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### Article abstract

Around the world, in revolutions, periods of social reform, anti-colonial struggles and in international warfare, images of the mother have come to represent political aspirations. However common this phenomenon, is the meanings attributed to motherhood and the symbols employed to venerate it are constituted in the specificity of political struggles. In this paper I analyze the discourse of motherhood as constructed by aboriginal women of Canada in their struggle for self-determination and full citizenship in First Nations, looking at two discrete yet interrelated themes: the absence of patriarchal appropriation of motherhood symbols as found elsewhere among colonized peoples and the distinct development of motherhood symbols in women's own political culture. By doing so, I hope to illuminate processes by which women produce moral accounts of themselves as mothers and in the process generate metaphors of motherhood that come to stand for aboriginal female identity. Finally, I conclude with an analysis of the failure of the motherhood discourse to alter First Nations's women's political subordination.

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# Child of the State Mother of the Nation: Aboriginal Women and the Ideology of Motherhood<sup>1</sup>

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A travers le monde, dans les révolutions, dans les périodes de réformes sociales, dans les luttes anti-coloniales et les guerres internationales, les images de la mère en sont venues à représenter des aspirations politiques. Aussi commun que soit ce phénomène, les significations attribuées à la maternité et les symboles utilisés pour la vénérer sont constitués par la spécificité des luttes politiques. Dans cet article j'analyse le discours de la maternité tel que construit par les femmes autochtones du Canada dans leur lutte pour l'autodétermination et le plein droit de cité au sein des Premières nations, et ce, en examinant deux thèmes distincts mais interreliés: l'absence d'appropriation patriarcale des symboles de la maternité telle qu'on peut trouver chez d'autres peuples colonisés et le développement particulier des symboles de la maternité dans la culture politique propres aux femmes. En procédant ainsi, j'espère mettre en lumière les processus grâce auxquels les femmes produisent des récits moraux aur elles-mêmes en tant que mères et, par la même occasion, créent des métaphores sur la maternité qui tiennent lieu d'identité aborigène féminine. Pour finir, je conclus sur une analyse de l'échec du discours sur la maternité à changer la subordination politique des femmes des Premières nations.

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Women are Keepers of the Culture. It was our grandmothers who held on to what they could of our identity as a People. It was they who in their own indirect way would ensure we would be able to know who we are. Often times the fire would grow very dim, but still our grandmothers persisted. We were taught that the time we are in is only borrowed from future generations—generations yet unborn. Our thoughts, words and actions impact seven generations from now. It is these children held sacred by our Mother Earth for whom we must leave a true fire.

Dedication  
Editorial Collective  
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## Introduction

Ideological association of motherhood with national struggles has had a long and varied existence. Around the world, in revolutions, periods of social reform, anti-colonial struggles and in international warfare, images of the mother have come to represent political aspirations. However common this phenomenon is (and few revolutionary or national struggles appear to be free of it) the meanings attributed to motherhood and the symbols employed to venerate it

are constituted in the specificity of political struggles. Moreover, symbols of motherhood are deliberately ambiguous, open to alternative yet favourable interpretations from the inside and the outside. Indeed, they may be simultaneously manipulated by ideological opponents countering each other's moral claims to disputed land, history and political rights.

One need only consider South Africa in this regard. In recent years, Winnie Mandela rose to universal recognition as 'mother of the nation'. Her struggles as a leader of the ANC for the 'children' of Black Africa were inextricably intertwined with her roles as the wife and mother to the children of the imprisoned Nelson Mandela. She is, of course, the most famous of a host of women who as wives and mothers have endorsed the struggles against apartheid and related oppression suffered by Black African women and their children since the turn of the century (Williams 1991; Barrett et al. 1985:122). Yet historically, the Afrikaners have held onto the same idealized motherhood — '*volksmoeder*' or 'mother of the nation' — in their own ideological struggle against both the British and Black Africa. Following the Boer War, for example, Afrikaner women became emblems of Afrikaner virtues and culture. In the name of God and their lost country, Afrikaner women committed themselves to rearing warrior sons who would fight to retain Afrikaners' identity as a distinct people. Over time, '*volksmoeder*' became associated with the discourse of racial purity. Middle-class women engaged in charity work defined the Christian, Afrikaner ideals by which poorer women should conduct themselves in order to retain ethnic and racial purity (Brink 1990; Butler 1989).

Similarly, Palestinian women have been at the forefront of that nationalist struggle, in particular the *intifada*, deriving fame, sympathy and political influence as the martyred mother of the warrior son. It is not always the oppressed, however, who conduct such ideological campaigns. For the Nazis of the Third Reich, idealized motherhood was equally important as an emblem of racial purity and nationalism (Koonz 1987).

As diverse as these ideologies have been, some commonalities can be identified. One is the penchant for patriarchal forces to appropriate images of the mother for their own purposes, defining mother in relation to the valour and heroic sacrifices of warrior men and martyrs (Lakshmi 1990). Another has been for colonized men to unite under the symbols of motherhood, as images of the poor, self-sacrificing

mother are made to stand for national or ethnic identity and are invested with a purity that provides the primary distinction between the colonizer and colonized (see Bagchi 1990 for a Bengali case). A third is the common discursive sub-themes of women's courage and resistance in the face of violent oppression. Most common, however, is the idealization of a circumscribed role wherein as wives and mothers women sustain the social fabric of home and community in the face of indescribable oppression and yet refrain from deed and word that would question the patriarchal appropriation of their reproduction roles (Lazreg 1990; Barrett et al. 1985). Women stand by their men, supporting them in their revolutionary struggles.

This is not always the case, however. Women, independently of men, have politicised their maternal role, claiming unique and spiritual powers of motherhood to legitimate their own autonomous entry into the political arena. This ideological strategy appears to emerge where women, through the intersection of state authority, secular patriarchy<sup>2</sup>, and/or religious patriarchy, have not only been denied a direct and effective voice in local and nationalist politics but have also developed a political consciousness of mistrust of their male peers. Two cases illustrate this phenomenon. According to Martin (1990), women of Buena Vista, Mexico adroitly manipulated ambiguous symbols of the Virgin Mary to assert themselves as political actors in their own right. As they did so, Buena Vista women challenged male authority and expressed their mistrust of local male leadership. In somewhat similar circumstances, Carrier women of central British Columbia have developed a political culture in which metaphors of motherhood are central to claims for political equity (Fiske 1992). Like the Buena Vista women, Carrier women challenge their exclusion from the political arena by invoking their special attachment to children and the community.

What is interesting in the latter case are the ways in which Carrier women's political culture converges with and diverges from the ideals and metaphors asserted by other aboriginal women in Canada with respect to local politics, and the ways in which these compare to the political discourse of the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC), the national umbrella association of status Indian<sup>3</sup> women. What this paper proposes to do, therefore, is to analyze the discourse of motherhood as constructed by aboriginal women of Canada in their

struggle for self-determination and full citizenship in First Nations. It looks at two discrete yet interrelated themes: the absence of patriarchal appropriation of motherhood symbols as found elsewhere among colonized peoples and the distinct development of motherhood symbols in women's own political culture. It poses four key questions: Given the colonial humiliation and disempowerment First Nations share with their colonized brethren, why have male leaders not politicised the humiliation of womanhood and rallied to the protective role assumed by colonized men elsewhere? In these circumstances, how have aboriginal women come to assert an ideology of traditional motherhood that not only identifies and authenticates the particulars of their self-determination struggles but that also contests the foundations of post-colonial patriarchy? If we say that colonized women create their histories, does this suggest that they apprehend and encompass state patriarchy in terms of enduring aboriginal cultural systematics? Or is it as colonized women with status inherent in the simultaneity of a dual oppression—as aboriginal people and as women—that they make their history?

Given the current state of flux in Canadian constitutional reform, a political process that will have far reaching consequences for First Nations women and from which they have been excluded (described herein), these are significant and timely questions. Krosenbrink-Gelissen (1991) has argued that the adoption of a 'traditional motherhood concept' by the NWAC has helped link sexual equality to Indian folk laws instead of to state law and has predicted that with this discourse the NWAC might successfully overcome political resistance of male-dominated political organizations to women's equality within First Nations. This has not been the case. Rather in 1992 the NWAC was denied a direct voice in constitutional negotiations. Moreover, in mounting court challenges to that exclusion, they were unable to sustain a discourse of 'traditional motherhood' and instead were forced into one of individual and collective rights as encoded in state laws. It appears, therefore, that women's struggle to recreate the moral hegemony of aboriginal politics has failed. Hence at the heart of the issue lies a need for a deeper analysis of women's political discourse as a "sociocosmological" history of aboriginal women as it emerges through a struggle in and against the ruling categories set by the coercive patriarchal state.

This article unfolds as follows. First it offers an overview of the ways in which the Canadian state has affected gender relations of aboriginal peoples with respect to denial of full social adulthood for women and to the specific attacks that the state has perpetuated against female reproductive roles and rights. In this section, the gender discrimination imposed on women is viewed through consideration of the discourses adopted by the state and male aboriginal political leaders as they confront women's demands for justice under Canadian law and full citizenship in aboriginal communities.

As aboriginal women talk and write about the gender discrimination they face, and in seeking solutions to these troubles through talk, they create valued images of themselves and their communities. Because overt gender conflicts generated by outside powers profoundly disturb community life, analysis of the discourses of women's politics may reveal the work of constructing a meaningful and persuasive view of motherhood as a legitimate basis for contesting patriarchal assumptions and practices of the state and of male-dominated political organizations. Hence in the second section I move away from the broadly construed political arena of confrontation with the state to closer analysis of discourses situated in small communities. By doing so, I hope to illuminate processes by which women produce moral accounts of themselves as mothers and in the process generate metaphors of motherhood that come to stand for aboriginal female identity. Finally, I conclude with an analysis of the failure of the motherhood discourse to alter First Nations's women's political subordination.

### *Child of the State*

The degree to which the Canadian state has interfered in aboriginal women's lives and the ways in which it has denied them full social adulthood is without parallel in Canadian society. From the outset, colonial forces viewed the Indians through the lenses of paternalism, that is, as children neither competent in their own affairs nor capable of exercising the responsibilities of Canadian citizenship. While in practice and policy the colonial administration perceived both men and women to be childlike and, therefore, consigned them to the status of state wards, in keeping with the prevailing gender biases of British Colonial society Indian women were more clearly determined in their childlike stature. Not only was the aboriginal woman a 'child of the state'<sup>4</sup> she was,

like her European counterparts, a dependent of her male kin. The dominant hegemony of the colonial state, therefore, cannot be accurately categorized as coercive paternalism but rather must be viewed as patriarchal. As we shall see, in its efforts to achieve assimilation through the most effective and parsimonious route, the colonial (and contemporary) state appropriated control over biological and social reproduction through the inferiorization of aboriginal motherhood.

The Indian Act of 1876<sup>5</sup> assigned fewer fundamental rights to women than to men. Most noticeably, in 1869 women were denied the right of full political participation in band affairs. Unlike men, women could neither hold electoral office nor vote for male representatives. Neither could women speak at public meetings. As the state steadily expanded its intervention into aboriginal people's daily lives through statutory revisions and routine practice, it imposed greater social and legal disabilities upon women. For example, women enjoyed fewer property rights than men. While patriarchal practices varied across the country, in general women were excluded from holding parcels of reserve land under the state designated system of certificates of possession. Indian agents often arbitrarily denied widows property unless there was a male heir to succeed the mother, thus reinforcing Eurocentric patriarchal biases. Moreover, with the 1884 revisions of the Indian Act, the government even found it necessary to decree that widows had to be of good moral character to inherit; furthermore in 1927 it stipulated that the Superintendent-General of Indian Affairs was to be the "sole and final judge as to the moral character of any widow of any intestate Indian" (Jamieson 1978:51 citing The Indian Act RSC 1927 Section 26[d]). Denial of property rights directly affected a mother's capacity to support herself and her family. In areas of western Canada, for example, some women were excluded from regulated resource appropriation such as commercial trapping, while on other reserves women were excluded from farming assistance.

Historically, the Indian Act also contained gender discriminatory clauses that denied women the same social rights and legal status as Indian men. In 1879 women who married non-Indians were stripped of all rights and privileges of Indian status (since the patriarchal view of the state defined a woman's socio-legal status only in terms of male kin, either her father or, upon marriage, her husband).

These women could no longer transfer their Indian status to children of their marriages to non-Indian men. In losing Indian status, women and their non-status children lost all rights to residency on a reserve, inheritance of property from status kin, and even the right to burial in a reserve cemetery. Similarly, with marriage to a registered Indian of another band, a woman was forced from her natal community and lost all rights within it and was assigned by the government to membership in her husband's band. Thus were mothers exiled from their cultural community and denied the right and capacity to educate their children in traditional language and Indian thought within the context of family life. Having no status independent of their husbands and fathers, married women and their minor children were also involuntarily stripped of their legal status when their husbands (fathers) willingly enfranchised<sup>6</sup> themselves, or when the men themselves were involuntarily enfranchised according to stipulations of the Indian Act. Men, however, suffered no discrimination upon marriage. On the contrary, their non-Indian wives were granted Indian status as were the children of these marriages and their Indian wives could not independently exercise the option of voluntary enfranchisement.

Further discriminatory sections of the Indian Act have at various moments specified gender privileges based on birth:<sup>7</sup> for example, sons born outside of marriage to status men were similarly registered, daughters born in these circumstances were not. Moreover, children born out-of-wedlock to status mothers were registered only if no one protested their paternity. Ultimately, in keeping with the discretionary powers granted to him, an Indian Agent could entertain such a protest and demand proof of paternity.

As early as the 1860s women and male leaders had protested the sexual discrimination applied to legal registration and marriage on the ground that communities were losing valued members and children (Jamieson 1978: 30, 36-37, 41). These protests failed to congeal into a systematic politicisation of Indian motherhood, however, perhaps because of a lack of cohesive pan-tribal political organizations. Nonetheless, some sixty years later Indian protests to the Joint Committee of the Senate and House of Commons, which sat from 1946 to 1948, also failed to politicise symbols of traditional motherhood. Rather, when speaking against involuntary enfranchisement and when calling for reinstatement of

non-status women and their children, male leaders now addressed their political rights to control band membership not the specifically sexist nature of the Indian Act (Jamieson 1978:55). They sought not revisions to the Act, which would sustain state powers, but empowerment for themselves, while retaining the legal categories that entitled status Indians to specified rights and privileges. In seeking political power they cast their goals in a legal discourse of political rights due to them as governments of independent peoples. Absent from their protests was a discourse embedded in concepts of moral suasion and cultural identity, the very discourse that women would come to rely on thirty years later.

The parliamentary committee ignored these demands for self-determination and voiced the opinion that even greater state intervention into the routine lives of status Indians was called for in order to accelerate their assimilation. Hence, even while granting status women the right to full political participation in band affairs, it further diminished the rights of their non-status sisters.<sup>8</sup> Finally, in the infamous 1969 White Paper, the government proposed rapid elimination of the special status protected by the Indian Act; a position it retracted almost immediately as Indian protests alleged that the Act itself was the 'bible of Indian Rights', which to a large extent represented traditional practices and customary laws. In the political aftermath as political organizations expanded they also divided according to the legal boundaries defined in the Indian Act. Status and non-status organizations now openly confronted each other's very different political and legal goals and charted unique oppositional ideologies vis-a-vis resistance to the state. Despite their ideological differences, however, the organizations shared a significant common factor: a male-dominated leadership that dealt directly with a male-dominated bureaucracy.

It is not surprising, therefore, that when women went to court<sup>9</sup> to regain their legal status and to force revisions of the Act, the National Indian Brotherhood (NIB) and other male-dominated status political organizations engaged the women in a lengthy, bitter confrontation over the nature of 'Indian rights' and 'women's rights', asserting that women's rights must not be obtained at the expense of self-government powers.

The NIB and other male-dominated organizations confronted women's struggles by adopting discourses from dominant society that reflected the

extent to which they had internalized the patricentric privileges offered them by colonial society. Thus the Association of Iroquois and Allied Tribes, protesting in particular against Bedard, by birth a member of their nations, asserted that traditional Iroquois society had been governed by patrilineal and patrilocal principles (Krosenbrink-Gelissen 1991:83).<sup>10</sup> As Krosenbrink-Gelissen clarifies, however, this very discourse had to a large part been created over the decades by the Indian Agents and belied what anthropologists knew to be true: Iroquois society had traditionally been matrilineal and matrilineal (ibid; cf. Jamieson 1978:87). The National Indian Brotherhood decried the women's protests as irresponsible actions of "a bunch of women libbers who fight for their own, individual rights" (Krosenbrink-Gelissen 1991:132). Its viricentric discourse converged with rationalizations of the state regarding patrilineal descent, although, ironically, the oppositional discourse of the NIB grew out of its resistance to assimilation and its demand for self-determination, whilst the same discourse from the state was intended to promote assimilation and to cast aspersions on the NIB leadership, even to the extent of alleging Indian men were withholding Indian rights from women against the express wishes of the state.<sup>11</sup>

As feminist theorists have made clear, the institutions, practices, and discourses of the state are inextricably bound up with prerogatives of manhood (MacKinnon 1983, Eisenstein 1984, Pateman 1989, Brown 1992). Regulation of aboriginal peoples has been no exception. The socially masculine powers of the state have defined women's position to men in terms of domination, dependence, discipline, and protection, that is, within the parameters of all female subordination. In consequence, any counter discourse from male political leaders intended to oppose the denigration of aboriginal womanhood would seem to threaten the foundations of male privilege enjoyed by the same leaders and by men at large. The NIB's viricentric discourse is exemplified in the writings of Harold Cardinal (who was at the forefront of resistance to the 1969 White Paper) who had written solely within a masculinist so-called generic frame that foreshadowed the discourse of the state. Thus when he asserted that "the Indian must be an Indian. *He* cannot realize *his* potential as a brown white *man*. "Only by being an Indian ... can *he* ever be at peace with himself: (1969:170, emphasis added), Cardinal anticipated the masculinist orientation of the 1969 White Paper that opened with the state-

ment "To be an Indian is to be a *man* with all a *man's* needs and abilities" (emphasis added).

In his discourse on the racism directed towards Indian peoples and the need to establish a new tradition-bound Indian identity, Cardinal gives only passing references to the sexism suffered by women, "admit[ting] to deep and penetrating wounds inflicted by the white man's attitudes towards our women" (ibid 77). However, these are not the wounds suffered by women. Rather, Cardinal speaks of the humiliation felt by men upon hearing their wives, mothers, daughters and sweethearts called 'squaws'. Although Cardinal decries "The despoilation of our women by unthinking, unfeeling self-indulgent whites ... as the most degrading insult inflicted upon our people," he miserably states, "We don't know where to start to correct this situation" (ibid: 77). and lamely suggests attitudinal changes on the part of the white man. Clearly, Cardinal's use of 'we' does not address women; furthermore this omission makes aboriginal women the object of aboriginal men's interest and initiative. He appears never to entertain the possibility of full social adulthood for women within aboriginal society, nor even of a sustained counter ideology to the patriarchal hegemony of the state, which has colluded with the broader humiliation of aboriginal women.

Some male leaders did link traditional motherhood to 'Mother Earth', but qualified powers of womanhood by suggesting they were homebound, subtle, and apolitical. Hence, even while seeking compromise with the leadership of the NWAC and Indian Rights for Indian Women (IRIW) in 1982, one leader felt compelled to assert that only 'nonpolitical' women's issues could be included in the NIB political agenda with respect to constitutional reform (Krosenbrink-Gelissen 1991:101 citing Ontario Native Women's Association 1983:27). Most significantly, the NIB discourse never confronted the reality of gender discrimination in its own political organization nor in the daily lives of Indian women. The NIB leadership remained male and the virtual absence of women from community-level leadership aroused no apparent concern among male leaders. Moreover, adherence to respect for traditional motherhood did not alter the NIB's determination to sustain legal boundaries dividing status and non-status Indians and to harbour the entitlements of legal registrations within these state-defined distinctions.<sup>12</sup> Whatever the sacred ties between traditional and contemporary mothers and Mother Earth might be, they stood

outside of the NIB's discourse of Indian rights and its political mandate. Adherence to legal categories stigmatized non-status women as 'not real Indians' just as the state had so defined them.

A slight shift in discourse did occur when Sandra Lovelace, a Maliseet woman of Tobique, New Brunswick, turned to the United Nations Human Rights Committee for elimination of sexual discriminatory clauses. While opposing intervention that would privilege individual rights over collective rights, the NIB insisted that the offensive sexist membership criteria were derived from coexisting patrilineal biases of the Euro-Canadians and were not aboriginal traditions. Moreover, they argued that the government, bowing to international pressure, cynically portrayed Indian leaders as male chauvinists. Denying systematic sexual discrimination in their own ranks, the male leadership alleged its opposition derived from a real fear that western philosophical traditions of individual human rights would undermine the collective identity of aboriginal peoples and the sacred traditions that bind individuals into a mutually-obliged collectivity. While asserting the sacred custom could ensure sexual equality, and in the past had, the national organization and other male-dominated organizations still fell short of linking sacred law to motherhood.

Stipulations denying Indian women status upon a mixed marriage were finally eliminated with the passage of Bill C-31 in 1985. This, however, did not eradicate gender discrimination. Reinstatement of Indian status remains dependent upon male lineage.<sup>13</sup> Children of reinstated mothers and non-status fathers cannot transfer status to their own children nor are they guaranteed membership in their mother's natal band; each band holds power over extending membership and residency rights to this second generation. If denied band membership, any privileges and rights devolving from Indian status must be exercised directly through the agency of the federal government. In practice, therefore, these status individuals remain exiled from their status Indian communities. Denied membership and residence in their cultural community, they are consigned to a marginal, most frequently urban, role in aboriginal culture and politics. As Indian bands have come to identify themselves as sovereign First Nations and have reformulated band membership as citizenship,<sup>14</sup> the urgency of retaining legal political categories has been augmented. Whether rejecting outright the principles of reinstatement or

denying residency or full political rights to reinstated women and children (often stigmatized as 'a Bill C-31 woman'), male leadership has followed the course of the Canadian state: denial of full adulthood to women and, by omission more than commission, rejection of traditional motherhood as a font of cultural knowledge and identity.

Even while adopting a discourse of sexual equality, the government has used Bill C-31 to further disempower Indian motherhood. Not satisfied with the potential for discretionary surveillance of out-of-wedlock births allowed for in earlier legislation, the federal government mandated tighter restrictions that have brought greater state surveillance of women's daily lives and sexual relations. It now presumes that an out-of-wedlock birth disqualifies the infant from the full rights and privileges of Indian status, that is, it assumes the father is either non-Indian or an Indian unable to transmit status to his children. Hence the onus is on the mother to prove otherwise by submitting an affidavit of paternity. Such state intrusion into a mother's relationship to her children and to their father is unknown to other Canadian residents. Significantly, this insult to womanhood also goes unchallenged by male leaders.

In a myriad of other ways, aboriginal mothers have suffered at the crossroads of state-directed racism and sexism and the viricentric discourse of the state is replete with condescending attitudes toward Indian motherhood. Housing policies of the Department of Indian Affairs provide but one illustration. As mentioned above, state patriarchy denied women equal access to homes on the reserve. That this was a self-conscious practice derived from masculinist conceptions of male property rights is made clear in the following statement, which Jamieson (1978:71) cites from a policy paper entitled *The Indian Housing Programme and the Role of the Indian Woman*: "As a member of on-reserve Indian community, you can play a very constructive role in housing. You may wonder how! Normally we associate building houses as a role for men." The underlying assumptions of patriarchal nuclear family units that frame this statement precluded consideration of the needs of single mothers and the tensions created by denying women equal access to marital housing, the very problems that gave rise to women's political resistance manifested in their protest march on Ottawa one year later.

Contradictions and deficiencies in federal and provincial laws exacerbate situations in which women's access to and continued residence in their spouses' or kin's home is subject to local-level arbitrary ruling. No federal legislation directly addresses the relationship between the Indian Act and provincial and federal family law, marital property laws and marriage and divorce acts (Bartlett 1986; Holmes 1987). Because provincial marital property law cannot be enforced on Indian reserves (since reserve property falls under federal jurisdiction), women's access to secure housing varies from reserve to reserve. Just as male leaders categorized women's struggles against the Indian Act as an inappropriate expression of western individualism so they rejected further appeals to revise the Act to allow for the same marital property rights as other Canadian women (Bartlett 1986). Yet again, aboriginal mothers found themselves stigmatized by the state and by their male peers and denied the security of housing and community residency essential to family well being and community cultural needs.

More horrific, but not inseparable from lack of housing and secure residency in their natal community, has been the treatment of mothers by child welfare authorities and the Indian agents who have overtly denigrated women by apprehending their children and by treating the women themselves as minors incapable of self-direction (Ratner 1990, Johnston 1983, Kline 1990). Child apprehension for the purposes of adoption by non-aboriginal families prevailed for decades and resulted in thousands of children being sent out of their natal province and out of the country for anonymous adoption. More recently, as non-aboriginal adoption has been assailed by indigenous and non-indigenous communities and has resulted in public disapprobation of the practice, child apprehension has resulted in wholesale cultural loss on the children's part and irredeemable suffering to their mothers and communities (Johnston 1983; Ratner 1990; Kline 1990; Monture 1989).

Underlying the child welfare discourse of children's rights and children's best interests is an insidious trend towards a recreation of static, stereotypical Indian identity that precludes the cultural and moral viability of women residing in cities. Not only are children apprehended when their own mothers are deemed incompetent, they are denied care by female kin because the courts fail to appreciate women's capacity to retain cultural identity and knowledge in urban environments (Kline 1990). Child



apprehension culminates in a double-sided ideological attack on Indian motherhood. First, the social conditions leading to child apprehension are not confronted by the state in such a way as to remedy them. Elimination of women's lack of housing, employment and secure residency in the community and extraordinarily high rates of domestic violence<sup>15</sup> is not high on the public agenda. Furthermore, public exposure of domestic violence and sexual assault has brought some women into legal confrontation with male politicians, for example, the women in Manitoba who now face accusations of character defamation consequent upon their concern that community leaders have not dealt effectively with the social crises of families resident on reserves (Winnipeg Free Press February 27, 1992: B24; March 9, 1992: A11; March 3, 1992: B16; March 22, 1992 B12; April 8, 1992: B13). Thus even as women are disadvantaged by the state they are punished as children might be; threatened by powers of public patriarchy and reduced to clients of the state itself, women find themselves powerless to exercise discretion over their own lives and over their dependent children. Furthermore, women who leave their reserves to pursue economic and social security in urban environments may be deemed to be not 'real' Indians to the extent that courts assume a lack of cultural integrity within city neighbourhoods (Kline 1990). These women find themselves passed over by social workers and courts in favour of the placement of apprehended children in non-aboriginal homes or in favour of reserve-based child care institutions.

Women have been further disempowered through exclusion from key processes of negotiation with the state. In the 1970s the government created a NIB-Cabinet consultative committee to revise the Indian Act from which women were excluded. In the 1980s the government denied the NWAC a seat at the First Ministers' Conferences mandated in the Canadian Constitution, 1982. To date the NWAC and other women's organizations continue to be denied a direct voice in constitutional negotiations. Male dominated organizations at the table have never protested their own privilege. In fact, in 1992 the AFN established its own women's committee as a counterfoil to NWAC's political and legal struggles for a direct voice in future constitutional negotiations (Winnipeg Free Press, March 14, 1992: A11).<sup>16</sup>

Aboriginal women have been relegated to the weakest position in adult Canadian society. They have the lowest rates of post-secondary education,

earn the lowest average incomes, suffer the highest rates of unemployment and are more likely to be dependent on the state for survival than any other group of Canadian residents. Infant mortality rates are higher than for other Canadians. Additionally, almost one-third of aboriginal women (as compared to ten per cent for Canada as a whole) are single mothers, the majority of whom live in absolute poverty relying on social assistance (Faith et al. 1991:170-171).

Despite the exigencies of women's disempowerment and the serious threat to social reproduction, male leadership has not associated motherhood with their nationalist struggles. This is not to say that they have not condemned the gravity of child apprehension. Indeed they do denounce it as a form of cultural genocide. But their discursive practice has been to link these oppressive practices with violation of collective rights rather than as a humiliation of aboriginal motherhood. As significant as the protection of collective rights is, this strategy has not reconciled gender tensions, rather even as women struggle to regain the powers of traditional motherhood they find themselves in conflict with band and/or tribal leaders over the priority of their rights as women/mothers and the collective right to retain children as future citizens. Significantly, the denigration of Indian womanhood in general and of motherhood in particular has not evoked a counter discourse from male political leaders designed either to protect Indian motherhood from the state or to venerate Indian womanhood as a symbol of ethnic identity. Despite the promise of unifying symbols of sacred motherhood, AFN discourse remains viricentric and implicitly defines collective aboriginal rights as the legal privileges and birthright due to men.

### *Mother of the Nation*

Aboriginal women have responded to their diminished social and legal status in a number of ways. In the 1970s, as they engaged in political lobbying and prepared their cases for court, First Nations women adopted a legal rights discourse and united under the slogan Indian Rights for Indian Women, which in due course became the name of a national association. As Krosenbrink-Gelissen (1991) has informed us, however, ongoing antagonism with male-dominated political associations over revision of the Indian Act and constitutional reform led the NWAC to a shift from a legal rights discourse to a moral/cultural discourse that embraced notions of

traditional motherhood. Countering the legal ideology of the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), which succeeded the NIB in 1982, with a moral and cultural discourse was seen as political strategy with potential to unite women and men against the state. As women sustaining unique aboriginal traditions of social reproduction, the NWAC leaders sought to redefine sexual equality as an aboriginal custom, thus hoping to distance themselves from the white liberal feminism and western philosophy of individualism feared by their male counterparts. Traditional motherhood came to be seen less as a biological function than as a cultural honour: motherhood was said to sustain aboriginal nationhood through transmission of language and culture (ibid:116). By arguing that aboriginal nationhood depends on motherhood, women engaged in a new discursive practice that inserted them into the centre of the ethno-political struggle for self-determination. It is as female aboriginal citizens that they struggle against the intrusion of the state, not as women seeking individual rights as against their male peers. It is because of their collective responsibility for future generations that they seek sexual equality within their First Nations (ibid; Turpel 1989). Thus spokeswoman for the Ontario Native Women's Association (ONWA) redefined their politics within moral obligations of traditional motherhood: "As traditional women, we understand the role of the association to be the same as our roles as women, mothers and grandmothers....We are the first teachers" (O'Conner et al. 1989:38). Traditional motherhood was linked directly to a spiritual consciousness of the responsibility to heal, honour and respect Mother Earth and the voice of the NWAC is now perceived to a spiritual voice (ibid; Turpel 1989:156).

Traditional motherhood has become a multi-valent symbol; it evokes images of one's foremothers, of the collective spiritual identity of the aboriginal peoples and promises what men cannot: the creation of life itself and hence the perpetuation of the peoples and their cultural identity. As a sacred symbol it unites aboriginal peoples and distinguishes them from the non-aboriginal society that has denigrated womanhood. By evoking a spiritual continuity, symbols of traditional motherhood challenge the contemporary inequality of aboriginal women's daily lives and the chauvinism of male politicians. Unequivocally, motherhood symbols signify that neither of these connote authentic aboriginal practices, rather they are the consequences of cultural and economic colonialism. Because of

their authenticity as pre-colonial traditions, motherhood symbols can be evoked by men and women in resisting the state and in establishing ethno-political boundaries.

Nonetheless, the NWAC's political strategy derived from a moral motherhood discourse failed. Unable to reconcile its political tensions with the AFN and the Native Council of Canada (NCC), and convinced that the federal government violated their democratic right to freedom of political expression by excluding them from constitutional negotiations, in 1992 the NWAC sought legal remedy by appealing to Charter protection of their individual and collective rights. Arguing before the Federal Court of Canada, their legal counsel alleged the government had violated the sexual equality provisions of Sections 2(b), 15, 28 and 35. Reversing the ruling of the federal court trial division,<sup>17</sup> on August 20 (as constitutional negotiations drew to a close) Justice Mahoney of the Federal Appeal Court concurred with their arguments respecting Section 2(b) and 28, and found that:

the Canadian government has accorded the advocates of male dominated aboriginal self-governments a preferred position in the exercise of an expressive activity.... It has thereby taken action which has had the effect of restricting the freedom of expression of aboriginal women in a manner offensive to Ss 2(b) and 28 of the Charter (cited by NWAC 1992a:1).

Legal victory, however, did not result in a clear political triumph. The court did not accept their arguments that the collective rights of aboriginal women were protected under Section 15 equality rights; rather it argued only that women were justified in their fear that their individual rights might be lost under recognized self-government. The court also rejected their petition for protection of sexual equality under Section 35.4.

The NWAC was not invited to the constitutional table and a third federal court ruling on October 16, 1992 found that they had no legal entitlement to such an invitation. Nor did this court accept their argument that their exclusion rendered the referendum invalid.

"What principles are the courts to apply in making up an invitations list for a constitutional conference," the court said. "How is a judge to determine who genuinely represents those interests and who does not? These are surely political questions for which there are no legal principles to guide a court in its decision." (Globe and Mail, October 17, 1992).

By the close of the referendum on the Charlottetown Constitutional Accord tensions between the NWAC and AFN had intensified. Throughout their struggle for a direct voice at the constitutional table, the women stressed their fear that self-government would not be subjected to the Charter:

We support the inherent right to self-government but because we know what kind of power [the chiefs] are talking about, we know we need the Charter. Native Women cannot go without human rights on Indian lands in this country. Nor should we be asked to make that sacrifice (Theresa Nahanee cited by Hill 1992:3).

Instead of achieving a level playing field for all aboriginal peoples, there will be one standard of rights for aboriginal men and a different standard of rights for aboriginal women....What is frightening is that the [constitutional] parties either do not understand this, or they do not care what the impact will be upon aboriginal women's collective rights (Sharon McIvor cited by Vancouver Sun, 13 May 1992: B11)

The appeal court was sympathetic. The AFN, which did not intervene in the case, and the NCC, which did intervene,<sup>18</sup> were denounced by the court. Echoing the NWAC's perception of their male leadership as one whose "Whole history ... has been one of opposition to sexual equality and the rights of Indian women" (Hill 1992:3), the court castigated the AFN and the former NIB as [having] "vigorously and consistently resisted the struggle of native women to rid themselves of the gender inequality historically entrenched in the Indian Act" and stated that the "AFN was likely to take a constitutional position harmful to native women" (ibid:7). The final wording of the legal text of the accord supports this view and substantiates the women's greatest fears. Self-governing First Nations were accorded the right to opt out of the Charter under Section 33, and Section 25 was strengthened, apparently to "trump" existing guarantees of sexual equality in Section 28 (Bayefsky 1992:2). Before the closure of the constitutional negotiations acrimonious relations between the two organizations were aired across the national media. The AFN ceased to provide confidential legal documents and hence blocked NWAC further in its efforts to participate. The campaign found AFN and NCC supporting the Charlottetown Accord and the NWAC (now firmly united with the feminist lobby organization, National Action Council on the Status of Women which highlighted the women's stance) opposing it. Failure of the referendum, however, is unlikely to bring NWAC political victory in the future.

Only time will reveal whether the NWAC will again adopt a motherhood discourse and whether it can transcend limitations of a discourse of human and political rights. At present the failure of the NWAC's attempt to construct an authentic aboriginal identity within a discourse of traditional motherhood is not yet fully understood. This raises the question: Has a similar discourse empowered women at the grassroots levels?

At local levels<sup>19</sup> metaphors of motherhood have come to stand for cultural continuity from time immemorial and to signify the sole route of its perpetuation into an infinite future. The political discourse of female elders of the Carrier Nation of Saik'uz (Stoney Creek, BC)<sup>20</sup> draws on enduring cultural images of their matrilineal society, adeptly translating traditional images into contemporary political responsibilities. Women link their contemporary domestic authority to images of mythical women, significantly the 'old woman', or the symbolic grandmother, of Carrier indigenous narratives who was forever the helpmate to even the most powerful of male legendary protagonists including the creator heroes.

Carrier women say that in a true matrilineal society "it is not just that we come from our mothers but that we have clan mothers and community mothers who teach us and look after our people." Just as these women are convinced that harmonious strong families rely on a woman's care, so they remain certain that 'unless there is a woman' involved at all aspects of community life the community will falter. Hence, their political discourse does not distinguish between private and public spheres of responsibilities and powers; rather it unites the two. Women see public leadership emerging naturally from a mother's and grandmother's domestic authority, which they say has cultural precedence in a traditional era. Thus women's intervention in the political arena, whether through voluntary associations, elected office, or hereditary positions in matrilineal clans, is perceived as a women's responsibility and right. In fact, to refrain from public action can be construed as negligence. A mother who cares for her family will agitate for what her family needs. In the words of one leader:

You can't stop right there at home. You need to get out there and speak up for your family. Who else is going to do it? ... that's women's business, to speak for the families.<sup>21</sup>

Carrier women's political discourse explicates the gender discrimination women encounter in family and community relations. With respect to domestic authority women admit some men seek to maintain a public image of being in control even while deferring to the authority of their wives at home. Said one female elder of her husband, "He always defers to me. He never interferes but he's hurt if I act like a big shot everywhere. He likes to look as if he's in charge." It is perhaps for this reason, the expressed need of some men to appear as if gender relations within the home were asymmetrical in their favour, that women hasten to rationalize their public behaviour as inseparable from traditional expectations of domestic responsibility, that is as an immutable extension of family management.

Women must also confront gender tensions when exercising community leadership. Looking back over four decades of community struggles, contemporary elders recount their confrontations with men, often their own kin, when they first sought elected office in the band council and when they first intervened in community relations as leaders of women's voluntary associations. They take credit for lobbying for community services while acknowledging that male leadership had failed to provide the same level of family and community care.

The men weren't doing nothing for us .... They were off working, hacking [rail road] ties and clearing land. Our babies were dying and our elders were really sick. That's when women started trying out for the council. We were trying to get the water cleaned up....I wanted to get right to the government men and make them listen.

In the same vein when contemporary politics draws elected leaders away from the community to address struggles for land claims settlements and constitutional recognition of self-determination, women continue to focus their political activities on the community's basic needs, saying as they do so that they are carrying out their responsibilities as mothers. Even while conceding the weaknesses and failures of male leadership, Carrier women seek community harmony that will transcend not aggravate gender divisions. By evoking strong images of traditional mothers and grandmothers, women appeal to men's memories of their own mothers and images of their own foremothers. Simultaneously, by evoking their children's and children's children's future, they appeal to complementary roles of male and female in biological and social reproduction.

Despite family violence and gender conflicts, Carrier women's political discourse does not pit women against men of their community. Rather, women point to the government's interferences in aboriginal affairs, in particular the harsh consequences of resource appropriation and arbitrary paternalism of the Indian Act, to explain the sources of gender conflict they experience. Unbelievably high rates of male unemployment, male disenchantment and suicide, and sexual violence are all said to have their root causes in the colonial degradation and disempowerment of men. Thus, women merge motherhood and community leadership when they create income generating schemes for men through the elected council and through their own voluntary associations in order to resolve problems created by the state. In consequence men often accept and promote the political aspirations of their female kin, and in speaking of it they echo women's ideological formulation of female reproductive roles. In their eyes as well, mothering, with its pain and its singular sacrifices, is sufficient justification for women to take political action on behalf of the entire community and to intervene in broader issues, such as the struggle for self-determination and the settlement of land claims.

Notwithstanding their support for ideological veneration of motherhood as expressed by female kin and their support for women's community-level politics, men do not independently formulate a similar political discourse. Nor does this discourse of motherhood necessarily extend beyond community-level politics. As Carrier Nations, under the leadership of the Carrier Sekani Tribal Council, confront the implications of Bill C-31 and the battle for self-determination of First Nations' citizenship they, too, adopt a discourse of collective rights and traditional governance. The future of womanhood, in particular of ideological formulation of motherhood, is conspicuously absent.

Like Carrier women, Mikmaq of Atlantic Canada utilize metaphors and symbols to organize a discourse that counters patriarchal stigmatization of women. Unlike their Carrier sisters, however, Mikmaq women do not stress traditional distinctions of gender. Rather they envision a traditional genderless society as evidenced in thought and genderless language, and attest to the unity and indivisibility of male and female through family responsibilities. The writings of Marie Battiste characterise the political discourse of Mikmaq women within

community and professional spheres.<sup>22</sup> Unity with Mikmaq men is accentuated in their political discourse even while women are said to be invested with special honours consequent upon their reproductive and nurturing responsibilities.

Mikmaq concepts do not divide man from woman; the concepts only honour their ordinary efforts as mothers, grandmothers, teachers, healers, and the like. European thought calls them 'roles.' Mikmaq thought labels them extraordinary honours (Battiste 1989:62).

Appeals to traditional culture that lacked gender divisions recreates an ethnic identity based on a vision of tribal unity that explicitly rejects individualism of the dominant society, especially as associated with a stereotypical view of feminism that sees white women firstly as engaging in hostilities against men and secondly as seeking gender equality that essentially demands sameness with men. Distinguishing themselves from 'white feminists' Mikmaq women declare, "We don't want equality, we are the centre of our people."<sup>23</sup>

Women's claims to a non-gendered tradition, however, are challenged by the political claims of their male leaders, who have also opposed the NWAC's efforts to have future First Nations governments subject to the equality clauses of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Even when endorsing views of traditional motherhood and gender equality, male leadership has suggested that formal equality will violate Mikmaq political tradition. The Grand Chief of traditional Mikmaq society, which at present is more an honorary advisory role than one of political authority, is said to be a male role hence modern perceptions of equity cannot be applied indiscriminately for this would threaten male patrilineal succession to these positions (Chronicle Herald, Thursday June 11, 1992).

Just as Carrier women evoke concepts of matrilineality and clan motherhood as symbols of traditional culture, and as the source of future ethnic identity, so Mikmaq women adopt feminine symbols as emblems of their unique culture identity: women are symbolised as "keepers of the fire," "keepers of the unknown," "keepers of change," "the first teachers who transmit knowledge of the past and present to the future" (ibid). Women also claim responsibility for sustaining community stability and cultural continuity through upholding traditional family relations that empower women:

Mikmaq women represent a resiliency, ... Mikmaq grandmothers, mothers, sisters, and aunts typify a spirit of commitment, dedication, and physical and mental hardiness that allow the people as a whole to withstand economic hardships and social changes. Perhaps it is for this reason that Mikmaq people have weathered the contact with Europeans for so long (Battiste 1989:62).

This reliance is seen as the fundament of Mikmaq culture and political resistance, for as Battiste states, "When European racism attempted to enslave Mikmaq males, the Mikmaq family became the last resort of pride and respect" (ibid). As is evident from Battiste's statements, by evoking traditions of motherhood and extending these through metaphors of kinship and 'keepers of the culture', symbolically and politically women erase barriers of public/private dichotomy emanating from the political discourses of the state and male-dominated leadership. As traditional mothers, contemporary women seek to shelter community members from abuse by state agencies in much the same way as their Carrier sisters. In this way, Carrier and Mikmaq women have shifted their position from patriarchal subordination of being responsible to men to a traditional position of being responsible for men.

Responsibility for men is a common theme among aboriginal women, although its meaning is differently construed depending on the immediate social and political context. In central British Columbia, women of Kamloops express concern over the quality and direction of male leadership in their community in terms of reintroducing traditional ways. "What I have been taught has been that our men have basically fallen down, they've forgotten what they're supposed to be doing. So it is up to us to teach them again" (Faith et al. 1991:175). Male violence and domestic irresponsibility is seen as an inappropriate and misguided apprehension of the non-aboriginal patriarchal culture, which leads men, however inadequately, to emulate macho behaviour: "[Our men] have to be macho—I guess that is what you would call it—but they don't know how. Many of them are raised in a traditional family where things are equal....And a lot of them are raised by single mothers" (ibid:183). Mistrust of male leadership mingles with sympathy for male kin so that women once again draw on traditionalist views of sacred ties of motherhood and Mother Earth. In the words of Sharon McIvor,<sup>24</sup>

...unlike non-Native society, the woman had say. And in many issues, like land issues. The women are the ones responsible for the land, and what they decided was what was acted on — Across Canada that was it. Your Native spirituality, the way the family fits together, the women had certain responsibilities and land was one of them (Faith et al. 1991:175).

McIvor holds to “the old belief that women were very important to the Band, therefore they didn’t go out to negotiate” (ibid:176). In other words, rather than being protected by men because they were weak and vulnerable, women were sheltered because of their extraordinary social significance. It is this extraordinary role that contemporary women hope to regain. In the meantime, in their professional capacities as lawyers, social workers and family support workers they voice social responsibilities in terms of familial roles and draw on traditionalist versions of motherhood to clarify social goals and to confront gender-based tension. In short their discourse simultaneously acknowledges and condemns sexual violence; exposes and rejects male chauvinism as a colonial legacy, and delineates women’s subordination even while celebrating women’s enduring strength and cultural centrality.

Politics of mothering have taken a different turn in communities where women have come to confront directly sexual discrimination rooted in regulations of the old Indian Act. Such is the case at Tobique, New Brunswick, the best known site of women’s collective resistance to state-imposed sanctions on non-status women and their children. While the Tobique women’s discursive practices also resonate with images of motherhood and role of family within the community as the fundament of aboriginal identity, they also articulate a discourse of women’s rights that is conceptualized outside of familial obligations.

Nonetheless, Tobique women’s struggles did not emerge from political consciousness of ethno-politics or of women’s rights. Rather women came together as a result of individual struggles to improve their personal living conditions. Their discourse is less explicit in its adherence to traditional concepts of motherhood and more clearly imbued with concern for women’s rights. At the heart of their struggle lay the pain and grief of domestic violence and family breakup; hence Tobique women immediately and directly contested the basis of patriarchy in their community. They made public their struggle against violent husbands (Silman 1990:46) and decried the

arbitrary power of men that left women, status and non-status, homeless. “You see, that has always been the case with women and housing. You always had to live with your relatives. You didn’t have no place to go” (ibid:47). As other women have done in similar circumstances, Tobique women turned to the past for role models and the cultural validity of an indigenous society wherein women exercised valued domestic authority.

Some people say that traditionally Maliseets were matriarchal; that women had more of a say. I don’t know too much about that, but in the household I was raised in, it was true. It was my grandmother; she always had the say—what was right or what was wrong—and my grandfather seem to almost automatically honour or respect it....he didn’t interfere all that much. He let her run the household and finances an [sic] everything pretty well all the time. I think that he strongly felt he had to (ibid:111).

Reflecting on the violence of their own lives, women also recall an earlier period of domestic harmony and recognize the cultural discontinuity and amorality of their own experiences. In the words of Eva (Gookum) Saulis, “Oh, we always knew what was happening to women was wrong. We just got to the point where we weren’t going to take it any more” (ibid:93). It was at this point that the women developed a political consciousness that drew them together in a common struggle. According to Shirley Bear,

When all this was happening—women losing their rights and men kicking them and their children out—that’s when we first started becoming aware of these things. Of course there’s very few instances where the man would keep the children: the children all went with the Indian woman (ibid:100).

As their consciousness grew, their discourse shifted to one of political and legal rights as well as one of moral right. Thus their struggle for their ‘birthright’ (ibid:9) became a political and legal battle for equality and justice. They successfully protested the local practice of registering marital property only in husbands’ names and the difficulties single mothers faced when seeking certificates of possession to secure their property and housing rights. They rejected the media view that theirs was a ‘cultural’ problem, claiming it was a justice issue that could and should be resolved by the Canadian government through revisions of the Indian Act. Some, like Shirley Bear, joined the NWAC

The men were making a lot of the rules and talking for their women and I didn't like it, felt I didn't need it. But I knew there was something wrong...then I joined the Native Women's Association of Canada—it has a small provincial branch (ibid:102).

As women shared their experiences they came to realize that the very centre of their lives—their role as mothers—was being violated not only by patriarchal violence and state authority but by the women themselves as they sought a desperate solution to a desperate situation:

I knew a lot of women had hysterectomies to avoid having more children; women used to be able to talk doctors into giving them hysterectomies because they did not want more children (ibid:103).

Their increasing awareness of the injustices suffered by mothers' struggles for secure housing and incomes was transformed to "one main goal ... equality for women" (ibid:9). Committed now to a political and legal struggle for equality, the women found themselves in conflict with the local male politicians of the Union of New Brunswick Indians, whose leadership labelled male control of property and the expulsion of non-status women from reserves as "our [Maliseet] laws." Drawn into a two-fold legal discourse, customary law vindicating male domination and that of Indian rights protected by statute, the women countered by seeking political and legal redress in Ottawa. As a moral crusade they organised the aboriginal women's walk from Oka to Ottawa in 1979 and then proceeded to take the issue to the international courts as Sandra Lovelace protested to the United Nations Human Rights Committee.

It is important to understand that despite the severity of gender tensions and the spiralling consequences of women's individual strategies, Tobique women, like their aboriginal sisters elsewhere, seek solutions for men as well as for themselves. As citizens of the Maliseet Nations they, too, construct an oppositional ideology to the colonial legacy that degraded womanhood while disempowering and humiliating men. Juanita Perely, for example, speaks of escalating social problems consequent upon male unemployment:

I hear it was even worse after the Second World War. There was no way for the men to get work and this is probably what frustrated them most. Politics had a big hand in it, too: the political powers didn't even treat the people equally (ibid:104).

Even as their discourse evolves to centre on one of women's rights, the meanings attributed to the concept of these rights remain culturally specific. As with other aboriginal women, Tobique women's political ideology simultaneously opposes patriarchy while casting women's identity within boundaries created by the ethnopolitical struggle for aboriginal self-determination. Thus once again, women seek harmony and compromise within their culture in the hopes of attaining a new vision of gender equity based on a traditionalist version of motherhood: motherhood that embraces biological and social reproduction consistent with an indigenous spiritual awareness of the sacred trust invested in women as the first teachers and hence as the future of aboriginal nationhood.

To sum up: at the grassroots level aboriginal women confront gender inequity in their own communities. Male political pre-eminence, domestic violence, and more subtle phenomena of masculine privilege limit women's formal and informal social powers and in so doing shape women's political discourse within the ruling categories of aboriginal resistance to their colonial history. Reverence for traditional motherhood may be acknowledged by male leaders as an aspect of sacred family traditions but is not embraced as a traditional basis for political equity in contemporary and future political structures.

### *Conclusion*

Aboriginal women of Canada share a common colonial legacy of paternalism and patriarchy that first relegated them to being a 'child of the state' and second diminished their social status vis-a-vis their male peers to one of patriarchal subordination. The colonial legacy has rendered the attributes and practices of aboriginal women deviant, not customary, for the purposes of subordination. But subordination can empower its object and this 'deviant' space has been filled and renamed by women within a cultural politics which itself has been remade even as their discourse of traditional motherhood has been transformed.

Through their counter discourse of motherhood women have reclaimed what the state violated. Mother is a multivalent symbol imbued with the moral and sacred principles of the past; she embodies the integrity of ancestors and hence provides a contemporary cultural identity linking women

through Mother Earth to autochthonous emergence of humankind in North America. The discourse of motherhood captures an essentialist cultural view that simultaneously denies time while evoking traditional foundations of respect. Mothers are the past, present and future of the Nation. Contesting degradation of motherhood imposed by state patriarchy in terms of enduring cultural icons and symbols is a prerequisite to achieving full social adulthood.

However, this is not a full answer to their political dilemma. Aboriginal women must create their own histories in the simultaneity of a dual oppression as aboriginal people and as women. In their community-level struggles and in their national political battles, aboriginal women seek to transcend their subordination through redefinition of aboriginal politics by asserting traditional symbols of motherhood under which a community of men and women can unite as a nation. The sociocosmological history that aboriginal women claim simultaneously contests ruling categories of ethnic and gender discrimination. Their cosmological world view constitutes a vastly different meaning of mother than that of the dominant feminist movement. Indigenous systems of meaning attached to the supremacy of Mother Earth and the claim to traditions that flow from it since time immemorial contrast the moral regime of family, wherein women are responsible for men in consequence of their moral responsibility to their nation, with what is perceived by them as the cynical, self-serving individualism of liberal feminism. Furthermore it differentiates them from the women's movement that is conceived by aboriginal leadership as an organized threat to aboriginal collectivity. Aboriginal women must avoid seeking unity with the 'other' for such apparent solidarity can be construed as an alliance against men. In consequence traditional motherhood becomes the ideological charter for contemporary political action because it concurrently differentiates aboriginal morality from non-aboriginal feminism.

As this paper illustrates, however, the success of this strategy is limited. Even where men do confirm women's political ideology, they fail to transform symbols of motherhood to emblems of aboriginal identity. Unlike colonized men elsewhere, aboriginal men have not constructed an ideology of motherhood as a counter hegemonic strategy to the 'most degrading insult' inflicted upon them. Responses to colonialism found elsewhere are absent

because there is not the religious ideology that attaches male honour to female purity. The most degrading insult is not the same blow to male honour as experienced elsewhere; male pride and family patriarchy are insulted without the same social consequences as experienced in other forms of colonial subordination. The gender division of public powers enables Indian men to retain leadership and an attendant identity as full social, competent adults, which aided by the state's masculinism, perpetuates and venerates family and public patriarchy.

In consequence, the symbolic 'mother of the nation' frequently located in struggles to retain racial/ethnic purity failed to emerge as men came to realize politicised non-status women could not be controlled. Reconciliation with non-status women on the women's terms became impossible as the non-status women in particular came to represent defiance of male definitions of idealised womanhood and as women's struggle for political equality threatened to shift the basis of ethnic identity from legal categories to self-identification of membership. The non-status woman was seen to have defied the circumscribed position of idealised womanhood and to have threatened Indian rights even as she struggled to regain those rights for herself.

Male-dominated political associations and individual men do not face the same constraints as women do. Men are free to establish political alliances with non-aboriginal men and to marry non-aboriginal women for neither action is perceived as an organized threat to cultural purity or social unity. Nor do these actions constitute a threat to legal differentiation and the privileges that inhere within it. Thus, while the AFN tentatively embraced an ideology of motherhood, it has not retained it as central to ethnic identity. Women's redefinition of their political rights as traditional cultural morals has failed to mediate the political tensions between women and men. The uneasy truce between the AFN and the NWAC has come to an end, and perhaps with it the empowerment of discourse of aboriginal motherhood. Constitutional struggles brought the NWAC full circle as they reverted to a discourse of women's rights. Failure of the constitutional referendum in October 1992 is unlikely to release the NWAC from this strategy. Since the AFN and other male directed organisations continue to defend First Nations' rights to revoke the equality protection of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in the name of equity between 'three levels of government', women continue to seek protection



against men and from the masculinist prerogatives assigned to male-dominated political powers.

An analysis of aboriginal women's discursive practices weighed against their political dilemmas raises the issue of whether shifts in discourse have effective power to alter the political reality of doubly disadvantaged women. Failure of the motherhood discourse to alter First Nation's women's political subordination can be attributed to both relations of ideological phenomena and material factors. Without an effective power base in their natal communities and without a formal political role at the national level, aboriginal women lack the means to shift the grounds on which their political battles are fought. Masculinist privileges of the state underlie male appropriation of the state's ruling categories for these inextricably legitimate and give shape to the First Nations' political aspirations as espoused by the NIB and AFN. Not only has the state granted men political dominance, it has extended this dominance to public patriarchy as it has transferred control over biological and social reproduction to the electoral system it empowered. As First Nations gain greater control over citizenship (band membership) so they experience greater need to control women and the conditions of women's reproduction.

## Notes

1. Paper presented to the joint meetings of the Atlantic Canada Studies and B.C. Studies Associations, Saint John's, Newfoundland, May 21-24, 1992 and Victoria, British Columbia, November 12, 1992. I would like to thank the Halifax Women's History Reading Group for their comments and suggestions.
2. The term patriarchy has multiple meanings and its efficacy is continuously queried by feminist scholars. I use the term in two senses: a traditional rule of male kin as exemplified in religious and legal traditions and as an aspect of state power wherein women's subordination is simultaneously experienced within kinship relations and in the state's appropriation of women's power to control their sexuality, reproductive roles, and to exercise authority over and on behalf of their dependent children. The specific meaning applied is made clear in the context of each usage. I agree with Carole Patemen's declaration, "'Patriarchy' is, to my knowledge, the only term with which to capture the specificities of the subjection and oppression of women and to distinguish this from other forms of domination" (1989:35, emphasis in original).

3. The term 'Indian' is now generally considered inappropriate as it derives its meanings from colonial rule, nonetheless it is adhered to here insofar as it is consistent with the legal status is necessary. First Nations is the preferred term of aboriginal peoples designated as status Indians under the Indian Act, and is also used individually and collectively by aboriginal persons denied legal registration as status Indians. Aboriginal and indigenous are used interchangeably throughout; either term is applied to any or all of the descendants of peoples inhabiting North America (Turtle Island to First Nations and aboriginal associations that have adopted this symbol from Iroquoian creation texts) prior to European settlement.
4. The invidious comparison of aboriginal peoples to incompetent children needing protection and guidance was stated boldly in early colonial discourse, becoming less strident only in the mid twentieth century. Significantly, as aboriginal women seek to reclaim their adulthood, they have apprehended the term 'child of the state' to signify their resistance to the continuing paternalism of state authorities.
5. The Indian Act of 1876 consolidated existing statutes including pre-confederation legislation pertaining to the aboriginal peoples collectively known as Indians and established their relationships to the state and to other residents of Canada. It established a register of legally recognized Indians, for whom the federal government would be responsible and for whom it would establish and manage lands known as Indian reserves. Individuals of Indian descent not legally recognized by the state according to stipulations of the Indian Act have come to be known as non-status Indians; they enjoy none of the privileges and rights granted to their status counterparts.
6. Enfranchisement brought to men a change in their legal status; in exchange for rescinding their status as registered Indians men gained the full rights of Canadian citizenship.
7. See Jamieson 1978 for a full discussion of the history of relevant revisions to the Indian Act.
8. It is important to realize that women's electoral rights within the Indian band system were not a priority for male political leaders addressing the Joint Committee of the Senate and the House of Commons in 1946. It may have been, as Krosenbrink-Gelissen (1991:57) suggests, that parliament was anticipating the 1952 United Nations Convention on the Political Rights of Women, to be ratified by Canada.
9. Political lobbying by non-status women to alter the Indian Act began in 1968 when Mary Two Axe Early and others presented their cases to the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, which made a recommendation for the elimination of the offending

membership clauses in the Indian Act. Two women brought their cases to court shortly thereafter: Lavell (Ontario county court and Federal Appeals court, 1971) Bedard (Supreme Court of Ontario, 1972), Bedard and Lavell (Supreme Court of Canada, 1973). In 1977 Lovelace took the issue to the United Nations Human Rights Committee.

10. The Association of Iroquois and Allied Tribes led the resistance to statutory reform, receiving funding from the Canadian Solicitor General to do so (Jamieson 1978:91).
11. Boldt and Long (1985:173) go to great pains to disassociate male leadership from gender inequity while condemning the Canadian government. They describe the government's acquiescence to charges of sexual discrimination as cunning and allege that "government politicians recast the Lovelace affair as a simple case of discrimination and, with much fanfare, sought to invoke the Charter's provisions on sexist discrimination to restore Lovelace's Indian status."
12. Significantly, male-dominated political associations did not confront the legal privileges enjoyed by individual men; the higher marriage rates of status Indian men to non-Indian women, for example, elicited no comment. The rates are significant, however; in 1976, 611 Indian men married non-Indians, only 451 Indian women did so (Jamieson 1978:66, citing statistics from Department of Indian Affairs).
13. For a full discussion of residual discrimination see Krosenbrink-Gelissen 1991; Green 1985; Jamieson 1986
14. An indicator of the implications of this discourse shift is seen in the Edmonton Assembly of First Nations' decision to change the name of its Chiefs Committee on Bill C-31 to the Chiefs Committee on Citizenship (AFN 1988:4).
15. The problem of domestic violence has received considerable study by aboriginal women in recent years. For examples see Turpel (1988), Ontario Native Women's Association (1989), Brillon 1988, and Indian and Inuit Nurses if Canada (1988).
16. At a joint meeting of NWAC and the National Action Council on the Status of Women (NAC), Women of the Metis Nation expressed their dismay at exclusion from constitutional negotiations. It must be noted, however, that in the pre-referendum campaign, aboriginal women were divided on their support of the Charlottetown Accord: some groups supported AFN position and broke with NWAC on the legal text and on the issue of political strategy and relationship with the AFN.
17. In NWAC et al. v. her Majesty et al., Federal Court Justice Allison Walsh dismissed the NWAC case on the grounds that no discrimination had ensued and

that the 4 male-dominated organizations adequately represent men and women. Justice Walsh acknowledged the fact that these 4 organizations received 95% of state funding but failed to perceive this as gender discrimination (Hill 1992:3).

18. The Inuit Tapirisat of Canada and the Metis National Council intervened. While the court found no reason for them to do so, it is likely that they too were concerned with the priority of collective rights. Furthermore Women of the Metis Nation were aggrieved at their exclusion from the negotiating table and were concerned that their male representatives would not act in women's best interests.
19. A caveat is in order: the four cases presented here are not intended to be representative of all First Nations women and their communities.
20. I have documented the process of women's politics in this community more fully elsewhere. The following account of Carrier discourse is excerpted from "Carrier Women and the Politics of Mothering," in *British Columbia Reconsidered: Essays on Women*. Gillian Creese and Veronica Strong-Boag, eds., Vancouver: Press Gang 1992.
21. Quotations are taken from interviews and conversations during fieldwork at Saik'uz, 1983-1985.
22. While I draw excerpts only from this one published source, they are by no means unique. Recorded conversations and interviews with Mikmaq women and public talks by community leaders all resonate with the same symbols and images, as does the discourse of the Native Women's Association of Nova Scotia.
23. I have often heard this comment at meetings of the Native Women's Association of Nova Scotia, from students in class discussions and at various academic conferences.
24. Sharon McIvor, a lawyer, is currently an executive member of the NWAC.

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