FIRST NATIONS WOMEN IN THE FUR TRADE: FROM ESSENTIAL TO REDUNDANT

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Prior to colonization, women were a present and powerful force in the Indigenous society. Legal scholar Robert Williams states that traditionally women controlled the political realm in a number of North American Indian tribes by selecting the male chiefs and other political leaders.[1] They also held the power to initiate or call off war. In addition, women owned substantial property interests, including the marital home, and exercised exclusive dominion over the means of production and the products of major subsistence activities, such as farming.[2] Thus, Indigenous women controlled the economic, political and social aspects of their pre-colonial society. Further, the Iroquois Confederacy operated on a matriarchal system prior to the arrival of the Europeans.[3] This system was based on the concepts of equality between the genders. Iroquois women played a profound role in the political and economic life of the community. They also traditionally played important roles in their communities as nurturers, educators, and providers.[4]

First Nations women were essential to the creation of Canada. Their social networks, efforts, know-

1 R. Williams, "Gendered checks and balances: Understanding the legacy of White patriarchy in an American Indian cultural context," Georgia Law Review 24 (1990): 1019-1044.

2 Williams, 1990.

3 Mann, Barbara Alice. (2000). *Iroquian Woman: the Ganowisas*. New York: Peter Lang.

4 Mann, 2000.

ledge and companionship meant survival for the early European fur traders and the fur trade industry on which this country was founded. In fact, intermarriage between fur traders and Indigenous women was encouraged to promote growth of the industry.[5] Although prized "country wives"[6] in early Canada, their contribution was soon overlooked and they found themselves alienated by the very people they helped. Their fur trader "husbands" were marrying European women and they were being tossed aside or "turned off."[7] As Jennifer Brown wrote of such an example, when a high-ranking fur trader (re)married, "a white lady from (the) civilized world," such traders, "interposed new social barriers between themselves and the natives of the country."[8] Indigenous women were subjugated and vilified for the very traits that had previously made them so valuable.

In the early days of European contact, the newcomers relied heavily upon the First Nations community. European traders were forced to adopt a native lifestyle to survive.[9] First Nations women were not only invaluable to the success of the early European fur traders, but the Canadian fur trade as a whole. Their involvement made it possible for the fur trade to prosper and set the foundation for the creation of Canada as a country. Historian Sylvia Van Kirk found that, "throughout the 18th century, officers of the day argued with the London Committee that it was essential to keep Indian women in the posts, as they performed important tasks (which) the British had not yet mastered."[10]

As country wives, their practical skills such as language and translation talents were vital to the trade activities between the Indigenous people who had the furs and the European traders who wanted them. Traditional skills such as preparing country food, cooking and making camp helped meet the immediate needs of food and shelter. Other necessities such as suitable clothing, moccasins, snowshoes and canoes were also required for travel outside the camp. As early explorer Samuel Hearne once commented, "the man cannot even venture outside the fort to collect firewood or hunt small game in winter without snowshoes. To be without women to make them is to invite disaster."[11] The tasks Indigenous women performed were second nature to them, but unfamiliar — and yet essential — to the traders.

Perhaps the most utilitarian role of First Nation "country wives" was that of cultural liaison. Their community connections and economic linkages helped their fur trade spouses solidify their com-

5 Van Kirk, Sylvia. 1980. *Many Tender Ties: Women in the Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870*. Winnipeg: Watson & Dwyer.

6 Country wives were First Nations who married fur traders.

7 Being 'turned off" meant that their marriage to a fur trader was not seen as a permanent bond. Van Kirk, 50

8 Brown, Jennifer S. H. 1980. *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country*. University of British Columbia: Vancouver. P. 133

9 Van Kirk, 1980.

10 Van Kirk. 1980. P. 54

11 Van Kirk. 1980. P. 55.

mercial partnerships with her family and her extended social and political network. These practical skills made them the highly-prized wife of any ambitious trader. In addition, their affection, companionship, and childbearing abilities produced a family environment that made for a more comfortable lifestyle as traders lived so far away from their country of origin.

As European women entered fur trade society they were soon viewed as more civilized, respectable and cultured. They quickly supplanted First Nations women as the "preferred" spouse of the respectable or aspiring trader. Thus, the once-irreplaceable First Nations wife was rejected, reviled, deemed "less than" and summarily eliminated from "respectable" society.[12] European traders seemed to prefer the "glorified frailty" and dependence of settler women over the strength, endurance and independence of their former Indigenous conjugal partner. Robert Connell would argue that men benefit when women are dependent upon them because men then have more control over women's actions and they are more easily dominated.[13]

Although highly-coveted wives of fur traders, settler women had few rights and their value remained strictly in the private sphere. Their duties dealt primarily with the care for home and family. They prided themselves on their ability to aid the success of others — supporting their husband's ambitions, having a well-maintained home with clean and well-behaved children. A modern interpretation of this domestic gaze is explained by Susan Faludi's (1991) assertion that women must sacrifice themselves for others for a society to work, and that the advancement of women is bad for the family and the children.[14]

Settler women were expected to remain virtuous at all times. This expectation widened the social gulf and thus further alienated First Nation women, as clergy and "society" people spread rumours about First Nations women being promiscuous, "easily available," bad mothers and poor housekeepers — basically, lacking all the qualities of "decent" settler women".[15] They believed that the domestically inept Indigenous women must be helped to raise themselves up to the moral, hygienic and domestic standards of the more refined settler society. This damning indictment of First Nations women's domestic ability and degenerate morals would dog them for centuries, and, in my opinion, contributes to the subordination that First Nations women suffer to this day.

Many factors led to the subordination of Indigenous women. These factors include the hegemonic view of European supremacy, patriarchy, the manipulation of the historical record, efforts to eliminate

12 Harper, Anita Olson. (2009). "Sisters in Spirit." In *Restoring the Balance: First Nations Women, Community, and Culture*. Gail Guthrie Valaskakis, Madeleine Dion Stout, and Eric Guimond (eds). Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press. 175-199. P. 177

13 Connell, R. W. (2002). *Gender, Short Introductions*. Oxford: Polity Press.

14 Faludi, Susan. (1991). *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*. New York: Anchor Books.

15 Harper, Anita Olson. (2009). 'Sisters in Spirit." In *Restoring the Balance: First Nations Women, Community, and Culture*. Gail Guthrie Valaskakis, Madeleine Dion Stout, and Eric Guimond (eds). Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press. 175-199. P. 177

Indigenous people, and the creation of discriminatory legislation.

With colonization, the Europeans brought established opinions of their cultural, intellectual, and structural supremacy over the Indigenous people they encountered in the new land. European ideology rested on the assumption that their civilization was superior to all others and carried with it the self-imposed burden of "civilizing the barbarians." The European view of the world was simple: Indians were savages; women were socially and politically invisible; and individualism and patriarchy must prevail. These attitudes formed the foundation of the Eurocentric view that the newcomers must *fix* whatever they viewed as *unacceptable* in the social, economic and political conditions of the New World. This preference included the subordination and exclusion of women in public matters.

In Western society, the written word had long been considered the "true medium" of historical accuracy, while oral history was viewed as primitive, biased, and unreliable. As a result, creating the historical record was left to the discretion of the literate and those with the ability and opportunity to put pen to paper — whatever their agenda, philosophy, or predisposition.

European explorers, fur traders and missionaries wrote early accounts of women's status in the First Nations community. These accounts tell us as much about the ideological perspectives of the authors as they do about the subject at hand. The authors were part of the patriarchal and hierarchical structure that benefitted from their domination of women. As a result, they did not acknowledge the contributions made by First Nations women to everyday life. Patricia Albers and Bea Medicine (1983) write that journalistic accounts either ignore or trivialize women's contributions, activities and experiences by dealing exclusively with Indian men and documenting only the pursuits of males.[16]

In conclusion, Indigenous women were crucial to the success of their fur trader spouses and the fur trade industry. Their traditional skills and wide social networks helped lay the foundations for a new country — Canada. Intermarriage between European traders and indigenous women was encouraged because it helped cement economic advantage through familial bonds and allowed entrée into extended social networks. However, the conjugal unions formed during the early days of the fur trade were only temporary. After their usefulness waned, they were subjugated, vilified and alienated. They eventually became unimportant in the eyes of the traders and colonizers as a result of their race — as Indians — and their gender — as women. Their contributions to Canada were thus overlooked in the historical record.

16 Albers, Patricia, and Beatrice Medicine, eds. (1983). *The Hidden Half: Studies of Plains Indian Women*. New York, University Press of America.