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Introduction to "Indigenous Women: The State of Our Nations"

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"Indigenous Women: The State of Our Nations" originated with our desire, as co-editors, to continue a working relationship that began with the anthology *Strong Women Stories: Native Vision and Community Survival* (2003). In *Strong Women Stories*, the contributors addressed the range of issues that Aboriginal women take on as they work to ensure the survival of our communities. A number of them examined the complex legal categories through which Canada classifies Nativeness, and explored how being labelled as a "C-31 Indian," or as "non-status" or "Metis," affected their ability to feel a sense of belonging within their own and other Native communities. Other women addressed issues of child-rearing, schooling, sexuality, community leadership, women and "traditionalism," aging, violence against women and children and healing. Notably absent in these accounts, however, were articles that explicitly explored the politics of sovereignty. This absence both intrigued and troubled us, and prompted us to ask the contributors to this journal to write about Aboriginal women and nationhood.

As a starting point, we knew that "community issues" and "sovereignty issues" have often been separated within our communities. "Sovereignty issues," as articulated by the formal leadership (largely male) have addressed land claims and constitutional battles, in the courts and within government circles. "Community issues," as articulated by the informal leadership (largely female), have encompassed a range of struggles, including addressing violence against women and children, alcoholism and other addictions, the health needs of children and elders, and education that is culture-based and community controlled. Too often, the agendas of the formal leadership are prioritized, while the informal leadership's concerns receive secondary attention. The gender divisions that underpin whose perspectives are prioritized are obvious; what is less clear are the ways in which the gender divisions forced on us by the colonizer may have resulted in different definitions, among men and women, of "sovereignty" and "nationhood."

WHERE ARE YOUR WOMEN?

The absence of Aboriginal women in politics is rooted in our history, as coined in the "Where are your women?" question posed by Cherokee Chief Attakullakulla upon meeting a colonial United States (US) delegation. As Marilou Awiakta reports, Chief Attakullakulla's party included women "as famous in war, as powerful in the council," while the US party included only men (1993, 9). In terms of governance, where were (are) their women - and what has happened to our Indigenous female political authority, vision, voice and direction?

We know that colonial governments historically refused to negotiate with Indigenous women, accepting only male representatives when discussing terms of relationship. They then actively disempowered women by attacking the clan systems and other forms of female representation, and by making it illegal for Indian women in Canada to take part in the band councils that replaced traditional Indigenous governments. The legacy of the *Indian Act*, in the form of all-male representation, has shaped the nation to nation discourse since then. This has set the stage for a political representation that is not shaped by women's ways of knowing the world.

Native women have been far from silent about community needs and priorities, but our voices are only beginning to be heard politically at the national and international levels. More Aboriginal women are entering formal leadership

positions nationally and are increasingly addressing international forums on Indigenous issues, yet the reality of ongoing colonization ties our hands. Our families and communities require constant attention because we continue to move from crisis to crisis. As primary caregivers, these responsibilities weigh heavily on us.

There have been other reasons for us not taking active roles in formal political structures. Some Aboriginal women have sought a broader vision than the band council system forced on our communities and so tightly controlled by Canada. These women may have maintained traditional leadership as clan mothers, or have worked in other ways to re-awaken or strengthen the traditional systems of government in their nations. However, other Aboriginal women, particularly those who have struggled against being formally expelled from their nations because of gender discrimination in the *Indian Act*, have borne the brunt of actually having formal political structures work against them.

It is becoming increasingly well-known that a critical act of political resistance on the part of Native women has been against the *Indian Act* clause that expelled Indian women who had married non-Indians from their communities, while allowing Indian men to bestow Indian status on their white wives. Indian women struggled long and hard against this legislation which disenfranchised them from the life of their nations while in many places enabling white women to replace them. The organization "Indian Rights for Indian Women," initiated by the late Mary Two-Axe Early, was probably one of the earliest examples of Native women's resistance to this gendered form of colonialism. However, in the early 1970s, when aspects of overt racial inequality within the *Indian Act* were overturned in the *Drybones* case, two Native women, Jeannette Corbiere Lavell and Irene Bedard, attempted to have the overt gender inquality within the *Act* overturned by challenging the loss of their Indian status in the courts. Ultimately, however, the Supreme Court judgment in *Lavell and Bedard* maintained the gender discrimination which had been so central to Native women's colonial disempowerment. Subsequently, when the women of Tobique First Nation in New Brunswick began to challenge the manner in which housing on reserve was assigned only to men, leaving their families homeless when marriages broke down, their struggle gradually evolved into the larger issue of loss of Indian status. This ultimately led Sandra Lovelace to the United Nations (UN), where she argued that Section 12(1)(b) of the *Indian Act*, through which Indian women lost their status, was in violation of Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which protects the rights of minority groups to enjoy their culture, practise their traditions, and use their language in community with others from their group. In 1981, the UN ruled against Canada, and found that Lovelace had been denied her cultural rights under Article 27, thereby forcing Canada to change the *Indian Act* in 1985 (Lawrence 2004).

What has been less well documented than the above interventions, however, are the ways in which gendered struggles against colonialism have all too frequently been reduced to "women's issues" by the formal male leadership, and then presented as a wholesale threat to sovereignty. The now notorious incident when the National Indian Brotherhood (predecessor of the Assembly of First Nations), when faced with the *Lavell and Bedard* case, actually lined up, with Canada, to be intervenors *against* Lavell and Bedard (Jamieson 1978), is only one example. There are others. When the *Lavell and Bedard* decision clearly foreclosed any possibility of legal redress within Canada, Mary Two-Axe Early and sixty other women from Kahnewake attempted to take Canada's gender discrimination into the international arena by attending the International Women's Year conference in Mexico City in 1975. They returned to find that their band council had served them eviction notices (Jamieson 1979). Meanwhile, the struggle of the Tobique women for housing and against loss of status, which they waged at one point by occupying their band office, resulted not only in threats of arrest by the leadership but also continuous physical violence against them and their families. This happened to such an extent that the American Indian Movement actually offered to come into the community to protect them (Silman 1987).

Against this background, it is perhaps not surprising that the Native Women's Association of Canada did not feel sufficiently "represented" by the Assembly of First Nations, and therefore struggled, fruitlessly, to get a seat for status Indian

women at the table during the 1982 talks around repatriating the constitution. It is also not surprising that the Métis National Council of Women has been forced into the courts in their attempts to bring about national representation of Métis women's voices. These struggles all highlight the extent to which the formal male political leadership has, in general, refused to address colonialism when women, rather than men, are targeted, and why a section of Native women activists have lost faith in these organizations to represent them.

Indeed, it is only since 1985, when changes in the *Indian Act* began to threaten the children of Indian men as well as Indian women with loss of status, that the formal male leadership has begun to see loss of status as the sovereignty issue that it has always been.[1] The implications of this continuous disregard for sovereignty violations when only women are affected are staggering. Over the past one hundred and twenty-five years, approximately 25,000 women and their descendants were expelled, by colonial legislation, from their homes and communities. The most conservative estimates suggest that these women had between half a million and one million descendents, within two generations of first losing status. With the exception of the 127,000 who were reinstated in 1985, almost all of these individuals were permanently lost to their nations; the numbers approach two million if the third generation is taken into account (Lawrence 2004). Indeed, by the time the *Indian Act* was changed in 1985, there were only 350,000 Status Indians still listed on the Department of Indian Affairs Indian Register (Holmes 1987).

There are other ways in which women's concerns have been dismissed by isolating and privatizing them as "individual concerns." A number of Native writers, including Emma LaRocque, addressing gender bias in community justice inititives (1997), and Madeleine Dion Stout, writing about violence against women (1994), have commented on the ways in which the rights of men in our communities are continuously framed as "collective rights," while women's efforts to protect themselves are continuously framed as demands for "individual rights." These so-called "individual" rights are then juxtaposed to "collective rights" as obstacles to sovereignty.

Gender divisions, then, run like a fault line through many Native communities in Canada, fragmenting decolonization efforts in a number of ways and marginalizing women's voices within communities. Because gender discrimination has been a central means through which the colonization of Native communities has taken place, particularly in Canada, addressing the marginalization and devaluation of women's voices becomes central to decolonization.

Viewed this way, the political choices facing our communities are not, as they are frequently articulated, between "sovereignty" (men's concerns) and "community healing" (women's concerns). They are about different ways of understanding sovereignty. In the shutting out of women's voices from sovereignty struggles, it is impossible for Native women not to fear that "sovereignty," as the formal male leadership expresses it, may ultimately involve gendered and racialized formulations of nationhood. And yet, so pervasive has been the devaluation of women's voices by the *Indian Act*, that many of us take for granted that Native men's frameworks of sovereignty issues are the only ways to speak of sovereignty and nationhood at all.

WHERE ARE THE INDIANS?

Colonization has silenced us in other arenas as well. Within academia, Aboriginal women's voices have been largely absent within the growing body of postcolonial scholarship on nationalism. The stunning extent of marginalization of both Aboriginal men and women within Canadian universities, in particular, has a central role to play in this. In most universities across Canada, you can count the number of Native academics, male or female, on the fingers of one hand. With such under-representation, those few Aboriginal women who *are* in the academy have found that their highest priorities involve finding ways to "bring their communities with them." They are busy working to utilize academic frameworks to address community needs, rather than addressing issues of nationalism on a more abstract level.

Perhaps more to the point, the reality is that for Aboriginal people, there is nothing postcolonial about our situation! We find ourselves battling non-stop efforts to erase our existence as peoples within Canada. Our Indigenous nations

remain dismembered, their very existence miscast as the band-level governments erroneously called "First Nations" which are the only levels of government that Canada recognizes. Our identities are fragmented from the attack on our cultures and communities, and by legal definitions of "Indianness" that divide us and encourage us to struggle amongst ourselves for greater access to the state financial support that keeps many of our communities alive.

In these ongoing attempts to obliterate our presence from Canada, Native women in academia are struggling to clarify who we were before the *Indian Act* redefined our identities, usually through working with elders on cultural recovery. We are also trying to understand who we might become, through the visions of our youth and our artists. This process involves defining and writing about the realities we face in our own ways. In the end, postcolonial scholarship on hybridity and the positioning of women within nationalist movements may have some value in addressing some of the issues Native women are currently involved in. But we need to address these issues in a way that makes sense to our realities which, at present, has little to do with any level of postcolonial discourse.

ENGAGING IN THE DIALOGUE

Trying to understand what Indigenous female visions of nationhood and the future *are* out there, we sent out a call for papers internationally. The instantaneous nature of how email has become our "bush telegraph" was immediately apparent: within days of issuing the call for papers, inquiries poured in from Indigenous women in Australia, New Zealand, Latin America and the United States. We even received inquiries from Sami women in Norway. Ultimately, however, as the reality of press deadlines approached, geographic distance re-asserted itself. Few of the international contributions could be made ready for publication in time. The vicissitudes of translating from other languages, contextualizing sovereignty struggles in international settings, and the multiple pressures on women's time took its toll.

In the end, we are happy to present a fine collection of articles out of Canada and the United States. This means that at least one border - the one separating those colonized by Anglo-American states - is more fluid, but many more borders remain. There is an ongoing need for an international discourse on nation-building created by Indigenous women. The international gatherings of Indigenous women which are happening throughout the Americas are one manifestation of this. We hope that this edition of *Atlantis* can stimulate others to take up and enlarge on this dialogue.

THE CONTRIBUTIONS

From the start, we found that there was a tension within the submissions between those women who were accustomed to writing about women's roles in community issues, without regarding this as nation-building, and the women who were accustomed to writing about nation-building, but in ways that left out any references to women. It was clear that the contributors were struggling with how to write about sovereignty or nation-building in women's terms, and with how to see community activism as part of sovereignty struggles or nation-building.

We have loosely grouped the final selection of essays into four categories. The first group of articles focuses on the so-called "social issues" that have long been the purview of women and which highlight the importance of healing to decolonization. Secondly, there are articles that directly address the politics of sovereignty / self-determination or Indigenous governance, frequently in ways which demand a rethinking, not only of the relationships between individuals and communities but between Native communities and Canada. Thirdly, there are writings that address traditional knowledge, and its centrality to ways of maintaining our nationhood. And finally, the writers take on issues of representation, not only how we are represented in the colonizer's eyes, but more importantly, how we see ourselves represented in relation to each other. Together with creative writing and poetry, this collection represents a first attempt for us as co-editors to have Aboriginal women speak to each other in writing, specifically about the state of our nations.

As many of us have learned from our mothers, sovereignty must begin with the individual and it is impossible to be sovereign peoples when the very safety and well-being of women and

children are at risk. We therefore begin this issue with two articles that link the politics of the individual to the politics of sovereignty. In "Decolonising the Body: Restoring Sacred Vitality," Alannah Earl Young and Denise Nadeau bring us right into the female body with an article about their work with women from Vancouver's downtown eastside. They demonstrate how regeneration and healing from violence can begin from this bodily location. In rediscovering the "sacred vitality" of our bodies, we have the potential to rebuild home and nation in the most powerful and elemental way.

We often hear the phrases "our children are out future" and "our children are the heart of our nations." The state of our nations thus depends on how we rectify the injustices to our children of the past and how we ensure the well-being of the children of present and future. We had a desire to hear from those who are most implicated in this processes. We were fortunate to have received a beautiful article entitled "The Ultimate Betrayal: Claiming and Re-Claiming Cultural Identity" from Tamara Kulusic, who outlines the history and current situation of Aboriginal child welfare in Canada, starting and concluding with her own story as an adoptee.

In a "special Native Women's edition" of a feminist journal, some individuals might find it ironic that, although the guest editors have struggled to assert the importance of Native women's voices, neither of us have held strong positions about feminism. Ultimately, we have found the arguments by Aboriginal women which either attack or support feminism to be less useful than the importance of Native women finding their own strengths from within their own heritage. Furthermore, like postcolonial theory, feminism in general may have both positive and negative aspects for Native women to work through, accept or discard. It is therefore not surprising that as Aboriginal women begin to explicitly address the politics of nation-building, they are not afraid to mine feminist sources for their potential insights. Both Val Napoleon, with "Aboriginal Self Determination: Individual Self and Collective Selves," and Natasha Powers, with "Beyond Cultural Differences: Interpreting a Treaty Between the Mi'kmaq and British at Belcher's Farm, 1761," analyse aspects of sovereignty, and have applied the ideas of feminist legal scholar Jennifer Nedelsky on the relationship between individual and collective self-determination to the diverse circumstances of their respective nations.

Val Napoleon has contributed a complex analysis of the circumstances facing her home community, the Saulteau First Nation, in Northern British Columbia. Napoleon locates the particularities of this community's experience (cultural isolation and location in another nation's territory) within the larger framework of British Columbia colonial policies that deliberately established tiny and fragmented reserves, and set up band and reserve structures which would cut across the traditional legal orders and political structures of the Indigenous nations of the region. Addressing the flaws in notions of self-determination based on western liberal concepts of autonomy, Napoleon examines Nedelsky's notion of personal autonomy that is social and relational, and finds potential for building structures which promote collective cohesion and enable the Saulteau First Nation to conceptualize new forms of governance.

Natasha Powers, on the other hand, articulates new ways of understanding treaty relationships. She does this in a context where contemporary Mi'kmaq resistance to ongoing colonization is based on popular understandings of the rights affirmed in the terms of the treaty of peace and friendship between the Mi'kmaq and the British. Powers takes guidance from stories about Glooscap and uses Nedelsky's concept of autonomy as inter-dependence and relationship to suggest that the Mi'kmaq, in negotiating the peace treaty, were fundamentally concerned not with defining exact terms of co-existence, but with establishing relationships of mutual respect.

Reinterpretation of the roles of Indigenous women in their nations (as well as in Canadian society) is central to the next two articles. Kahente Horn-Miller, in "Otiyaner: The 'Women's Path' Through Colonialism," focuses squarely on Indigenous women's tellings of their own history, highlighting both the effects of colonization on Haudenosaunee women, and their long resistance. Horn-Miller links the reawakening of knowledge of women's power explicitly to cultural and political regeneration of sovereignty, noting that cultural identity is central to Haudenosaunee empowerment.

For many of us who are attempting to write about women in our own communities, how we

know what we know is important. In "After the Fur Trade: First Nations Women in Canadian History, 1850-1950," Janice Forsyth provides a thoughtful overview of many of the basic concepts about Native women and colonization that have been articulated by Canadian historians in the past two decades. As historiography, her article asks crucial questions about the common-sense assumptions that we may be relying on in formulating our views of the past. Perhaps not surprisingly, she also provides stunning evidence of the centrality of gender in the suppression of plains Indian communities during this era, and the emergence of the Canadian nation. However, echoing the concerns of Devon Mihesuah (2003), Forsyth also suggests that feminist historians focusing on Native women need to begin to work *with* Aboriginal women within the context of their communities.

A central concern for First Nations women within their communities is the manner in which the *Indian Act* does not include provisions for the division of reserve-based real property when marriages break down. "Divorce and Real Property on American Indian Reservations: Lessons for First Nations and Canada," by Joseph Thomas Flies Away, Carrie Garrow and Miriam Jorgensen, provides valuable insights which Native women in Canada need to seriously consider. This paper, based on extensive research among four different tribal regimes, demonstrates clearly what works best for American Indian women. The authors also grapple with perceived conflicts between gender rights and sovereignty rights, suggesting that the directions which bands take in addressing such "women's issues" as matrimonial property rights have everything to do with sovereignty and the survival of our nations.

The next series of articles deal with traditional knowledge. The management of traditional knowledge is undoubtedly a sovereignty issue. We are at a critical time of defining how to create borders around our intellectual property, our knowledge, philosophies, worldviews, and ways of being. How do we prevent a neocolonial mining of these resources? How do we regain our foothold in this territory for ourselves and for the future generations?

One of the key factors in Indigenous epistemology and knowledge is language. Our elders are continually reminding us of the need to relearn our languages because to speak one's Indigenous language is to understand the distinct worldview of one's people. Jeane Breinig has contributed a wonderful article about her mother "Wahlgidouk," a woman of eighty-four who has worked diligently to regain and pass on the Haida language to the people that have been scattered from their original communities. Breinig contexualizes the language and culture recovery within the history of her people, giving a solid understanding of how language and historical memory are a central part of sovereignty struggles.

In another exploration of traditional knowledge, Deborah McGregor raises some critical questions about neo-colonial practices related to "TEK," the appropriation of traditional ecological knowledge by the resource sector. She speaks from her perspective as a scholar and an Indigenous woman who wishes to maintain an ongoing living relationship to the land. The article maps out the contradictions that she faces in terms of her work relative to TEK.

To be sovereign peoples, we need to have the right to self-representation, and there are two articles in this collection that address this need. Emerance Baker's "Loving Indianness" provides an inspiring inquiry into how we can rewrite ourselves as protagonists within our own Indigenous story. She demonstrates how we live these experiences, as the article is also a telling of Baker's personal story. If we love ourselves back into being as Aboriginal women, surely we can reclaim much of the territory that has been lost.

It has long been acknowledged that our artists are in many respects our greatest leaders today. In "Re-constructing the Colonizer: Self-Representation by First Nations Artists," Shandra Spears takes a look at how we tell our stories in a setting that is still colonized. Spears examines how colonizer images of "the Indian" establish Canadians in a position of dominance relative to Aboriginal people, and the strategies that Aboriginal artists employ to subvert those images and create other ones, images that challenge us to re-imagine ourselves as unique and special and whole, and that empower us and heal us.

In our Community Voices section, we have two contributors who address viscerally the turmoil of their nation's sovereignty struggles. Heather Majaury and Lynn Gehl are two Algonquin activists

who describe the multiple ways in which the Ottawa Valley land claim is accelerating colonial divisions within Algonquin communities that were created by two centuries of denial of their sovereignty.

The poetry and fiction in this collection remind us how important it is to include our artists in defining our nations. We enter the journal by way of Jaime Koebel's picture on the front cover; a telling about woman as the essence of creation. Jaime's picture of her own pregnant belly encapsulates how truth telling and the envisioning of our nations begins with self. Fyre Jean Graveline's story, "Wonder Learns Women's Ways" shows us how women, located as we are in our bodies and cycles, have much to contemplate in terms of our place and how we manage that place in our nations. Laura Schwager's work is based in the Iroquois creation story. She calls upon us to remember that, since the time when Sky Woman fell to earth, Aboriginal women have exercised a resistance and resilience that are key to our survival.

Resilience is a common theme in the literature that appears in this volume. "War Curio," by Molly McGlennen, is about Lost Bird, an infant survivor from the Wounded Knee massacre of 1890. In this poem, McGlennen brings up themes of representation, sovereignty of the body and the person, and reclamation. In "I Will Sing (For my people)," Caitlin Kight demonstrates how our ancestors can continue to support and drive us through time. Rebeka Tabobondung's "Mukwa and Her Sisters Still Walking" shows both the resistance and the resilience of Indigenous women internationally - about how we are "still walking" in spite of some of the abuses that we have endured.

As Indigenous people, we know that there is no separation between past and present. "modernity" by grace red earring, shows how past, present and future interface with one another, and how we struggle to make sense and reclaim our Indigenous selves in the toxic environment of the present. "Premonition," by Jennifer Foerster, highlights the bleak nightmare of America that the colonizer has created. In this poem, we are haunted by past and present images of genocide, the murders of Native women and the destruction of so many of our children. Meanwhile, "Medicine," by Jody Barnes, speaks to the healing power of dreaming, and how the strength of our collective pasts can strengthen us in the fractured reality of the present.

In the end, nationhood is all about finding home. Jennifer Fox Bennett gives us a poetic description of what home means to her, by taking us on a journey to her homeland of Wikwemikong First Nation. Home is also the Sassafras tree of Caitlin Kight's poem "Sassafras," and as personified in the father in Pamela Dudoward's poem, "When." In "Living Language," by Molly McGlennen, home is also the simple practice of picking blueberries, affirming, in traditional activities and reclamation of language, the reality of our survival.

We are so happy to have engaged with all the fine material that is presented here. We offer this issue of *Atlantis* with the hope that it contributes to the dialogue of how Indigenous woman are defining themselves, their homes, their communities and their nations. We offer heartfelt thanks to all of the contributors, including those women who wrote book reviews. We also wish to thank the league of Indigenous female academics, some fifty in all, who peer reviewed the many submissions that we received for this edition. We feel rich, indeed, to have been part of a working environment of all these brilliant Indigenous women. This experience leaves us with great hope for the future of our nations.

ENDNOTE

1. As Chatsworthy and Smith (1992) note, if out-marriage patterns remain stable, declining numbers of status Indians will become a serious issue within fifty years (two generations); it is expected that within a century, some First Nations will cease to exist as none of their members will have Indian status.

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