"WE'RE NOT GOING TO STOP FOR ANYTHING"[1]:

Concerned Aboriginal Women and the Constitution Express

Sarah Nickel*

On 20 July 1981 a group of Indigenous women referring to themselves as "Concerned Aboriginal Women" arrived at the Department of Indian Affairs (DIA) regional headquarters in downtown Vancouver. Once inside the fifteenth-floor offices, the women informed staff that they were there to stage an occupation. Fred Walchli, regional director of the DIA, surprised by the sudden arrival of the group in his office space, made a flustered and ultimately futile attempt to disperse it. Walchli tried to pull a few women aside to determine who they were and on whose authority they were acting, but when the women refused to cooperate, he agreed to vacate the building along with DIA staff, and the takeover continued.[2]

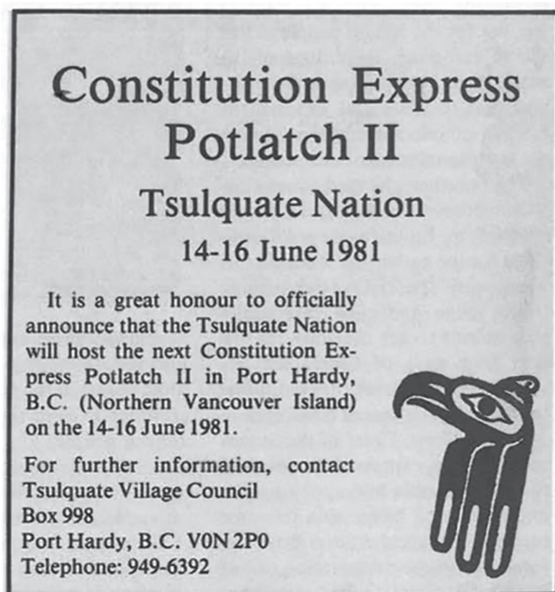
At this historical moment, Concerned Aboriginal Women (CAW) was not a longstanding group, or even a formalized one. While it had some roots in DIA occupations between 1975 and 1976, this particular group had emerged suddenly the previous day when several women from across the province had gathered at a Potlatch in Lytton, British Columbia.[3] It was here that the women, through conversing and working alongside

* I would like to express my gratitude to Emma Feltes and Glen Coulthard for ushering forward this important collection and inviting me to take part. Their suggestions and insights, along with those of the anonymous peer reviewers and the *BC Studies* team were instrumental to sharpening my analysis and argument. I'd like to acknowledge the activists who took part in the Constitutional Express in all of its facets, and special thanks to Doreen Manuel for speaking with me about this activism. Finally, this article was made possible by research assistance from Andrea Eidinger and Carling Beninger, and financial support from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

1 Quote by Amy Gauthier of the Blueberry Band referring to resistance against patriating Canada's Constitution, "Special General Assembly," *Indian World* 4, no. 2 (1981): 11.

2 "Concerned Aboriginal Women's Occupation," *Indian World* 4, no. 3 (1981): 12–13.

3 Doreen Manuel explains that the CAW built from the grassroots actions of 1975 and 1976, during which many community members travelled the province to shut down DIA offices to protest its handling of Indigenous issues. She notes that many of the same women involved in the CAW were part of these earlier activities. Doreen Manuel, interview with author, 15 July 2021.


Constitution Express
Potlatch II
Tsulquate Nation
14-16 June 1981

It is a great honour to officially announce that the Tsulquate Nation will host the next Constitution Express Potlatch II in Port Hardy, B.C. (Northern Vancouver Island) on the 14-16 June 1981.

For further information, contact
Tsulquate Village Council
Box 998
Port Hardy, B.C. V0N 2P0
Telephone: 949-6392

Figure 1. Constitution Potlatch Notice. *Source*: *Indian World* 4, no. 1 (1981): 15.

each other, realized the magnitude of their shared grievances against the Canadian government and decided they needed to act. The CAW not only became the coordinating vehicle for the occupation of the DIA but also, that summer, built on and engaged with existing political efforts in communities focused on Indigenous resistance to the patriation of Canada's Constitution.

The Lytton event was the third Potlatch held across the province in what became loosely defined as the "Constitution Express Potlatches" – eight community Potlatches held at Kamloops, Port Hardy, Lytton, Lillooet, Williams Lake, Kitimat, Bella Coola, and Gilford Island.[4] The first gathering, hosted in Kamloops 27–29 March 1981, reflected a significant turning point in the movement, with nine hundred participants gathering at the Kamloops Indian Residential School "to reaffirm that the Constitution Express is still alive and growing, both in strength and numbers."[5] It was here that attendees decided to continue the work of the Ottawa Constitution Express by sending a delegation of between one and

[4] "Constitution Express Potlatches," *Indian World*, 4, no. 3 (1981): 8; Union of BC Indian Chiefs Resource Centre (URC), summarized minutes of the 6th Special General Assembly, Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs, 14–15 May 1981, Vancouver, British Columbia.

[5] "We Are Still in a State of Emergency: Constitution Express Potlatch," *Indian World* 3, no. 11 (1981): 12.

two thousand people to London, England, and later to other centres in Europe. This, participants argued, would transform the Ottawa Express "from a one-time protest event to a political movement in itself."[6]

The initial Constitution Express was a political caravan to Ottawa that took place in November 1980. The idea for the event grew out of Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau's unwillingness to allow Indigenous Peoples to actively take part in constitutional talks leading up to patriation. With only observer status, Indigenous Peoples, including members of the provincial political organization the Union of BC Indian Chiefs (UBCIC), rightly feared that Indigenous Rights would not be entrenched in the Constitution without their direct involvement. Leaders agreed that confronting Trudeau about their political exclusion was the best way to have their voices heard. So, in November 1980, the UBCIC hired two passenger trains to bring Indigenous People from across Canada to Ottawa to protest constitutional content and processes. The Constitution Express was wildly popular, with estimates of around a thousand participants joining the trek and others lending support on the sidelines. On board the trains, contributors were politically educated through constitutional workshops to ensure group members were well aware of their rights. It was a timely illustration of Indigenous political unity and action; however, when it failed to shift Trudeau's stance on Indigenous Rights, that summer Indigenous Peoples continued to strategize, coming up with yet more actions aimed at ensuring the recognition of Indigenous Rights.

Indigenous women, including those who would join the CAW, were deeply committed to this struggle as articulated through the Constitution Express and the community Potlaches, but their work also went beyond these efforts, and this was expressed in the creation of the CAW splinter group. The CAW used its own brand of grassroots and kinship-based activism to critique not only the relentless barrage of colonial violence Indigenous Peoples faced daily but also, at times, the patriarchal underpinnings and practices of Indigenous leadership and the settler state. Using the creation of the CAW as a window onto the gender dynamics of the Constitution Express, this article explains how and why Indigenous women shaped these political activities in ways that challenged the categorization of the Indigenous Rights movement as male-dominated and as dictated solely by macro-political concerns. Positioned in a liminal space between the persistent efforts of organizations like the

6 URC, UBCIC Bulletins: Constitution Express, 11 April 1981, 1; "We Are Still in a State of Emergency," 12.

Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC), which sought equality under the law, and male-dominated Indigenous Rights organizations, which offered little space for women to express their concerns, women involved in the Constitutional Express movement and the CAW forged a unique path. Sometimes they collaborated with others to forward the goals of gender equality and sometimes they struck out independently to address other issues. In each instance, they foregrounded the everyday interests of community members, insisting that these be discussed alongside sovereignty, patriation, and Indigenous Rights, and, in doing so, they made space for grassroots political voices. Indigenous women's influence was not only crucial to the Constitution Express movement's longevity and breadth, but it also restructured and democratized the nature of Indigenous politics.

GENDERED POLITICS AND INDIGENOUS FEMINISM

Reading Indigenous women into the Constitution Express movement demands that we first see how Indigenous politics have been fashioned through settler-colonial gender logics, which centred patriarchy as a normative ideology and systematically undermined Indigenous women's socio-political positions. In part, the historical scholarship on twentieth-century Indigenous political activism follows these trends, often subsuming women's political work (where it appears at all) within separate categories, making it difficult to ascertain the influence women had on key political struggles.[7] Indigenous feminism, which captures how "gender and race, and therefore the systems of power related to these (sexism, racism, and colonialism) shape Indigenous peoples' lives,"[8] offers a useful entry point for unpacking the political erasure of Indigenous women as well as for understanding how Indigenous feminists have offered important correctives to this.

Indigenous feminist and critical scholarship from the fields of political studies/ecology, history, Indigenous studies, and legal studies situate Indigenous women's multiple and concurrent oppressions under

[7] Paul Tennant, *Aboriginal Peoples and Politics: The Indian Land Question in British Columbia, 1849–1989* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1990); Peter McFarlane, *Brotherhood to Nationhood: George Manuel and the Making of the Modern Indian Movement* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1993); Harold Cardinal, *The Unjust Society* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1999); Daniel Raunet, *Without Surrender, without Consent: A History of the Nisga'a Land Claims* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1996); Howard Adams, *Prison of Grass: Canada from a Native Point of View*, rev. ed. (Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1989).

[8] Sarah Nickel and Amanda Fehr, eds., *In Good Relation: History, Gender, and Kinship in Indigenous Feminisms* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2020), 3.

colonialism and sexism, but it also accurately inserts Indigenous women as constant and critical political actors both historically and presently.[9] There is a noteworthy body of historical scholarship that proves how generations of settler agents (whether fur traders, explorers, missionaries, Indian agents, or government officials) persistently reproduced patriarchal and colonial modalities by privileging and solidifying Euro-Canadian gender norms and inequities that included the nuclear family, separate gendered spheres, and women's political dispossession.[10] In Sarah Hunt's framing, settler legal structures reproduced women's "marginal status in colonial power relations" and enabled the normalization of violence against them.[11] These gender inequities extended into Indigenous communities, according to Joanne Barker, Val Napoleon, and Joyce Green, who grapple with the sexist and exclusionary ways Indigenous sovereignty

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[9] Kiera L. Ladner, "Gendering Decolonisation: Decolonizing Gender," *Australian Indigenous Law Review* 13, no. 1 (2009); Joyce Green, "Canaries in the Mines of Citizenship: Indian Women in Canada," *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue canadienne de science politique* 34, no. 4 (2001): 715–38; Cheryl Suzack, Shari M. Huhndorf, Jeanne Perreault, eds., *Indigenous Women and Feminism: Politics, Activism, Culture* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010); Susan Applegate Krouse and Heather A. Howard, eds., *Keeping the Campfires Going: Native Women's Activism in Urban Communities* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009); Joyce A. Green, *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism* (Black Point, NS: Fernwood, 2007); Joyce Green, ed., *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism*, 2nd ed. (Winnipeg: Fernwood, 2017); Joanne Barker, "Gender, Sovereignty, and the Discourse Rights in Native Women's Activism," in *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History,* eds. Lara Campbell, Tamara Myers, and Adele Perry (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2016); Isabel Altamirano-Jiménez, Nathalie J. Kermoal, and Kahente Horn-Miller, eds., *Living on the Land: Indigenous Women's Understanding of Place* (Vancouver: UBC Press 2016); Rauna Johanna Kuokkanen, *Restructuring Relations: Indigenous Self-Determination, Governance, and Gender* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); I. Knobblock and R. Kuokkanen, "Decolonizing Feminism in the North: A Conversation with Rauna Kuokkanen," *NORA – Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 23, no. 4 (2015): 275–81; J.N. Denetdale, *Reclaiming Diné History: The Legacies of Navajo Chief Manuelito and Juanita* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2007); Jennifer Nez Denetdale, "Chairmen, President, and Princesses: The Navajo Nation, Gender, and the Politics of Tradition," *Wicazo Sa Review* 21, no. 1 (2006): 9–28.

[10] Sarah Carter, *Lost Harvests: Prairie Indian Reserve Farmers and Government Policy*, 2nd ed. (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019); J.A. Fiske, "Colonization and the Decline of Women's Status: The Tsimshian Case," *Feminist Studies* 17 (Fall 1991): 509–35; Justin Tolly Bradford and Chelsea Horton, eds., *Mixed Blessings: Indigenous Encounters with Christianity in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016); Suzack et al., *Indigenous Women and Feminism*; Sarah Nickel, *Assembling Unity: Indigenous Politics, Gender, and the Union of BC Indian Chiefs* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2019); Kathryn Magee, "'For Home and Country': Education, Activism, and Agency in Alberta Native Homemakers' Clubs, 1942–1970," *Native Studies Review* 18, no. 2 (2009): 27–49.

[11] Sarah Hunt, "Representing Colonial Violence: Trafficking, Sex Work, and Violence of Law," *Atlantis* 37, no. 2 (2015): 28. See also: Sarah Hunt, "Colonial Roots, Contemporary Risk Factors: A Cautionary Exploration of the Domestic Trafficking of Aboriginal Women and Girls in British Columbia, Canada," *Alliance News* 33 (2010): 27–31; Sarah Hunt, "Decolonizing Sex Work: Developing an Intersectional Indigenous Approach," in *Selling Sex: Experience, Advocacy, and Research on Sex Work in Canada*, eds. Emily van der Meulen, Elya M. Durisin, and Victoria Love (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013).

has been and continues to be imagined.[12] Still, Indigenous women resisted their legal and political dispossession by organizing in their own associations and by leaning into the *felt* nature of these experiences, as Dian Million puts it – through storytelling and everyday acts of survival.[13]

To comprehend the motivations and actions of Indigenous women who were engaged in the Constitution Express and the CAW, we need to come to terms with their everyday experiences of colonialism, including losing status and band membership if they married a non-Indigenous person; overcrowded and underserviced reserves; unemployment and underemployment due to racism and sexism; high rates of child welfare apprehensions; poor access to appropriate health care and education; and widespread DIA indifference or resistance to these longstanding issues. Viewing the grassroots activism of Indigenous women through an Indigenous feminist lens exposes how colonial socio-political systems have historically erased and failed to respond to the various modes of colonial violence – especially how colonialism is experienced and embodied regularly and disproportionately by Indigenous women and children. We can also make sense of how, through its actions, the CAW was calling attention to the male-dominated nature of the Canadian government and the patriation of the Constitution as well as the patriarchal foundation of the band council system and the DIA.

WOMEN'S ACTIVISM

Many of the women involved in the CAW were not new to political activism, and many took part in multiple efforts and political platforms simultaneously. For instance, CAW members Marceline Manuel and her daughters Doreen and Vera also participated in the fall 1980 Indian

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[12] Barker, "Gender, Sovereignty, and the Discourse Rights"; Val Napoleon, "Aboriginal Discourse: Gender, Identity, and Community," in *Indigenous Peoples and the Law: Comparative and Critical Perspectives*, eds. Benjamin J. Richardson, Shin Imai, and Kent McNeil (Portland: Oxford, 2009); Green, *Making Space*.

[13] Dian Million, "Felt Theory: An Indigenous Feminist Approach to Affect and History," *Wicazo Sa Review* 24, no. 2 (2009): 53–76; *Therapeutic Nations: Healing in an Age of Indigenous Human Rights* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2013); Laura Bonnett, "Toward a More Inclusive Concept of Citizenship: Women and the 1981 Ad Hoc Constitutional Conference" (MA thesis, Carleton, 1997); John Borrows, "Aboriginal and Treaty Rights and Violence against Women," *Osgoode Hall Law Journal* 50, no. 3 (2013): 699–736; Diedre A. Demarais, "The Native Women Women's Association of Canada's Struggle to Secure Gender Equality Rights within the Canadian Constitution" (MA thesis, University of Regina, 1998); Martha Mantour, "Matriarchy and the Canadian Constitution: A Double-Barrelled Threat to Indian Women," *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, no. 13 (1992): 59–64; Joyce Green, *Balancing Strategies: Aboriginal Women and Constitutional Rights in Canada* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

Child Caravan – a march and demonstration initiated by Splatsin te Secwépemc with the support of Indigenous women outside the community, to protest high rates of child apprehensions from Splatsin and to assert their authority to care for their children.[14] They, and others, were also involved in the various occupations and blockades that swept the province in May 1975 as part of a coordinated direct action strategy to pressure the resolution of the BC Land Claim, and Doreen Manuel explained that the events rolled into each other.[15] Further, many of these women were also part of women's groups and political organizations in the province, and they were involved in ongoing lobbying efforts to combat racism and gender inequality, including within the Constitution debates.[16] This is important because the CAW's work built upon previous and ongoing efforts by Indigenous women to reshape their communities through ad hoc groups, formal organizations, and other efforts, and it reminds us that Indigenous women's politics is extensive and multi-vocal despite its having been largely excluded from the historical record and its invisibility when compared to high-profile male-dominated activism.[17]

This is not to say that Indigenous women did not participate in male-dominated organizations like the UBCIC; however, because women were historically barred from elected band positions, few of them held Chief and councillor positions during this era (and therefore lacked formal representation in leadership-oriented organizations like the UBCIC). But there were some important exceptions. Chief Sophie Pierre of ʔaq'am

14 For more on the Indian Child Caravan, see Sarah Nickel, "'I Am Not a Women's Libber although Sometimes I Sound Like One': Indigenous Feminism and Politicized Motherhood," *American Indian Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (2017): 299–335.

15 Throughout this period Indigenous organizations frequently used the phrase "the BC Land Claim" to refer to the reality that most of the province was unceded land and untouched by treaty. The Union of BC Indian Chiefs even strategized putting forward one land claim for all British Columbia: this was part of its philosophy that the province's bands should be united. See Doreen Manuel, interview with author.

16 Doreen Manuel, interview with author; Nickel, *Assembling Unity*; The Native Women's Association of Canada, "Aboriginal Women and the Constitution Debates: Continuing Discrimination," *Canadian Woman Studies* 12, no. 3 (1992): 14–17.

17 The recent 2020 edition of *Brotherhood to Nationhood: George Manuel and the Making of the Modern Indian Movement* is a fantastic example of how, with an eye towards the gender erasures of the original work, Peter McFarlane, along with co-author Doreen Manuel (George Manuel's daughter), has rectified the historical record by including George Manuel's wife Marceline's political contributions in the narrative. Other works have likewise sought to challenge the presumption that only Indigenous men were political, while Indigenous women were social. See Madeline Knickerbocker, "Making Matriarchs at Coqualeetza: Stó:Lō Women's Politics and Histories across Generations," in *In Good Relation: History, Gender, and Kinship in Indigenous Feminisms*, eds. Sarah Nickel and Amanda Fehr (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2020), 25–47; Magee, 'For Home and Country'; Patricia Barkaskas, "The Indian Voice: Centering Women in the Gendered Politics of Indian Nationalism in BC, 1969–1984" (MA thesis, University of British Columbia, 2009); Nickel, 'I Am Not'; Nickel, *Assembling Unity*.

(St. Mary's Band) was an active force in the UBCIC during the Constitution debates, taking part in conversations around Indigenous sovereignty and supporting the Constitution Express.[18] And, when the idea for the Express emerged at the UBCIC's general assembly, coordinators decided that "all staff of the Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs were assigned to this task."[19] This was noteworthy because, though few women held UBCIC leadership roles, the organization had a number of female staff members on payroll, which at least somewhat offset the gender imbalance. Of course, this is not to suggest that staff members had the same power or influence as the mostly male UBCIC leadership, but their presence was an important feature of this political mobilization.

In planning the Constitution Express, the UBCIC set out five areas of preparation: field teams in communities, a legal team at the UBCIC, an advance team in Ottawa, a national team for political strategy, and an international team in Europe and New York.[20] Women played key roles in each of these areas – as representatives and staff members of the UBCIC, Mildred Poplar, Rosalee Tizya, Mary Louise Williams, Sharon Venne, Winona Wheeler, Janice Antoine, and Vera Manuel were just a few of the women who served as administrators, fieldworkers, researchers, and legal support for the UBCIC during this important phase.[21] Others inside and outside of UBCIC staff positions took part as legal counsel, as participants in the Constitution Express (to Ottawa, New York, and overseas), as fundraisers, as Potlatch organizers and attendees, and in groups extending from the Constitution Express, as was the case with the CAW.[22] Women's broad involvement in this political project is important not only for understanding how women shaped the Constitution Express movement but also for how they mobilized their distinct relational and kinship-based activism.

[18] URC, summarized minutes of the 6th Special General Assembly.

[19] URC, UBCIC 13th Annual General Assembly, October 1981, Information Kit, Constitution Report, Union of BC Indian Chiefs, October 1981.

[20] URC, UBCIC 13th Annual General Assembly.

[21] URC, summarized minutes of the 6th Special General Assembly; URC, UBCIC 13th Annual General Assembly.

[22] Though Louise Mandell is not an Indigenous woman, her contribution to the Constitution Express as legal counsel cannot be ignored by Indigenous Peoples and allies, nor can her dedication to the UBCIC and Indigenous Rights movement overall.

COMMUNITY-BASED EXPRESS

Indigenous women's political work had long been centred on kinship-based and community responsibilities, and women's involvement in the Constitution Express movement was no different.[23] Just as they had influenced the trajectory of the UBCIC since its inception in 1969 – demanding that socio-political issues concerning women and children be discussed alongside sovereignty, so women ensured that the Constitution Express movement reflected community concerns and directly involved the grassroots.[24] To facilitate this, UBCIC fieldworkers and other staff travelled to communities to provide details about Constitution issues and the Express. They encouraged individuals to get involved and to bring their families on the trek to strengthen their cultural and political educations. And families responded.

Interviewed by *Province* reporter Don Hunter while they waited to board the train headed to Ottawa, Lyackson Nation members Francine and Irvine Norris (with their seven-month-old son, Billy) knew few details about the Constitution Express and what it hoped to accomplish, but they were determined to go as a family. When pressed by Hunter about why they had chosen to join, Irvine explained simply: "It has to do with my people."[25] With this brief statement, Irvine captured important sentiments about the power of community and solidarity, and the necessity of mobilizing when his "people" needed him. Twenty-one-year-old Gus Pierre of the Syilx Nation in Penticton gave a similar reason for his involvement, noting: "I am going because my Elders are going. I am going to be with them."[26] This kinship-driven activism meant that Pierre and others did not need to be well appraised of the political issues at hand; rather, they just needed to follow the lead of their Elders, who would guide, direct, and educate them.

On board the trains, the primacy of kinship and community was unmistakeable, with participants taking part in drumming, storytelling, visiting, and sharing traditional foods – activities that were focused on

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23 Susan Applegate Krouse and Heather Howard-Bobiwash, eds., *Keeping the Campfires Going: Native Women's Activism in Urban Communities* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2009); Susan Lobo, "Urban Clan Mothers: Key Households in Cities," *American Indian Quarterly* 27, nos. 3/4 (2003): 505–23; Nickel, "I Am Not"; Aroha Harris and Mary Jane Logan McCallum, "'Assaulting the Ears of Government': The Indian Homemakers' Clubs and the Maori Women's Welfare League in Their Formative Years," in *Indigenous Women and Work*, 225–39; Suzack et al., *Indigenous Women and Feminism*; Carol Williams, ed., *Indigenous Women and Work: From Labor to Activism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012).

24 Elsewhere I have shown how Indigenous women and grassroots members influenced the political organization and activities of the UBCIC. See Nickel, *Assembling Unity*.

25 Don Hunter, "Indian Baby Goes on Protest Ride," *Province*, 25 November 1980, D8.

26 Hunter.

cultural closeness and well-being – in addition to more formal political activities like workshops. Trekkers recalled, with pride, the communal and supportive nature of the event as well as the personal and financial sacrifices made to take part, including leaving their jobs, paying their fares, and sleeping uncomfortably in their seats while children found spaces to sleep on the floors of the trains.

These types of communal arrangements were not accidental but were grounded in part in political ideology and in part in necessity. As mentioned above, Indigenous women's political goals prioritized improving community and family conditions; however, equally important, some women's ongoing domestic responsibilities required that activists incorporate their voluntary political work into child and Elder care demands. Whereas male activists regularly travelled to conduct political work while their children stayed behind, Indigenous women were typically not afforded the same accommodations.[27] Simply put, Indigenous women could not participate in political activities that took them away from their homes unless children and elderly family members came along. These realities reflected the type of event the Constitution Express was, but they also helped shape it.

This was not a delegation of individual Chiefs delivering a petition to government that they had confirmed at a private UBCIC meeting governed by Robert's Rules of Order. Nor was it a radical and isolated protest taken on only by individual members of a community frustrated with political progress. It was a complex event that encapsulated the bureaucracy and organizational efforts of the UBCIC and the ideological, political, and practical needs of the grassroots expressed through direct action and activated through broad community involvement. Because it was inclusive, it also had to be responsive to the needs of its participants – young and old. There had to be space for children's entertainment and education as well as accommodations for some Elders' decreased mobility and comfort needs. And these considerations were all part of the organizational efforts. Through their involvement in its coordination and execution, then, Indigenous women helped to democratize Indigenous politics – shifting constitutional issues away from the sole

[27] Personal conversation with Margaret Beament, 14 October 2020; Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan (PAS), Indian and Native Affairs Secretariat, Collection R-1453, files 1.250, Saskatchewan Native Women's Association – statement on subsidy, 1981, Omamwi-Atoskewin, Working Together Conference, Expense Claim, 22–25 November 1981, Regina, Saskatchewan; Annual Conference, 1979, 28 June 1979 to 26 November 1979, Secretary of State, "Grant Application Form," 19 October 1979, Library and Archives Canada (LAC), Citizenship Sector, Native Women's Association of Canada, RG 6-F, box 21, file 9256-F, 1989-90/157 GAD.

purview of elected Chiefs and councils to something legible, accessible, and negotiable for the grassroots.

Some mainstream media outlets, however, saw things differently and focused instead on images of masculine violence rather than on community inclusivity. Across the pages of the *Ottawa Citizen*, in particular, participants were cast as angry warriors on a historic mission to combat their forgotten status within Canada, with references to bomb threats, riot gear, barricades, and Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) infiltration.[28] This was not a historical abnormality; rather, it was built on generations of settler colonial policies and fears about Indigenous resistance that directly contributed to the longstanding dismissal of Indigenous politics as legitimate as well as to the criminalization of Indigenous Peoples broadly and in relation to political resistance. Lisa Monchalin, Patricia Monture-Angus, Sarah Carter, and Joan Sangster have definitively proven the connection between gendered moral regulation, class, colonialism, and race and the over-incarceration of Indigenous People for crimes of public order, poverty, and morality.[29] Simply being Indigenous (and even more so being an Indigenous woman) in settler colonial spaces, as Sherene Razack reminds us, was justification for state repression.[30]

In fact, Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark is clear that the gendered nature of criminality under settler colonialism was necessary to assert state sovereignty. Stark proves this in her exploration of the ways men's political authority, recognized through the treaty process, had to be stripped by colonial agents who constructed them as "savages, criminals, and lawless figures," while women, who had been sidelined in the treaty

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[28] Iain Hunter, "Anger behind Warrior's Song Aboard Constitutional Express," *Citizen* (Ottawa), 27 November 1980, 1 and 77; Iain Hunter, "Indians' Long Trek 'Effort of Will,'" *Citizen* (Ottawa), 28 November 1980; Iain Hunter, "Indians on 'Historic Mission,'" *Citizen* (Ottawa), 29 November 1980, n.p; UBCIC Resource Centre, Constitution Express, 1980, newspaper clippings; Peter Maser, "Indians Claim Infiltration by RCMP," *Citizen* (Ottawa); Aileen McCabe, "RCMP Riot Barriers to Be Removed," *Citizen* (Ottawa), 30 November 1980; "Bomb Threat Halts Express," *Citizen* (Prince George), 27 November 1980, 1.

[29] Joan Sangster, "Criminalizing the Colonized: Ontario Native Women Confront the Criminal Justice System," *Canadian Historical Review* 80, no. 1 (1999): 32–60; Lisa Monchalin, *The Colonial Problem: An Indigenous Perspective on Crime and Injustice in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016); Sarah Turnbull, *Parole in Canada: Gender and Diversity in the Federal System* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016); Patricia Monture-Angus, "Women and Risk: Aboriginal Women, Colonialism, and Correctional Practice," *Canadian Woman Studies* 19, no. 12 (1999): 24–29; Danielle Bird, "Negotiating Successful Transitions: 'Criminalized' Indigenous Women in Saskatchewan" (MA thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 2020).

[30] Sherene H. Razack, "Gendered Racial Violence and Spatialized Justice: The Murder of Pamela George," in *Race, Space, and the Law: Unmapping a White Settler Society* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2002), 121–56; Sherene Razack, Malinda S. Smith, and Sunera Thobani, *States of Race: Critical Race Feminism for the 21st Century* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2010).

process, were controlled through domesticity.[31] Stark traces this long-standing connection between political resistance and criminalization using examples of nineteenth-century Indigenous political struggles in Canada and the United States to understand how these were "recast as criminal activities … enabl[ing] these two states to *reduce* Indigenous political authority, domesticating Indigenous nations within the settler state, while *producing* the settler nation-state and its accompanying legitimating judicial narratives."[32] In the Red Power era of the 1960s and 1970s, settler descriptions of Indigenous masculine militancy and the presumed threat of radical Indigenous men intensified state resistance to Indigenous activism, prompting increased surveillance over Indigenous Peoples' activities and the further erasure of Indigenous women and children as key figures on the frontlines of these struggles.[33]

What this means is that not only did media and state agents such as government ministers and members of the RCMP (who stopped and searched the Constitution Express trains under the guise of there being a bomb threat) misunderstand who participated in direct action in such events,[34] but they also presumed these actions were inherently militant with the potential for violence and, therefore, illegitimate.[35] Express participants rejected this blatant profiling, insisting the community-driven event concentrated on sharing ideas and cultural values, understanding nationhood, and seeking valid rights recognition through an appropriate political channel that included peaceful protest.[36] Indeed, Stó:lō Nation member Lila Peters explained that the Constitution Express helped her to understand what "having rights" meant, highlighting the ways she was politically transformed through her involvement. But Peters was by no means a violent warrior.[37] This did not mean, of course, that the Indigenous Rights revolution the Constitution Express architects and participants were trying to build was innocuous. Canadian state

[31] Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark, "Criminal Empire: The Making of the Savage in a Lawless Land," *Theory & Event* 19, no. 4 (2016), muse.jhu.edu/article/633282.

[32] Stark, emphasis in the original.

[33] For a more fulsome discussion of these issues, see Scott Rutherford, "Canada's Other Red Scare: The Anicinabe Park Occupation and Indigenous Decolonization," in *The Hidden 1970s: Histories of Radicalism*, ed. Dan Berger (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 77–96; Scott Rutherford, *Canada's Other Red Scare: Indigenous Protest and Colonial Encounters during the Global Sixties* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020); Nickel, *Assembling Unity*.

[34] Arthur Manuel and Ronald Derrickson, *Unsettling Canada: A National Wake-up Call* (Toronto: Between the Lines Press, 2015).

[35] Nickel, *Assembling Unity*.

[36] Archie Pootlass, "Constitution Express to Ottawa," *Indian World* 4, no. 1 (1981): 13.

[37] Lila Peters, "Constitution Express to Ottawa," *Indian World* 4, no. 1 (1981): 13.

agents had plenty to be concerned about in Indigenous Peoples' bid for sovereignty – including the unseen but intensifying work of Indigenous women – but bombs and weapons on the Constitution Express were not one of them.

CONSTITUTION POTLATCHES

The struggle for rights would continue beyond the Constitution Express, particularly as it became clear that the federal government remained unmoved by the caravan, and UBCIC president George Manuel quickly regrouped to redirect protest. As the Express ended and participants returned home, through community Potlatches they continued to pursue their broader political goals of strengthening unity and initiating fundraising for the next iteration of the Constitution Express in Europe. In many ways, the Kamloops Potlatch gave legs to the Constitution movement. For some, the fact that people had travelled to Kamloops at their own expense from all across British Columbia suggested that they could send a delegation to England without government support.[38] And the Kamloops gathering did more than just provide a plan for the continued Constitution Express: it also initiated another prong of the movement, whereby Indigenous Peoples across the province could "[gather] together to talk, share, sing, dance, and generally bring back the Indian way of life."[39] That this was not a one-time event but, rather, that it spurred seven other such gatherings reveals that Indigenous Peoples across British Columbia saw value in continued community get-togethers and felt uplifted and supported in these unified, pan-Indigenous settings.

Potlatches, like the Constitution Express, were also governed by strict rules prohibiting drugs and alcohol consumption as well as duties around preparing meals, taking part in the ceremony, and maintaining the gathering sites.[40] At each event, participants were introduced to the cultural specificities of that region. In Bella Coola, Nuxalk hereditary Chief Lawrence Pootlass introduced the newcomers (many of whom had never been to Nuxalk territory) to traditional coastal food, including "salmon, oolichan, herring eggs, and of course, Indian steak (bologna)."[41] And, at each gathering, it was evident that community

[38] URC, summarized minutes of the 6th Special General Assembly; URC, UBCIC 13th Annual General Assembly.

[39] URC, summarized minutes of the 6th Special General Assembly.

[40] "Constitutional Express Potlatches," *Indian World* 4, no. 3 (1981): 8; Chief Ron John, "In the News ...," *Indian World* 4, no. 1 (1981): 24. Reprinted from *Chawathil Newsletter*.

[41] "Constitutional Express Potlatches," *Indian World* 4, no. 3 (1981): 8.

people were standing behind their leaders' bid to prevent the patriation of the Constitution. Reflecting on what the summer had brought for the Constitution Express movement, George Manuel explained:

> Many of us took our experience back to our communities and began to build. The "Constitution Song," written by the people on the Express became a War Cry of our nations. As the year passed, more and more of our songs were being heard again as people picked up their silent drums and began to beat. More and more gatherings, give-aways, and potlatches were being held around the Province. The young people began to get excited and began to understand the power of our nationhood through our ceremonies.[42]

Of course, the significance of holding Potlatches in Indigenous communities was not lost on participants, given the Canadian government's historic Potlatch ban between 1885 and 1951.[43] For some communities, this was the first Potlatch they had held since the practice was outlawed. In Bella Coola, participants noted that it had been sixty-five years since the last Potlatch – which meant that, while the Nuxalk Nation continued to hold Potlatches well into the ban, it did not immediately return to the practice once it was no longer illegal.[44]

Still, the historic ban continued to weigh heavily on peoples' minds, particularly as they were met with a heavy state presence.[45] At Gilford Island, for instance, Wayne Christian noted "the RCMP were harassing those boats that were taking people over there. They fined a couple of the men on those skippers, something like $2,000 for having no lifejackets. If you remember back when they outlawed the Potlatch, they did the same type of activities they are beginning again."[46] For Christian, police presence was highly symbolic of state intervention and represented continued attempts to assimilate Indigenous Peoples into Canadian culture. Though RCMP activities were not directly related to the legality of the Potlatch, attendees interpreted this otherwise, and were left feeling targeted and harassed as Indigenous Peoples attempting to express their cultural freedoms.[47] The extent to which communities organized and

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[42] URC, minutes of the 13th UBCIC Annual General Assembly, 28 October 1981, 37.

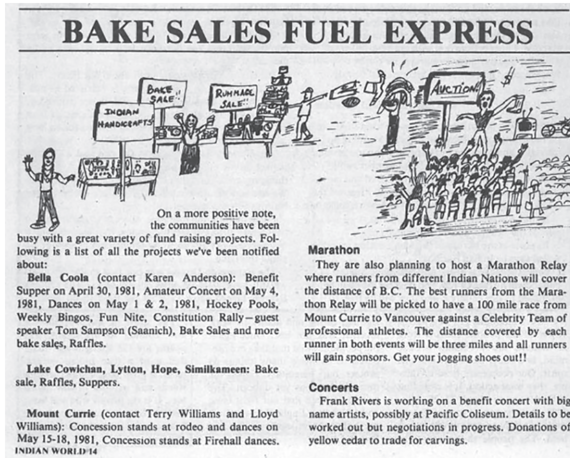
[43] Leslie A. Robertson and Kwagu'ł Gixsam Clan, *Standing up with Ga'axsta'las: Jane Constance Cook and the Politics of Memory, Church, and Custom* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2012); Douglas Cole and Ira Chaikin, *An Iron Hand upon the People: The Law against the Potlatch on the Northwest Coast* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1990).

[44] URC, minutes of the 13th UBCIC Annual General Assembly, 29 October 1981, 111.

[45] URC, 112.

[46] URC, 112.

[47] URC, 112.



BAKE SALES FUEL EXPRESS

On a more positive note, the communities have been busy with a great variety of fund raising projects. Following is a list of all the projects we've been notified about:

Bella Coola (contact Karen Anderson): Benefit Supper on April 30, 1981, Amateur Concert on May 4, 1981, Dances on May 1 & 2, 1981, Hockey Pools, Weekly Bingos, Fun Nite, Constitution Rally—guest speaker Tom Sampson (Saanich), Bake Sales and more bake sales, Raffles.

Lake Cowichan, Lytton, Hope, Similkameen: Bake sale, Raffles, Suppers.

Mount Currie (contact Terry Williams and Lloyd Williams): Concession stands at rodeo and dances on May 15-18, 1981, Concession stands at Firehall dances.

Marathon

They are also planning to host a Marathon Relay where runners from different Indian Nations will cover the distance of B.C. The best runners from the Marathon Relay will be picked to have a 100 mile race from Mount Currie to Vancouver against a Celebrity Team of professional athletes. The distance covered by each runner in both events will be three miles and all runners will gain sponsors. Get your jogging shoes out!!

Concerts

Frank Rivers is working on a benefit concert with big name artists, possibly at Pacific Coliseum. Details to be worked out but negotiations in progress. Donations of yellow cedar to trade for carvings.

INDIAN WORLD 14

Figure 2. Fundraising Notices. *Source*: *Indian World* 4, no. 1 (1981): 4.

facilitated Potlatches under the auspices of the Constitution Express indicates that, just as Indigenous Peoples resisted the Potlatch ban as it "became a major factor in the emergence of a sense of injustice," so, too, did 1980s participants see the now legal Potlatches as symbols of resistance.[48]

The Constitution Potlatches and community fundraising activities supported these efforts and drew heavily on the expertise, experience, and frequently unseen labour of Indigenous women. At the local level, communities across the province held bingos, raffles, concerts, suppers, and craft and bake sales, and these were orchestrated by local women who had extensive experience using these methods.[49] Each of these activities relied on Indigenous women's home production skills and event management, and drew on their longstanding contributions to political fundraising, whereby they would sell beadwork, baskets, and leatherwork to fund Chiefs' and delegates' travel to meetings and conferences, community improvement initiatives, and, later, to fund work in their

[48] Forrest LaViolette, *The Struggle for Survival: Indian Cultures and the Protestant Ethic in British Columbia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), 97.

[49] "Bake Sales Fuel Express," *Indian World* 4, no. 1 (1981): 14; Sarah Nickel, "Sewing the Threads of Resilience: Twentieth-Century Indian Homemakers Clubs in Western Canada," in *From Suffragette to Homesteader: Exploring British and Canadian Colonial Histories and Women's Politics through Memoir*, ed. Emily Van der Meullen (Halifax: Fernwood, 2018), 157–74; Sarah Nickel, "'Making an Honest Effort': Indian Homemakers' Clubs and Complex Settler Engagements," in *In Good Relation: History, Gender, and Kinship in Indigenous Feminisms*, eds. Sarah Nickel and Amanda Fehr (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2020).

own associations.[50] At the UBCIC general assembly in October 1981, Neskonlith member Jenny Manuel announced a raffle, which included prizes such as a Secwépemc-made Indian government-themed quilt, a hand drum, and a birchbark basket – all produced by local women.[51] It is not surprising that, with a captive and engaged audience at the UBCIC assembly, tickets sold quickly, and all the proceeds went to the Constitution Express fund.

Women organized larger events as well, including an art auction, "Moccathon" walk, and "Indian Theme weeks," in shopping malls across the Lower Mainland. These "feature[ed] Indian dancing, food, carvers and people with their handicrafts," and were similar to the booths set up by the BC Indian Homemakers' Association (BCIHA) throughout the 1970s and 1980s at the Pacific National Exhibition and other events.[52] But the "Moccathon" walk was perhaps the strongest nod to the previous work of Indigenous women's organizations in British Columbia.[53] In 1969, the provincial BCIHA had organized several successful walks known as "Moccasin Miles" to raise money to hold an "All Chiefs Conference" that year.[54] This conference, which resulted in the creation of the UBCIC, demonstrated the importance of women's moral, political, and financial support in forwarding the Indigenous Rights movement as well as the continued use of women's fundraising strategies.[55] Women's contributions, then, were integral to the advancement of the Indigenous Rights movement, but they tended to go unrecognized – cast as social or domestic work rather than as political labour.

Beyond organized fundraising, Indigenous women also directly donated funds to the cause. Donna Anthony of Neskonlith[56] proudly reported to the UBCIC special general assembly that she and her band "ha[d] committed [them]selves … to begin fundraising to send as many people as [they could] to England."[57] Other communities responded

[50] *Beading Red: The Red Paper Through Generations,* executive producers Shalene Jobin, Conor McNally, Tanya Kappo, and Tara Kappo (Edmonton: RedcoolMedia, 2021), https://www.redcoolmedia.net/download/videos/cinema/video-beading-red-the-red-paper-through-generations; Nickel, *Assembling Unity*. Sewing also played a predominant socio-political role in Indigenous women's clubs as they produced sewn items for charity in their communities and personal use, but also engaged in piecework contracts with the Department of Health and Welfare to sew items for patients in the segregated Indian hospitals. For more on this, see Nickel, "Sewing the Threads."

[51] URC, minutes of the 13th UBCIC Annual General Assembly, 28 October 1981, 67.

[52] Ron George, "Constitution Express Fundraising," *Indian World* 4, no. 2 (1981): 15.

[53] Nickel, "Making an Honest Effort."

[54] Nickel, *Assembling Unity*, 31.

[55] Nickel, *Assembling Unity*, 23–31.

[56] Also "Neskainlith" in the records.

[57] URC, minutes of the 13th UBCIC Annual General Assembly, 28 October 1981, 67.

in kind. During the October UBCIC general assembly, after George Manuel announced participants would be paying their own way to Europe, a few bands began pledging donations, generally in the realm of $2,000. These dollars were significant – revealing important community political buy-in, but it was an individual pledge from Marceline Manuel of the Ktunaxa Nation that initiated a burst of donations that would exceed $12,000 for that day alone.[58] With her relatively modest pledge of ten dollars, Manuel expressed concern that the patriation of the Constitution would threaten her nation's lands and noted that she was donating not only as an individual concerned for those lands but also a "Concerned Aboriginal Woman."[59]

Three months earlier, the phrase "Concerned Aboriginal Woman" might have generally referenced the anxieties many Indigenous women had about conditions in their communities – the lack of services for health, welfare, education, and employment – conditions that prompted many to get involved with the Constitution Express and community Potlatches. But by October it was synonymous with an ongoing political movement driven by Indigenous women who first staged a takeover of the DIA that directly challenged its political authority and male-dominated Indigenous leadership, and then took part in the European Constitution Express by mobilizing its members' identities as Indigenous women and mothers.

CONCERNED ABORIGINAL WOMEN

At the Lytton Potlatch, the CAW members united over their frustration with the federal government's long history of ignoring issues facing Indigenous Peoples. They visited and shared stories about how they and their children *felt* colonialism (in Million's framing), and this provided key consciousness raising and fuel for a political response.[60] According to the UBCIC's publication *Indian World*: "many of them had stories of their children dying by suicide because of the injustices done upon our people. Others talked of parents, grandparents and children dying in house fires because of DIA poor quality houses. Others talked of the boarding [residential] schools and their experiences there. Some talked of alcoholism and the paternalistic attitude of the government."[61] The event provided space for women to connect across communities and to

[58] URC, minutes of the 13th UBCIC Annual General Assembly, 29 October 1981, 105.

[59] URC, minutes of the 13th UBCIC Annual General Assembly, 28 October 1981, 44.

[60] Million, "Felt Theory."

[61] "Concerned Aboriginal Women's Occupation," *Indian World* 4, no. 3 (1981): 12.

share similar experiences, which were removed from the direct concerns of the Constitution and other political considerations, and at times they could directly challenge them. For instance, the women recognized that, in their leaders' bid to have Indigenous Rights entrenched in the Constitution, issues like women's status under the *Indian Act* were not at the forefront of their minds. But the CAW and other Indigenous women's groups understood that the question of Indigenous Rights, and who might benefit from those Rights, was inherently connected to citizenship status.[62] Thus, patriarchal definitions of citizenship needed to be disrupted.

Unlike NWAC, which directly challenged sexism through lobbying efforts and protest, the CAW took a different approach. Discouraged by their political exclusion and the DIA's attitudes and remoteness (the regional office in Vancouver was geographically and symbolically removed from many of their nations), the women hatched a plan to travel to Vancouver the following day to stage a takeover.[63] The dual critique implicit in their actions is important as their decision to pursue direct action was a restrained but clear criticism of their leaders' inability to motivate government action in these particular areas of concern. And the depth of their frustration was evident: by the time they arrived at the fifteenth-floor offices, the group consisted of ninety members (excluding children).[64]

In a recorded message to the DIA, a spokesperson for the occupation explained: "We feel our people have suffered enough. We as Aboriginal women have suffered enough. For this we have occupied the Department of Indian Affairs Office."[65] The speaker then outlined the group's demands, which included: the resignation of Regional Director Fred Walchli; a meeting with Minister of Indian Affairs John Munro; and a

62 Nickel, *Assembling Unity*, 154–55; Kathleen Jamieson, "Sex Discrimination and the Indian Act," in *Arduous Journey: Canadian Indians and Decolonization*, ed. J. Rick Ponting (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986), 112–36; Barker, "Gender, Sovereignty, and the Discourse Rights";; Green, *Making Space*; Million, "Felt Theory.".

63 URC, UBCIC 13th Annual General Assembly.

64 *Concerned Aboriginal Women Occupy the Department of Indian Affairs*, directed by Amelia Productions (Vancouver: Amelia Productions, 1981), DVD. This would not be the first time Indigenous Peoples across the province occupied DIA's regional offices. In 1975, a group of individuals, some from the UBCIC, the American Indian Movement, and individual communities occupied the offices as a part of a month-long direct action strategy designed to forward the BC Indian Land Claim and Indigenous sovereignty. This action, though limited in many ways, prompted many to see the value in direct action strategies, and the CAW was able to capitalize on this recent action as well as the pressure from the Constitution Express. For more on the 1975 DIAs occupations, see: Nickel, *Assembling Unity*.

65 *Concerned Aboriginal Women,* DVD.

full investigation of the DIA.[66] The group refused to leave the building until its demands were met.[67] Holding signs with messages that included "Trudeau is an oppressor. Wants genocide of the Aboriginal people of Canada," the group drummed and sang songs. This was a powerful dichotomy – by naming the state violence against Indigenous Peoples alongside peaceful and culturally meaningful drumming, the protestors exposed the hypocrisy of a state determined not only to eradicate Indigenous Peoples by failing its fiduciary duties but also to dismiss Indigenous Peoples as radical militants when the violence, in fact, flowed the opposite way.

Despite the peaceful and organized nature of the event, and significant support by allies, including the Union of BC Indian Chiefs, the National Indian Brotherhood, the Indian Association of Alberta, the Indian Women's Council of Manitoba, and the World Council of Indigenous Peoples, on the fourth day of the occupation, a number of sheriffs arrived to serve a court order to the occupiers, demanding they vacate the building.[68] In documentary footage, the group listened quietly and respectfully as a sheriff read the court order, but the women ultimately remained unmoved. They were not willing to end the occupation before their demands were met, and, while they knowingly posed a threat to the existing social order of Indian policy, their presence at the DIA offices, they argued, in itself was not threatening. In fact, during this tense exchange with the sheriffs, as if on cue, a crying baby and children's laughter could be heard in the background, reminding state agents that this was both a family event and a peaceful protest, but it also reminded them that many participants had multiple duties to perform in those offices besides protest.[69] Not only were women using peaceful direct action to respond to their everyday experiences under a colonial and capitalist system while simultaneously pushing for Indigenous Rights and sovereignty, but children were ever present because, as mentioned above, they needed to be.

Still, DIA officials looked to dismiss the women by discrediting their authority – drawing explicitly from their patriarchal understandings of Indigenous politics. During the occupation, Walchli again asked the women which organization they were part of and whether they had

[66] URC, UBCIC 13th Annual General Assembly.

[67] *Concerned Aboriginal Women,* DVD.

[68] *Concerned Aboriginal Women,* DVD; telexes supporting the Concerned Aboriginal Women, Canadian Women's Movement Archives Fonds, no. 19, file 20, Concerned Aboriginal Women, University of Ottawa Archives and Special Collections.

[69] Telexes supporting the Concerned Aboriginal Women.

approval from their band councils to stage this action. Walchli could not accept or understand that participants were acting independently. This represented a patriarchal and paternalistic understanding of women's political powers – assuming that they operated only through established, male-dominated, and state-recognized political structures, when in fact their presence signified a distinct refusal of those structures.

Walchli's line of questioning was not only about trying to confirm the legitimacy of the women's actions but also about how he might resolve the situation through other means – namely, monetary means. By asking women about their political authority, Walchli was, in essence, trying to determine to which government-funded organization or band council the women were accountable. Since the women had no formal organization and were not representing their councils, "he couldn't blackmail these women into backing down [because] there was nothing he could take away or threaten to take away from them."[70] This was a well-established government strategy – the withholding of organizational funding, treaty payments, relief, and rations to secure desired outcomes and Indigenous deference.[71] The irony here was that the women's political and financial inequalities actually served to empower their position during the occupation and beyond.

Indeed, the type of grassroots organizing advanced by the CAW was effective in large part because it did not depend on endorsement by such political entities as Chiefs and councils, male-dominated Indigenous political organizations, or the settler state. This was, in itself, a refusal of definitions of patriarchal citizenship. The women did not need to be "recognized" by band leadership to politically assert themselves. And, while they lacked financial security, women, being unencumbered by bureaucracy, could be flexible and responsive, able to act according to their own needs in short order. They could – as they proved – decide to occupy the DIA offices on one day and arrive in great numbers the following day. And while grassroots actions were regularly dismissed by state agents as not being representative of broader community will – thus allowing occupiers to be labelled as troublemakers or even as foreign radicals, as was the case with the 1975 takeover of the DIA in Vancouver – in this moment it was difficult to ignore such a large and

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[70] "Concerned Aboriginal Women's Occupation," *Indian World* 4, no. 3 (1981): 12; *Concerned Aboriginal Women*, DVD.

[71] James W. Daschuk, *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life* (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2013); Hugh Shewell, *'Enough to Keep Them Alive' – Indian Social Welfare in Canada, 1873–1965* (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 2004); Robin Brownlie, *A Fatherly Eye: Indian Agents, Government Power, and Aboriginal Resistance in Ontario, 1918–1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014).

cohesive group of women, united in their concerns and refusing to leave Walchli's office.[72] The DIA was forced to respond.

By day seven, Senator Raymond Perrault was brought in to mediate in a bid to end the occupation. The women were receptive to Perrault, in part because they had reached a stalemate and wanted a peaceful and productive solution. They asked that he listen to their grievances in good faith without interrupting and said that they, in turn, would offer him the same. Perrault agreed, noting that he wanted to hear evidence of their concerns.[73] One by one, women took to the microphone, detailing issues such as the crumbling foundations and bad wiring in the homes on their reserves, the ongoing impact of residential schooling, the high number of child welfare apprehensions in their communities, the lack of jobs, and the impact of welfare handouts on their people.

Women were staunch in their insistence that communities were proactive and creative in their attempts to build economic capacity but that they came up against DIA barriers. One woman spoke at length about her community's dedication to training people in heavy equipment operation and other skills for economic development projects only to have DIA contract work out. "Our people have hands, they want to work," she explained: "It isn't that we want more welfare, we want jobs. Like any other human being, we want the dignity to earn for our families and ourselves."[74] Several speakers challenged the usefulness of social assistance payments, and one Elder pointed out the paradox of Indigenous Peoples getting so-called handouts from a government operating on unceded lands. "It seems to me," she began, "where this building stands, you haven't paid for the land. You'll have to remove this building, so I can stand on my own ground. You're trespassing."[75] The connection between the everyday suffering of Indigenous Peoples under settler colonialism and the need for Indigenous sovereignty was clear, and, in this way, Indigenous women were taking up some of the same arguments as the Indigenous Rights movement, albeit in a different forum.

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[72] In May 1975, Indigenous activists from the UBCIC, grassroots, and American Indian Movement occupied the same regional DIA office in downtown Vancouver to protest the unsettled BC Land Question. DIA regional director Larry Wight dismissed the action as the work of foreign militants, who, he suggested, had co-opted the BC movement. Wight connected the occupation with similar efforts by AIM in the United States at the time, and incorrectly assumed that AIM was a movement limited to the US without strong local expression in Canada. See Nickel, *Assembling Unity*, 134–36.

[73] *Concerned Aboriginal Women,* DVD.

[74] *Concerned Aboriginal Women*, DVD.

[75] *Concerned Aboriginal Women*, DVD.

In the end, while Perrault promised to make recommendations and lend his support to addressing the concerns outlined by the women, fifteen hours after his meeting with the group (on day eight of the occupation), the Vancouver City Police moved in and forcibly removed the women from the offices. As they were being carried out one by one, they continued to sing and drum, and their determination to maintain their position to the very end was palpable.[76] All told, fifty-three individuals were held overnight in the Vancouver city jail and charged with public mischief. That night supporters held a vigil outside the jail, and in the following days and weeks, the CAW and its allies continued to press for their cause through rallies and other events, noting they had nothing left to lose.[77] For many members of the CAW, the stories that had motivated the occupation as well as the testimony provided to Perrault had laid bare the multiple, overlapping, and ultimately unbearable conditions under which they were living, and they were determined to continue fighting for justice using whatever methods they could. The occupation was just the beginning.

Three months after the occupation, eight members of the CAW joined the advance Constitution Express team in Europe. This signified several things, including the CAW's important contribution to the movement, its recognition as an established group, and its resolve to influence the movement's overall message. With five children in tow, the women divided their duties, with Terry Williams heading to Paris while the rest of the group (including Vera Manuel, Lorna Meagan, Sylvia Woods, Dinah Schooner, Gaye Williams, and Karen Anderson) travelled to Holland, where they joined members from the legal team. From there, the women travelled in pairs to speaking engagements across Europe in the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, and, finally, England.[78] In these forums, the women shared similar stories of what had prompted the creation of the CAW and the DIA occupation, and shrewdly integrated these issues into discussions of the Constitution and the recognition of Indigenous Rights.

In this way, the CAW's participation in the Constitution Express in Europe reveals critical political nuances. In carrying their own messages of everyday sovereignty and nationhood, Indigenous women brought a distinctly humanizing element to the capital-"P" political issues and were able to reach diverse audiences and appeal to their empathy in ways that

[76] *Concerned Aboriginal Women*, DVD; telexes supporting the Concerned Aboriginal Women.

[77] Telexes supporting the Concerned Aboriginal Women.

[78] Vera Manuel, "Concerned Aboriginal Women Return Home from Europe," *Indian World* 4, no. 4 (1981): 10.

other leaders could not. This was essential to building a strong global base of political support. Indigenous women likewise had new platforms that enabled them to continue their general critiques of male-dominated politics (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) that continued to exclude them from several meaningful political conversations about status, citizenship, and rights.

CONCLUSION

As grassroots members, Indigenous women pushed the boundaries of the Indigenous Rights movement beyond the macro-political concerns of patriation and sovereignty, which many male leaders perceived as gender neutral but that actually excluded women as citizens. Women insisted that their everyday community concerns be taken up simultaneously with other concerns. It was not enough to simply participate in the Constitution Express to forward the Constitution: it was also necessary to make space for parallel efforts, such as critiquing the DIA's failure to provide adequate housing, education, and employment. Indigenous women were active in multiple and overlapping political spaces. This clearly demonstrates their political fluency and wide-ranging capacity to both support and influence the Indigenous Rights movement. It also showcases the messiness and multivocality of women's political involvement, which does not always fit neatly into simplified and dichotomous understandings of gendered political work. Lack of recognition, voice, and vote in key political spaces prompted women to mobilize in whatever arenas they could – and we do a disservice to the Indigenous Rights movement by failing to see how Indigenous women mobilized community efforts – grounded, at times, in tough conversations about which political priorities should be taken up. And this ultimately democratized the movement and made it more responsive to community. Women's political participations was not "auxiliary" work that was siloed off from the male-dominated movement – as it is represented not only in some of the historical literature but also in historical consciousness about Indigenous politics. It was foundational. And this work continues today.

The CAW and Indigenous women's actions are the product of this salient political and historical moment, but they also provide key lessons to those concerned with ongoing Indigenous political struggles today. Women's formal political capital has improved since the 1980s, but Indigenous women's and 2SLGTBIQ political organizations are still underfunded compared to male-dominated associations, even though

Indigenous women and 2SLGTBIQ people continue to lead in frontline struggles. They do this through ad hoc and grassroots organizing around the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG), sexual and reproductive health, child welfare, environmental protections, and land and resource rights (and many more). Like the CAW, groups like the Native Women's Association of Canada,[79] Idle No More,[80] the Native Youth Sexual Health Network,[81] 1492 Land Back Lane,[82] and Tiny House Warriors,[83] in addition to facilitating the political leadership of those often marginalized elsewhere, also directly challenge the patriarchal foundation of colonial systems, calling for broad structural transformations. Building on central lessons from the CAW and other grassroots organizing promotes more democratized expressions of decolonization and Indigenous sovereignty.

[79] Formed in 1974 as a national coordinating organization of thirteen Native women's organizations, the Native Women's Association of Canada advocates for the socio-political, economic, and cultural rights of all Indigenous women. https://www.nwac.ca.

[80] Idle No More began in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, in November 2012 with a teach-in about Bill C-45's environmental attacks on Indigenous lands and resources. It was led by Sylvia McAdam, Jess Gordon, Nina Wilson, and Sheelah Mclean. The movement has since expanded to support decolonialization efforts and Indigenous Rights recognition, and continues to be led by women. https://idlenomore.ca.

[81] The Native Youth Sexual Health Network is a transnational organization run by and for Indigenous youth to address issues of sexual and reproductive health, rights, and justice. https://www.nativeyouthsexualhealth.com/what-we-do.

[82] A protest site but also known as a land defence movement, 1492 Land Back Lane has been a site of ongoing Haudenosaunee protest since July 2020. Land defenders are disputing development in Caledonia, Ontario, as part of a longstanding rejection of claims to settler ownership. The lands in question were included in the Haldimand Proclamation of 1784, and, as of 2 July 2021, the protest has succeeded in cancelling the proposed housing development that prompted the latest blockade. This movement is led by Haudenosaunee women who, in order to protect their safety, are unnamed. https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/1492-land-back-lane.

[83] A movement led by Secwepémc women Kanahus Manuel, Mayuk Manuel, Isha Jules, and Snutetkwe Manuel, Tiny House Warriors is a land defender group that uses the strategic construction of tiny houses along the line of the Trans Mountain pipeline, where it crosses unceded Secwepémc Territory. http://www.tinyhousewarriors.com.