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Affirmations of an Indigenous Feminist

KIM ANDERSON

"I'm not a feminist" is a remark I often hear from Indigenous women – even though many of the people I associate with are advocates of women in one form or another. When I told friends and colleagues that I was working on an essay on Indigenous feminism, their responses were in keeping with this dismissal. Some seemed bored, others indicated it was a waste of time, and still others saw it as an exercise in negativity. As one friend put it, "Feminists are always arguing *against* something." In this view, Western feminism is unpalatable because it is about rights rather than responsibilities and because it emphasizes individual autonomy. Some see Western feminism as erroneously striving for an equality that implies sameness with men, and some feel that feminism represents an attack on our responsibilities as women, particularly as mothers. There is also the argument that we cannot employ feminism, because it will exclude men from our struggle for health and well-being as peoples.¹ These sentiments make it difficult for an Indigenous woman such as myself to identify with feminism – and certainly to write an essay about it! Yet there are many kinds of feminism, and as I will argue, Indigenous feminism in my own thought and practice is anything but negative or exclusive. My intention is to open a dialogue about how Indigenous feminist thought can help us re-create a world that validates life in all its forms.

I begin with the notion that Indigenous feminism is linked to a foundational principle in Indigenous societies – that is, the profound reverence for life. Although life-affirming practices and beliefs are still operational to

varying degrees in contemporary Native societies, our land-based societies were much more engaged with ways of honouring and nurturing life – all life. Our relatives had ways of giving thanks when life was taken, as is evident in traditional hunting practices. Indigenous nations throughout the Americas had protocols to ensure that they maintained respectful relationships with the animals they hunted. I have been particularly struck by the respect inherent in the practice of *notokwew mâciwin* (old lady hunting) as described by Cree Métis Elder Maria Campbell. Campbell remembers that it was the grandmothers who were the first teachers of hunting and trapping. Children as young as three or four would go out with their grandmothers to set snares because it was the grannies' job to teach children to be thankful, respectful, and gentle with the animals at this time and in this context. Old ladies were deemed to be the most appropriate first teachers of hunting because of their experience and wisdom as life givers. *Notokwew mâciwin* was the name given to the careful practice of taking life, as learned by young children and taught by the senior life givers.

In cases where life was given, there were also ways of paying respect. In particular, women were recognized for their unique contributions in the life-giving process. Indigenous creation stories taught that all life was born of the female, and Indigenous ceremonies replicated the cycles of renewal and rebirth that femininity represented. Indigenous philosophies and practices ensured that healthy life was maintained through balance between the various life forms, including men and women. These principles were built into all of our political, social, and economic systems and underpinned the health and well-being of the people and the environments they lived in.

Living as we currently do in a violent and militarized world, a world that operates on hierarchical systems and in which women and children suffer disproportionate levels of poverty and abuse, I am struck by the thought that we have much to learn from the systems our ancestors created to protect themselves and *Kā wee ooma aski*, their original mother, the earth. Perhaps they understood that systems of dominance and control are not sustainable and therefore created the checks and balances that they deemed necessary for survival. In any case, I believe that what we now call feminism – which the Merriam Webster's online dictionary defines as "the theory of political, economic and social equality of the sexes" – was simply a way of life to our ancestors.² Feminism was simply one plank in the platform of life-affirming values that kept us alive.

My own venture into Indigenous feminist thought began with my first pregnancy, which brought home in a visceral way teachings about the

sacredness of life. In carrying, giving, and then nurturing new life, I also began to understand the significance of women in the life-cycle process. I was overwhelmed by the responsibility and by the magnitude of physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual work involved in mothering. Being responsible for someone else's life was undoubtedly the most significant and the toughest thing I had done, and yet there was so little acknowledgment of this in the public domain. Although I was lucky to have support in my own home, I began to think about how small children and their caregivers (who are mostly women) are not validated or recognized by society. I was haunted by thoughts of the abuse and neglect that mothers and young children suffer on a daily basis. I wondered how we could possibly hope for a better future without due attention to the ways upcoming generations are living out their early years.

It was the emotional intelligence of mothering that really transformed me into an Indigenous feminist. I had for years been involved in social justice and policy work for Indigenous peoples, but I had not been particularly interested in so-called women's issues. In spite of knowing the statistics about how Indigenous women are doubly oppressed, I had not considered whether the oppression of women was connected to the overall state of disease in our societies. For me, pregnancy was a wake-up call about how far we have strayed from life-affirming principles in mainstream and Indigenous societies alike.

These feelings and thoughts led me to explore how Indigenous cultures validated women and their mothering work in the past. I was able to link the deplorable conditions of many contemporary Native women and children to the colonization and its handmaiden, patriarchy. I learned that one of the biggest targets of colonialism was the Indigenous family and that our traditional societies had been sustained by strong kin relations in which women had significant authority. There was no such thing as a single mother, because Native women and their children lived and worked in extended kin networks. In the case of matrilineal societies, the father or partner would move in with the woman and her kin. This system protected the women from abuse and isolation, allowing her to raise children with the support of her own family. Women were not dependent economically on a single male, and because of this, separation (divorce) was much more feasible than it is for women today. Women were considered the head of the household because they were primarily responsible for the work involved in child rearing and in managing the home and home community. Empowered motherhood was not only a practice but also an ideology that allowed women to assert their authority

at various political levels. In a number of Indigenous societies, it was older women who made decisions that set the direction for all of the people, which they did as clan mothers, through women's councils, and as head women of their own extended families.

My early musings about motherhood coincided with one of my other areas of interest: the participation of Indigenous women (or lack thereof) in governance. Before my first pregnancy I had spent three years working for a chiefs' organization. This job inspired my thinking about the role of Indigenous women in our contemporary governance systems, for it was there that I gained first-hand experience with the machinations of a male-dominated political organization. The hierarchical nature of the system places chiefs, who are primarily men, at the top of the pecking order, followed by technical people (policy analysts and the like) and their assistants, who are often women. I was hired initially to write a policy paper, but because of my gender and tenuous position in the organization, I found myself more than once being asked (if not expected) by visiting chiefs to get coffee and change airline tickets. Having moved from a female-run Indigenous organization in which rank was not immediately apparent by the space one occupied in the office, I found it odd to be in an environment that was organized by status and, ultimately, gender.

I eventually moved into a full-time position – developing social policy for children. We worked hard in our unit, and there were many admirable male chiefs who worked with us to raise the profile of children's social and health concerns. Yet time and again I was disappointed when we took our work to the regional assembly, only to have the social issues placed on the last day, where they would inevitably fall off the table because of lack of quorum. There seemed to be a fault line between the women who were doing much of the work at the community level (and with whom I consulted) and the men who did not raise the social issues we had been working on as political priorities. In turn, I don't recall any discussion about the need to address sexual inequality as part of our liberation as peoples. The gender equity plank was missing, but no one seemed to be paying much attention.

I hope that I am not dating myself with these experiences, and I certainly give credit to some of the current initiatives coming out of the male-dominated national political organizations in Canada. At the very least, there are women's councils at the Métis National Council and the Assembly of First Nations, and the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami now has a female president who has been vocal about children's needs. Matrimonial real property on reserves has become an issue in national politics, and awareness of this issue

may help to alleviate the losses incurred by First Nations women and children who flee their homes because of family violence. The Assembly of First Nations has engaged in a campaign to make poverty history and is working on a gender-based analysis framework. One can even find some decidedly feminist statements in its charter, including "the equality of men and women has always been a guiding principle ... Both men and women must be involved in the advancement of an equitable society." Yet actions, as the saying goes, speak louder than words.

I raise these anecdotes and issues in the context of arguments that Indigenous peoples should sidestep feminism because we have bigger issues at hand. Decolonization, healing, sovereignty, and nation building are areas of priority. If we work in these areas, so the logic goes, then the dire conditions in which many Native women find themselves will improve.³ Yet, in spite of our efforts to achieve self-determination since the middle of the twentieth century, the lives of Indigenous women continue to be plagued by violence and poverty. Going back to my mother's heart, I am disturbed to think that a staggering number of Native children are being raised in situations of violence and poverty by women who are not supported by the body politic. Contrary to the trickle-down logic that says Indigenous women's lives will improve when we address the bigger issues, I would argue that until we seriously address the political, social, and economic inequities faced by Indigenous women, we will never achieve full healing, decolonization, and healthy nation building.

This was the premise of my book *A Recognition of Being: Reconstructing Native Womanhood* (Sumach Press, 2000), the writing of which was another key factor in the development of my Indigenous feminist consciousness. In *A Recognition of Being*, I wrote about a four-part process of Indigenous female identity development that included resisting oppression, reclaiming Indigenous tradition and culture, incorporating traditional Indigenous ways into our modern lives, and acting on responsibilities inherent in our new-found identities. This process is now useful to me as I think about how Indigenous feminist thought can help build healthier nations.

As I have noted, my journey began with feelings of resistance to some of the inequities and injustices that began to preoccupy me as a young mother. I began by resisting the violence and poverty in the lives of Aboriginal women and children. I resisted the failure to address gender equity as a key component in decolonization, and I resisted the lack of Indigenous women's voices in governance. Reclaiming involved taking a look at our history and understanding how Indigenous women traditionally had authority in all

areas of society – political, social, economic, and spiritual – areas that I explored in *A Recognition of Being*. Incorporating traditional elements into our modern lives is more complicated, and it is at this stage that I find feminist thought to be critical. Feminism of all stripes can help us to tease out patriarchy from what is purportedly traditional and to avoid essentialist identities and systems that are not to our advantage as women. Studying feminist theory and history has been helpful to me, for I can draw parallels between some of what we call traditional and that which has been undoubtedly patriarchal in other contexts worldwide.

Lately, I have been able to call on feminist work to help me think through my ongoing interest in motherhood and nation building and how these two institutions work together.⁴ Motherhood, both in practice and as an ideology, was the source of Indigenous female authority in the family and in the governance of our pre-colonial nations. Contemporary Indigenous peoples now call on these teachings as part of the political discourse related to healing and rebuilding.⁵ As mothers of the nations, Indigenous women are supposed to be revered for birthing the upcoming generations and for being their first teachers. Women are also said to be carriers of the culture – a responsibility that we have by virtue of our connection to the very young. We are championed as the strength of the nation, a principle that is supported in often-quoted sayings such as “a nation is not lost until the hearts of its women are on the ground.”⁶ These ideologies of Indigenous womanhood are called upon by advocates for women’s presence in contemporary political processes. The Native Women’s Association of Canada, for example, has identified motherhood as a way of seeking authority in national Aboriginal politics.⁷

Calling on traditional ideologies of motherhood is challenging because the relationship between respect for Indigenous motherhood and women’s roles in the present day is not straightforward. By virtue of their position as mothers of the nations, Indigenous women in many pre-contact cultures had the authority to call up or halt a war, allocate the wealth of the community, and determine membership through decisions such as those related to inter-nation adoption. With this in mind, we have to ask what kind of decision-making power our contemporary mothers of the nation truly carry. We have to ask whether Indigenous male leaders are not only open to listening to but also to taking direction from their mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and their affiliate organizations. In cases where there are no systems for women to exercise their authority, how is the motherhood discourse being

used? If women are seen as mothers of the nations but are devoid of political authority, what *are* our roles and responsibilities?

One area worthy of examination is our literal role in birthing the nations. Because we are survivors of smallpox, massacres, eugenics, enforced sterilization, residential schools, and child welfare intervention, it is not surprising that there has been some pro-natalist (i.e., encouraging women to bear children) sentiment in our communities.⁸ The American Indian Movement, an early manifestation of the drive for Indigenous self-determination, certainly had members who espoused this concept.⁹ With higher than average birth rates, Native women of today are, indeed, taking up their responsibilities in child-bearing. Yet child-bearing can easily slide into an overwhelming responsibility for women, for there are plenty of women who end up without support from either the fathers of their children or the nations that supposedly value them. What, we may ask, are the fathers of the nation doing for children who no longer have the type of support from extended family that we knew in traditional societies?

Feminist literature exposes how pro-natalist movements and ideologies related to the mothers of the nation have been common in countries worldwide during war or postwar periods and within liberation movements.¹⁰ Feminist history has shown just how disempowering these movements have been for the women involved, because they typically confine women to motherhood roles within the patriarchal family. Sadly, dominance and control of women have been the classic response to nations struggling with liberation movements, war, or postwar recovery. Immersed as we are as Indigenous peoples in our own battle and recovery movements, we have to ask ourselves how our states of national crises have influenced the image of our women and the expectations we place upon them. It is also worthwhile to consider how well we can be served by maternal feminism, for maternal feminism practised in a patriarchal environment can be limited in its success.¹¹

These notions related to motherhood spill over onto Indigenous female identities in general. The less frequently stated, but often implied, corollary to the traditional motherhood discourse is that women are responsible for upholding tradition and cultural continuity through their identities, practices, and actions. The roles and responsibilities of Native women are purportedly grounded in Indigenous traditions. Women in other countries have been similarly employed as the keepers of tradition, a role that casts them as inherently static and relegates them to the backburners of political development. Men, by contrast, are charged with the forward movement of

the nation.¹² As we fervently recover our spiritual traditions, we must also bear in mind that regulating the role of women is one of the hallmarks of fundamentalism. This regulation is accomplished through prescriptive teachings related to how women should behave, how they should dress and, of course, how well they symbolize and uphold the moral order.

When I think about how our women are cast as the strength and foundation of the nation, I have to ask how well this is serving us. My Indigenous feminist red flag goes up because we hear so comparatively little about the roles and responsibilities of Native men, particularly in relation to their families. My worry is that what we celebrate as our responsibility is really a question of overwork for Native women. Without a doubt, Native women have demonstrated tremendous strength in sustaining themselves and their children throughout centuries of oppression. This should not, however, be used as an excuse to put off taking care of them or their needs.¹³

This circumstance brings us back to the criticism of feminism in general and the question of how we can carve out an Indigenous feminism that is more suited to us. If Western feminism is unpalatable because it is about rights rather than responsibilities, then we should take responsibility seriously and ask if we are being responsible to *all* members of our societies. If we are to reject equality in favour of difference, then we need to make sure those differences are embedded in systems that empower all members. If we see feminism as being too invested in Western liberalism and individual autonomy, then we need to ensure that our collectivist approaches serve everyone in the collective. And if we want to embrace essential elements of womanhood that have been problematic for Western feminists (such as motherhood and the maternal body), then we have to ensure that these concepts don't get stuck in literal or patriarchal interpretations. We need to give the essentials of Indigenous womanhood the full metaphorical power they once had and figure out ways to act on them now.

As is evident, I have more questions than answers about how we can incorporate our traditional feminist ways into the modern world. But we don't have to have all the answers before we begin to act, for the wheel is constantly turning, and we continue to resist, reclaim, and construct as we move through our life journey. *Acting* in my case has meant working with other women and men in community organizations and in publishing to advance Native women's health and well-being, which I always link to the advancement of our people as a whole. This being said, I most often work with women's groups because I am interested in how women organize and work when left to themselves. I don't see this as being exclusive or as part of

the negative man-hating rhetoric that still seems to hang around popular and ill-founded notions of Western feminism. To our own people, I would say that women's organizing is an Indigenous thing: our pre-colonial societies were sustained by women's work, women's councils, women's ceremonies, and women's languages. In practice today, it means creating the space for women to get together and to do work that will ultimately benefit all our relations.

In publishing, I have enjoyed collaborating with other women and men to work through questions of resistance, reclamation, construction, and action. In 2003, Bonita Lawrence and I published a collection of essays, *Strong Women Stories: Native Vision and Community Survival* (Sumach Press, 2003), with the intention of raising some of the prickly questions that are rarely publicly discussed in Indigenous communities. We gathered together some of our favourite thinking women to contribute to that anthology, women who were strong enough to point out the patriarchal underpinnings in what is often said to be traditional, women who could examine topics such as homophobia or the unrecognized contributions of women's leadership in our communities, women who were bold enough to withstand the negative repercussions of asking for change. Other contributions related to incorporating an Indigenous feminist vision into society. The last chapter was an essay we solicited from a young Anishinaabe man, Carl Fernandez. We deliberately sought out the voice of a young man to conclude this Indigenous feminist volume because we wanted to envision a future world in which men and women, young and old, would come together to work in balance and harmony among themselves and with all of creation. As Fernandez so eloquently stated in the final sentence of *Strong Women Stories*, "Our path must come to create a spiral, one that turns back to the past while at the same time progressing forward in order to survive in a different world."¹⁴

For me, Indigenous feminism is about creating a new world out of the best of the old. Indigenous feminism is about honouring creation in all its forms, while also fostering the kind of critical thinking that will allow us to stay true to our traditional reverence for life. If we want to avoid some of the ideological pitfalls encountered by other women and children worldwide, we would do well to become acquainted with feminist theory. Feminist theory can help us to be vigilant in protecting our own teachings, lest they reappear as patriarchy with an Indigenous face. We especially need to learn about the feminist elements of our various Indigenous traditions and begin to celebrate and practise them. As we spiral forward, we can only gain from considering some of these teachings of Indigenous feminist thought.

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NOTES

- 1 Indigenous feminists worldwide have run into the same arguments. See contributions to Joyce Green, ed., *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism* (Black Point, NS: Fernwood, 2007). These arguments have also been used to denounce black feminism. See bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981); and Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (London: Routledge, 1991).
- 2 The term *equality* is problematic to many Indigenous women who assume that it means women should be the same as men. The argument is that we should not be seeking equality, because we have our own unique identities, roles, and responsibilities. I don't take *equality* to mean "like in nature" but rather "like in status." More often, I use the term *equity*, which Merriam Webster's online dictionary defines as "justice according to natural law or right; freedom from bias or favouritism."
- 3 In her article on feminism and Indigenous Hawaiian nationalism, Haunani-Kay Trask has articulated sentiments that I have heard in Canada. Trask states, "Sovereignty for our people is a larger goal than legal or educational or political equality with our men. As we struggle for sovereignty, our women come to the fore anyway." See Trask, "Feminism and Indigenous Hawaiian Nationalism," *Signs* 21, 4 (1996): 14. These arguments have been made in Indigenous communities worldwide, as is evident from the essays in Green, *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism*.
- 4 See Patricia Albanese, "Territorializing Motherhood: Motherhood and Reproductive Rights in Nationalist Sentiment and Practice," in Andrea O'Reilly, ed., *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings* (Toronto: Demeter Press, 2007); Patricia Albanese, *Mothers of the Nation: Women, Families, and Nationalism in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006); Ann Taylor Allen, *Feminism and Motherhood in Western Europe, 1890-1970* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Ann Taylor Allen, *Feminism and Motherhood in Germany, 1800-1914* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991); Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Miranda Pollard, *Reign of Virtue: Mobilizing Gender in Vichy France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Raffael Sheck, *Mothers of the Nation: Right-Wing Women in Weimar Germany* (Oxford: Berg, 2004); and Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* (London: Sage, 1997).
- 5 I have written more about this in Kim Anderson, "Giving Life to the People: An Indigenous Ideology of Motherhood," in O'Reilly, *Maternal Theory*.
- 6 These popular sentiments are voiced in a recent collection of scholarly essays edited by D. Memee Lavell-Harvard and Jeannette Corbiere Lavell, *Until Our Hearts Are on the Ground: Aboriginal Mothering, Oppression, Resistance and Rebirth* (Toronto: Demeter Press, 2006).

- 7 Jo-Anne Fiske has written about the use of a motherhood discourse in Indigenous politics and argues that it has been more effective at the local level. See Fiske, "Carrier Women and the Politics of Mothering," in Gillian Creese and Veronica Strong-Boag, eds., *British Columbia Reconsidered: Essays on Women* (Vancouver: Press Gang, 1992), 198-216; "Child of the State, Mother of the Nation: Aboriginal Women and the Ideology of Motherhood," *Culture* 13, 1 (1993): 17-35; and "The Womb Is to the Nation as the Heart Is to the Body: Ethnopolitical Discourses of the Canadian Indigenous Women's Movement," *Studies in Political Economy* 51 (Autumn 1996): 65-95.
- 8 Lisa Udel reports that, in light of our history, having Indigenous children can be interpreted as an act of resistance. She states, "Given the history of the IHS campaign to curtail Native women's reproductive capacity and thus Native populations, Native women emphasize women's ability, sometimes 'privilege,' to bear children. Within this paradigm, they argue, Native women's procreative capability becomes a powerful tool to combat Western genocide. Motherhood recovered, along with the tribal responsibility to nurture their children in a traditional manner without non-Indigenous interference, assumes a powerful political meaning when viewed in this way." See Udel, "Revision and Resistance: The Politics of Native Women's Motherwork," *Frontiers* 22, 2 (2001): 50-51.
- 9 See Mary Crow Dog (Brave Bird) and Richard Erdoes, *Lakota Woman* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1990), 78.
- 10 See references in note 4. See also Wenona Giles Malathi de Alwis, Edith Klein, and Neluka Silva, eds., *Feminists under Fire: Exchanges across War Zones* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2003); Lois Ann Lorentzen, *The Women and War Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); and Rita Manchanda, *Women, War, and Peace in South Asia: Beyond Victimhood to Agency* (New Delhi: Sage, 2001).
- 11 Lisa D. Brush has reviewed international historical studies on motherhood to explore the potential for maternalist politics in the present day. See Brush, "Love, Toil and Trouble: Motherhood and Feminist Politics," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 21, 2 (1996): 429-54.
- 12 See McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 359, and Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*, 6.
- 13 Nahanni Fontaine has written an interesting essay that demonstrates how contemporary Indigenous youth gang culture rolls patriarchy and popular notions of Indigenous women's strength into a justification for violence. Women in gangs are cast as either matrons or whores (i.e., as old ladies or as bitches and "hos"). Old ladies are expected to stay home and refrain from doing drugs and to endure beatings from their partners. In the words of one old lady, "We couldn't stop it because we had to take it like a woman." See Fontaine, "Surviving Colonization: Anishinaabe Ikwe Gang Participation," in Gillian Balfour and Elizabeth Comack, eds., *Criminalizing Women: Gender and (In)Justice in Neo-Liberal Times* (Halifax: Fernwood, 2006).
- 14 Carl Fernandez, "Coming Full Circle: A Young Man's Perspective on Building Gender Equity in Aboriginal Communities," in Kim Anderson and Bonita Lawrence, eds., *Strong Women Stories: Native Vision and Community Survival* (Toronto: Sumach Press, 2003).