties in contemporary Indigenous–settler relations', in Gina Starblanket, David Long, and Olive Patricia Dickason (eds), *Visions of the Heart: Issues Involving Indigenous Peoples in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2019), 13–33; Karine Duhamel, Emily Grafton, Rainey Gaywish, Peter Schuler, and Russel Fayant, '"There's no word in my language for reconciliation": Challenging the settler appropriation of the discourse of reconciliation', *Journal of Critical Race, Indigeneity, and Decolonization*, 1:1 (2024), https://doi.org/10.22329/jcrid.v1i1.7983; Rauna Kuokkanen, 'Reconciliation as a threat or structural change? The truth and reconciliation process and settler colonial policy making in Finland', *Human Rights Review*, 21:3 (2020); Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Michael Murphy (ed.), *Reconfiguring Aboriginal–State Relations* (Kingston: Institute of Intergovernmental Relations, School of Policy Studies, Queen's University, 2005); Elizabeth Strakosch, *Neoliberal Indigenous Policy: Settler Colonialism and the 'Post-Welfare' State* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); David E. Wilkins and Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark, *American Indian Politics and the American Political System* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010); Liboiron, *Pollution Is Colonialism*.

brought a more sustained focus on Indigenous governance rooted in relationality, highlighting the interconnectedness and interdependence of individuals, communities, ecosystems, and more than humans. Indigenous scholars are increasingly framing governance questions around these relationships, seeking to address complex issues of sovereignty and accountability through this relational lens.[13] Within Indigenous scholarship, some scholars have critiqued the tendency to idealise Indigenous conceptions and practices of relationality, cautioning against the tendency to oversimplify relations. Maintaining that 'relations do not universalize', Max Liboiron urges us to embrace greater nuance and specificity in our understanding of relationships. While many Indigenous cosmologies acknowledge that 'everything is related', in his view this does not imply a uniformity in those relations; one does not owe the same kind of connection to everything.[14]

Others have challenged the term 'relationality' on the grounds that it refers to a fixed condition. They argue that 'relationality' implies an essential, inescapable reality or a fundamental state, lacking the flexibility or plurality often intended by its proponents. Instead of treating relations as an absolute condition, they prefer to emphasise the dynamic, open-ended nature of relations through terms such as 'relations' and 'the relational'. Instead of 'relationality', Morgan Brigg, Mary Graham, and Martin Weber propose 'relationalism' in order to advance a more fluid approach to thinking and acting in relation to others. Unlike relationality, relationalism in their view avoids the risk of prematurely 'closing down' relational possibilities.[15]

I agree with both critiques and find them pertinent to my theory of Indigenous feminist relational freedom, though with an important caveat. We may understand the term 'relationality' not necessarily as an absolute or fundamental condition, but rather as a concept that encompasses both the active processes of forming, sustaining, and nurturing relationships, and the wider cultural or philosophical framework that regards relationships as foundational. Relationality is more than just an interpersonal activity; it represents a *worldview* or an *episteme* in which relationships – between individuals, communities, and the environment – are essential to understanding existence and social organisation.[16] This framework recognises that relationships are not incidental but serve as foundational – though not fixed – to how identity, community, and well-being are understood in specific cultural contexts. For this reason, I have not adopted the term relationalism but engage with and build on the more widely used concept of relationality.

Similarly, I argue that freedom is inherently relational – that is, never detached from relations – comprising relationships that can both bolster autonomy and restrict it. Our freedoms interact, intersect, and are mutually constitutive. Further, relational freedom necessarily recognises the presence of oppressive and negative relationships at all levels, placing them at the centre of

[13]Kirsten Anker, 'Ecological jurisprudence and Indigenous relational ontologies: Beyond the "ecological Indian"?', in Kirsten Anker et al. (eds), *From Environmental to Ecological Law* (London: Routledge, 2020), 104–18; Astrid Ulloa, 'The politics of autonomy of Indigenous peoples of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, Colombia: A process of relational Indigenous autonomy', *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies*, 6:1 (2011), https://doi.org/10.1080/17442222.2011.543874; J. Agnew and U. Oslender, 'Overlapping territorialities, sovereignty in dispute: Empirical lessons from Latin America', in W. Nicholls, B. Miller, and J. Beaumont (eds), *Spaces of Contention: Spatialities and Social Movements* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 121–40; Jean Dennison, 'Relational accountability in Indigenous governance: Navigating the doctrine of distrust in the Osage Nation', in Brendan Hokowhitu, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, and Steve Larkin (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Critical Indigenous Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 295–309; Matthew Wildcat, 'Replacing exclusive sovereignty with a relational sovereignty', *borderlands*, 19:2 (2020), https://doi.org/10.21307/borderlands-2020-014; James Blackwell, 'Relational Wiradyuri approaches to diplomacy: From country, on country, for a nation?', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 77:6 (2023/11/02 2023), https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2023.2268025; Sean Robertson and Gita Ljubicic, 'Nunamii'luni quvianaqtuq (It is a happy moment to be on the land): Feelings, freedom and the spatial political ontology of well-being in Gjoa Haven and Tikiranajuk, Nunavut', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 37:3 (2019), https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775818821129

[14]Liboiron, *Pollution Is Colonialism*, pp. 32, 24.

[15]Brigg, Graham, and Weber, 'Relational Indigenous systems'.

[16]See Rauna Kuokkanen, *Reshaping the University: Responsibility, Indigenous Epistemes and the Logic of the Gift* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007).

decolonisation efforts. While keeping the broader goals of decolonisation in mind, it is also important to focus on our present interactions. Relational freedom highlights *both* the importance of non-coercive and non-violent relationships as fundamental to decolonisation *and* the idea that present-day relationships should not be seen as secondary concerns to be addressed only after the 'real' work of decolonisation is completed.

In this article, I advance discussions of Indigenous relationality by arguing that many existing accounts – including those on Indigenous–state relations and the concept of relationalism – fall short in analytical robustness due to their tendency to overlook the gendered impacts on *all* our relations. This includes both gendered and gender-differential impacts of colonial relations as well as relations of gendered domination that operate within and beyond Indigenous communities.[17] Dispossession and oppression have historically operated and continue to operate in gendered ways, affecting individuals and communities unevenly across genders.[18]

In this article, I extend Liboiron's point about the non-universal nature of relations by highlighting the social reality that relationality is always gendered. I theorise what I call Indigenous feminist relational freedom, which, in addition to the Indigenous relational understanding discussed above, exposes and considers the harmful dynamics of gendered domination and dependency, unequal material relations within Indigenous communities, and their impacts on Indigenous political, social, and cultural life, as well as on various forms of gendered insecurity.[19] I suggest an account of Indigenous relational freedom that is explicitly feminist; that recognises how relations are always gendered in complex ways that reflect broader societal norms, power structures, and intersecting identities and depend on cultural, social, and historical contexts.

While Indigenous relationality emphasises interconnected relationships between humans, land, water, animals, and spirits, Indigenous feminist relational freedom highlights the specific impacts of gender on these relationships. It recognises that colonialism and environmental degradation often impact women and gender-diverse individuals disproportionately, such as through gender-based violence near extraction sites or marginalisation in decision-making processes. Through theorising Indigenous feminist relational freedom, I introduce an analysis of power and intersectionality that is less explicit in existing considerations of Indigenous relationality. My account focuses on how colonial, patriarchal, and capitalist systems intersect to marginalise not just Indigenous peoples generally, but Indigenous women and gender-diverse people specifically.

Indigenous feminist relational freedom thus accounts for the social fact that in most societies, gender plays a role in guiding the ways in which individuals are expected to relate to one another. For example, women may be socialised to relational dynamics that prioritise nurturing

[17]John Borrows, 'Contemporary traditional equality: The effect of the *Charter* on First Nations politics', *University of New Brunswick Law Journal*, 23 (1994); Andrea Bear Nicholas, 'Colonialism and the struggle for liberation: The experience of Maliseet women', *University of New Brunswick Law Journal*, 43 (1994); Joyce Green, 'Canaries in the mines of citizenship: Indian women in Canada', *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 34:4 (2001); Judith F. Sayers and Kelly A. MacDonald, 'A strong and meaningful role for First Nations women in governance', in Judith F. Sayers et al. (eds), *First Nations Women, Governance and the Indian Act: A Collection of Policy Research Reports* (Ottawa: Status of Women Canada, 2001), 1–54; Andrea Smith and J. Kehaulani Kauanui, 'Native feminisms engage American Studies', *American Quarterly*, 60:2 (2008); Winona Stevenson, 'Colonialism and First Nations women in Canada', in Enakshi Dua and Angela Robertson (eds), *Scratching the Surface: Canadian Anti-racist Feminist Thought*, ed. (Toronto: Women's Press, 1999), 49–80.

[18]Isabel Altamirano-Jimenez, 'Nunavut: Whose homeland, whose voices?', *Canadian Woman Studies*, 26:3/4 (2008); Maile Arvin, Eve Tuck, and Angie Morrill, 'Decolonizing feminisms: Challenging connections between settler colonialism and heteropatriarchy', *Feminist Formations*, 25:1 (2013); Angela Cameron, '*R.v. Gladue*: Sentencing and the gendered impacts of colonialism', in John D. Whyte (ed.), *Moving toward Justice: Legal Traditions and Aboriginal Justice* (Saskatoon & Regina: Purich & Saskatchewan Institute of Public Policy, 2008), 160–80; Kahente Horn-Miller, 'Otiyaner: The "women's path" through colonialism', *Atlantis*, 29:2 (2005); Patricia Johnston and Leonie Pihama, 'The marginalization of Maori women', *Hecate*, 20:2 (1994); Scott Lauria Morgensen, 'Theorising gender, sexuality and settler colonialism: An introduction', *Settler Colonial Studies*, 2:2 (2012), https://doi.org/10.1080/2201473X.2012.10648839.

[19]See Rauna Kuokkanen and Victoria Sweet, 'Indigenous security theory: Intersectional analysis from the bottom up', in Gunhild Hoogensen Gjørv, Marc Lanteigne, and Horatio Sam-Aggrey (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Arctic Security* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 80–90.

and caretaking relationships, while men may be socialised to prioritise competitive or hierarchical relationships. Gender further intersects with other social identities such as ethnicity/race, class, and sexuality to shape relational experiences. For this reason, Indigenous women experience relational dynamics differently than white women due to the intersections of gender and ethnicity/race, and Indigenous queer individuals differently than heterosexual Indigenous women due to intersections of gender and sexuality.[20]

My second rationale for theorising Indigenous relational freedom is to critique the framing of Indigenous sovereignty or self-determination through the lens of non-interference – an approach shaped by conventional notions of political autonomy grounded in liberal thought.[21] While such conceptions of self-determination correctly emphasise the need for autonomy from state intervention, they fall short of fully capturing the depth of Indigenous freedom. Both historically and contemporarily, the West has persistently interfered in nearly every dimension of Indigenous existence, which has, understandably, led Indigenous self-determination and sovereignty discourses to stress the need for state non-interference. However, while the emphasis on political autonomy is both valid and essential, it remains an insufficient framework for envisioning a more substantive theory of Indigenous freedom which accounts for the underlying structures of domination. The failure to account for the underlying domination prompts me to turn towards republican theories that consider freedom as non-domination rather than non-interference.[22]

I theorise Indigenous relational freedom by situating it within the broader theoretical frameworks of non-domination and gift relations. First, I consider the concept of non-domination in republican theory as an alternative to liberal autonomy, arguing that freedom as non-domination better addresses relational power asymmetries both within Indigenous communities and in Indigenous–state relations. I contend that engaging with republican theories of freedom is necessary if we are to focus on structures of domination that persist independently of direct interference. Such structures encompass not only state institutions that collectively dominate and subjugate Indigenous communities but also internal systems of gender domination that marginalise Indigenous women and LGBTQ+ individuals. The continued presence of these structures fundamentally obstructs the realisation and full exercise of Indigenous self-determination. Second, I offer an overview of perspectives on Indigenous freedom, including the discourse of Indigenous

[20]Indigenous gender roles have never remained static but have varied and evolved over time. Lisa Frink, Rita S. Shepard, and Gregory A. Reinhardt (eds), *Many Faces of Gender: Roles and Relationships through Time in Indigenous Northern Communities* (University Press of Colorado & University of Calgary Press, 2003); Nickel and Fehr, *In Good Relation*; Emily Snyder, *Gender, Power, and Representations of Cree Law* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2018).

[21]Non-interference as articulated by liberal thought is different from traditional cultural practices of non-interference found in some Indigenous societies evident, for example, in fluid gender identities and parenting conventions. Alice Kehoe, 'Blackfoot persons', in Sue-Ellen Jacobs, Wesley Thomas, and Sabine Lang (eds), *Two-Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 113–25; Asta Balto, *Sámi mánáidbajásgeassin nuppástuvvá* (Oslo: Ad Notam Gyldendal, 1997); Joe Wark, Raymond Neckoway, and Keith Brownlee, 'Interpreting a cultural value: An examination of the Indigenous concept of non-interference in North America', *International Social Work*, 62:1 (2019), https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872817731143. In the words of Daniel Malz and JoAllyn Archambault, 'Whereas autonomy in contemporary Western thought is equated with independence, in native American thought it is compatible with interdependence'. Daniel Malz and JoAllyn Archambault, 'Gender and power in Native North America: Concluding remarks', in Laura F. Klein and Lillian A. Ackerman (eds), *Women and Power in Native North America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), p. 230–50.

[22]Theories of republicanism are not the same as the US Republican Party ideology. The two have different origins, histories, and conceptual foundations, despite sharing the term 'republicanism'. The philosophical roots of republicanism can be traced back to ancient political thought, particularly in Greece and Rome, where the focus was on civic virtue, the common good, and participation in governance. Republican theories stress the importance of active participation in political life, with an emphasis on collective decision-making, civic virtue, and the common welfare. While the US Republican Party ideology promotes individual rights, its positions often reflect more conservative, traditional values that do not align with the more collective and civic-minded focus of republican theories. The Republican Party has also been associated with social conservatism, particularly in opposition to policies that promote gender equality and reproductive rights, often reflecting a more patriarchal approach to social issues. This stands in contrast to contemporary republican theories that seek to address systemic inequalities and promote inclusivity.

resurgence, along with critiques from Indigenous feminist and queer viewpoints. The third and final section theorises Indigenous feminist relational freedom by building on Indigenous gift relations, the logic of the gift, and feminist relational autonomy and citizenship. In that section, I also consider ways to implement the principles of relational freedom in Indigenous governance.

Freedom as non-domination

In its later 20th-century forms, republican theory has come to focus on three main themes. First, there is a rejection of interest-group pluralism, viewed as a reduction of politics to an amoral process of bargaining and exchange. Secondly, there is discontent with definitions of freedom that solely emphasise freedom from coercion or interference. Thirdly, there is a perception that contemporary societies are witnessing a concerning decline in the quality of their public life.[23] The focus here is on the second theme. Republican theory challenges a prevailing conception of freedom in contemporary liberal democracies: the idea that individuals are considered free as long as their actions remain uninhibited by external interference.[24] This view is rooted in the idea of personal independence: individuals have rights to personal liberty and decision-making that others, particularly the state, are obligated to respect by maintaining a hands-off approach.[25]

Catherine MacKinnon has further argued that the idealisation of non-interference is patriarchal because it perpetuates unequal power dynamics and silences dissent from marginalised groups, particularly women. By prioritising non-interference as a core value, the specific needs and struggles of women are ignored or made invisible. There are several ways in which non-interference contributes to gendered power imbalances in society. For instance, it can be used to maintain traditional gender roles within families, reinforce resistance against legislative efforts to address gender inequality, and justify cultural practices that restrict women's rights and reinforce their subordination. MacKinnon's argument underscores how seemingly neutral concepts like non-interference can be used to uphold systems of oppression.[26] Feminist critiques of republican theory build on this by highlighting the limitations of focusing solely on political structures that challenge domination, arguing instead for a stronger emphasis on the underlying inequalities that perpetuate women's subordination within these structures.[27]

In considering Indigenous feminist relational freedom, it is crucial to acknowledge how liberal autonomy tends to ignore the relational nature of power. Liberal autonomy assumes that freedom is intact as long as there is no interference, even if individuals are structurally dependent on others who have significant control over their lives. In this sense, liberal autonomy fails to account for latent forms of dependency and domination, where power imbalances exist, but interference is not overt. For example, a person may be formally free but vulnerable if they are economically or socially dependent on someone with unchecked authority over them. In practice, liberal autonomy is typically enshrined in laws and policies that prohibit explicit interference but do not address inequalities that foster dependency or subtle forms of domination.

[23] Anne Phillips, 'Feminism and republicanism: Is this a plausible alliance?', *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 8:2 (2000), https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9760.00103.

[24] The liberal view of freedom as non-interference was also critiqued by Marx, who argued that defining freedom solely by the absence of coercion is insufficient. True freedom requires access to the material resources necessary to make one's choices genuinely attainable. Marx and Engels maintained that, without the essential material means, the concept of 'freedom' becomes devoid of substance. Karl Marx, 'On the Jewish Question (1844)', in Robert C. Tucker (ed.), *The Marx–Engels Reader* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 1978), 26–52; Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 'The German Ideology (1845)', in Robert C. Tucker (ed.), *The Marx–Engels Reader* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 1978), 148–70.

[25] Isaiah Berlin, 'Two concepts of liberty', in *Liberty Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2017); John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 33–57.

[26] Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

[27] Phillips, 'Feminism and republicanism'. See also Rauna Kuokkanen, Sheryl Lightfoot, Gina Starblanket, and Matthew Wildcat, 'Are Indigenous conceptions of sovereignty as non-interference patriarchal?' *Review of International Studies* (2025), 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210524000846.

In contrast, republican theories of freedom conceptualise freedom not as mere non-interference but as non-domination. Non-domination means being free from arbitrary or coercive control by others, where one is not subject to power wielded in a way that could interfere, even if it is not actively exercised. For republicans, freedom is compromised if others have unchecked power to interfere at their discretion, regardless of whether they actually choose to do so.[28] If freedom were simply defined as the absence of interference, one might argue that a slave left alone by an indifferent or benevolent master experiences full liberty, or that a wife pampered by her accommodating husband enjoys the same freedom as a bird, despite societal laws or norms denying her independence. However, in the republican view, neither scenario makes much sense. A populace subject to the whims of its rulers cannot be considered free, even if those rulers choose not to intervene.[29]

Thus, non-domination is achieved when systems or relationships are structured in a way that constrains potential abuses of power. Republican theories of non-domination focus more than liberal conceptions of autonomy on the *structures* of power within relationships. Republican views of freedom are seen as necessarily involving safeguards against the potential for domination, whether from individuals, groups, or institutions. From this stance, freedom is compromised whenever one party has unchecked power over another, even if that power is not exercised. Republican freedom, therefore, requires active resistance to power imbalances, often through collective means like legal protections, democratic participation, or community norms that prevent arbitrary control.[30] Non-domination requires not only the absence of interference but also the presence of institutions and social structures that ensure individuals are protected from arbitrary coercion and domination.[31]

For Indigenous political theory and practice, Pettit's theory of freedom in particular offers an alternative perspective to consider the role of domination. That said, there is a notable tension in his focus on the freedom of the individual and his suggestion that non-domination comes from establishing democratic institutions and the rule of law, which for Indigenous peoples are *the* source of domination. Nevertheless, I maintain that Pettit's focus on non-domination allows for a deeper examination of power's arbitrary nature, highlighting the absence of accountability and necessary constraints. I suggest that republican theories of non-domination are particularly relevant in collective contexts, such as Indigenous communities, where external powers – like the state or corporations – exert influence or control, often in spite of existing legal protections or policies supportive of Indigenous rights or governance. Liberal autonomy frameworks also do not fully account for structural or indirect forms of power that might constrain a community's choices or make it vulnerable to manipulation.

Non-domination, by contrast, emphasises the importance of autonomy in a way that requires vigilance against both overt and latent forms of domination. For Indigenous communities, this might mean working not only to avoid direct interference from the state but also to resist structural dependencies and ensure that governance is grounded in community-led protections.[32] Here, freedom as non-domination aligns more closely with Indigenous critiques of dependency and control, supporting a model of self-determination that actively seeks to dismantle power asymmetries and all relations of domination while advancing relational freedom. While there is no question that for Indigenous peoples, the source of arbitrary power is the state and its institutions, as Indigenous

[28]Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[29]Pettit, *Republicanism*; Philip Pettit, *On the People's Terms: A Republican Theory and Model of Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[30]Iseult Honohan, *Civic Republicanism* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Quentin Skinner, 'A third concept of liberty', in David Miller (ed), *Liberty Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 243–54.

[31]Pettit, *On the People's Terms*.

[32]See Rauna Kuokkanen, *Restructuring Relations: Indigenous Self-Determination, Governance and Gender* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

feminist scholars have demonstrated, the state is not the only source of domination, and this needs to be taken into account when considering Indigenous relationalities and conceptions of freedom.[33]

There is a wide-ranging body of scholarship examining Indigenous peoples' relations of dependency and domination vis-à-vis the state, including Marxist, other material, or economic analyses that highlight the fact that Indigenous dispossession remains firmly entrenched by state policies, legal frameworks, political structures, economic dependencies, cultural impositions, and social inequalities. Scholarship examining Indigenous peoples' relations of dependency and domination vis-à-vis the state interrogates the ways in which state institutions continue to exert control over Indigenous lands and governance structures through neocolonial development projects, resource extraction industries, and paternalistic policies.[34]

Jennifer Nedelsky's concept of relational autonomy provides an important bridge between the principles of non-domination and Indigenous feminist accounts of freedom. Nedelsky challenges the conventional understanding of autonomy as individual independence, proposing instead that autonomy is fundamentally shaped by relationships. She argues that autonomy should not be seen as a matter of self-sufficiency or isolation, but rather as a capacity that emerges through and is supported by social connections and interdependencies. The relational approach highlights that besides individual agency, genuine autonomy involves the influence and support of communities, suggesting that fostering autonomy requires attention to social structures and relationships that can either empower or constrain individuals.[35]

In Indigenous scholarship on relationality, there is a tendency to overlook the question of the quality of relationships. The discourse around community solidarity or kinship networks in particular often presumes that all relationships are inherently positive or constructive. These relationships are celebrated for fostering support, resilience, and a sense of belonging, which can indeed be true. However, this view can overlook how power imbalances, conflicts, and even forms of exploitation can exist within these very networks. For example, within some tightly knit Indigenous or rural communities, kinship structures may sometimes enforce rigid gender roles, restrict individual autonomy, or discourage members from challenging problematic norms, behaviors, or 'traditions' to maintain harmony in the community.[36]

Similarly, within families, there is often an assumption that family bonds are nurturing and safe. Yet family relationships can also be sources of trauma, control, and violence.[37] Assuming relationships are universally or generally positive can obscure the complexities and harms that can exist within intimate or communal ties, which may be especially problematic when these issues need to

[33]Joanne Barker, 'Gender, sovereignty, and the discourse of rights in Native women's activism', *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*, 7:1 (2006); Joyce Green, 'Constitutionalising the patriarchy: Aboriginal women and Aboriginal government', *Constitutional Forum*, 4:4 (1993); Val Napoleon, 'Aboriginal discourse: Gender, identity and community', in Benjamin J. Richardson, Shin Imai, and Kent McNeil (eds), *Indigenous Peoples and the Law: Comparative and Critical Perspectives* (Portland: Hart, 2009), 233–55; Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*; Megan Davis, 'Aboriginal women: The right to self-determination', *Australian Indigenous Law Review*, 16:1 (2012); Jennifer Nez Denetdale, 'Chairmen, presidents, and princesses: The Navajo Nation, gender, and the politics of tradition', *Wicazo Sa Review*, 21:1 (Spring 2006); Lisa Kahaleole Hall, 'Strategies of erasure: U.S. colonialism and Native Hawaiian feminism', *American Quarterly*, 60:2 (2008).

[34]Deloria and Lytle, *The Nations Within*; Joanne Barker, *Native Acts: Law, Recognition, and Cultural Authenticity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); J. R. Miller, *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens: A History of Native–Newcomer Relations in Canada*, 4th ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018); Wilkins and Stark, *American Indian Politics and the American Political System*; Ezra Rosser, *A Nation Within: Navajo Land and Economic Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*; Arthur Manuel, *Unsettling Canada: A National Wake-Up Call* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2015).

[35]Jennifer Nedelsky, *Law's Relations: A Relational Theory of Self, Autonomy, and Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[36]Green, 'Canaries in the mines of citizenship; Barker, 'Gender, sovereignty, and the discourse of rights in Native women's activism'; Shannon Speed, R. Aida Hernandez Castillo, and Lynn M. Stephen (eds), *Dissident Women: Gender and Cultural Politics in Chiapas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006).

[37]See, for example, Melissa Lucashenko, 'Violence against Indigenous women: Public and private dimensions', *Violence against Women*, 2:4 (1996).

be addressed openly for healing and growth. This assumption also risks marginalising individuals within the community who may suffer from these adverse relational dynamics, as it can make it harder to acknowledge and address the negative impacts of relationships within communities that are otherwise positively framed.

Assuming relationships as universally positive conceals the complexity of relational dynamics particularly around gender-based violence experienced by Indigenous women, Two-Spirit, and non-binary individuals.[38] While this violence is often rooted in colonialism, systemic racism, and the commodification of Indigenous bodies, we should not allow gendered violence to be overlooked in discussions of either Indigenous relationality or freedom. Existing scholarship on Indigenous freedom has only recently began to address the gendered character of oppressive relations.

Indigenous accounts of freedom

James Tully's 'The Struggles of Indigenous Peoples for and of Freedom' is among the first explicit analyses of the concept of Indigenous freedom in the context of Indigenous peoples' struggles for self-determination and sovereignty. He argues that Indigenous freedom encompasses both the struggles for freedom (the pursuit of political, economic, and cultural rights) and the struggles of freedom (the ongoing process of self-constitution and collective agency). Tully further critiques the dominant liberal conception of freedom, which overlooks the collective dimensions of freedom and fails to address the historical injustices and ongoing forms of oppression faced by Indigenous peoples. For Tully, Indigenous freedom involves reclaiming and revitalising Indigenous legal and political traditions, which are based on principles of consensus-based decision-making, stewardship of the land, and respect for cultural diversity. He calls for a rethinking of freedom and advocates for a pluralistic approach to governance that acknowledges and respects Indigenous legal orders alongside state legal systems.[39]

With a specific focus on Anishinaabek context and concepts, John Borrows has explored the pursuit of freedom (dibenindizowin) and a fulfilling life (mino-bimaadiziwin) for Indigenous peoples in Canada, and the obstacles hindering its attainment. His definition of freedom is very similar to Pettit's as not merely the 'absence of coercion or constraint'; it also necessarily entails the ability to 'choose, create, resist, reject, and change laws and policies that affect your life'.[40] According to Borrows, a significant obstacle of achieving Indigenous freedom lies not only in the law's persistent failure to align with Indigenous values, desires, and beliefs but also its consistent and continued disregard towards Indigenous peoples' struggles for freedom. Other scholars have considered the concept of freedom within the context of disrupting settler colonialism and reclaiming Indigenous sovereignty through acts of spatial disruption, such as land reclamations, blockades, and protests. Some have suggested these spatial disruptions create 'spaces of dangerous freedom' where Indigenous peoples assert their rights and autonomy outside of settler colonial frameworks and institutions.[41]

The creating and advancing of such 'spaces of dangerous freedom' is often referred to as resurgence. At its core, Indigenous resurgence is a response to centuries of colonialism, representing

[38]Emma LaRocque, *Violence in Aboriginal Communities*, Public Health Agency of Canada (Ottawa, 1994); Lynn Stephen and Shannon Speed (eds), *Indigenous Women and Violence: Feminist Activist Research in Heightened States of Injustice* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2021); Kim Anderson, Maria Campbell, and Christi Belcourt (eds), *Keetsahnak: Our Missing and Murdered Indigenous Sisters* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2018); Eileen Luna, 'Indigenous women, domestic violence and self-determination', *Indigenous Law Bulletin*, 4:25 (1999).

[39]James Tully, 'The struggles of Indigenous peoples for and of freedom', in Duncan Ivison, Paul Patton, and Will Sanders (eds), *Political Theory and the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 36–59.

[40]John Borrows, *Freedom and Indigenous Constitutionalism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), p.12.

[41]Adam J. Barker and Emma Battell Lowman, 'The spaces of dangerous freedom: Disrupting settler colonialism', in Sarah Maddison, Tom Clark and Ravi de Costa (eds),*The Limits of Settler Colonial Reconciliation: Non-Indigenous People and the Responsibility to Engage* (Springer, 2016), 195-212.

both a multifaceted and dynamic movement and a concerted effort by Indigenous communities to reclaim agency and assert their rights to self-governance, land, and resources. Resurgence typically emphasises the importance of understanding freedom within a relational context, highlighting the interconnectedness of Indigenous peoples, lands, and communities. Indigenous freedom is not only about individual rights but also about collective responsibilities and relationships with the land and other beings.[42]

What most Indigenous discourses of freedom fail to consider is that Indigenous freedom does and cannot mean the same thing for all Indigenous individuals or for everyone in Indigenous communities. They miss the fact that freedom for Indigenous men as a group can mean something very different compared to Indigenous women, whose freedom differs from Indigenous queer, Two-Spirit, and gender-diverse people, including (or perhaps particularly so) at the level of law and policy, or access to participation and decision-making. Some Indigenous feminist scholars have called attention to heteropatriarchy within Indigenous nation-building and the gender blindness in the resurgence movement. They have posed critical questions such as: how can we create circumstances where resurgence does not perpetuate idealised concepts of cultural harmony and collectivism which have previously been employed to dismiss Indigenous women's concerns regarding male-dominated self-government? How can Indigenous nationalism help to restore the political status of women[43] – or build it in contexts where Indigenous women have not historically been constructed as powerful political actors but possibly targeted through gender discrimination?[44] How to formulate and enact decolonisation that encompasses the eradication of sexism and misogyny? In the collective endeavour of nation-building within Indigenous contexts, what impact does the critical dismantling of gender hierarchy have on Indigenous women, children, and Two-Spirit/Queer bodies, and how do their experiences serve as indicators of our nations' success?[45]

Cree feminist scholar Gina Starblanket has noted how the resurgence movement also runs the risk of perpetuating selective, exclusionary, or essentialist traditionalism, which has been critiqued by early Indigenous feminist scholars.[46] She suggests that these tendencies can be countered by critically examining the power dynamics inherent in our interactions with the past, including critically

[42]Borrows, *Freedom and Indigenous Constitutionalism*; Elaine Coburn (ed.), *More Will Sing Their Way to Freedom: Indigenous Resistance and Resurgence* (Winnipeg: Fernwood, 2015); Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*.

[43]LaRocque, *Violence in Aboriginal Communities*; Audra Simpson, 'Consent's revenge', *Cultural Anthropology*, 31:3 (2016), https://culanth.org/articles/818-consent-s-revenge.

[44]For example, Joan Scottie, Warren Bernauer, and Jack Hicks, *I Will Live for Both of Us: A History of Colonialism, Uranium Mining, and Inuit Resistance* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2022).

[45]Alex Wilson, 'Our coming in stories: Cree identity, body sovereignty and gender self-determination', *Journal of Global Indigeneity*, 1:1 (2015); Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*; Gina Starblanket, 'Being Indigenous feminists: Resurgences against contemporary patriarchy', in Joyce Green (ed.), *Making Space for Indigenous Feminisms* (Winnipeg: Fernwood, 2017), 21–41. Yet not all see resurgence as gender-blind or dismissive of violence. For example, Scott Lauria Morgensen, 'Conditions of critique. Responding to Indigenous resurgence within Gender Studies', *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 3:1–2 (2016), https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-3334379, examines how engaging with Indigenous resurgence can contribute to challenging and transforming the racial and colonial violences that shape discussions about gender, including those addressing trans and feminist issues.

[46]R. Aida Hernandez Castillo, 'National law and Indigenous customary law: The struggle for justice of Indigenous women in Chiapas, Mexico', in Maxine Molyneux and Shahra Razavid (eds), *Gender Justice, Development, and Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 384–412; Fay Blaney, 'Aboriginal Women's Action Network', in Kim Anderson and Bonita Lawrence (eds), *Strong Women Stories: Native Vision and Community Survival* (Toronto: Sumach Press, 2003), 156–72; Margarita Gutiérrez and Nellys Palomo, 'A woman's eye view of autonomy', in Aracely Burguete Cal Mayor (ed.), *Indigenous Autonomy in Mexico* (Copenhagen: IWGIA, 2000); Jennifer Nez Denetdale, 'Securing the Navajo national boundaries: War, patriotism, tradition, and the Diné Marriage Act of 2005', *Wicazo Sa Review*, 24:2 (2009), 53–82; Dawn Martin-Hill, 'She No Speaks and other colonial constructs of "the traditional woman"', in Kim Anderson and Bonita Lawrence (eds), *Strong Women Stories: Native Vision and Community Survival* (Toronto: Sumach Press, 2003), 106–203; Patricia A. Monture, 'The right of inclusion: Aboriginal rights and/or Aboriginal women?', in Kerry Wilkins (ed.), *Advancing Aboriginal Claims: Visions, Strategies, Directions* (Saskatoon: Purich, 2004), 9–66; Speed, Castillo, and Stephen, *Dissident Women*; Green, 'Constitutionalising the patriarchy'; Emma LaRocque, 'The colonization of a Native woman scholar', in Christine Miller, Patricia Chuchryk, Marie Smallface Marule, Brenda Manyfingers and Cheryl Deering (eds), *Women of the First Nations: Power, Wisdom, and Strength*

evaluating, choosing, and using sources of knowledge that are central to our cultural identities as Indigenous peoples. Critical of the cultural or political 'turn inward' advocated by resurgence and of its potential implications for already excluded or marginalised Indigenous women, Starblanket argues that an internal orientation may further intensify the insularity of Indigenous communities, which is a problem particularly for Indigenous women living in violent relationships.[47]

Cree author and scholar Billy-Ray Belcourt further maintains that resurgence involves a 'hidden neoliberal ideology that places individualized responsibility on Indigenous peoples for overcoming the conditions of coloniality that permeate their lives'.[48] Overcoming coloniality can be particularly challenging for those Indigenous people, including many women, queer, and transgender individuals, who confront a pervasive network of institutional, racial, and spatial marginalisation. For them, simply 'rising above'[49] or prioritising 'land-back' movements or other Indigenous land restitution efforts is simply not feasible. There is also a mistaken assumption that the resources for resurgence are equally available to all Indigenous individuals, despite significant inequalities, particularly concerning existing sexual hierarchies and gender regimes.[50] The discourse on resurgence, despite its intersections with Two-Spirit or queer thinking and advocacy, offers particularly little for queer and trans Indigenous individuals outside of artistic or academic circles in terms of tangible solutions for addressing the everyday violence faced by queer and trans Indigenous people.[51]

Indigenous feminist relational freedom

If structures of domination from settler colonialism and gendered oppression are indeed mutually interlocking and co-constitutive, theorising Indigenous feminist relational freedom becomes important for several reasons. First, it allows us to articulate a model of freedom that directly addresses the unique, intersecting forms of subjugation Indigenous people face, rather than relying on frameworks that treat these issues as separate or additive. It also enables us to critique and move beyond existing models of freedom that primarily emphasise non-interference, which may lack relevance to Indigenous communities facing ongoing *relational* harms. Instead, relational freedom emphasises freedom from domination in all its forms – not only from external colonial forces but also from harmful dynamics within Indigenous social structures. Such a framework provides a basis for reimagining a self-determination that is holistic, ensuring that gender justice and the dismantling of hierarchical relations are integrated into the broader pursuit of Indigenous sovereignty and well-being.

Third, adopting a framework of relational freedom shifts us away from the limitations of individual freedom that often emphasises personal autonomy at the expense of collective well-being. In the contemporary neoliberal social order, the focus on individual freedom tends to privilege market-driven, competitive relationships over cooperative, interdependent ones, reinforcing social and economic inequalities. The theory of relational freedom highlights how neoliberal concepts of freedom create significant inequalities both locally and globally but also acknowledges the historical development of neoliberal freedom as we understand it today.

The evolution of the concept of freedom has been traced to the 1960s calls for personal autonomy by the political and counterculture movement known as the New Left. This laid the groundwork for

(Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1996), 11–18; Megan Davis, 'The globalisation of international human rights law, Aboriginal women and the practice of Aboriginal customary law', in Maureen Cain and Adrian Howe (eds), *Women, Crime and Social Harm: Towards a Criminology for the Global Age* (Oxford: Hart, 2008), 137–57; Cyndy Baskin, 'Contemporary Indigenous women's roles: Traditional teachings or internalized colonialism?', *Violence against Women*, 26:15–16 (2020), https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801219888024.

[47]Starblanket, 'Being Indigenous feminists. Resurgences against contemporary patriarchy'.

[48]In Billy-Ray Belcourt and Lindsay Nixon, 'What do we mean by queer Indigenous ethics?', canadianart, updated 23 May 2018, https://canadianart.ca/features/what-do-we-mean-by-queerindigenousethics/.: n.p.

[49]Belcourt and Nixon, 'What do we mean by queer Indigenous ethics?'.

[50]On Indigenous gender regimes, see Kuokkanen, *Restructuring Relations*.

[51]Belcourt and Nixon, 'What do we mean by queer Indigenous ethics?'.

the neoliberal understanding of freedom that emerged in the late 20th century. Particularly through the free speech movement, the New Left articulated a profound desire for individual freedom and autonomy, rejecting large, oppressive institutions. According to Gary Gerstle, the desire for personal expression and individuality resonated with the ideals of the personal computer movement and its proponents, who envisioned technology as a tool for personal empowerment, free from corporate control. While the cry for liberation was originally part of the New Left's agenda, it was co-opted by the rising neoliberal order, which shared a similar interest in deregulation and freeing individuals from the constraints of larger institutions. Neoliberalism advocated for minimal government intervention, with the role of the state limited to ensuring that markets functioned freely. The neoliberal vision of a 'free' world – where people, goods, information, and capital flow without constraint – ultimately merged personal autonomy with the economic interests of capitalism. Gerstle suggests that while the Left did not intentionally create neoliberalism, their call for personal freedom and autonomy inadvertently supported the very economic framework that neoliberalism later embodied.[52]

The 1960s Left's calls for freedom provide both inspiration and cautionary lessons for Indigenous relational freedom. The Left's pursuit of freedom emphasised civil rights, anti-colonialism, and social liberation, advocating for greater autonomy and equality across marginalised groups. These movements laid critical groundwork for decolonisation, for example, by challenging state repression, structural inequality, and the legacies of colonialism, all of which resonate with Indigenous struggles for self-determination and resistance to oppressive structures.

The 1960s freedom movements, however, also contributed to the evolving concept of freedom that neoliberalism would later adopt and transform. While initially rooted in collective liberation, calls for freedom began to pivot towards individual autonomy and anti-state sentiments, which neoliberal ideologies co-opted to justify market deregulation, privatisation, and a focus on personal choice over collective rights. Neoliberal concepts of freedom obscure relational interdependence, commodify natural resources, and erode Indigenous self-determination by integrating it into capitalist frameworks. By understanding the historical trajectory of neoliberal freedom, Indigenous relational freedom can critically resist being subsumed by individualism and market logic and instead preserve the emphasis on collective well-being, mutual obligations, and sovereignty that challenges extractive systems. This caution helps ensure that Indigenous freedom aligns with its principles of relationality and non-domination in order to not inadvertently replicate the same forms of domination Indigenous communities seek to dismantle.

Republican and Indigenous political theories agree that genuine freedom is found in self-determination. However, while republican theories focus on individual self-determination, Indigenous political theories prioritise collective self-determination. Yet as the above discussion shows, prioritising collective self-determination at the cost of individual self-determination poses a particular problem for those Indigenous women and LGTBQ+ individuals for whom overlooking individual self-determination implies continued relations of domination and subordination, including celebrating problematic, sometimes sexist or gender-discriminatory 'traditions'. Research further shows how Indigenous women consider individual self-determination as a precondition of collective Indigenous self-determination. Self-determination thus should not be seen solely as a framework for granting rights, but also as a principle that can be either promoted or undermined by the relationships we form and the positions we hold, both individually and collectively.[53] Consequently, a crucial aspect of freedom involves examining which types of relationships uphold the principle of self-determination in its all forms.

As discussed above, non-domination for Pettit arises from establishing democratic institutions and adhering to the rule of law. For Indigenous peoples, however, these institutions often are the source of domination. If non-domination involves more than simply the absence of interference,

[52]Gary Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order: America and the World in the Free Market Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

[53]Kuokkanen, *Restructuring Relations*.

encompassing the establishment of institutions and social structures that safeguard individuals and communities from arbitrary coercion and control, then this principle can also serve as a foundation for Indigenous self-determination that ensures freedom for all. We would need to consider both individual and collective self-determination – and limitations of and to each – in striving to eliminate arbitrary power and control in all relationships. Transforming established multicausal structural impediments would require system-wide approaches that have the potential to enable a synchronous change. For example, establishing jurisdiction for Indigenous authority alone remains inevitably deficient in addressing violence against Indigenous women. As highlighted by an Indigenous legal expert, establishing a legal framework for tribal authority alone is not enough for addressing gendered violence within Alaska Native communities. To make a meaningful impact, an entire crisis intervention system including law enforcement, temporary detention facilities, safe houses, women's safety planning, and sustained funding would need be developed at the community level.[54]

The limitations of jurisdictional authority alone are evident in cases where tribal courts issue protective orders that state law enforcement agencies refuse to enforce, rendering legal protections meaningless in practice. In rural Alaska, for example, survivors of domestic violence often have no access to local law enforcement, meaning that even when legal authority exists on paper, there is no one to implement it. Similarly, safe houses are nearly non-existent in many Indigenous communities, forcing women to choose between staying in dangerous situations or leaving their homelands altogether. These gaps illustrate how a lack of coordination between legal recognition and material resources undermines efforts to address gendered violence and Indigenous relational freedom. Without direct investment in enforcement mechanisms, crisis response infrastructure, and survivor support services, the expansion of Indigenous jurisdiction risks being a symbolic victory rather than a functional solution.[55]

The idea of a comprehensive community-based crisis intervention system aligns with Nedelsky's concept of relational autonomy, which emphasises that meaningful autonomy is shaped not only by individual actions but by the broader social structures and relationships that influence one's ability to exercise freedom. Focusing on social structures and relationships that either empower or constrain individuals in Indigenous settings could also mean building gender-sensitive structures and support systems that promote individual autonomy while reinforcing cultural continuity. It would require addressing the ways in which internal social dynamics, such as patriarchal norms or hierarchical roles, constrain individual and collective autonomy. For example, gender-sensitive structures could involve supporting Indigenous women's and LGBTQ+ leadership in governance and decision-making roles to challenge existing gender-based constraints, thereby fostering a more inclusive environment where all community members can exercise and participate in self-determination individually and collectively in ways that accounts for relational freedom.

Another helpful framework for advancing Indigenous feminist relational freedom is the Indigenous logic of the gift, which challenges liberal ideas of constrained reciprocity and individualism and instead emphasises a relational and open-ended form of reciprocity. While the liberal norm considers the self as autonomous, with constrained reciprocity involving equal, transactional exchanges that limit personal obligations, Indigenous reciprocity is not about maintaining an even score through equal exchange. Constrained reciprocity is limited by specific, often-rigid expectations of what is 'owed' in return. It forces people to give with the expectation of a direct return, stifling the flow of mutual care and the freedom to act outside of a predefined system of exchange. Constrained reciprocity can lead to feelings of indebtedness, transactional relationships. The constrained model restricts true relational freedom by creating power imbalances and transactional motives, rather than allowing people to freely engage based on the needs and desires of the relationship itself.

[54]Rauna Kuokkanen, '"It doesn't rise to the level of crisis that other situations would": Indigenous self-determination and gendered violence in Alaska', *Politics and Gender* (2025), https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X25000133.
[55]Ibid.

The logic of the gift recognises reciprocity as a continuous, open-ended process aimed at fostering collective well-being through establishing maintaining relations through gifts. In this Indigenous framework, giving is part of a larger relational cycle – one that includes other people, land, and all living beings. This form of circular reciprocity sustains and acknowledges kinship and interdependence with the world, supporting survival and community well-being over the accumulation of individual gain. Importantly, this logic of reciprocity recognises the needs and rights of others, affirming interdependence and co-existence without subordinating individual or community needs.[56] The gift in this context is not a means of ensuring a return but a vital expression of mutual recognition, relationality, and respect for all beings within an ecosystem.[57]

The logic of the gift and its open-ended reciprocity in particular are central for relational freedom because, unlike the constrained reciprocity of give-and-take, open-ended reciprocity enables relationships to flourish in ways that are fluid and dynamic. Open-ended reciprocity is based on the understanding that relationships are not transactional exchanges with predefined outcomes. Instead, they are dynamic and evolve over time. This approach reflects the interconnectedness of all beings, where the freedom of individuals and communities is bound up with the well-being of others. In Indigenous and feminist thought, relational freedom is about being able to give, receive, and reciprocate without restrictions, knowing that this exchange will naturally find balance through ongoing engagement and care.

Open-ended reciprocity is an ongoing process of giving and receiving that cannot be neatly accounted for or constrained by time, value, or specific terms. This autonomy supports individual agency while also fostering a deep sense of responsibility towards the collective well-being. It acknowledges that people have different needs at different times, and these needs can be met in different ways throughout their lives. This relates to relational freedom by emphasising the balance between individual autonomy and collective responsibility within relationships. In this model, people are not locked into rigid roles or static positions within relationships. This allows for a dynamic freedom that is both self-determined and community-oriented, where individuals are free to move between roles of giving and receiving without being limited by fixed societal, including gendered, expectations. The flexibility of relational freedom, through acknowledging diverse needs, also means that people can grow and evolve within their relationships.

In feminist terms, relational freedom critiques hierarchical and extractive relations in which one person's or group's freedom or autonomy is asserted at the expense of another. The model of relational freedom advances the idea that freedom should be collective and that power should not be hoarded by one individual or group but shared in a way that allows for the flourishing of all. It challenges a one-size-fits-all approach to freedom or autonomy, particularly the Western, neoliberal notion of freedom as the ability to act without regard for others. Indigenous feminist relational freedom recognises that autonomy is not a uniform experience and that certain groups, especially women and marginalised people, require more flexibility, care, and attention to thrive. It provides a framework where freedom is not imposed in a standard, patriarchal way but is adaptive to the needs of all, particularly those most marginalised.

Relational freedom recognises that individual and collective freedoms are fundamentally intertwined: just as the freedom of one individual cannot be achieved through the subjugation or harm of another, the freedom of one group cannot be sustained on the exploitation or exclusion of another. This interdependence means that our freedom is bound to the freedom and well-being of others – including not just other humans but ecosystems and more-than-human beings. When our freedom rests on the oppression or control of others, it ceases to be true freedom and instead

[56]This does not suggest that the individual is insignificant in Indigenous communities (see Emma LaRocque, 'Re-examining culturally appropriate models in criminal justice applications', in Michael Asch (ed.), *Aboriginal and Treaty Rights in Canada: Essays on Law, Equity and Respect for Difference* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997), 75–96; Kuokkanen, *Restructuring Relations*).

[57]Kuokkanen, *Reshaping the University*.

becomes an extension of oppressive structures. By linking responsibility to the collective well-being, Indigenous relational freedom further enables both men and women to share in caregiving roles and community responsibilities.

Thus, relational freedom highlights the fact that freedom and domination cannot coexist. If our freedom relies on controlling or subordinating others – whether that be through gender oppression, marginalisation of LGBTQ+ people, or exploitation of land, ecosystems, or other sentient beings – it is not true freedom but instead, an extension of a system of domination. For relational freedom to be realised, structures that marginalise or oppress certain groups (such as women, LGBTQ+ people, Indigenous communities, ecosystems) must be transformed. Moreover, relational freedom necessitates a sense of accountability and responsibility, which extends to how we engage with land, the environment, and more-than-human life. Acknowledging that our freedom is interconnected with that of others – both human and non-human – advances pluralism for diverse ways of being and living.

Relational freedom has implications also for decision-making, making it a more inclusive, participatory process that considers the voices and needs of all affected parties, including the environment, ecosystems, and all sentient beings, thus creating a potential for a form of governance that is constituted upon the interconnected character of all life. Here I draw on Mary G. Dietz's concept of feminist citizenship, which emphasises that true freedom within a democratic society extends beyond mere negative liberty, i.e. the absence of interference from others or the state. Instead, it prioritises positive liberty – the active capacity to participate in democratic processes and governance. In this framework, freedom is not just about being left alone but about having the means and support to actively engage in and shape the political and social structures that affect one's life. Dietz's feminist citizenship advocates for a collective, participatory approach where individuals have the power to influence decisions and structures that impact them. This perspective challenges traditional liberal views of citizenship, which often emphasise individual rights and protections over collective empowerment and engagement. For Dietz, genuine freedom involves not only personal autonomy but also the structural support and opportunities necessary for individuals, especially women and marginalised groups, to influence the institutions that shape their lives. This relational and inclusive approach redefines citizenship as a shared endeavour, in which individuals engage in mutual responsibility and cooperative agency to foster justice and equality in society.[58]

At the level of practical implementation, relational freedom implies creating policies and practices that support the autonomy and self-determination of communities without undermining – dominating or oppressing – others. This could mean challenging the ingrained gendered divisions of labour that are oppressive or unwelcome[59] and the assumption that women should bear the brunt of emotional and caregiving labour without recognition. It could mean gender-equity initiatives that ensure LGBTQ+ inclusion or sustainable development that accounts for Indigenous land rights and jurisdiction are practical ways to operationalise relational freedom. In environmental terms, relational freedom promotes sustainability as it recognises that ecological health is foundational to collective well-being. By valuing the freedom of ecosystems, plants, and animals, relational freedom inherently supports the long-term viability of the planet, acknowledging that human freedom is contingent on a healthy environment.

To implement the principles of relational freedom in Indigenous communities in a feminist and gender-sensitive manner, the focus would need to be on creating systems of governance, cultural practices, and community engagement that both honour the autonomy of individuals and foster collective decision-making. In some contexts, this may include ensuring that women, Two-Spirit,

[58] Mary G. Dietz, 'Context is all: Feminism and theories of citizenship', *Daedalus*, 116:4 (1987).

[59] The qualifiers here are necessary because there are Indigenous governance structures with clear gendered division of labor but which are not oppressive or exclusionary. See the n. 58.

and non-binary people have an equal voice in decision-making bodies, particularly in leadership roles traditionally dominated by men. Implementing gender-sensitive practices within these structures – such as quotas, gender-equitable voting systems, or community-led forums – would ensure that all voices are heard and that the decisions made reflect the needs and perspectives of all members. In others, where there is a history of Indigenous female leadership and/or matriarchal governance systems, it may involve reclaiming or strengthening women's economic and political leadership conventions and traditions. Importantly, this does not always imply an 'equal voice' or status, as there are governance structures with a clear division of labour based on gender, such as the Haudenosaunee traditional governance where the ultimate power is vested in clan mothers who appoint the male chiefs.[60]

A feminist and gender-sensitive approach to relational freedom also requires the inclusion of Indigenous feminist knowledge systems and practices that centre women, gender-diverse individuals, and the land. This means revitalising Indigenous women's historical positions not only in governance but in knowledge-sharing, decision-making, and the stewardship of land, which may have been suppressed through colonialism.[61] Indigenous feminist perspectives on kinship, land stewardship, and community well-being provide alternative models of governance and relationality that prioritise interdependence and balance over individual autonomy.

Further, for positive liberty to be realised, individuals must have the necessary support systems to engage in governance and decision-making. In Indigenous contexts, this could mean creating educational and mentoring programmes that enable women and gender minorities to take on leadership positions, ensuring that they have the tools and knowledge to participate effectively in political and social processes. Another key aspect would be the promotion of culturally specific gender-sensitive education within the community, focused on structures and relations of domination which often remain unrecognised or overlooked. Education would need to engage with both traditional knowledge and Indigenous feminist theory to develop an understanding of how relational freedom can be lived out in practice and in specific cultural and social contexts without losing sight of the fact freedom is contingent upon the well-being of *all* others, not at their expense. The necessary support systems may also mean creating safe spaces where all members, particularly marginalised genders, can engage in dialogue and share their perspectives on how governance structures should function. Relational freedom demands that the processes of governance are shaped by the lived experiences of all, especially those who have been historically oppressed.

Governance frameworks based on relational freedom would further require justice systems that are restorative and intersectional, recognising how gender-based violence, colonial histories, and other forms of oppression intersect and how gender regimes can become entrenched in Indigenous institutions. This would involve developing Indigenous-led legal systems that address gendered violence while promoting freedom of all within the community in a way that merely punishes wrongdoers. Here Iris Marion Young's concept of social connection model of responsibility can be helpful. It emphasises that individuals and groups are responsible for social injustices not because they directly caused them, but because they are part of the interconnected social structures that perpetuate those injustices. The social connection model shifts the focus from blame to collective responsibility, suggesting that we are all accountable for addressing systemic

[60]Diane Rothenberg, 'The mothers of the nation: Seneca resistance to Quaker intervention', in Eleanor Leacock and Mona Etienne (eds), *Women and Colonization: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York: Praeger, 1980), 63–87; Anthony F. C. Wallace, 'Tuscarora political domains', in Brian Hosmer and Larry Nesper (eds), *Tribal Worlds: Critical Studies in American Indian Nation Building* (Albany: State University of New York, 2013), 21–36; Robert B. Porter, 'Decolonizing Indigenous governance: Observations on restoring greater faith and legitimacy in the government of the Seneca Nation', *Kansas Journal of Law and Public Policy*, 8:2 (1999).

[61]See, for example, Stevenson, 'Colonialism and First Nations women in Canada'; Nathalie Kermoal and Isabel Altamirano-Jiménez (eds), *Living on the Land: Indigenous Women's Understanding of Place* (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2016); Waaseyaa'sin Christine Sy, 'Relationship with land in Anishinaabeg womxn's historical research', in Julie A. Gallagher and Barbara Winslow (eds), *Reshaping Women's History: Voices of Nontraditional Women Historians* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 222–36.

issues through collective action and solidarity.[62] Any gender-sensitive, Indigenous-led legal system would also require comprehensive support for survivors of gender-based violence, including community-driven initiatives focused on mental health, healing, and collective responsibility.

Relational freedom redefines freedom as a shared, collective state, contingent upon dismantling structures and relations of domination – whether rooted in colonialism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, or environmental exploitation. This framework challenges traditional individualistic and (neoliberal notions of freedom and offers an alternative that is inherently tied to justice, equity, and sustainability. True freedom, from this perspective, is an interdependent and inclusive experience – one that sustains and actively promotes the freedom, integrity, and dignity of all beings.

Conclusion

In this article, I have explored the concept of Indigenous feminist relationality, offering a theoretical framework that critiques conventional notions of Indigenous freedom and sovereignty. Drawing on republican theories of non-domination, Indigenous gift relations, and the logic of gift, I have proposed a more comprehensive conception of Indigenous relational freedom, one that prioritises the dismantling of all forms and structures of domination, both external and internal. The article critically explored various perspectives on Indigenous freedom, including the discourse of resurgence, and evaluated the critiques of Indigenous relationality.

The republican concept of freedom as non-domination goes beyond the notion of negative freedom (the absence of interference), emphasising the significance of preventing the use of power that constrains individual autonomy and self-determination. According to this concept, domination occurs when individuals or groups are under the unjustified control of others, even in the absence of active interference at a specific time. In addition to the subordination of Indigenous women, Two-Spirit and queer individuals in the form of denial of their self-determination, I suggest that claims according to which Indigenous lives ought to be all about the land are also manifestations of subtle domination that constrains freedom of certain Indigenous people.

Non-domination, when seen as more than just the absence of interference, includes the creation of institutions and social structures that protect individuals and communities from arbitrary power, including oppressive gender relations. This broader definition can serve as a foundation for Indigenous self-determination, ensuring freedom for all. I have suggested that in practice, transforming structural impediments requires system-wide approaches capable of enabling change. For instance, simply establishing Indigenous jurisdiction is insufficient in addressing gendered violence. Effective solutions require comprehensive culturally appropriate systems that include law enforcement, crisis intervention, shelters, and sustained funding, to ensure meaningful protection. In short, legal authority without material resources and infrastructure fails to address the goal of genuine freedom and self-determination.

By theorising Indigenous feminist relational freedom, I have highlighted the critical need to address not only the intersections of gender, ethnicity/race, and other social identities in shaping our freedoms that are interdependent on others but that any account of freedom is incomplete without recognising the existence and impact of structures and relations of domination even in the absence of interference or direct violence. This approach reveals that true freedom cannot be attained if it is predicated upon the subjugation or exclusion of any group, especially Indigenous women, Two-Spirit, and queer individuals.

[62]Iris Marion Young, *Responsibility for Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Applying Young's model in Indigenous contexts, see Catherine Lu, 'Responsibility, structural injustice, and settler colonialism', in Jude Browne and Maeve McKeown (eds), *What Is Structural Injustice?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 107–25; Rauna Kuokkanen, 'Indigenous gender justice and self-determination', in Monique Deveaux et al. (eds), *Handbook on Grounded and Engaged Normative Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2025 forthcoming).

While Indigenous relationality focuses on maintaining and revitalising relationships with land and community, Indigenous feminist relationality advocates for transforming both external and internal social structures that are inherently gendered (albeit not necessarily in the same ways). This means challenging patriarchal norms within Indigenous communities as well as opposing colonial systems, making it a more explicitly activist framework aimed at achieving gender justice alongside environmental, social, and cultural resilience at both individual and collective levels. Indigenous feminist relationality actively works to reclaim conventions and systems that colonialism and patriarchy have altered or erased, such as gender-diverse leadership and the matriarchal or egalitarian structures historically found in many Indigenous societies.

The theory of Indigenous feminist relational freedom does not seek to idealise relationships. It acknowledges the historical and ongoing bad relations of colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy in Indigenous communities and highlights the resilience and resistance of Indigenous women. It draws attention also to the relations of dependency and domination among Indigenous people and within Indigenous communities. As a critical theoretical framework, Indigenous feminist relationality enables us to identify and interrogate macro and micro level hierarchies. It emphasises the background inequalities that contribute to the relations of domination, in contrast to mainstream Indigenous politics that focus on challenging relations of domination with the state.

My conception of Indigenous feminist relational freedom draws on the concept of relational autonomy, which acknowledges that besides being a source of autonomy, relationships can be a radical restriction to it. Indigenous feminist relationality underscores how we cannot lose sight of relations of domination, such as high levels of violence against Indigenous women, when theorising Indigenous relationality. Theorising Indigenous feminist relationality highlights the significance of understanding the nature of relationships, also behind disputes and problems, and in that way, of challenging and transforming the power structures that perpetuate gendered violence, inequality, and environmental degradation, and creating more just and equitable societies.

Importantly, Indigenous feminist relational freedom is not merely a theoretical critique but a framework for transformative action. The framework calls for a rethinking of both external colonial relationships and internal patriarchal norms, advocating for a revitalisation of Indigenous governance systems that honour the contributions and leadership of women and gender-diverse individuals. By contemplating freedom from the perspective of both relational autonomy and non-domination, we gain a more intimate understanding of self-determination and decolonisation and the complexity of relations involved in both processes. Indigenous feminist relational theory serves as a valuable tool in this regard, recognising and identifying the negative relations as well, including oppressive gender relations that severely restrict the freedom of Indigenous women, queer, and gender-diverse people. Specifically, negative relationships encompass cases of gendered violence that diminish the lives of numerous Indigenous individuals.

Sometimes Indigenous scholarship can be constrained by identity politics, as discussions tend to focus on broad categories such as 'Indigenous people' without acknowledging the internal diversity within these communities. This oversimplification overlooks the distinct political experiences and struggles of different groups within Indigenous societies. To ensure a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of Indigenous political, social, and cultural realities, discussions on Indigenous societies in general and Indigenous relationality in particular must move beyond generalised identity frameworks and adopt more complex, intersectional perspectives that recognise how gender, sexuality, and other intersecting factors shape distinct positions and status of Indigenous individuals and groups.

Ultimately, this article contributes to the broader discourse on Indigenous sovereignty by situating Indigenous feminist relationality as a critical tool for understanding and addressing the layered power dynamics that continue to affect Indigenous communities today. It emphasises the importance of reclaiming not only land and political autonomy but also the relational practices that

sustain and nurture justice, equity, and sustainability within Indigenous societies. Through this lens, Indigenous freedom becomes a collective, interdependent pursuit that demands the recognition of all forms of relational and social justice. Indigenous relational freedom calls attention to the shortcomings of non-interference which can be utilised to oppose legislative and policy reforms aimed at tackling gendered domination, such as measures to address gender-based violence, or to uphold traditional social norms and cultural practices that perpetuate subordination of certain genders.

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Rauna Kuokkanen (Sámi) is Research Professor of Arctic Indigenous Studies at the University of Lapland (Finland) and Adjunct Professor at the University of Toronto. Her most recent book is the award-winning *Restructuring Relations: Indigenous Self-Determination, Governance and Gender* (Oxford University Press, 2019). Her research focuses on comparative and Arctic Indigenous politics, Indigenous feminist theory, governance, law, and Nordic settler colonialism.

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