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Female First Nations Chiefs and the Colonial Legacy in Canada

Cora J. Voyageur

As the British Empire expanded into North America, the imperialist power was quick to deal with the people of the *terra nullius* in a manner befitting its preconceived notions of racial, social, and cultural superiority.¹ This Eurocentric ideology justified the harsh treatment meted out to the indigenous peoples, including outlawing many of their traditions and beliefs, reorganizing their societies, and subjecting them to extensive regulation. Furthermore, this racist philosophy justified the taking of Indian lands and resources for the colonizer's sole benefit.

The social, economic, and political regulation of Canada's First Nations was codified in the Indian Act.² Rooted in colonialism and paternalism, the Indian Act was created by the government of Canada to fulfill three functions: to define who was and was not an Indian, to civilize the Indian, and to manage the Indian people and their lands.³ To facilitate the first function, the government incorporated section 1(3) into the 1869 Indian Act and, thus, authorized government representatives to determine whether a person was entitled to Indian status.⁴ The second purpose was more for the government's benefit than it was for the Indians'. When Canada was formed in 1867, the new federal government assumed responsibility from Britain for Indians and the lands reserved for Indians.⁵ The Canadian government reasoned that a civilized Indian would place no financial burden upon it.⁶ With an eye to reducing the costs of supporting the Indians, the government devised various ways of

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reducing the Indian population.⁷ Provisions aimed at stripping the Indian of status are found throughout the Indian Act and include the double mother rule, exclusion of illegitimate children, loss of status from living in a foreign country, and the marriage of an Indian woman to non-Indian man.⁸ The government made every effort to get the Indians to give up their status voluntarily, and those who remained Indians were ruled with an iron fist.⁹ The final purpose of the Indian Act made the Crown solely responsible for managing Indian people and their lands. The government viewed its responsibility to oversee Indian lands favorably because it benefitted greatly from the taxes and royalties derived from the resource-rich reserve lands.¹⁰

The Indian Act is restrictive and continues to govern virtually every aspect of Indian life including band membership, leisure activities, and land use and band leadership. For example, the Department of Indian Affairs, through the Indian Act, changed the governance structure of First Nations communities from the traditional, hereditary chieftainship governance system to a municipal-style elected chief and council system.¹¹ The elected governance system has specific rules to regulate how a reserve election will be conducted, the length of term for the elected leaders, who can vote, and who can run for elected office.¹² Once elected, the First Nation leaders are expected to govern in accordance with the colonial regulations of the Indian Act.¹³

Over time, some of the more restrictive policies governing Indians were dropped and more freedoms were granted. As a result, First Nations people began to enjoy some of the privileges set aside for mainstream Canadians. In addition, First Nations women began to enjoy some of the government-sponsored privileges that were previously reserved for First Nations men. Some of these privileges included the ability to participate openly in band politics, run for elected office, and vote in reserve elections. One year after a 1951 Indian Act amendment allowed women to be officially involved in band politics, Elsie Marie Knott of Curve Lake, Ontario, broke the gender barrier by becoming Canada's first female chief elected as a result of the Indian Act.¹⁴ Other elections of women chiefs or councilors on Indian reserves across Canada quickly followed.¹⁵ By 1960, there were twenty-one Indian women elected to band councils.¹⁶

There has been a rapid increase in the number of women elected to the role of chief in Canada's First Nations community throughout the past fifteen years, and this article explores some of the explanations for this recent phenomenon. Using the lens of postcolonial theory, I explore women chiefs' experiences with the lingering effects of colonialism, colonial notions of womanhood, and how indigenous women have been able to oppose those beliefs.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Postcolonial theory involves the discussion of immigration, slavery, suppression, resistance, representation, difference, race, gender, place, and responses to the influential master discourse of imperial Europe and the experience of writing these into being.¹⁷ It seeks to explain the residual effect of colonialism on a specific culture; however, it cannot be fully understood without an explanation of imperialism and colonialism. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin define *imperialism* as “a conscious and openly advocated policy of acquiring colonies for economic, strategic and political advantage.”¹⁸ According to Edward Said, imperialism is “the practice, theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory.”¹⁹ Ashcroft and colleagues view colonialism as European expansion into the peripheral regions of the world that then serve as sources of raw materials and labor for the colonial powers.²⁰ Said believes that colonization responds to the mythology of European racial superiority on which the exploitive system is built. He follows this concept closely with what he calls the “practice” of colonialism whose tenets include the European hegemonic view of the New World, the subjugation of indigenous people, patriarchy, the absence of women in the public realm, ethnographic practices that misinterpreted or ignored women’s issues, and encouraging the indigenous men to adopt European values and governing systems.²¹

Feminist Postcolonial Theory

Feminist postcolonial theory provides a gendered analysis as a variation of postcolonial theory. Gayatri Spivak, in her concept of the subaltern (those individuals who are marginalized and controlled by the colonizers), states that women suffer the long-term social, political, economic, and cultural economic effects of colonization more than men.²² Thus colonized women faced twice the discrimination of colonized men.

Feminist postcolonial theory goes beyond merely addressing gender issues by including class and race into its analysis.²³ Spivak is also concerned with the material effects of colonialism. She says that the marginalized group must adopt Eurocentric ways to be heard by the colonizer.²⁴ Postcolonial theory is a fitting theory to deal with much of the experiences of First Nations people because it addresses the resistance against many aspects of the colonial regime. If colonial theory explores how indigenous people are subjugated by policies and legislation, then postcolonial theory explores how First Nations people are able to make use of and overcome many of the colonizer’s rules in order to take more control of their lives and their communities.

PROTOCOL, DATA, AND METHODS

Research participants were recruited from the list of chiefs provided to me by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC).²⁵ I was able to find additional women chiefs by using a snowball sampling technique and through my own social network.²⁶ The data are drawn from sixty-four interviews conducted between 2001 and 2005, which represents approximately 70 percent of the female chiefs in Canada. Using a semistructured interview schedule, I asked the participants to describe some of the lingering impacts of colonialism that they have experienced as the highest-ranking elected official in their reserve communities. I also asked them how they dealt with those experiences. The information collected from the participants was qualitatively analyzed in order to draw out aggregate trends in the data.²⁷

First, I will provide a snapshot of the contemporary First Nation community in Canada and highlight some of the differences in the First Nations population. Second, I report some of the societal differences between the First Nations community and the European settler population at the time of contact. Third, this will be followed by examples of how First Nations' women leaders were able to overcome some of the colonial notions held about women in order to increase their own status and gain more control over themselves and their communities.²⁸

A SNAPSHOT OF CANADA'S FIRST NATIONS COMMUNITY

Today, when people speak of Canada's First Nations community, they are speaking about a group of people who are geographically, culturally, and linguistically diverse. The community consists of more than six hundred separate First Nations that are located in every part of the country including its remote, rural, and urban areas.²⁹ First Nations people live on more than 2,200 parcels of land called reserves. Reserves can be vast like the 136,263-hectare Blood Reserve in southern Alberta, or small, like the 290-hectare Tsawwassen Reserve near Delta, British Columbia.³⁰ Diversity in the First Nations community also comes from the size of its band membership. A band can be small like the White River First Nation in the Yukon Territory with only 137 members or large, like the Six Nations of the Grand River in Ontario with more than 22,000 members.³¹ The typical reserve is rural and has about 550 members.³² The First Nations community is also culturally diverse. For example, the Province of Alberta has forty-seven separate First Nations from the Blackfoot, Nakota, Cree, Dene, and Saulteaux nations. Linguistically, the First Nations community in Canada boasts fifty-three separate languages from eleven different language families.³³

COLONIAL NOTIONS OF WOMANHOOD

The First Nations community experienced tremendous adversity at the hands of the newcomers. They were marginalized by the new settler society that was springing up around them and were subjected to colonial ideologies. Duane Champagne states, “Since the beginning of the colonial experience, the powers and effects of political, cultural, and economic colonialism have been deepening with increasingly powerful and externally controlled impacts on indigenous cultures.”³⁴ Thus the imposition of a foreign-based law saw the dispossession of First Nations people from the lands as well as an assault on their traditional forms of leadership, self-governance, and freedom.³⁵

A significant point of departure between the settler society and the First Nations community during the early days of contact was their divergent views regarding the role and importance of women. Historian Sarah Carter states that women in settler societies were not in the position to define themselves. Settler society saw women’s roles entirely in the private sphere, in which they were expected to concern themselves solely with home and children. Meanwhile, settler men occupied themselves with pursuits in the public sphere.³⁶ Settler women had few individual rights and were ruled by the men in their lives—their husbands or fathers—who treated them as property. Although First Nations women were heavily involved with childrearing and household duties, they also played an important and visible role in their community’s social, economic, and public affairs. For example, the matriarchal social system of the Iroquois Confederacy gave women an integral role in the social, economic, and political life of the community. A community’s wealth was assessed not only by its land but also by its food surplus, and women controlled this.³⁷ Furthermore, women in North American tribes held high-status positions within the community and had the political power and community-sanctioned authority to select and depose male leaders. The importance of women in Native American communities is reiterated by historian Devon Mihesuah, who described them as relevant in all aspects of community life.³⁸ Colonial notions forced the First Nations woman from her high status and elevated public position to that of a mere wife and mother who was largely confined to the home. The First Nations woman was silent and absent in the public sphere. First Nations women had become the subaltern—those marginalized and controlled as a result of colonization. They were doubly insignificant in the eyes of the colonizer: first as Indians and second as women.

Contemporary First Nations women have suffered the lingering effects of colonialism in the social, economic, cultural, and political aspects of their lives. For example, the colonizers deemed them socially inferior and stereotyped them in the polarized role of either a princess or a whore.³⁹ Both forms of

stereotypes are damaging to First Nations women. As the princess, they are romanticized and not taken seriously. As the whore, individuals who feel they can assault, rape, or murder them with impunity endanger their lives.⁴⁰ Economically, First Nations women are disadvantaged because they hold fewer jobs than First Nations men and mainstream women. Those holding jobs earn less money than their non-First Nation counterparts.⁴¹ First Nations women are less likely to marry and enjoy whatever securities a legal marriage might provide. Culturally, they must deal with some First Nations men who adopted, and now cling to, European hegemonic notions of male dominance. Many First Nations men adhere to the patriarchal Indian Act, which gives them more privileges than it gives women.⁴² Politically, as Jo-Anne Fiske states, First Nations women are subjugated by a patriarchal system first set out by the state but also adhered to and supported by male-dominated chiefs and councils.⁴³ Even today, “many First Nations women are discouraged from seeking decision-making roles outside the home by those who still believe that a woman’s place is in the home.”⁴⁴

However, First Nations women have successfully overcome many of the restrictions set out in the rules in the Indian Act, which placed them in positions of dependence upon and obedience to men, church, and government. The women generally now define themselves as individuals and are no longer just “the daughter of” or “the wife of.” They have learned that they can defy the stereotypes that position First Nations women as subservient to men and that they can take their places in the home and in public office.

OPPOSING COLONIAL NOTIONS

One way that First Nations women are able to combat such subordination is by regaining some power and control by contesting and winning an elected office in their communities. The Assembly of First Nations documented forty-five female chiefs in the mid-1990s but that number now sits at 120—about 19 percent of all chiefs in Canada.⁴⁵ To invoke Spivak’s terminology, the subaltern is moving in from the margins and is now making decisions for themselves and their communities.⁴⁶

The once-marginalized women are beginning to move “front and center” and are regaining their rightful place in the public sphere. This newly regained authority goes against the colonial ideals that marginalized them as First Nations people. These same ideals meant that they were expected to be silent, remain in the home with concerns only for family and spouse, defer all decision making to men, and refrain from getting involved in public issues. Women

chiefs' newly found agency is bolstered by a number of factors including educational attainment, administrative experience, and political involvement.⁴⁷

Education

Education is a prime determinant of social standing and well-being in society. This is particularly important in the First Nations community because education is a way to elevate itself from its low socioeconomic standing in Canada. In addition, education is a means for First Nations women to earn job security and a higher income.⁴⁸ Fiske writes, "Women's influence appears to derive from their education which leads them to paraprofessional, administrative and social, health, and educational services."⁴⁹ The women chiefs in this study were firm believers in the value of education, with approximately 60 percent of the study participants having attained a postsecondary education. They said that education helped them fulfill their duties as chief. "I learned things in university that help in my job as chief," commented one participant.⁵⁰ Another said, "The substantive information in the various courses I have taken was useful for me in my role but some of the intangible skills—multitasking and thinking critically—were just as valuable to me."⁵¹

These educated women either remained in the community or returned to the community after they obtained their formal training. Obtaining a postsecondary education is a relatively new phenomenon because, until recently, reserve school offered only a grade-eight education—a level that was not high enough to gain a person entry to a postsecondary institution. However, education levels have increased rapidly throughout the past few decades with approximately twenty-five thousand First Nations students now in postsecondary institutions.⁵² Today, women in the First Nations community are generally more educated than the men.⁵³ One explanation for this is that a First Nations man can more easily obtain a well-paying job without an education than a First Nations woman can.⁵⁴ This means that women must earn educational credentials to help earn higher wages and to obtain jobs within the reserve bureaucracy. These women are what Bruce Miller would call "the technocrats" because they have specialized education, training, and expertise.⁵⁵ In addition, there are a large number of female-headed, single-parent households in the First Nations community.⁵⁶ This means that women have a strong drive to obtain an education in order to support their families better.

An advanced education means that the women have had exposure to the world outside the reserve.⁵⁷ They will have been exposed to new ideas and ways of doing things and, in turn, make themselves more innovative in finding solutions. In addition, they can draw on the social and political networks that they built during their postsecondary careers in order to help them solve some

of the community's concerns. They will have learned a variety of skills during their time at school that are useful when leading the community. However, there is a tension within the First Nations community because attaining a formal education can work against them. Many respondents note that formal educational credentials did not necessarily ensure success and support in the community. As one woman put it, "credentials are more for the outside world; 'non-Indians' seem to respect you more if you have an education."⁵⁸ Some felt, as many educated indigenous people do, that they must prove themselves all over again to the community. They had to win the trust of their detractors. They felt they must prove that they have not "sold out" to mainstream society and that their hearts and minds are still in the community. The First Nations women chiefs who were interviewed found the confidence to enter the political arena as a result of their formal education. Another factor for these indigenous women prevailing over barriers to become elected political leaders was their experience as community administrators and community members.

Administrative Experience

Policy changes meant to lighten the administrative load for INAC occurred through the devolution policy of the early 1980s.⁵⁹ Devolution of control over service delivery served as a means for the female administrators on the reserve community to familiarize themselves with the policies and procedures that govern their lives and their community. It gave them administrative and managerial experience. This knowledge proved to be invaluable to those seeking political office and helped them fulfill their traditional caregiving role when they took office.

The matters the women had to deal with when they were administrators (for example, education, transportation, elder care, day care, and housing) are also the issues that they must deal with as the chief. They are now more directly involved in the operations of the community and must take a wider and more holistic view. They now have the power and authority to champion initiatives needed in the community. But they are not completely free of external influences because they must still adhere to Indian Act regulation and Indian Affairs policy, especially strict funding guidelines.

In this study, 80 percent of the women chiefs were born and raised in the community they led. The long history made them keenly aware of the community's concerns and issues. The women leaders maintain their traditional role of caregiving by dealing with social aspects of community life and the lingering effects of colonization. Many of the study respondents emphasized a need to heal the community and cited many problems within their community. One woman said, "The best way to deal with problems in the community is to get

the problem out in the open.”⁶⁰ They expressed deep concern regarding the legacy of physical, psychological, spiritual, and sexual abuse left by residential schools, and believed that many former residential school students had fallen prey to alcohol and drug abuse and had carried out lateral violence. Concern also existed about exchanging one vice for another. They talked of the trend in the community in which drinking or using drugs is being replaced by gambling, in the form of video lottery machines or bingo. In any event, these activities make parents unavailable to their children and other responsibilities. The respondents said services had to be designed to promote a healthy community in which children are well cared for by their parents and other social problems are under control. They stated that, although economic development was needed in the form of jobs and other economic projects, success rested on having healthy people able to obtain and maintain those jobs.

Those who had worked previously in the community had a further advantage when entering community politics. Community members already recognized the good judgment, organizational skills, and ability of the women to complete projects that they had exhibited as community-service administrators and managers. The community could trust these women and, equally as important, they could trust themselves. One participant said, “I knew the system because I worked in band administration for many years. The new chief and councilors depended on us to teach them the ropes. I knew the government and industry people. I knew the government’s rules and how to get around them. This helped me a lot when I became the chief.”⁶¹ Another way that the women were able to overcome the colonial legacy was through political involvement.

Political Involvement

In the past, political involvement for First Nations women on the reserve was practiced under stealth. One of the earliest examples of First Nation women’s political activity was the establishment of the Native Homemakers Association. Although women were politically excluded by colonial legislation, this opportunity inadvertently presented itself and allowed them to organize. In 1937, the Department of Indian Affairs encouraged Indian women to gather regularly in order to acquire good practices for greater home efficiency. They also encouraged these women to form local chapters of the Native Homemakers Association on reserves across Canada. Little did the department know that these seemingly harmless female get-togethers served as a means for Indian women to organize dissent and strategize for change to their impoverished living conditions on the reserve. Political activity that began as part of community-sanctioned “home economics” gatherings spawned a

plethora of Aboriginal women's rights organizations. One such organization was the Ontario Native Women's Association, which was created in 1972 and had its genesis in kitchen tea parties and sewing circles.⁶² In addition to the political strategies that they learned from each other, many of the women of this study learned about politics from their male relatives.

The informal learning about local political issues that the women received was just as important as their formal education. The vast majority of the female chiefs interviewed (80 percent) came from families that were involved in reserve politics. The informal training they received from their families when they were growing up played a significant role in their political preparation. They learned a great deal about the political process simply from being present when others—relatives and close friends of the family—were involved in and spoke of politics, strategies, government policies, and band concerns.

As a result of this informal political and activist experience, many of the respondents ran for and were elected to serve as band councilors before becoming chiefs. The band councilor position was a stepping-stone that allowed them to gain experience with the political structures, processes, and policies; being in the public eye; and dealing with the public. This political experience was invaluable because they had firsthand experience with band governance. As councilors they learned the duties and expectations that were incumbent on the chief and council. The women generally held a variety of portfolios that allowed them to gain in-depth knowledge regarding specific issues such as housing, education, social services, or seniors' matters. Having a firm grasp on a few topics helped facilitate their transition into the chief's role in which they were expected to be conversant in all the portfolios. Being band administrators and band councilors helped the women become familiar with the rules, administrative systems, government officials, and industry representatives. The fact that they were elected meant that they had earned the trust and confidence of the community members.

As a result of this political involvement, these female chiefs knew the community and its politics and issues inside out. Most had been community workers, activists, or movers and shakers before they assumed the position of chief. They are what Diane-Michelle Prindeville describes as advocates who make important contributions to their community.⁶³ They possess a high degree of agency and do not shy away from unpleasant tasks or initiating change. Their desire to do something concrete about community concerns caused many of them to run for elected office, so that they would have the official authority to make changes to the reserve's social fabric. Unlike the colonial notion that women were only concerned with private matters, these women chiefs were tackling public issues and not relying on their husbands or fathers to take care of them.

DIFFERING EXPECTATIONS

One of the lingering effects of colonization is that women chiefs feel that they have differing expectations placed on them as leaders. Despite the recent increase in women being elected as chiefs, gender relations are clearly present in the First Nations community as the band members' continue to have differing expectations of male and female chiefs. The following illustrates these women chiefs' experiences.

Women chiefs believe that they are expected to behave and carry out their duties differently than male chiefs. One female chief said, "People expect you to be more compassionate and listen to them. I was the first chief to visit in their homes and to go out into the community to see and hear for myself what their issues were. Many people were very surprised by my visit."⁶⁴ They describe their style of solving the problems of individuals—listening more carefully, being more objective, and trying to see all points of view—as different than a male's method of problem solving.

The women also feel that they require more skills and effort than men in order to be elected. Charismatic men who dominate by sheer force of personality govern some bands.⁶⁵ One woman commented, "Yes, our society is male-dominated. Women have a very different perspective when it comes to our family, community, and well-being. Women take on the responsibility for feeding our children. Men appear to be more corruptible and lose sight of the issues in the community."⁶⁶ None of the women interviewed felt that they were charismatic leaders.

Therefore, gender does play a role in the experiences of the women as political leaders. The reluctance of some men to assist women involved in public affairs is a backlash against those who venture outside the colonial realms of home, church, and children. Men have been placed in positions of privilege vis-à-vis women by colonial governments in policies such as the Indian Act. Prior to European contact, tasks were completed by either women or men simply because they needed to be done. Colonialist notions enforced gender-based duties.⁶⁷ Unlike men, women are still expected to maintain their domestic roles within the household after they are elected. One chief commented that her husband acted differently toward her after her election and seemed somewhat resentful that she was spending so much time away from home.⁶⁸ Thus she was not receiving the support from her spouse that many married men receive from their wives when they are chiefs. In addition, those with children living at home found it difficult to juggle all that was expected of them. Some spoke of the embarrassment in having to hire someone to clean their house. They felt a sense of guilt, as if they were not fulfilling their role as the caretaker for their family. One said that she had just finished an all-day meeting with

government officials and then had to go to the grocery store to buy something for dinner because the refrigerator was empty. She commented, "Who else was there to do it?"⁶⁹ Balancing the demands of home, family, and the job felt overwhelming for most of them. One chief stated, "It's different when you are a man. You have a wife. She is there to cook and clean. A man comes home, he puts down his briefcase, and his wife brings him some tea. He gets to relax. Even if he is unmarried, he generally has a mother or sisters who 'take care of him.' That would be the day that my brother would come over and clean my house because I had been at meetings all week!"⁷⁰

Another aspect of colonization, according to Spivak, is that women are to be controlled. In the case of the women chiefs, attempts were made to control them with intimidation and threats of physical violence.⁷¹ One of the most startling findings in the research was that many women said they had feared for their physical safety since they took office. Some women had received threats of violence, and community members had even assaulted some. Many said they had been intimidated, both overtly and under stealth, including reports of verbal abuse and threats of physical violence. One chief stated that someone tried to run her down when she was walking down a road on her reserve, while another spoke of her home being vandalized, and yet another said a note telling her to "back off" was left on her doorstep, with a bullet on top of it.⁷² Even on council, males treat their female colleagues differently and use intimidation tactics to try to bully them into submission. One woman said, "Some of these men on council get so mad when you do not go along with them. Sometimes they bang on the table. I was pretty scared when this big hulking man was looking down at me trying to get me to change my mind. I didn't change it."⁷³ This woman stood her ground. Many of these women bring change and new ideas to the community and practice "courageous" leadership under such circumstances.

Women in the First Nations community still experience the residual effects of colonialism. The women felt that members of their community adopted colonial notions of gender-based tasks and male superiority. For example, some experienced discrimination in the workplace. One woman stated, "When I took office, employees said they would not work for a woman." Further, some community members stated that men rather than women should be elected to leadership positions. This reinforces the colonial notion that men are the "natural" leaders in a community and that women leaders deviate from that norm. In addition, the colonial notion of women being submissive to men was illustrated in instances of women leaders being bullied by male councilors.⁷⁴ Although often more educated than their male counterparts, women are still not elected to the same degree as men. Many of the women felt that men could be charismatic leaders while they, as women, could not. They felt they

brought a larger skill set (that is, formal education, community knowledge, agency work, and communication skills) to their position of chief than their male counterparts. Women have transferred the skills they learned being the head of a household, such as budgeting, organizing, prioritizing, and resolving disputes, to the political sphere. The women are still responsible for their family's well-being but have also taken on the responsibility for the welfare of the community. It is as if they have opened their arms to embrace the community. However, those who cling to the colonial notion that women do not belong in public affairs do not always embrace the women as leaders.

CONCLUSION

The subordination of First Nations women began shortly after contact with European colonizers. In accordance with Eurocentric cultural norms of the time, women were expected to remain invisible in public life. First Nation males adopt these ideas because they controlled the power. However, as described in the preceding text, their political education, community service, and community activism brought them into public life. Women are becoming more visible, as a result of paid employment outside the home and higher rates of postsecondary attendance, and are becoming less reliant on men. They are also more visible in mainstream society due to the widespread migration from reserves to urban areas began during the 1960s and population growth that saw the number of First Nations people triple in thirty years.⁷⁵ Many First Nations women today are successful leaders in business, academics, medicine, law, arts, music, and provincial and federal politics.⁷⁶ In addition, with the civil-rights movement and in conjunction with the indigenous rights movement, they have become overt in their political activity.

Feminist postcolonial theory posits that women suffer the lingering effects of colonization. The colonizers sought to change the First Nations' social structure through the subordination of women. Government policies and church doctrine saw women reduced to mere chattels of their husbands and fathers. Women were removed from their former public positions of status and power to the private realm of home and children. As such, women were forced into dependence upon men.⁷⁷ Certainly, First Nations women have suffered from a sort of double jeopardy. Soon after European contact, First Nations women were forced from the prominent and public roles they had once held in their communities into the private sphere of the home. They were placed in a lower social position than settler women, who had little social, political, or economic power. Over time, First Nations women began to organize and

resist. They used state-authorized networks, such as the Native Homemakers Association, to work around restrictive policies and become politically active.

Today, times are rapidly changing in the First Nations community with women returning to positions of power in the community after a long hiatus. Many First Nations communities have begun to reinstate the traditional governance practices by electing women in contrast to the colonial model of male-dominated governance. Women are moving in from the margins and low-level administrative positions into the highest-ranking elected position in the reserve community.

The rapid increase in the number of women leading First Nation communities signals an emerging trend. Women are making decisions for the betterment of the community and are distributing the community's assets as they did in the past. First Nations women have many of the skills needed to "get ahead" and become leaders in First Nations society, including obtaining a postsecondary education, community and administrative experience, and political involvement. These women are making their way into the forefront of First Nations politics and are intent on building healthy communities. They are not as easily controlled as they were under the colonial regime. They are speaking for themselves and for their communities. They are advocates.

Community members have indicated that they want more focus on the softer issues of community healing and social programming and believe that women leaders will fulfill this task better than men. The ethos of the First Nations community lies in the sense of community and security in its relationships. These reflect traditional principles of being and doing that the impositions of the Indian Act sought to destroy. Women are once again expected to uphold standards of moral order and responsibility to the community. By virtue of their past work experience, they seem now to be natural choices for the job of community leader. They are the right leaders for the right time. They understand the political and social world of the First Nations community and are aware that changes are needed in the community in order to improve the lives of everyone. They are also aware of the benefits of political mobilization through their work in social service agencies. They are leaders who have made things happen in their communities and often have some formal administrative and management skills that assist them in their governance positions as chiefs. They have the knowledge and skills necessary to plan, determine goals, implement strategies, measure results, and respond to the community and government through reporting and open communications in a responsible manner.

The irony is that women are reestablishing themselves as leaders in the First Nations community by using the same repressive rules that ushered them out of power. The women became elected community leaders because of

the Indian Act amendments that allowed women to run for election in 1951. They emerged from their government-enforced, domestic role ready to share in building and shaping their communities. They have used the colonizer's education system to gain a more powerful position for their communities' rights and for the rights of First Nations women. The route these women have chosen for themselves is not an easy one, but they felt compelled to make a difference in their community. Their sense of efficacy and confidence in their own abilities as leaders allows them to act confidently on behalf of the community. The chief's position gives them the power and official authority to be a change agent. They also generally carry the attitude that "nobody is going to do it for you." They put their ideas into action and achieve results.

These women were able to overcome many aspects of the oppressive colonial legacy by gaining power and authority for themselves as women and as First Nations people. The women are well aware of the community's strengths and weaknesses and are working to overcome the colonial legacy that oppressed them as a nation and as women.

NOTES

1. *Terra nullius* means "open land." It was a notion that the land in North America was empty and could therefore be freely claimed by the European settlers. Thus the indigenous peoples occupying these lands were viewed as incapable of owning the lands because they were non-Christian and, therefore, uncivilized.

2. First Nations people (also called Indians) are the original people of Canada. They are one of three indigenous groups (the other two being the Inuit and the Métis) whose rights are recognized and affirmed in the Constitution Act of 1982. First Nations people are governed by the Indian Act and, thus, have a legal relationship with the federal government of Canada. They are listed on the Indian Register, which is the official record that identifies all status Indians in Canada. Indians are affiliated with more than 600 Indian bands and reside on more than 2,200 reserves across Canada.

Policies for dealing with Indians have existed since the mid-1600s. The first statute called the Indian Act was established in 1868 with amendments in 1869 and 1873. However, all the policies relating to Indians were formalized and amalgamated into one statute in 1876.

3. Colonialism is a form of exploitation that developed through European expansion into peripheral regions of the world throughout the last four centuries. European post-Renaissance colonial expansion developed concurrently with the mercantile system of economic exchange. This meant that the colonies served the primary purpose of providing raw materials, and that labor for the burgeoning economies of the colonial powers was greatly strengthened and institutionalized. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *Post Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2004), 45.

Paternalism is the attitude or policy of a government or other authority that manages the affairs of a country, company, community, individual, etc., in the manner of a father, especially in usurping individual responsibility and the liberty of choice in order to further its own goals. Thus Indians were treated as wards of the state. Allison Prentice, Paula Bourne, Gail Cuthbert Brandt, and Beth Light, *Canadian Women: A History* (Toronto: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988); Sharon Helen

Venne, *Indian Acts and Amendments, 1868–1975: An Indexed Collection* (Saskatoon: University of Saskatchewan, 1981), 166.

4. If a person qualifies for Indian status, the government grants band membership and gives the individual a status number. A ten-digit number that includes the person's band number, family number, and individual number identifies each Indian person in Canada. This number is kept on file at a central registry at the Department of Indian Affairs' headquarters in Ottawa.

5. "91. It shall be lawful for the Queen, by and with the Advice and Consent of the Senate and House of Commons, to make Laws for the Peace, Order, and good Government of Canada, in relation to all Matters not coming within the Classes of Subjects by this Act assigned exclusively to the Legislatures of the Provinces; and for greater Certainty, but not so as to restrict the Generality of the foregoing Terms of this Section, it is hereby declared that (notwithstanding anything in this Act) the exclusive Legislative Authority of the Parliament of Canada extends to all Matters coming within the Classes of Subjects next hereinafter enumerated; that is to say, . . . 24. Indians and Lands reserved for the Indians." Government of Canada, *British North America Act, 1867*, Ottawa.

6. An Indian was deemed civilized if he or she joined the clergy, received a university degree, or joined the military.

7. Government of Canada, Department of the Interior, "An Act for the Gradual Enfranchisement of Indians, the Better Management of Indian Affairs and to Extend the Provisions of the Act 31st Victoria Chapter 42," *Statutes of Canada* 6 (Ottawa, ON: Queen's, 1869).

8. The double mother clause was added to the 1951 Indian Act in ch. 29, sec. 12 (10) (A) (IV). It states that, in order to qualify for Indian status, a person must have both an Indian mother and an Indian paternal grandmother. Thus if children were born without an Indian mother and grandmother, they lost their status as an Indian and hence lost membership in their band. Children born out of wedlock, anyone who lived in a foreign country for more than five years, and an Indian woman who married a non-Indian man all lost their Indian status as well. Venne, *Indian Acts and Amendments*, 319.

The exclusion of illegitimate children was added to the 1880 Indian Act in ch. 28, sec. 10. It states that "any illegitimate child, unless having shared with the consent of the band whereof the father or mother of such child is a member of the distribution moneys [*sic*] of such band for a period exceeding two years, may, at any time, be excluded from the membership thereof by the Superintendent General." Venne, *Indian Acts and Amendments*, 58.

The loss of Indian status as a result of living in a foreign country was added to the 1880 Indian Act in ch. 28, sec. 11. It states that any Indian who has lived outside Canada for five years without the written consent of the superintendent general or his agent will lose his or her Indian status. Venne, *Indian Acts and Amendments*, 58.

Perhaps one of the most controversial ways of losing Indian status was contained in ch. 28, sec. 12 of the 1880 Indian Act. It states that an Indian woman will lose her status if she marries a non-Indian. However, an Indian man can marry a non-Indian woman, and she will gain Indian status. Venne, *Indian Acts and Amendments*, 58.

9. An Indian man could voluntarily give up his own Indian status and that of his wife and children. *Ibid.*, 59.

Restrictive policies endured by Indians included being prohibited from gathering in groups larger than three members, attending county fairs, leaving the reserve without a pass from the Indian agent, wearing ceremonial regalia at festivals, going into pool halls, and hiring a lawyer to bring a court case against the government. *Ibid.*, 339.

10. Many reserve lands are rich in natural resources including oil, gas, gold, diamonds, timber, ore, and water.

11. Some reserves had a parallel system of governance in which members observed both the traditional/hereditary system of governance and the Indian Act's elected government. One way around this situation was to have the traditional/hereditary chief elected under the Indian Act system. E.g., Chief Harry Chonkolay of the Dene Tha' of northern Alberta, was a hereditary chief who was also elected under an Indian Act election, and he served his community for more than 50 years.

12. The term of the elected First Nations leader ranges from 2 years (under the Indian Act Election, which is set out by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada [hereinafter referred to as INAC]) to 5 years (under the Custom Election rules as set by the individual First Nation).

13. There have been a number of First Nations that have opted out of the Indian Act in recent years. Some First Nations that have opted out of the Indian Act by entering self-government agreements include the Sechelt, Nishga'a, Tli Cho, and Labrador Inuit.

14. Ch. 29, sec. 76 (1): "A member of a band who is of the full age of twenty-one years and is ordinarily resident on the reserve is qualified to vote for a person nominated to be chief of the band, and in which the reserve for voting purposed consists of one section, to vote for persons nominated as councilors."

"Elsie Marie Knott: Enterprising Woman First Woman Chief, Obituary," *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), December 7, 1995, E6. Also see Cora Voyageur, "The Difficult Was Easy—The Impossible Took a Little Longer: Canada's First Female Indian Chief—Elsie Marie Knott," in *Indigenous History Reader*, ed. Kirsten Burnett (forthcoming, Oxford University Press, 2011).

15. A councilor is an elected leader of a First Nation community who serves with the chief in order to constitute the governing council. Shin Amai, *The 2002 Annotated Indian Act and Aboriginal Constitutional Provisions* (Toronto: Carswell, 2002); *Report of Indian Affairs Branch for the Fiscal Year Ended March 31, 1953* (Ottawa, ON: Department of Citizenship and Immigration, 1953), 4.

16. "Canada's First Woman Chief," *Indian Life* 1, no. 12 (1960): 17.

17. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Post Colonial Studies*, 2.

18. *Ibid.*, 122.

19. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993), 9.

20. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Post Colonial Studies*, 122.

21. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 53.

22. Gatayri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Methuen, 1987).

23. Chandra Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Feminist Review* 30 (Autumn 1988): 62–88. For an analysis of colonialism class and race, see Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin' Up to White Women: Indigenous Women and Feminism* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 2000).

24. Spivak, *In Other Worlds*.

25. As a First Nations woman, I was aware of the protocols of the First Nations community and wanted to ensure that I received permission to conduct this research. Before I began this project, I garnered support from four levels of the First Nations government in Canada. On the national level, I received ratification from the Assembly of First Nations (hereinafter referred to as AFN) when I presented my research proposal at the annual general assembly. The AFN is the national organization representing Canada's First Nations chiefs. It is a predominately male organization in which women have played a limited role. There has never been a female national chief, although Roberta Jamieson came second to Phil Fontaine in 2003 and Wendy Grant John finished behind the winner, Ovide Mercredi, in 1997. Currently, there is one female provincial vice-chief, Jody Wilson Raybold, who represents British Columbia.

I later received written support from AFN National Chief Phil Fontaine. At the provincial level, I obtained a support letter from the Treaty 8 Chiefs of Alberta. At the tribal council level, I received

a letter of support from the chiefs of the Athabasca tribal council from northeastern Alberta. At the First Nation level, I received a letter of support from my own chief and the council of the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation from Fort Chipewyan, Alberta. All the First Nation representatives from these four organizations endorsed and supported the research.

26. Snowball sampling is a nonprobability sampling method whereby each person interviewed is asked to suggest additional people to be interviewed.

27. Because I promised anonymity and confidentiality to the respondents, I do not attribute comments or experiences to particular individuals or provide a list of participants.

28. Although there are many similar experiences of colonization in Canada, the political experiences of Inuit and Métis women leaders of Canada differ from those of the First Nations women leaders because only First Nations are regulated under the Indian Act.

29. First Nations people are more likely to live throughout Canada's landmass than mainstream Canadians, who are more likely to live within 100 miles of the Canada-US border.

Reserves are deemed "remote" (44% of all reserves in Canada) if they are located more than 350 kilometers from the nearest service center and have year-round road access. Rural reserves (35%) are located between 50 and 350 kilometers from the nearest service center and have year-round road access. Urban reserves (35%) are located within 50 kilometers of the nearest service center and have year-round road access.

30. INAC, "Reserves/Settlements/Villages," http://pse5-esd5.ainc-inac.gc.ca/fnp/Main/Search/FNReserves.aspx?BAND_NUMBER=435&lang=eng (accessed August 22, 2009); Tsawwassen First Nation, "Innovation," http://www.tsawwassenfirstnation.com/media /090311_TFN_Innovation.pdf (accessed August 30, 2010).

31. "White River First Nation," http://pse5-esd5.ainc-inac.gc.ca/fnp/Main/Search/FNRegPopulation.aspx?BAND_NUMBER=506&lang=eng (accessed August 22, 2009); Six Nations of the Grand River, "Six Nations Council," <http://www.sixnations.ca> (accessed December 28, 2009).

32. INAC, *First Nations in Canada* (Ottawa, ON: INAC, 2009).

33. Government of Canada, *The Daily: Aboriginal Peoples in Canada* (Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada, January 15, 2008).

34. Duane Champagne, *Social Change and Cultural Continuity among Native Nations* (New York: AltaMira Press, 2007), 4.

35. Brian Calliou, "The Imposition of State Laws on Aboriginal Peoples and the Creation of a Variety of Hunting Rights in the Treaty 8 Territory," *Lobstick: An Interdisciplinary Journal* (Special Issue) 1 (2000): 57–83.

36. S. Carter, *Capturing Women: The Manipulation of Cultural Imagery in Canada's Prairie West* (Montreal, QC: McGill-Queens University Press, 1997).

37. R. Williams, "Gendered Checks and Balances: Understanding the Legacy of White Patriarchy in an American Indian Cultural Context," *Georgia Law Review* 24 (1990): 1019–44.

38. D. A. Mihesuah, *Indigenous American Women: Decolonization, Empowerment, Activism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003). A Canadian example of the importance of First Nations women is recorded in Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur Trade Society, 1670–1870* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983).

39. Janice Acoose, *Iskwewak Kah'ki Yaw Ni Wahkomakanak: Neither Indian Princess nor Easy Squaw* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1995).

40. Currently, there are more than 500 missing or murdered Aboriginal women in Canada according to the Amnesty International Report, *Stolen Sisters: A Human Rights Response to Discrimination and Violence Against Indigenous Women in Canada* (London: Amnesty International, 2004); AFN, *Draft Framework: Gender Balancing—Restoring Our Sacred Circle* (Ottawa, ON: AFN Women's Council, 2007).

41. Vivian O'Connell, "Aboriginal Women in Canada," in *Women in Canada: A Gender-based Statistical Report*, Catalogue No. 89-503-XPE (Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada, 2006).
42. Cora Voyageur, "Contemporary First Nations Women's Issues," in *Visions of the Heart: Contemporary Issues*, 3rd ed., ed. David A. Long and Olive Dickason (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2011).
43. Jo-Anne Fiske, "Political Status of Native Indian Women: Contradictory Implications of Canadian State Policy," *American Indian Cultural and Research Journal* 19, no. 2 (1995): 1–30.
44. Author interview with interviewee no. 62, Women Chiefs Study, 2004.
45. Telephone conversation with Marie Frawley-Henry from the AFN Women's Council, September 7, 2010.
46. Spivak, *In Other Worlds*.
47. Agency is defined as a person's ability to act independently and make decisions.
48. Eric Howe, "Education and Lifetime Earnings for Aboriginal People in Saskatchewan," Discussion Paper 2002-1 ISSN 0831-439X (Saskatoon: University of Saskatchewan); Statistics Canada, *Aboriginal Peoples of Canada 2006 Census*, Catalogue No. 92-593-XCB (Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada, 2008).
49. Fiske, "Political Status of Native Indian Women," 3.
50. Author interview with interviewee no. 7, Women Chiefs Study, 2003.
51. Author interview with interviewee no. 59, Women Chiefs Study, 2004.
52. Government of Canada, INAC, *Basic Departmental Data, 2004*, Catalogue No. R12-7/2003E (Ottawa, ON: INAC, First Nations and Northern Statistics Section, 2005), 61.
53. O'Connell, "Aboriginal Women in Canada." First Nations women hold three times more university degrees than First Nations men.
54. Howe, "Education and Lifetime Earnings for Aboriginal People in Saskatchewan."
55. Bruce Miller, "Women in Tribal Politics," *American Indian Quarterly* 18, no. 1 (Winter 1994): 25–41.
56. Government of Canada, INAC, "Community Profile," http://skiprod2.inac.gc.ca/FNProfiles?FNProfiles_geogr (accessed April 20, 2005).
57. There are a few postsecondary educational institutions on the reserve, but most First Nations people pursuing an advanced education must leave the reserve.
58. Author interview with interviewee no. 17, Women Chiefs Study, 2003.
59. The devolution policy is "the transfer of services and programs from INAC control to Indian bands, tribal councils and other Indian authorities." INAC, *Basic Departmental Data* (Ottawa: INAC, 2003), 110. Education and social services were among the first areas to be devolved to local First Nations administrators.
60. Author interview with interviewee no. 62, Women Chiefs Study, 2004.
61. Author interview with interviewee no. 38, Women Chiefs Study, 2004.
62. Prentice et al., *Canadian Women*.
63. Diane-Michelle Prindeville, "Feminist Nations? A Study of Native American Women in Southwestern Tribal Politics," *Political Research Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (1994): 101–12.
64. Author interview with interviewee no. 61, Women Chiefs Study, 2004.
65. Clara Sue Kidwell, Dian J. Willils, Deborah Jones-Saumty, and Dolores S. Bigfoot, "Feminist Leadership among American Indian Women," in *Women and Leadership: Transforming Visions and Diverse Voices*, ed. Jean Lau Chin, Bernice Lott, Joy K. Rice, and Janis Sanchez-Hucles (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 314–29.
66. Author interview with interviewee no. 56, Women Chiefs Study, 2004.
67. Mona Etienne and Eleanor Leacock, *Women and Colonization: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York: Praeger, 1980).

68. Author interview with interviewee no. 17, Women Chiefs Study, 2002.
69. Author interview with interviewee no. 35, Women Chiefs Study, 2003.
70. Author interview with interviewee no. 28, Women Chiefs Study, 2003.
71. Male leaders can experience the same verbal abuse and threats of violence at the hands of unhappy constituents as female leaders. However, female leaders felt particularly vulnerable because of gender, size, and strength differentials between themselves and the aggressor.
72. Author interview with interviewee no. 9, Women Chiefs Study, 2002; author interview with interviewee no. 3, Women Chiefs Study, 2001; author interview with interviewee no. 7, Women Chiefs Study, 2001.
73. Author interview with interviewee no. 41, Women Chiefs Study, 2004.
74. Author interview with interviewee no. 38, Women Chiefs Study, 2003.
75. Government of Canada, *The Daily*.
76. Cora Voyageur, *My Heroes Have Always Been Indians* (Calgary, AB: Detselig Press, 2010).
77. Etienne and Leacock, *Women and Colonization*.