# Exploring Indigenous Feminist Relational Sovereignty: Feminist Conversations, Non-colonizing Solidarities, Inclusive Nations

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**Abstract**

This article juxtaposes Indigenous feminist perspectives on sovereignty with related ideas of feminist scholars Jacqui Alexander and Nandita Sharma in order to further feminist theorizations of sovereignty and nationhood that reject neo-liberalism, and to forge a "non-colonizing feminist solidarity" with Indigenous peoples, particularly Indigenous women, in their struggles for self-determination.

**Résumé**

Cet article met en juxtaposition les perspectives féministes indigènes sur la souveraineté avec les idées reliées aux érudites féministes Jacqui Alexander et Nandita Sharma afin de faire avancer les élaborations de théories sur la souveraineté et sur l'esprit national qui rejette le néo-libéralisme, et de forger une ``solidarité féministe non-colonisatrice`` avec les peuples autochtones, particulièrement les femmes autochtones, dans leurs luttes pour leur autodétermination.

## Introduction

> Thus, I came to understand pedagogies in multiple ways: as something given, as in handed, revealed; as in breaking through, transgressing, disrupting, inverting inherited concepts and practices, those psychic, analytic and organizational methodologies we deploy to know what we believe we know so as to make different conversations and solidarities possible.
>
> (Alexander 2005, 7)

Following Jacqui Alexander, I endeavour to stimulate feminist conversations and solidarities by exploring points of engagement between Indigenous feminist notions of relational sovereignty and relevant aspects of non-Indigenous feminist thought. My reasons are two-fold - a blending of theory and practice: to simultaneously further feminist theorizations of sovereignty and nationhood that reject neoliberalism and to forge a "non-colonizing feminist solidarity" (Mohanty 2003) with Indigenous peoples, particularly Indigenous women, in their struggles for sovereignty. At stake is more than the possibility of enriched feminist theorizing on sovereignty and nationhood. Given the primacy of neoliberalism, which has proven disastrous to not only Indigenous peoples but to most others on the planet, we all need radically different ways of organizing our economies and polities. As feminist academics, we need to take seriously our influence on political struggles for social justice. I hope, therefore, to provide direction for future dialogue and stronger solidarities around issues of common concern amongst feminist scholar/activists of all theoretical and political stripes. The inspiration for this article crystallized at the 2006 Diasporic Hegemonies Conference at the University of Toronto, where Indigenous feminist scholar/activists[1] Bonita Lawrence and

Andrea Smith described their perception of a problematic aspect of some transnational and postcolonial feminist theories - their predication on an "Indigenous absence." As a scholar, I became curious about the extent to which non-Indigenous feminist theories engage - or could engage - with questions of Indigeneity and the ongoing colonial project of white settler societies such as Canada. Moreover, as a white feminist ally of Indigenous women's struggles,[2] I was intrigued by Andrea Smith's suggestion that Indigenous feminist "flexible notions of sovereignty" (2005a, 129) - as articulated by Indigenous women engaged in anti-colonial struggles - could contribute to the development of alternatives to neoliberal models of governance. This article reflects my continuing efforts as a scholar/activist to engage in a praxis of solidarity-building in relation to both Indigenous struggles for self-determination and broader efforts to dislodge "the homogenizing force of Western liberalism and free-market capitalism" (Alfred cited in Coulthard 2007, 447).

I draw primarily from the works of Indigenous scholar/activists Bonita Lawrence, Andrea Smith and Kim Anderson, comparing their ideas with those found in selected texts of feminist scholar/activists Nandita Sharma and Jacqui Alexander. I have chosen Sharma and Alexander for their trenchant critiques of nation-state practices arising out of the modernist paradigm. Sharma's scholarship on im/migrant issues provides theoretical insights into the ideological antecedents of exclusionary border practices of modern nation-states, and practical advice for progressive social change movements contesting the current configuration of national borders. Prominent transnational feminist theorist Jacqui Alexander, in addition to her analyses of neo-imperialism and neo-colonialism, explores a theme important to many Indigenous feminists - the value of the Sacred in political organizing.

My decision to set the stage for discussion with a rather lengthy focus on Indigenous feminist relational sovereignty resonates with Bonita Lawrence and Enakshi Dua's call (in a different context) for "discussions...on how to frame claims for antiracism that do not disempower Aboriginal peoples...[and] that dialogue between antiracism theorists/activists and Indigenous scholars/communities requires talking on Indigenous terms" (2005, 137). I proceed with a similar concern and spirit. In the first section, I raise the contentious issue of retraditionalization, which is not only a stumbling block in feminist attempts to work across difference, but also a substantive challenge for Indigenous peoples who, in invoking tradition, risk relegation to the "wrong" side of the tradition/modernity binary. I also appraise the work of Alexander and Sharma for points of convergence or divergence on the issue of tradition/retraditionalization. I then outline how Indigenous feminist notions of sovereignty draw on the traditional principles of relationality, interdependence and responsibility thereby leading to counter hegemonic understandings of land/creation, nation and sovereignty. In the second section, I consider how Sharma and Alexander "converse" with the implications of Indigenous feminist notions of sovereignty, starting with the principle of relationality. I focus on to what extent Sharma accommodates Indigenous worldviews and political concerns in her critique of the "modernist project of national state building" (Sharma 2005b, 12).

## Toward Relational Sovereignty

### Why Retraditionalization

Given the ravages of colonization, Kim Anderson (2000), Andrea Smith (2005a; 2005b; 2006) and others (Alfred 2005) contend that a recovery of traditional Indigenous ways of being and knowing is a central aspect of Indigenous struggles for decolonization and sovereignty. Lawrence asserts that "understanding how colonial governments have regulated Native identity is essential for Native people, in attempting to step away from the colonizing frameworks that have enmeshed our lives, and as we struggle to revive the identities and ways of living that preceded colonization" (2003, 4). According to the International Forum of Indigenous Women (FIMI), Indigenous peoples across the globe are engaging in retraditionalization - in broad terms, the

re-centering of traditional teachings that value women, nature and the land/creation.

Mindful of the dangers involved in the process - namely, re-entrenching patriarchal understandings of tradition or encouraging a fundamentalist cultural revitalization (St. Denis 2004) - Indigenous women insist that traditional teachings, particularly those related to gender balance or complementarity,[3] must be refashioned to meet the contemporary needs of Indigenous women and their nations. Andrea Smith explains:

> Prior to colonization, Native communities were not structured on the basis of hierarchy, oppression or patriarchy. We will not recreate these communities as they existed prior to colonization. [But], our understanding that a society without structures of oppression was possible in the past tells us that our current political and economic system is anything but natural and inevitable. If we lived differently before, we can live differently in the future. (2006, 17)

The idea of retraditionalization connotes a view of tradition as alive, non-static and fluid, not as inherently anti-modern or patriarchal (FIMI 2006). As Anderson explains, "'tradition' and 'culture' are living entities, subject to constant change" (2000, 34-35). Well aware of the potential for solidifying patriarchal practices passed off as traditions, she stresses that retraditionalization necessitates a careful review of the gender teachings in all traditional practices.

In elevating tradition to a status commensurate with "modern" values, Indigenous peoples must confront the Enlightenment-inspired and deeply entrenched tradition/modernity dualism, the prime prism through which they have been viewed. Another risk for Indigenous advocates of retraditionalization is the continued association of Indigeneity with an inferior, backward and immutable status, i.e., the tradition side of the binary. As it stands, Indigenous peoples are considered (mostly by non-Indigenous peoples) to be Indigenous only if they can prove their "traditional" authenticity,[4] a bind Lawrence (2003) links to the "white need for certainty about Indian difference" (2003, 23). Moreover, in attempting to accommodate this white need for certainty, Indigenous peoples risk reinforcing a belief in their eventual disappearance: "In a context of domination...the Western imagination has painted the world as populated by 'endangered authenticities,' always juxtaposed to modernity, always 'going crazy' in the face of the inescapable momentum of 'progress' and change....Such a viewpoint holds no future for Native people other than as quaint relics occupying an archaic pastoral backwater - or as 'the Vanishing American'" (Lawrence 2003, 23).

In tacit agreement with Lawrence, Sharma identifies one of the most deleterious colonial assumptions to arise out of modernity - the formation of "negative dualities of worth in which one half of the binary equation is privileged both symbolically and materially [and which] constitutes the identity politics of ruling" (2005a, 26-27). Alexander's assessment of the treatment of religion/spirituality within (post)modernity[5] comes closer to talking about Indigenous identity on its own terms, complementing analyses of how Indigenous identities are conceptualized as traditional and thereby regulated, and helping to elucidate why Indigenous peoples are caught in an "authenticity bind:"

> ...modernization discourses and practices...collapse divergent histories and temporalities into these apparently irreconcilable binaries of tradition and modernity, and produce other accompanying corollaries around religion and secular reason, stasis and change, and science and the nonrational. In so doing, they also territorialize their own distance, ultimately placing their claims within an ideological universe, whose analytic and material boundaries dovetail with imperatives that are most closely aligned with those of colonization. (2005, 189)

Alexander firmly ties the tradition/modernity binary to (post)modern colonial logic, while speaking to the ongoing nature of colonialism in the Americas and the perpetuation of stereotypes about Indigenous peoples in need of Christian "civilization:"

Yet, it is not only that (post)modernity's secularism renders the Sacred as tradition, but it is also that tradition, understood as an extreme alterity, is always made to reside elsewhere and denied entry into the modern....[(post)modernity] profits from a hierarchy that conflates Christianity with good tradition while consigning 'others' to the realm of bad tradition and thus to serve as evidence of the need for good Christian tradition. (2005, 296)

By pointing to the paradoxical sub-dividing of tradition into categories of "good" and "bad," Alexander explains how Christianity can become an indicator of registry in the modern, secular side of the equation, and not a marker of the outmoded superstitious beliefs associated with "traditional" cultures.

Guarding against the re/production of patriarchal gender relations and other misuses of tradition are prominent concerns for many women, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike. Along these lines, Sharma points to how "tradition" can be pressed into the service of the exclusionary practices of (post)modern nation building:

Postmodern practices of racism and nationalism rely less on ideologies of race separation and more and more on ideas sanctifying culture. An impoverished view of "culture" has come to overlie notions of biological race so that what connects identity to place is now said to be the historical existence of certain "traditions." In this, "tradition [becomes] the cultural equivalent of the process of biological reproduction." (2005a, 11)

Does Sharma, however unwittingly, equate Indigenous evocations of tradition with "traditions" that become a proxy for "notions of biological race"? Would she distinguish between colonial inheritances passed off as "tradition" and the revitalized traditions envisioned above? While Sharma qualifies her use of tradition by using quotation marks, she does not appear to consider the possibility of tradition as liberating.

Alexander, on the other hand, not only believes in the potential benefits of tradition, but provides a conceptual mechanism for its rekindling. Employing the idea of a palimpsest - "a parchment that has been inscribed two or three times, the previous text having been imperfectly erased and remaining therefore still partly visible" - she describes how "the idea of the 'new' structured through the 'old' scrambled, palimpsestic character of time, both jettisons the truncated distance of linear time and dislodges the impulse for incommensurability, which the ideology of distance creates" (2005, 190). This non-linear understanding of time resonates with Anderson's belief that the "past, present and future are understood to be inextricably connected" (2000, 15) and that reclaiming past traditions is by definition relevant to future incarnations of nationhood. Anderson further claims that "our definition and self-determination as individuals and as nations involves calling on the past to define the future" (2000, 15-16). Palimpsestic time, resulting in "the imperfect erasure, [and] hence visibility, of a 'past'" (Alexander 2005, 190), counters (post)modernist assertions that Indigenous peoples and their traditions are defunct (or hopelessly hybrid), and explains how traditions are never really lost and why their recovery is possible. If we accept the positions of Alexander, Smith and Anderson, then memory work is both possible and in accordance with Indigenous feminist assessments of decolonization as an "antidote to alienation, separation, and the amnesia that domination produces" (Alexander 2005, 14).

*The Contours of Relational Sovereignty*

In her recent book, Andrea Smith warns that "because [Indigenous] sovereignty entails a vision that is beyond what we can see now, it is not necessarily something that can be clearly articulated" (2008, 269). Nonetheless, I will outline my incomplete understanding of relational sovereignty as expressed in the words of Indigenous women scholars and activists. What aspects of Indigenous tradition are (or could be) harnessed to formulate flexible or relational forms of sovereignty? I contend that the traditional principles of relationality, interdependence and responsibility, which lie at the heart of Indigenous epistemological and ontological stances, also underpin Indigenous feminist views of sovereignty, with

the following four features: 1) human subjectivity as relational, enacted through a spiritual encounter with land/creation; 2) sovereignty as extended beyond the human; 3) land held in trust for future generations; and 4 ) the restoration of balance between women and men; individuals and the collective; and human beings and the Sacred (the whole of creation).

Firstly, adherence to the principles of relationality, interdependence and responsibility would require the human subject to experience herself as dependent upon and in relation to others and the environment. In contrast to the Western liberal reverence of individualism, Indigenous conceptualizations of sovereignty hinge upon respect for individual propensities and gifts believed to be derived from the Sacred, and contextualized by participation in the collective. Thus, Anderson refers to the process of rediscovering one's "sacred sense of purpose" and concludes that "as we learn to validate the purpose of each individual, we can build communities that are inclusive" (2000, 203). Andrea Smith hints at the application of these principles for the creation of alternatives to neoliberal governance: "Helpful in this project of imagination is the work of Native women activists who have begun articulating notions of nation and sovereignty that are separate from nation-states. Whereas nation-states are governed through domination and coercion, indigenous sovereignty and nationhood is predicated on interrelatedness and responsibility" (2005a, 129). By bringing decolonization and land to the fore of feminist political struggle, Indigenous women are challenging the idea of nation as inextricably intertwined with state and beginning to articulate counter hegemonic meanings of both nation and sovereignty (Smith 2005a, 2008).

Another dimension of demarcating nation from state is the extension of sovereignty beyond the human. As an Indigenous woman activist told Andrea Smith (2005a):

> The idea of a nation did not simply apply to human beings. We call the buffalo or the wolves, the fish, the trees, and all are nations. Each is sovereign, an equal part of the creation, interdependent, interwoven, and all related. These models of sovereignty are not based on a narrow definition of nation that would entail a closely bounded community and ethnic cleansing. (29)

Being faithful to such an expanded sense of sovereignty would require the fostering of respect between nations of all types. In stark contrast to the modern subject's individual rights relative to a "bounded community" such as the nation-state, the Indigenous subject as part of the collective would have embodied rights and responsibilities *vis-à-vis* all of creation, though in relation to a particular land base. Another Indigenous woman activist puts it this way:

> We understand the concept of sovereignty as woven through a fabric that encompasses our spirituality and responsibility....It differs greatly from the concept of Western sovereignty which is based on absolute power. For us, absolute power is in the Creator and the natural order of all living things...Our sovereignty is related to our connections to the earth and is inherent.
>
> (Venne cited in Smith 2006, 17)

The significance of the natural environment for both Indigenous feminist notions of relational sovereignty and of subjectivity cannot be overstated. Unlike Western subjectivity - which, by positing a separation between humans and the natural environment, obscures the role of the material in its formation - Indigenous subjectivity explicitly claims a spiritual relationship to land as its lynchpin. Anderson (2000) describes the centrality of land to Indigenous spirituality and to Indigenous women's subjectivities in particular:

> Our relationship with creation involves connecting with all that exists around us...Because the land is our Mother Earth, and the moon is our Grandmother, Native women have a special relationship with these parts of creation. To many Native women, reclaiming a relationship to land is as important as recreating Indigenous social and human relations, because the land is something through which we define ourselves, and it is essential to our creation....The land is a relative with whom we have a special relationship. (180)

The human subject engages in a process of "becoming" through identification with the land. Citing ceremonies as the mechanism through which Indigenous women and men re/affirm their spiritual connection to the land, to themselves, and to their communities and nations, Smith (2005c) clarifies the significance of land for understanding relational sovereignty:

> Native spiritualities are land-based - they generally cannot exist without the land from which they originate. When Native peoples fight for cultural/spiritual preservation, they are ultimately fighting for the land base which grounds their spirituality and culture....Native communities argue that Native peoples cannot be alienated from their land without cultural genocide....[Therefore] to disconnect Native spiritual practices from their land base is to undermine Native peoples' claim that the protection of the land base is integral to their survival and hence is to undermine their claim to sovereignty. (99)

Henrietta Mann describes the collective responsibilities understood by Indigenous peoples to inhere in this spiritual relationship between their nations and the land:

> Over the time we have been here, we have built cultural ways on and about this land. We have our own respected versions of how we came to be. These origin stories - that we emerged or fell from the sky or were brought forth - connect us to this land and establish our realities, our belief systems. We have spiritual responsibilities to renew the Earth and we do this through our ceremonies so that our Mother, the Earth, can continue to support us. Mutuality and respect are part of our tradition - give and take. (Taliman 2005, 15)

Within this worldview, it is recognized that to ensure the viability of the earth is to ensure the viability of human life. The Council of Chiefs of the Haudenosaunee explain that for Indigenous peoples a spiritual relationship to land both reflects and translates into a collective responsibility as caretakers of the land: "We are connected to the land in a spiritual way....[as] stewards. Our spiritual obligation is part of that stewardship...The land is sacred to us. It defines our identities, belief system, languages, and way of life"[6] (Six Nations 2006).

What emerges from these narratives is an attitude towards land entirely distinct from the Western notion of land as (private) property. Anderson (2000) encapsulates this perspective: "Aboriginal women do not see the land as a wild material resource that needs to be developed, possessed, or controlled" (180). Land "is 'owned' in a formal sense only by unborn children in the invisible sacred realm" (Lawrence and Dua 2005, 126). Caretakers are to hold the land "in trust" for future generations.

For Kim Anderson (2000), fulfilling a vision of sovereignty as relational, interdependent and responsible requires the restoration of balance between women and men, individuals and the collective, and human beings and the Sacred (the whole of creation). Seeking balance would commit women and men to fulfilling their responsibilities to self, family, community, nation and creation. Women and men are ascribed social roles according to their "predominant qualities" (to create and nurture, to protect and provide respectively), which are seen as complementary and equivalent in value. Hence, Indigenous women play a special role in the maintenance of family, community and nation because they are considered to be the life givers, teachers and nurturers of future generations. Indigenous conceptualizations of gender attributes and consequent roles flow from social relations that prioritize balance, harmony and reciprocity, along with respect for the female power of creation. Consequently, gender roles would be re/established, but not fixed, in the service of the collective.

Andrea Smith reminds us to historicize and politicize any discussion of gender and Indigenous nationhood. She writes,

> It has been through sexual violence and through the imposition of European gender relationships on Native communities that Europeans were able to colonize Native peoples in the first place. If we maintain these patriarchal gender systems in place, we are then unable to decolonize and fully assert our sovereignty.
>
> (2005a, 124)

Together with a growing number of

Indigenous "feminists without apology" (those who unabashedly claim the feminist label despite derision from their own communities and a fraught history *vis-à-vis* mainstream feminism), she emphasizes that any project to revitalize tradition in the interest of sovereignty would have to categorically disrupt the colonial legacies of patriarchy and sexualized violence in Indigenous communities.

## Relational Sovereignty in Conversation

### Relationality and the Individual/Collective Dialectic

To what extent do the Alexander and Sharma texts speak to Indigenous feminist notions of relational sovereignty? Importantly, both Alexander and Sharma allude to a core Indigenous ontological precept: relationality evidenced in the individual/collective connection. Alexander states, "The central understanding within an epistemology of the Sacred is that of a core/Spirit that is immortal, at once linked to the pulse and energy of creation. It is the living matter that links us to each other, making that which is individual simultaneously collective" (2005, 327). Her theorization of the Sacred corresponds to Indigenous attitudes about the sacredness of creation and, by extension, to the need for individual/collective balance in order to realize a vision of relational sovereignty. Additionally, for both Anderson and Alexander, the Sacred is not the exclusive domain of Indigenous women, but must be accessed by Indigenous men to dismantle patriarchy.

While not speaking in terms of balance through a reconnection with the Sacred, Nandita Sharma's concept of "radical diversity" echoes Indigenous calls to value individual gifts or propensities in the service of the collective, and I would add, for the creation of an inclusive nation. Sharma (2005a) distinguishes between the concepts of difference and "radical diversity," the latter referring to "the tangible existence of heterogeneity and mutual reciprocity within nature and within that part of nature that is humanity. Differences, on the other hand, are socially organized inequalities between human beings and between humans and the rest of the planet" (26). Do Indigenous visions of nation and sovereignty embrace "radical diversity" as opposed to difference as defined by Sharma? Given Indigenous calls for gender balance, an end to patriarchal hierarchies and strict male-female binaries, as well as the valuation of individuals for their unique contributions to community well-being, it would seem so. Certainly Indigenous experiences with state identity regulation would make them sensitive to Sharma's demand that "we be able to distinguish between diverse self-determined identities and the process of differentiation used to mark Others as subordinated beings" (Sharma 2005a, 29).

### On Land, Borders and National Sovereignty

To what extent does Sharma's critique of territoriality in relation to nation-state building projects accommodate Indigenous worldviews and political concerns? In other words, does she adequately take up the "spiritual and geopolitical relations" (Lawrence and Dua 2005, 126) said to connect Indigenous people to the land/creation and/or acknowledge the possibility of Indigenous nation-building projects as being distinct from nation state-building projects? Sharma offers a clear analysis of the problem with nation state-building projects:

> In modern, national styles of ruling there is a convergence between the imagining of communities as national and the ability of states to uphold and defend the space it occupies. In this sense, what we have usually understood to be nation-building projects are more accurately understood as nation state-building projects. It is for this reason that borders - and the immigration policies that enforce and regulate them - are the point where the nation state's sovereignty finds its expression. (2005b, 11-12)

She writes of "homey forms of racism" that function to tie national identities to geographically-bounded territories - a fundamental part of modern nation state-building (Sharma 2005a). Quoting Malkki, she writes, "The assumption that any given culture is rooted in a particular geographical place and is best kept

homogeneous 'actively territorializes our identities, whether cultural or national...[and] directly enables a vision of territorial displacement [of the group in question] as pathological'" (12). In most cases, however, modern nation-states must erase history - negating the very existence of Indigenous populations - to justify their formation:

> ...the doctrine of *Terra Nullius* that allowed the Americas and the South Pacific to be viewed as empty lands awaiting European civilization and cultivation [which] was ...very useful in the "founding" of "White settler societies," such as Canada. The notion that indigenous peoples were never at home on these lands worked to depoliticize their homelessness after the advent of colonialism and the official redistribution of White settlers. (Sharma 2005a, 9)

Sharma (2005a) expounds upon the manipulation of "home" to further nationalist projects:

> Home...is an idea that masquerades as a place. Having a home within a nation, in particular, is not a geographical signpost but an ideological signifier....[However] because [home is lived out as a spatial concept], it profoundly shapes our consciousness of the relationship between place and "belonging." Its power rests in its ability to project modernist formulations of home back through human history so that our contemporary understandings of homelands come to be seen as merely the outcomes of some supposedly primordial need for rootedness. (8-9)

Sharma (2005a) rightly notes that "many supposedly natural homelands exist only because of the forcible dispossession, displacement, violent assimilation, and sometimes extermination of those who previously built their lives and livelihoods in these places" (15). However, would Sharma use different criteria to evaluate the notion of home used in the territorial claims of Indigenous peoples? Would she concede that not all origin stories are reducible to tactics that establish the "privileged link between habit and habitat upon which the myth of indigenous original rests" (2005a, 14)?

The answer would seem to be no. While explicitly recognizing the dispossession of Indigenous lands through colonialism, Sharma does not appear to conceptualize "land as a contested space" in the way required by Lawrence and Dua (2005, 126), which would mean "to acknowledge that we all share the same land base and yet to question the differential terms on which it is occupied, [which] is to become aware of the colonial project that is taking place around us" (126). While the historical displacement of Indigenous peoples in Canada figures into her work, Sharma does not appear to differentiate between contemporary Indigenous land claims and exclusionary nation state-building projects, nor is it clear that she would. In fact, her hopes to abolish the right of nation-states to differentiate citizenship and regulate borders, i.e., her call for "a world without borders" (2005b, 12), would not seem to acknowledge the integral role of land in Indigenous subjectivity, spirituality and sovereignty.

Lawrence and Dua (2005) have this to say about borders:

> Borders in the Americas are European fictions, restricting Native peoples' passage and that of peoples of color. However, to speak of opening up borders without addressing Indigenous land loss and ongoing struggles to reclaim territories is to divide communities that are already marginalized from one another. The question that must be asked is how opening borders would affect Indigenous struggles aimed at reclaiming land and nationhood. (136)

Sharma does not ask this question here. To be fair, this omission could stem primarily from her focus on im/migrant issues, which leads her to use terms like the "nationalization of space and identity" (2005a, 6), and the "Canadianization of space" and "nationalized imaginations" (2005b, 7) in ways distinct from how nation is invoked by Indigenous peoples. At any rate, despite references to Indigenous peoples and colonial history, she does not make the ongoing colonization of Indigenous nations by Canada foundational to her work as Lawrence and others would have it.

**Towards a Future Dialogue**

A fundamental question remains: would Indigenous conceptions of sovereignty

allow us to overcome the "modernist ideas of family and home" that Sharma argues both fuel patriarchal social relations and result in strictly defined, exclusionary nation-state borders (Sharma 2005a, 8)? Would broader definitions of nation allow for less rigid geographical boundaries and more inclusive practices *vis-à-vis* membership in a nation? Historical evidence would suggest so: "the Mi'kmaki, the 'land of friendship,' which encompasses what is now called the Atlantic provinces, [has] historically been part of...a larger geopolitical unit that extends into what is now the northeastern United States" (Lawrence and Dua 2005, 126). Likewise, Napoleon explains that Aboriginal nations "practiced forms of nationhood that were deliberately inclusive in order to build strong nations with extensive international ties" (2005, 38). What are the implications of a stewardship relationship with land, as opposed to one of domination, for national borders? Could more porous boundaries be established that simultaneously recognize the responsibilities of those deemed the caretakers of the land and the rights of access to others? In other words, would the "boundaries of responsibility" envisioned by Indigenous nations differ from the borders erected by modernist nation-states?

According to the Council of Chiefs of the Haudenosaunee, "land is a collective right. It is held in common, for the benefit of all....Our ancestors faced overwhelming odds and relentless pressure to give up our lands....The agreements we recognized reflect an intention to *share* the land and to lease the land" (Six Nations 2006; italics added). I would suggest that conceiving of land as a collective right for the benefit of all would increase the likelihood of allowing people(s) access to land for subsistence agriculture, for example. Also, especially when framed within the distinction made by Indigenous peoples between nation and nation-state, intentions to share or lease lands do not imply their cordoning off. Despite popular (non-Indigenous) fears to the contrary, expansive notions of sovereignty that distinguish between nation and state would not lead to the forced displacement of "others." Smith contrasts non-Indigenous assumptions about Indigenous sovereignty with the sentiments of Indigenous women activists who talk about "how indigenous sovereignty is based on freedom for all peoples" (2005a, 130) and that expulsion would be out of the question. These are just some of the questions that would arise out of the "total rethinking of Canada" called for by Lawrence and Dua: "Aboriginal people need to reestablish control over their own communities: have their land returned to them, making communities viable and rebuilding nationhood....This requires a total rethinking of Canada; sovereignty and self-determination must be genuinely on the table as fundamental to Indigenous survival, not as lip service" (2005, 125-126).

**Conclusion**

In this article, I centre Indigenous feminist understandings of and struggles for (relational) sovereignty, and put them "in conversation" with relevant ideas from the texts of feminist scholar/activists Nandita Sharma and Jacqui Alexander.

After reviewing the challenges facing Indigenous nations who opt for "retraditionalization" as a fundamental step towards decolonization and sovereignty, I share my understanding of Indigenous feminist notions of sovereignty as predicated on relationality, interdependence, responsibility and balance - principles also at the heart of Indigenous epistemologies and ontological perspectives. Accordingly, sovereignty would extend to both human and non-human nations, reflecting a demarcation between "nation" and "state." Human subjects would thus be called upon to respect the sovereignty and interrelatedness of all of creation, as individuals and members of the collective. Human subjectivity and sovereignty are understood to emanate from a spiritual relationship with the land, which is not owned as such, but held in trust for future generations. Indigenous women, as symbols of the power and interrelatedness of creation, figure centrally in the maintenance of the well-being of Indigenous nations, and thus patriarchy is to be disrupted and balanced gender relations restored. Within this paradigm, power resides in creation and

nurturance, not domination and possession.

By juxtaposing Indigenous feminist notions of relational sovereignty with the ideas of Alexander and Sharma, I can say definitively that neither scholar/activist can be said to completely "write out" Indigenous peoples from their analyses. For example, both Alexander's "epistemology of the Sacred" and Sharma's "radical diversity" resonate with and enhance the Indigenous feminist notion of an inclusive nation, which hinges on the individual-collective dialectic. I do, however, detect a different degree of affinity between the works of Sharma and Alexander and those of Indigenous feminists on relational sovereignty. Whereas both scholar/activists acknowledge the pervasiveness and political expediency of the tradition/modernity duality, Alexander's analysis of religion in (post)modernity more thoroughly addresses the ongoing colonial regulation of Indigenous identities. Alexander also envisions tradition as a potentially liberating force; there is a profound synergy between Indigenous women's invocations of rekindled tradition and Alexander's "betrayal of secular citizenship and dispossession to sacred citizenship and possession, from alienation to belonging, from dismemberment to rememory" (2005, 16). Furthermore, Alexander's notion of palimpsestic time echoes Indigenous depictions of time as non-linear, a commingling of past-present-future, and hence a gateway to potentially liberating traditions. On the other hand, it would seem that Sharma does not see tradition as liberating. She also does not appear to look to Indigenous conceptions of relational sovereignty and nationhood as an antidote to the modernist project of nation state-building. If her call for a "world without borders" is truly silent with respect to contemporary questions of Indigeneity, she cannot be said to accommodate the "spiritual and geopolitical relations" of Indigenous peoples to the land. Finally, whether or not she would distinguish Indigenous notions of home, nation and territory - i.e., the differential terms on which Indigenous nations base sovereignty/land claims - from the exclusionary border practices of modern nation-states, remains unclear.

Above all else, I hope to have provided direction for future dialogue and the formation of non-colonizing bonds of solidarity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous feminist scholar/activists around not only Indigenous struggles for sovereignty, but social justice more generally. More specifically, I would suggest that a deeper engagement with Indigenous feminist views of relational sovereignty might well facilitate a rethinking of national borders and the creation of more inclusive nations. Perhaps a more careful consideration of the overlaps, convergences and divergences of purportedly antagonistic feminist currents - Indigenous, transnational and postcolonial included - would assist distinct groups to clarify their courses of action, including the possibility of creating links and solidarities around common concerns about nation, empire and democratic governance.

**Endnotes**

1. As Andrea Smith (2005a; 2006) clarifies, not all Indigenous women activists call themselves feminists. My use of "Indigenous feminist" is consistent with recent articulations by Smith and other Indigenous scholar/activists who describe some Indigenous women's efforts to reclaim feminism and address sexism within their communities *as integral to* securing Indigenous sovereignty.
2. Since 2005, I have been an ally member of *No More Silence* (NMS), a Toronto-based group of Indigenous women and allies raising awareness about violence against Indigenous women on Turtle Island within a broader project of decolonization. (Turtle Island is used by Indigenous communities in Canada to refer to North America). I began my involvement with Indigenous issues in 1988 as a Rotary scholar in Australia. I increased my awareness of the oppression of Indigenous peoples globally as a human rights observer with the *United Nations Mission in Guatemala* (MINUGUA) from 1995-1998.
3. This term appears in the literature (see FIMI 2006), as well as in interviews I conducted for my MA thesis with Guatemalan Indigenous women.

4. See FIMI (2006, p. 22-25) for a discussion of how mainstream human rights discourse perpetuates a false "culture" vs. "rights" dichotomy, pitting "traditional" cultural practices against so-called liberating "modern" ones.
5. My use of the parentheses in the term (post)modernity is a deliberate attempt to acknowledge the latent absolutism which, according to Alexander (2005), infuses the supposedly cultural relativist impulses of postmodernity. In identifying this latent absolutism, I believe Alexander intends to demonstrate the complex, non-linear relationship between the colonial, neo-colonial and neo-imperial state formations, and the falsity of the modernity/postmodernity binary. This would explain how Indigenous peoples experience the modern moment alongside and through the postmodern moment, i.e., that colonization is ongoing.
6. This is an excerpt from a statement by the Council of Chiefs of the Haudenosaunee (Six Nations "Iroquois" Confederacy), Grand Rivers County, concerning the ongoing land reclamation near Caledonia, Ontario.

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