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## MÉTIS AND FEMINIST

### Ethical Reflections on Feminism, Human Rights and Decolonization

Emma LaRocque

To speak or write on matters of human rights for Aboriginal peoples, especially for Aboriginal women, is to be confronted with extraordinary challenges, in part because there are so many issues to address. I have struggled with what issues to foreground with respect to Aboriginal women and feminism, reviewing a menu of socio-political items such as poverty, racism/sexism, violence and the culturalization of violence, the criminal justice system, self-government, exclusions of Aboriginal women in constitutional processes and so forth. Yet, one feels compelled to offer a more positive portrait of the ways in which Aboriginal women live: as victims of colonization and patriarchy, yet as activists and agents in their lives; as oppressed, yet as fighters and survivors; and as among the most stereotyped, dehumanized and objectified of women, yet as the strong, gracious and determined women that they are. I also wondered whether I should just concentrate on Métis Nation women as their histories and contemporary concerns are frequently submerged, if not erased, under the umbrella terms and treatment of Aboriginal women (which almost always means dealing exclusively with status Indian issues).

Perhaps a way to bring together some of these wide-ranging concerns is to offer reflections on my engagement with feminism as a scholar and educator, a writer and social critic, a human rights advocate and most pertinently, as a Métis woman who grew up with all the contradictions and burdens of a community wracked with the colonial situation, and in a society injured to this situation.

I am aware that many, perhaps even the majority of, status Indian and Métis women do not identify with or readily use the label "feminist." Joyce Green has observed that

Feminist identification and feminist analysis [are] weak within Aboriginal communities and organizations, and [are] not widespread among individual women. Aboriginal women have been urged to identify as Aboriginal, in the context of the domination and exploitation by the newcomer community, to the exclusion of

identification as women with women across cultures, and with the experience of exploitation and domination by men within Aboriginal communities. (1993: 111)

Reasons for this are complex and include political, historical, cultural and socio-economic factors as well as some misunderstanding about feminism. For some Aboriginal women, such misunderstanding reflects their disadvantaged socio-economic position and marginalization, which, among other things, deprives them of attaining adequate education. But there are also Native women intellectuals who charge white feminism with having little or no understanding of colonial history, Aboriginal peoples or race oppression (Stevenson 1993; Monture-Angus 1995; Ouellette 2002).

Given that feminism is neither well-understood nor readily received by many Aboriginal women, it is useful to offer some basic assumptions, definitions and understandings about feminism. Josephine Donovan writes that "historical and anthropological studies reveal" four "determinant structures under which women, unlike men, have nearly universally existed" (1990: 172). I find her concise overview of these structures helpful:

First and foremost, women have experienced political oppression.... Second, nearly everywhere and in nearly every period, women have been assigned to the domestic sphere.... Third, women's historical economic function has been production for use, not production for exchange.... Fourth, women experience significant physical events that are different from men's. (1990: 172-73)

Is this also true for Aboriginal women? Without going into all the possible nuances and exceptions to the rule, and taking somewhat of a different direction from Donovan, I have no hesitation in accepting that such determinant structures are most definitely present in the lives of the majority of Aboriginal women. While there are some notable exceptions in history, such as some semi-matriarchal societies among Indigenous peoples, and while we can pinpoint colonization as the major factor in our present conditions, it remains true that we currently live under structures that proscribe or marginalize our lives. Aboriginal women experience political oppression in a number of ways. Our alienation from constitutional processes and from positions of leadership in white and Native male-dominated institutions are evidence of this. Aboriginal women have not enjoyed automatic inclusion or leadership roles in the public sphere of either Canadian society or in the upper echelons of national Aboriginal political organizations. Nor have they enjoyed equal treatment in Canadian legislation or in Aboriginal governance. They continue to face discrimination in a wide spectrum of social and economic settings. Even in areas of religion or spirituality, Aboriginal

women's roles are circumscribed by church doctrines or by some renderings of Aboriginal traditions. Women are politically oppressed when their roles and standing in the political and cultural life of their societies are restricted when compared to men.

While much has been made of "balance" between genders in Aboriginal traditions, there is overwhelming evidence that, by and large, Aboriginal women's roles have been confined to the domestic sphere. As Donovan explains, women have "been consigned to the domestic sphere and to domestic duties — including child-rearing or mothering — throughout recorded history" (1990: 172). We also need to ask what is meant by balance. Does the rhetoric of "balance" necessarily or automatically mean gender equality? It could merely mean that male and female roles are to be interdependent or complementary but from within gender-specified stations. The problem is in the definition of the roles. For instance, I have heard a male elder baldly declare that "man is the law, and woman is to serve the man and to nurture the family." Here, the elder is equating balance not with gender equality but with maintaining the status quo, that men maintain their over-arching dominance in the family, the stuff of patriarchy. "Balance" then becomes a new buzzword for keeping women to domestic and nurturing roles. I am sure not all people who promote balance between genders mean to say that women's roles should be restricted to home life. However, it does remain that for many, idealization of nurturing/motherhood has been reified and has gained political currency within nationalist and cultural difference discourses. I come back to this later.

Concerning women's economic function, I would be careful — as is Donovan — not to apply western-based economic ideas onto pre-industrial societies, and in our case, original Indigenous societies. Concepts such as "production for use" versus "production for exchange" may not be applicable to land-based, non-capitalist cultures. Living off the land does tend to encourage greater flexibility in gender/labour roles. However, we can see that Aboriginal women's gender roles, including economic roles, became more restricted with the arrival of European missionaries, "explorers" and fur traders. Separation between home (domestic) life and work (productive) life (the public/private dichotomy identified by feminist analysis) certainly increased. The fur traders, for example, encouraged male labour and travel, which of course meant that women were left to attend to child-rearing and other family and home demands. Missionaries twisted such gender role and economic changes into moral mandates. Within a few years of Confederation in 1867, the Canadian government legislated Indian status/non-status identity, rights and gender roles along patriarchal lines.

Donovan invokes "significant physical events that are different from men's," citing menstruation, childbirth and breastfeeding as examples, and

uses these differences as a springboard towards formulating a particularly female epistemology and ethic (1990:173). Donovan does not name sexuality or sexual violence here. However, Aboriginal women need to consider violence as a significant physical event (or series of events) as Aboriginal females of all ages continue to suffer from child abuse, wife battering, sexual assault and murder in epidemic proportions. As Patricia Monture-Angus explains: "It is likely Aboriginal women experience violence in their lives with greater frequency than any other collective of women in Canadian society"; further, that "violence is not a mere incident in the lives of Aboriginal women" (1995: 170).

Deploying Donovan's approach, then, we can see that Aboriginal women's experiences and socio-political positions in both Native and white communities fall within these structural determinants. Thus, we cannot remove Aboriginal women's concerns from other women's concerns for we too live under over-arching male-dominated conditions both as Canadian citizens and Aboriginal people. And although we must be sensitive to racial, cultural or economic differences, we can address Aboriginal women's multiple layers of oppressions from a feminist perspective.

### FEMINISM

What then is "Feminism"? I understand feminism as a struggle to end sexism and gender-based inequality in society. "Feminism... is comprised of the well-founded belief that girls and women are legally, politically and socially disadvantaged on the grounds of their sex; the ethical stance that this oppression is morally wrong; and the pragmatic commitment to ending injustice to all female human beings" (Overall 1998: 15).

bell hooks has a more comprehensive definition:

Feminism is the struggle to end sexist oppression. Its aim is not to benefit any specific group of women, any particular race or class of women. It does not privilege women over men. It has the power to transform in a meaningful way all our lives. Most importantly, feminism is neither a lifestyle nor a ready-made identity or role one can step in to. (1994: 24)

Feminism, then, does not belong to any particular group, and those who understand and practise this social idea of ending gender inequality and injustice are feminist. In this sense, men and women of all backgrounds can be feminists, and feminists should be among our best allies, and many are. Aboriginal writers, artists, scholars and community activists resisting our dehumanization and our dispossession are doing work very similar to feminist principles and objectives. Feminist and Aboriginal resistance entails

both deconstruction and reconstruction. Aboriginal, non-Aboriginal, male and female feminists will especially examine theories, portrayals, political positions or social treatments of Aboriginal women. Feminism provides us with theoretical tools with which we can analyze historical realities such as patriarchy. Feminism is not so much about complaining about one particular man, event or even piece of legislation (i.e., the *Indian Act*); rather, feminism is an analysis of how social systems work to privilege men and disadvantage women. Feminism has an ethical component in that feminist analysis interrogates, confronts and seeks to transform those realities that compromise women's well-being and human rights.

### BEING MÉTIS

Given the seemingly innocuous and even grand principles and objectives for human rights embedded in feminism, I have often been surprised, at times even startled, at the negative reactions to this concept. Because the labels "feminist" or "feminism" carry such a negative or unclear meaning for many women, perhaps it is best not to fixate on terminology or on oppositional politics but rather to begin by trying to find what is important to us as Aboriginal women. Here I outline what is important to me with the inference that what is important to me may or ought also to be important to other women.

I do not come from any racially or economically equal, much less privileged, background.<sup>1</sup> The Métis in my community have been written up from an urban-centric bias as "bush people" living in "isolated" or "remote Indian" communities along a railroad line in northeastern Alberta (Garvin 1992). Although we spoke Plains Cree (with Michif) and lived off the land, legally we were/are not status Indians and so never lived on reserves. We were/are Métis but never lived in the Alberta Métis Settlements, or "Colonies" as they were once called. We knew ourselves as Apeetowgusanuk (or "half-sons" in Cree) who were descended from both the Red River Métis and locally originated Métis<sup>2</sup> communities with deep kinship connections to both status and non-status Indian peoples. And although Métis do originate from the early fur trade era of First Nations and European peoples, both my maternal and paternal family histories are grounded in Métis Nation lineage with no remembrance of or relational ties with non-Aboriginal people. My parents, aunts and uncles all spoke of "scrip"<sup>3</sup> and how Apeetowgusanuk lost and were continuing to lose beloved domains of lands either through scrip or simply through urban, industrial and farming encroachments. Legally, we did not own any land but in those years we could still definitely live on, from and with the land, for morally, it was our land.<sup>4</sup> My grandparents occupied, used and loved this land long before Confederation, and my father was born before Alberta became a province.

My parents' generation made a living from the many resources of the land, including hunting and trapping, as well as from wage labour, wherever such could be found. And although most Apeetowgusanuk were hard-working, proudly independent, or Ootayemsuak peoples, they/we were suffering from unimaginable poverty and racism, complete with layers and waves of both legal and social dispossession.

Among the multiple sites of dispossession, public schooling contributed significantly to my generation's sense of cultural dislocation and intellectual alienation. Not only did schooling aim to extract us from our mother language and our motherland with its particular western ethos, it failed to teach us basic classroom reading and writing skills, thereby failing to prepare us for the new brave world of industrialization/urbanization, even as this world was fast overtaking us, especially after World War II. Undergirding this pedagogy was the colonialist version of history and the "National Dream," all equated with "progress." Not surprisingly, the vast majority of Métis students left school as fast as they could do so legally. In 1971, the average grade level for Métis people in Alberta was four. This and more have left many people of my generation and their children in a socio-cultural vacuum. This is the direct and continuing legacy of colonization, and it is the sociological after-effects of this colonial earthquake that has dislocated and disoriented many of our youth.

Two things have always followed me from my early years: on one hand, our richly woven cultural life based on our blended land and railroad line ways, textured with our Métized (my coin) Cree oral literature, language and worldview; and on the other hand, our extreme poverty and alienation from the financial and material privileges of mainstream Canada. I do not speak of poverty in any abstract sense. Depending on seasons (trapping or non-trapping), wage-labour employment or non-employment, we could also go without much food for months, for years. My parents typically struggled to outfit us with adequate or socially acceptable clothing, lunches and other school supplies during school terms. Poverty in my family and community translated into social warfare on our bodies. As virtually penniless people of the land who spoke only Cree and often lived miles away from town, we had minimal access to doctors or hospitals throughout the 1900s, but most relevant for my generation, in the 1940s–70s. Consequently, many people died, often from tuberculosis or other diseases. Many of my relatives were sent away to sanatoriums due to TB, among them, my older sister and brother. Some came back in coffins. We were lucky: my older brother and sister survived and came home. Some children were never returned from hospitals, and those who were orphaned (but were taken care of within extended kinship systems) were often confiscated by state welfare agencies. The now infamous "sixties scoop," social welfare systems taking children away from Native families, was

also practised on northern Métis communities. Those who survived were left with bewilderment and broken hearts along with a wide array of medical or social problems. Some individuals and some families increasingly displayed fragmentation, depression, alcohol abuse, anger and violence.

Yet, remarkably, numerous Métis individuals and families kept body and soul together, and I hasten to add, many men including my father did not take to violence under any circumstances. In my home there was no physical violence (except for the rare disciplinary willow lashings from my mother); as a rule, I grew up safe and secure inside our home. But my mother (1918–1981) did not grow up so safe. Somewhere, during the Depression, my maternal grandfather had been dispossessed of his scrip, his store, his land and dairy farm, uprooting his large family. Apparently, he took to drinking and family violence. Overnight my mother's young life had become one of abject poverty, and she and her sisters suffered the most immediate consequences. As part of making ends meet, my grandfather pushed his many daughters out of the home as soon as they became "of age." In a patriarchal world, they were left to find men who could take care of them.

I cannot say whether my grandfather's treatment of his daughters was typical of Métis attitudes of those times but I can say that patriarchy did not end with my grandfather. The Métis community of my generation was by no means free from patriarchal notions and practices. Take the name we had for ourselves: Apeetowgusanuk, or "half-son." Why not "half-daughters"? In my own family, all the men got two given names, and all the women had one name. This practice goes back to my grandparents and great grandparents. There was also the typical double standard about male and female sexual behaviour. To put it in the vernacular, men could "run around," women could not. If women exercised sexual freedom they could expect censorship. In the Roman Catholic Church, boys could assist priests in the service, girls could not. In our home, however, my mother, who integrated Cree traditions with Roman Catholic rituals, assumed spiritual leadership. She also led the way in many of our family decisions and activities. Although my own parents allowed the girls as much freedom of expression as the boys, I do recall one incident that indicated they had been much influenced by male-favoured thinking. When I was quite young I was told by my mother not to walk over my father's and brothers' trapping/hunting supplies and preparations. I immediately asked why not? She explained that it would bring bad luck to their trapping/hunting. I do not remember her answer, if any, to my next "why?" but I called on natural justice — if my brothers could walk over them, so could I. I was left to my youthful logic but the message was disturbing: girls are contaminated, girls bring bad luck and girls can't do all the things boys can, simply because they are girls. I am aware that today people attach spiritual power to menstrual taboos, but I was premenstrual, indicating that

this taboo reflected wider and deeper gender biases and could be generalized at will.

To me all this problematizes human customs that are biology-linked. World-wide, women and girls suffer horrific mutilations as well as extreme confinements, which the international post-colonial community has largely tolerated in deference to nationalisms, cross-culturalism or tradition. Given our scientific knowledge today,<sup>5</sup> it seems to me we should ask whether any biology-based restrictions, even if spiritualized, are benign. Of course, I am raising normative questions, unlike my parents who tended to let things be for they were raised in an ethic of non-interference.<sup>6</sup> I am of a different generation — I marvel at the power tradition has over human beings. Yet, my mom was by no means sanguine about traditions that impacted her more directly.

Even though my mom was a remarkably resourceful woman who took exceptional care of us, she was by no means a happy homemaker. She most definitely did not romanticize motherhood; if anything, she resented the fact that responsibility fell on her to do the major portion of child-rearing and other home-related duties. This is all the more interesting because my amiable father assisted with many of the household chores, such as cooking, making our lunches for school and so forth, whenever he was home. Conversely, my mother enjoyed working outside alongside my dad. My mom was as free to trap and do many other so-called masculine-assigned tasks as my father was free to work in the home. Yet the key difference for my mom lay in the fact my father had a choice concerning childcare and kitchen work whereas my mother did not. And she really had no other choice. Although highly gifted and creative, my mom, along with the vast majority of other Métis women of her generation (and even my older sisters' generation), never had any opportunity to go to school or to develop her many gifts, much less to have a career or even get a job. So my mom lived with the frustration of remaining financially dependent on my father — something she viewed as an affront to her dignity.

Poverty also sets up social conditions that facilitate violence against women. In my mother's generation, white males, including police and priests, attacked Native women because they knew the women were in no position to bring them to justice. Similarly, predators in our communities targeted the most defenceless because they too knew they could get away with it. Generally, many women in our area were bullied, battered or assaulted. Aboriginal women's relocations to urban centres is in part a result of such poverty and violence.

Previously, I have addressed the topic of violence against women within Native communities (1993, 1997). I have tried to place this troubling issue in the context of colonialism, yet at the same time, have emphasized that

for many reasons, male violence cannot be fully explained by social or political conditions. In other words, neither colonization nor poverty explains everything about why or how Native men (and societies) may assume sexist attitudes or behaviours. This point has to be emphasized because male violence continues to be much tolerated, explained or virtually absolved by many women of colour, including Aboriginal women, usually in defence of cultural difference, community loyalties or nationalist agendas, or out of reaction to white feminist critiques. I am concerned too that sexual violence, in particular, is often treated as only one of many colonial-generated problems that we face. But as numerous studies show, this is no ordinary social problem. Sexual violence devastates human dignity and freedom and rips apart the lives of victims, their families, kinships and other crucial community seams (Shkilnyk 1977). As far back as humans have existed this crime against humanity has existed and remains global in scope and obviously requires much greater analysis and confrontation than it has received.

Clearly, poverty is a social evil that steals from poor people a quality of life each Canadian citizen should have the right to expect. Poverty severely compromises the physical, cultural and psychological well-being of children, women and men, but it is the case that the most defenceless, usually women, children and the elderly, often bear the greatest burdens. These are issues that centrally concern women who most certainly have a great stake in working towards a society in which every citizen has access to fundamental resources for a safe and decent quality of life. Indeed, this should be a fundamental human right in our world. At the very least, this must mean ending poverty and violence.

### CRITICISM AND FEMINISM

On a philosophical level, freedom to choose is fundamental to our humanity. It is theorized (Freire 1970; Puxley 1977) that what makes us human is our capacity to make choices, which in turn, gives us moral agency. This is why colonization or any other form of coercion is a form of dehumanization. The human need and the human right to be able to have and to make choices, then, is an act of humanization. The freedom, the means or the capacity to make choices is really what self-determination is all about. Although the international community recognizes self-determination as a basic human right, all too often the concept of self-determination is applied only to cultural, ethnic or political forms and movements. But self-determination cannot be limited to constitutions, cultures or collectivities; it must be extended to individuals. Self-determination must mean that all individuals have a basic right to a certain quality of life, free from the violence of colonialism, racism/sexism and poverty, as well as from the violence of other humans, even if these other humans are one's people, or even one's relations, or are themselves suffering

from colonial conditions. For multiple reasons, Aboriginal women have the greatest stake in self-determination, both as part of a people struggling to decolonize and as individuals struggling to enjoy basic human rights.

Self-determination must also mean intellectual freedom. I turn to this issue from the context of my work in Native studies for three decades now. Many of us in Native studies have made a living deconstructing the Euro-Canadian master narrative with its canons and ideologies; but we must also have the right to exercise our analytical skills and training in the service of advancing Aboriginal scholarship and humanity. We must maintain our freedoms to practise our scholarship. I emphasize intellectual and academic freedom because as feminist scholars or professors, we face political problems in pedagogical settings. I used to teach what I thought was a fairly benign seminar on Native women. I noticed that students responded well to history or information on the social conditions confronting Aboriginal women. However, when I presented them with literature or thinking that was remotely "feminist," I was greeted with silence. Interestingly, my student numbers from this course started dwindling. I do not know whether or not this was the result of an organized effort, but I certainly received the message about any critical reflection on the place of Aboriginal women in Aboriginal communities. I was, on one hand, chided by a Native male student for "airing our dirty laundry in public," and on the other, I was labelled and psychologized by white students unhappy with their marks. These are two tactics used to discredit Aboriginal and feminist analyses.

I am painfully aware that social and political realities place Native academics in unusual circumstances. In the first place, we are still a very small community, making it difficult to treat each other's works critically. I feel this pressure with this chapter! Moreover, there seems to be an unstated expectation that women not criticize women, or that Native scholars not criticize Native scholars. This is unfortunate because it detracts from the important theoretical work that needs to be done, and it hampers intellectual vibrancy. Aboriginal scholars walk a tightrope between keeping a wary eye on western-defined canons and negotiating cultural and/or community interests. Of course, cultural issues are urgently important to contemporary Native peoples. Issues of cultural, social or political urgency can, however, present conflicting interests for scholars as critical thinkers and as decolonizing educators.

For example, stereotypes about traditional knowledge and how this is expected to function in gender roles, usually with inferences that Native women be all-embracing mothers and healers, poses particular problems to those who disagree or practise roles outside of these expectations. Many popular creeds portray Aboriginal women as centrally maternal, nurturing and feminine. Typically authenticated by biology, culture or tradition, such

characterizations are widely articulated by academics, writers and policy-makers as well as many community platforms. I am partial to a female epistemology and appreciate what is nurturing and feminine but I find certain idealizations of this role quite problematic.

For purposes of discussion I will take up some representations from Kim Anderson's *A Recognition of Being: Reconstructing Native Womanhood* (2000). This is an important and substantial book, one of a handful of books that focuses on Aboriginal women's experiences and issues. It is compassionate, thoughtful and well written, and the author made an effort to respectfully include a wide variety of views, including mine. This book has gained wide readership and is a useful springboard for debate on Aboriginal feminist theory.

Anderson's objective is to facilitate as many Native women's voices as possible. However, although Anderson allows for different voices, no debate is generated, for she foregrounds those views of motherhood as central to Aboriginal women's epistemology. She writes: "Motherhood was an affirmation of a woman's power and defined her central role in traditional Aboriginal societies" (2000: 83). To be sure, Anderson takes great pains to extend the "Aboriginal ideology of motherhood" (2000: 171) to those women without children and employs the concept of "aunties" in a very positive way. She also points to special women who have done great international work of healing, women with no biological children but "their role is the same as that of any mother: to teach, nurture and heal all people" (2000: 171). This is indeed a sterling vocation and ethic, echoing some feminist directions which have argued for a maternal-based "moral vision" (Donovan 1990: 173). Nonetheless, such maternalization is totalizing and exclusionary. Many women today choose not to be mothers, and they neither have desire nor appreciate being forced into what is essentially an heterosexist framework, even if a feminine one. Ultimately, motherhood does imply biology, and, as deployed in Anderson, defines "womanhood."

Even more disconcerting is the notion that a skirt is a way of accessing connectedness to the earth (2000: 167). Anderson explains that the skirt is "another symbol related to woman's ability to produce and nurture life" (2000: 166). This is then extrapolated into a rather startling view of what constitutes womanhood, or femininity. Anderson quotes a young woman who remarks: "The skirt itself represents the hoop of life. So, as a woman, you need to walk like a woman, you need to sit like a woman, you need to conduct yourself like a woman, and part of that is being recognized, not only on this earth, but also in the spirit world, as a woman" (2000: 168).

Such an assertion reflects a statement of faith, and while we must respect people's faiths, what do we do when faith turns to dogma that requires submission or contradicts other rights? I do not wear skirts, and I most cer-

tainly do not feel any less connected to the earth. Indeed, I take umbrage to any suggestion that my spirituality is wanting simply because of clothing or ceremony! But my take here is much more than personal: as a scholar and as a feminist, I too question such a remark. In the first instance, this view is strikingly similar to patriarchal Christian and other fundamentalist constructions of "woman," and one wonders to what extent the influence of residential schools and other patriarchal agencies and attitudes, both old and new, is at work here.

It is simply not true that there was any universalized Aboriginal understanding about "womanhood," especially one that made much of masculinity or femininity in the western sense. In fact, archival records reveal that European men reacted to the fact that, in several Aboriginal nations, there was little difference between men and women in roles, appearance, clothing or even physical strength.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, there were widely divergent traditions around gender roles.

Equally problematic is the naturalizing of human gestures to biological determinism, which has every potential to discriminate against those who do not fit certain expectations. Gender stereotypes such as walking "like a woman" or "like a man" carry heterosexist preferences and prejudices that perpetuate the oppression of gay people, among others. And I might add, as one who grew up in the bush with no modern amenities, we did not think in terms of gender-proscribed ways of walking when we picked berries, chopped wood, carried water or walked for miles to towns or to our traplines, and so forth. There is much scholarly evidence to suggest that gender, and with it notions of femininity, or masculinity, are constructed (Roscoe 1998). It remains debatable whether one walks, talks or gestures "like a woman" or "like a man" naturally, or is taught to do so. The other and perhaps more important point is that traditionally, Indigenous nations demonstrated much tolerance for difference and individuality (LaRocque 1997). Even in cultures that practised fairly rigid sex roles there were allowances, even honour, for those who assumed cross-gender roles, although it appears there was more honour given to women who took on male roles than men who took on female ones (Hungry Wolf 1980: 60–64, 67). This implies a cultural bias in favour of male-defined roles.

With respect to assigning gender quality to certain clothing, a study of Native women's roles in the fur trade shows that European men, reflecting their westernized notions about femininity, modesty and chastity (sexual mores), pressured their Native wives and their halfbreed daughters to conduct themselves with "lady-like" manners and to adopt the wearing of western clothing such as skirts and other "feminine," usually English, accoutrements (Van Kirk 1980). Further, many Aboriginal cultures did not produce skirts or dresses as we know them today, and both men and women wore either

ribes, pants or pant-like leggings. It was European husbands and fathers assuming authority over their Native families who pressured Native peoples to associate clothing with gender roles or even with spirituality. We see here that colonization is almost completely about over-arching male dominance, which clearly had a domino effect on Aboriginal cultures and practices.

While intending to affirm Aboriginal women and cultures, both much beleaguered in white North American archival records, histories and popular culture, many writers readily criticize Euro-Canadian colonial forces (not a bad thing in and of itself), but they tend to both gloss over Aboriginal practices that discriminate(d) against women, and they generalize and romanticize traditions. There is an over-riding assumption that Aboriginal traditions were universally historically non-sexist and therefore, are universally liberating today. Besides the fact that not all traditions were non-sexist, we must be careful that, in an effort to celebrate ourselves, we not go to the other extreme of biological essentialism of our roles as women by confining them to the domestic and maternal spheres, or romanticizing our traditions by closing our eyes to certain practices and attitudes that privilege men over women.

There is no doubt that many pre-Columbian cultures developed political systems and spiritual practices in which women held significant power and influence. Nor was this power relegated to the domestic sphere. And there is no question that colonial forces have seriously disrupted Aboriginal thought and institutions. There is no question that we need to rebuild and restore ourselves and our cultures. However, this cannot mean that we refrain from confronting patriarchal and sexist attitudes or oppressive behaviours. The fact remains that there is an awful lot of gender inequality within Native families, communities, organizations and governments. In the final analysis, it does not much matter what the ultimate cause of sexism or misogyny may be. What matters is that, on a fairly universal level, it permeates the lives of women throughout the world today, and it certainly permeates our lives, and that is what feminism attends to.

Women cannot saddle ourselves with the staggering responsibility of teaching or nurturing the whole world; nor should we assume sole responsibility for "healing" or "nurturing" Aboriginal men. To assume such roles is tantamount to accepting patriarchal definitions about the nature and role of women, and it results in assuming responsibility for our oppression and our inequality. And to do this is to deny our historical and sociological experience as women. This is not in any way to dismiss men's experiences or to suggest we should be aloof or callous towards those men who also suffer from racism and colonialism (and in some instances, even from female violence). I know too well how hard my beloved Bapa worked to take care of us because he had no other opportunities than to be a labourer; I know too well how much my two brothers continue to struggle to make ends meet

even today because school failed them. However, men and women experience colonialism differently. This is not about "blaming our men" but of assessing women's situation in an historical and social context. The point is, colonialism and patriarchy are systemic problems, and we cannot address these adequately by assuming personal or collective female responsibility for how the world hurts or how men may behave.

I believe that some of the maternalist claims about roles and positions are taken without adequate historical or anthropological research, and without awareness about their implications. But they are also taken in an effort to outline our difference from western definitions. "Difference" serves rhetorically as part of an anti-colonial arsenal in the process of culture re-building. However, in decolonization movements traditions about women are often framed as largely domestic and supportive in nature. The disturbing pattern in nationalist movements is that while women are celebrated abstractly as carriers of culture and guardians of tradition, their fundamental human rights are often denied (Young 2003). "Historically... women do not reap equal benefits from decolonisation for reasons of gender inequality [because] the decolonised nation is hardly interested in female liberation [as men become] chief beneficiaries of political and economic power gained through the nationalist struggle" (McLeod 2000: 115). My hope is that First Nations and Métis peoples can avoid these pitfalls. But it is worrisome that a discernable pattern is already there: Native women are "honoured" as "keepers" of tradition, defined as nurturing/healing, while Native men control political power. What concerns me even more is that in the interest of being markers of difference, many non-western women are apparently willing to accept certain proscriptions, even fundamental inequalities. Why is it women who are always the ones to do this? In Canada, much of the rhetoric of Indigenous nationalism is filtered through the language of "cultural difference" requiring "culturally appropriate" responses and models.

The question is, to what extent is difference discourse serving us as women? How different are we, and from whom, exactly, are we to be different? Who is defining the difference? Feminism invites us to think seriously about difference, but to also remain focused on women's human rights.

This is not to say that we are exactly the same as white Canadians or that we want to be. Of course we are different! But our difference today, as it was in pre-Columbian times, is much more dynamic, diverse, complex and nuanced than what the popularized and stereotyped "cultural differences" discourse suggests. That these "differences" are often neatly typologized into a handful of traits<sup>8</sup> may be convenient for many, and they are certainly more political than cultural, but I believe they serve to entrench the colonizer's model (to borrow J.M. Blaut's [1995] phrase) of "the Indian," rendering women marginalized and vulnerable to unequal treatment.

The irony is that, generally, there is a tendency to lump Native scholars and/or writers, perhaps especially Native women, under certain universalized and prescribed notions of experience or of expression. For all the talk of difference we continue to be stereotyped as some mother-earthly mass of battered bodies. Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal writers tend to do this. While many of us may have much in common, the generalized treatment to ourselves or to our work is an act of erasure, to each of us.

Further, it is unacceptable that many feminist writers, perhaps especially white and African American writers, seem unaware of our existence, both as politically situated women and/or as intellectuals and scholars. There is in mainstream Canadian and American feminist writings a decided lack of inclusion of our experience, analysis or perspectives. Recently, I perused about fifteen textbooks on feminist theory, most of them published in the 1990s. With the exception of about three authors,<sup>9</sup> not one of them wrote a single word on Aboriginal people (American or Canadian), including women, much less referred to any of our deconstructions, Indigenous-based anti-colonial theories; to the contemporizing of Aboriginal epistemologies in our classrooms; or to our matrifocal societies and traditions, even though most of them had several chapters on "women of colour." However, there are some more recent works, especially by women of colour, that have treated Aboriginal women seriously and respectfully.<sup>10</sup>

Clearly, there remain problems with white-constructed feminism, and just as clearly, Aboriginal women must deal with multiple sites of being othered. But, to use an old aphorism, let's not throw out the baby with the bath water! As we address white feminist exclusions we must be careful that we not sabotage our human rights or our critical capacities. I do not think it is fruitful for us to weaken our resources or our analysis by fixing upon what is now a very common argument, namely, that feminism is irrelevant because white women have conceptualized it (and presumably know nothing about racism or colonial history), or because race/racism is more urgent and fundamental to Native women than sex/sexism. Racism/sexism is a package experience and it is virtually impossible to untangle one from the other (LaRocque 1990a). But the integrity of my sexuality and my body will not be sacrificed for race, for religion, for "difference," for "culture" or for "nation."

Much work is needed to decolonize the feminist/academic community concerning the treatment and reading of Aboriginal women's material and intellectual locations. That we are diverse, complex and divided is all the more reason for greater efforts to be made by all intellectuals. New theoretical directions are urgently needed to help think through the issues confronting Aboriginal women today.

Nonetheless, despite these problems, and despite the substantive so-



cio-economic disparities between Native and non-Native women (Frideres 2003), and even despite the colonial chasms that do exist, I do believe that feminism is viable as a basis for analysis and as an ideal for equitable gender relations. This feminism though cannot be read as solely belonging to white women; Aboriginal women have fought for their rights long before and long after European arrival or influence even if they have not used white feminist language. Further, being feminist cannot and does not mean abandoning our commitments to the Aboriginal community.

The relationship between Native and white women cannot be unidirectional. The Canadian or international women's movements cannot define all the terms nor expect Native women to assume dominant cultures as their own, even if we share common interests around gender. Native women's cultures challenge state and cultural systems. White women must do some consciousness-raising about the quality of life and the nature of political and intellectual colonialism in our country.

Aboriginal values and worldviews offer genuine alternatives to our over-industrialized, over-bureaucratized, corporate-controlled society. Many Aboriginal beliefs and practices, *the real* traditionally based practices — and those reinvented — also offer models and concepts on gender equality that can enhance woman-centred notions of equality and valuation. Naturally, we need to transform those traditions that obstruct gender equality; we need to confront thinking and institutions that violate our rights and we need to ensure that our contemporary First Nations and Métis liberation efforts move away from that either-or pattern of sacrificing women's equality in the interests of the ever amorphous "collective." We must be both decolonizers and feminists.

Finally, I am painfully aware that I have raised questions and issues that are politically charged and may cause discomfort. I am highly conscious of the fact that there are ideological divisions among us as we seek to find common ground in the theorizing of our lives, both as women and as diverse Aboriginal peoples. I am equally aware that we are oppressed peoples and that we are making valiant efforts to restore ourselves to rebuild our stolen and fragmented cultures and traditions. I appreciate that it is difficult for us to bear any further criticism. Yet, history teaches us that it is in moments of nationalisms that we are most vulnerable not only to essentialisms/fundamentalisms (Green 2003), but to the disempowerment of women. It is in moments of nationalisms that we must exercise our critical capacities towards the enhancement of our human freedoms.

Freedom from imperial, systemic and personal dominations must remain the basis of our emancipatory efforts. This must mean that, paramount among our principles, is an abhorrence of violations against other human beings. Specifically, in this discussion, no injustice against any persons, whether

constitutional, cultural or physical/sexual, should ever be tolerated in the name of advancing any collective or political interests, even when idealized as some kind of a decolonizing reconstructive process. We must understand that it is not in the interest of any collective or culture to dismiss or abuse individual rights, particularly matters as crucial as citizenship, identity or personal safety and integrity. It is not deliverance if some people's rights within any decolonizing or liberation movements are sacrificed.

In the final analysis, what matters to me is that, as we rebuild, we have an opportunity to create contemporary cultures based on human rights that extend to all members of our communities. Such rights will respect cultures and traditions but, at the same time we must be vigilant that cultures and traditions uphold the human rights of all peoples, certainly children and women.

## NOTES

1. As part of my resistance scholarship theory, I have refused to stand aloof from some of my research and published works, and accordingly locate some family or community contexts. For more biographical information see my essay "Tides, Towns and Trains," in J. Turner (ed), 1990.
2. Some capitalize "Métis" to indicate those who originate from the Red River in order to make distinctions from other métis who do not have Red River lineage. See Peterson and Brown (1985).
3. Between 1870 and 1900, the federal government issued a series of tickets with monetary or land value (scrip) to "Halfbreed Heads of Families" as a form of recognizing Métis rights to land. However, in large part, the Métis were divested of the scrips by speculators, fraud, government legislation and cultural processes alien to them (see RCAP 1996).
4. I am grateful to my younger brother, who has remained on our original land area but like my father before him, can only lease the land as we have never had resources to purchase this land. But if there was any justice for Métis people the governments should simply transfer ownership to those Métis families who have loved and tended specific lands — and continue to do so — long before Confederation.
5. It is theorized that most biology-linked customs that tend to injure or constrict females in "traditional" societies were created in pre-scientific eras when people did not understand bodily functions and so tended to mystify them. It is interesting, however, that so many such customs were invented to circumscribe women more than men.
6. There is much beauty to this ethic as it facilitates tolerance for difference, among other things. But ethically it does have its limitations for many social evils such as slavery, which existed because it was tolerated by society. Similarly, sexism flourishes because it is tolerated. What should we tolerate and to what extent?
7. In a scathing critique of Alexander Mackenzie's journals, Parker Duchemin notes that MacKenzie interpreted Sekani women's height and "lusty make"

(that Mackenzie imagined) as "inverting normal distinctions of gender" (1990: 60–61).

8. See my analysis of this (LaRocque 1997).
9. The authors (in my collection at the time) that included some treatment of Aboriginal women are Emberly (1993), Hunter (1996), and Stalker and Prentice (1998). While Emberly and Hunter take a respectful and considered approach, Stalker and Prentice include one puzzling chapter on "Native Students and Quebec Colleges," which is written by a non-Aboriginal woman.
10. I am thinking especially of Sherene Razack's works, *Looking White People in the Eye* (1998) and *Race, Space and the Law* (2002). See also Bannerji (1993).

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