

The Making of a Colonial Archive: The Royal Commission on the Status of Women

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Abstract

The Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada (RCSW), embedded in liberal hegemonic feminist ideology, is largely the landscape that influenced and continues to influence the simultaneous politicising and depoliticisation of the mainstream women's movement in Canada since the 1970s. The testimonies and recommendations of the RCSW predominately represented the needs and voices of white, heterosexual, Anglophone and Francophone, able-bodied, middle-class women. Using an intersectional critical race feminist framework, this article analyses the "making" of RCSW "against the grain" in relation to discourses of nation-building and racialisation. Drawing on extensive historical archival data and relevant in-depth expert interviews, I argue that the RCSW as a colonial archive furthered nation-building projects while crystallising Indigenous women and women of colour as the Other. The article illustrates how the feminist organisation, Vancouver Status of Women, is embedded in the colonial archive of the RCSW, one that reproduced nation-building discourses of essentialism, racialisation, and exclusion.

Keywords: hegemonic feminism; colonial archive; nation-building; Royal Commission

Introduction

The Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada (RCSW), embedded in hegemonic liberal feminist ideology, is largely the landscape that influenced the simultaneous politicising and depoliticisation of the mainstream women's movement in Canada since the 1970s. Some women and their communities have benefited from this Royal Commission, but we cannot deny that it also

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engaged in essentialism and exclusion of the needs of women who are often constructed as “Other” (Arscott 1996; St. Lewis 1997; Turpel-Lafond 1997). The thoughts and recommendations of the RCSW predominantly represented the needs and voices of white, heterosexual, Anglophone and Francophone, able-bodied, middle-class women who were most visible in the Canadian women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s (Freeman 1998). Therefore, the RCSW is both a counter-hegemonic and a hegemonic record, as it challenges state legislated gender oppression while reinforcing processes of exclusion for marginalised groups of women, in particular racialised women across interlocking identities.

The RCSW was set up on February 16, 1967 under Prime Minister Lester Pearson’s minority Liberal government due to significant pressures from the liberal Anglophone white feminist movement (Bird 1997; Freeman 1998). The campaign was led by Ontario activist Laura Sabia, then the president of the Canadian Federation of University Women. During the 1960s, Canada’s post-war economy thrived, and largely produced the landscape for white middle-class women to lobby for women’s economic rights to work outside of the home and to have equal opportunity. Internationally, women in many countries were also lobbying the United Nations to organise its first women’s conference, which took place in Mexico City in 1975.

Many other social, economic and political factors influenced the introduction and revision of several national policies of the late 1960s and early 1970s, as the state responded to national anxieties. The Indian Act of 1951 was revised due to much lobbying by Indigenous organisations concerned with deplorable living conditions, unemployment, poor health, residential schools, lack of status of Indigenous women, treaty rights and land claims. In addition, the Immigration Act of 1952 came into full effect in the 1960s and emphasised restrictions of entry into the country based on nationality, ethnic group, occupation, class or geographical area of origin, as well as peculiar customs and habits (Abu-Laban 1998). The mid-1960s also reflected increased English–French conflict and tension resulting in the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism (1963–1969), which is described by Haque as a national formulation that “emerged to install a racial order of difference and belonging through language in the ongoing project of white settler nation-building” (Haque 2012, 4–5). Out of these Royal Commissions and national policies emerged a nationalistic model of citizenship participation that reproduced national discourses of Othering,

racialisation, exclusion and essentialism. Most importantly, discourses of difference embedded in these national policies become signifiers of what enables the nation to be. I argue that these Royal Commissions, including the RCSW, as instigated by the nation, reproduced a racialised hierarchy of belonging and citizenship rights.

Seven commissioners were appointed to the RCSW, five women and two men, who travelled across Canada to hear the issues and concerns related to the political, economic, and legal status of women. For Canada, this would be the first Royal Commission in its history to have a woman chair, the Ottawa journalist and broadcaster Florence Bird. The Commission's mandate was to investigate and report on all matters pertaining to the status of women in Canada and to recommend what steps might be taken by the federal government to ensure equal opportunities for women and men in all aspects of Canadian society (RCSW and Bird 1977). The Commission called for presentations of briefs from individuals and organisations by using a brochure only in English and French, which was circulated only in mainstream supermarkets, libraries, associations, and the media across Canada. In April 1968, the commissioners engaged in the task of setting up public hearings for the next six months in 14 cities across the country. The Commission received 468 briefs and 1,000 letters of opinion, and also heard from 890 witnesses over 37 days (Bird 1997). On February 8, 1970, the 488-page RCSW Report was tabled in the House of Commons, providing the government with 167 recommendations of which 122 were within federal jurisdiction and the remainder within provincial and territorial jurisdictions. The RCSW Report recommendations emphasised the elimination of sexual inequality in Canada by specifically focusing on the following: equal pay for work of equal value, maternity leave, day care, birth control, family law, educational opportunities, part-time work, pensions, and women's access to managerial positions.

The Report's recommendations were based on fundamental liberal feminist principles, which assumed that equality of opportunity for Canadian women was possible, desirable and necessary. The RCSW played a major role in defining the "status of women" as a legitimate social problem of the nation. It focused attention on women's grievances, recommended changes to eliminate sexual inequality by means of social policy, and sparked the formation of several women's groups to advocate for implementation of the recommendations. Vancouver Status of Women (VSW) was one of such women's groups formed in 1971 with the specific mandate of ensuring that the

recommendations of the Report were implemented (Vancouver Status of Women. n. d.). The organisation was created out of liberal feminist “equality” discourses during a conference in Vancouver on January 30, 1971.

In this article, I critically analyse the *making* of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women *against the grain* in relation to discourses of nation-building, racialisation and exclusion while situating the *birth* of VSW as emerging from the RCSW. By examining the Royal Commission as a colonial archive and site of contested knowledge, I engage with discourses of power relations that are inscribed in the making of this archival document. The making of the RCSW is the making of colonial knowledge, as it produced and reproduced privileged social categories. My own historical and current positionality within the women’s movement locally, provincially, and nationally allowed me to identify important historical and current tensions and anxieties within feminist movements. My entry point into this examination begins with the following questions: did the making of the RCSW further marginalise the visibility and multiplicity of voices and needs of racialised women in Canada? How were discourses of citizenship, belonging, and nation-building constructed during the RCSW era of 1967 to 1971?

Theoretical Frameworks and Literature Review

Intersectional Feminist Framework

This article employs an intersectional feminist framework within its language, writing, methodology, and analysis, with a particular focus on critical race feminism. Razack, Smith and Thobani (2010, 9–10) explain:

Critical race feminism, like critical race theory, more broadly interrogates questions about race and gender through a critical-emancipatory lens, posing fundamental questions about the persistence, if not magnification, of race and the “colour line” in the twenty-first century; about racialized, gendered relations in an ostensibly race- and gender-neutral liberal state; and about the ways in which these interlink with continuing coloniality and Indigenous dispossession in the settler state.

The Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women’s (CRIA)W) publication, *Intersectional Feminist Frameworks: An Emerging Vision* (2006), presents a critical reflection on the failing of gender-based analysis and calls for analyses that reflect the interlocking and intersectional realities of women’s lives. Intersectional feminist frameworks will be used to study

how discourses emerging from the RCSW era engaged in processes of exclusion, nation-building, and racialisation. By employing multi-pronged, multi-dimensional analyses and knowledge systems, intersectional frameworks allow us to challenge notions of binary thinking and essentialism. Furthermore, an intersectional analysis engages with discourses, identities, experiences and systems of domination/oppression as fluid, changing, negotiated, historical, locational, situational and diverse (Bunjun 2010; CRIAW 2006). Most importantly, this theoretical framework rejects the notion that there is only one entry point of analysis—gender. Rather, there are multiple entry points of analysis, which interact. By recognising that multiple identities simultaneously interact with each other to construct the experiences of women and their historical lived realities, we bring a deeper consciousness to discourses of sexuality, ability, race, class, citizenship, age, and nation formation.

For many, the first reference to the concept of intersectionality derives from Sojourner Truth's speech in 1851 at the Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio:

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery. ... Ain't I a woman?

This quotation by Sojourner Truth explicates her intersectional experience of race, gender, class, sexuality, labour, chattel slavery, geographic location, family status and legal status. Almost 125 years later, in 1974, one of the first organisations to articulate intersectionality in its mandate was the Combahee River Collective. They recognised Black women's struggle as interlocking oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Intersectionality as an analysis was further strengthened in the late 1970s and in the early 1980s with the works of bell hooks and Audre Lorde, which theorised the impact of multiple oppressions and social relations interacting upon racialised bodies (hooks 1981; Lorde 1984). By the early 1990s, the conceptualisation of intersectionality developed by Patricia Hill Collins and Kimberlé Crenshaw challenged and further demonstrated the limitations of treating gender as a singular analytical category and entry point of analysis (Collins 1993; 2000; Crenshaw 1991). As demonstrated above, intersectionality largely

derives from racialised feminists (Indigenous women, Black women, and women of colour) who directly contested hegemonic feminism's investments in essentialism and exclusion.

Royal Commissions as Hegemonic Nation-Building Colonial Projects

When studying the RCSW, it is best to understand the archive by moving away from the “archive as-source to archive as-subject” and to understand the role of Royal Commissions “as stories that states tell themselves” (Stoler 2002, 103). The RCSW reflected colonial, patriarchal and capitalist anxieties—especially testimonies unsettling to the security of white and male privilege of the imagined community. White, middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied women who lobbied for the RCSW were considered worthy of state interests and state expense. Furthermore, such hegemonic discourses translated into state policies and justified state funding eligibility. According to Stoler (2002, 104),

When nothing else works and no decision can be reached, appoint a commission was a favourite response of colonial authorities. But commissions were not just pauses in policy and tactics of delay. Like statistics, they help determine the character of social facts and produced new truths as they produced new social realities. They were responses to crisis that generated increased anxiety, substantiating the reality of that crisis itself.

Stoler further argues, “commissions in turn affirmed the state's authority to make judgments about what was in society's collective and moral good” (2002, 106). In order to understand the Royal Commissions as colonial archives, Stoler affirms that it is critical to understand the institutions that they served. To better comprehend how decisions are made and how colonial histories are written and sustained, one must ask significant questions such as “what subjects were cross referenced, what parts were rewritten, and what quotations were cited?” (2002, 107).

Hence, this article *reads* the RCSW and its era from 1967–1971 as not merely a site of knowledge retrieval but as a colonial site of knowledge production and contested knowledge that organised knowledge, rearranged categories and appointed state officials as creators of knowledge. Discourses emerging from the RCSW era must be contextualised within a specific time, place, and space as they are “critical features of colonial politics and state power” (Stoler 2002, 87). In particular, I question the making of colonial knowledge within this Report and how it upholds the foundation of colonial European white authority and supremacy. I carefully re-read these archives

and engage in oral histories with women who lived during the era of the RCSW from 1967–1971.

The commissioners are state representatives who act as colonial authorities determining recommendations that further translate into policy. This article identifies what Stoler proposes as the possibilities that shaped what could be written, what warranted repetition, what competencies were rewarded, what stories could not be told, and what could not be said (Stoler 2002, 87). Selective forgetting and selective recollections are also present when writing a colonial archive such as the Royal Commission Report. Were there briefs or presentations classified as matters of state security or political subversion against the state? Did any of the briefs or hearings discuss issues of violence, police brutality, queer/trans/two-spirit bashing, harassment by the state via immigration, and other information considered “out of place”? As I engage with this research, I analyse the social history of truths that organise power relations that have been enjoyed and reserved for those considered nation-builders of the Canadian state, in particular heterosexual, able-bodied, middle-class, white women who spoke French or English.

Lee and Cardinal’s research focuses on the effects of nationalism on the Canadian feminist movement, its political culture and strategies (Lee and Cardinal 1998). They argue that English/Anglo Canadian nationalism has largely mediated the mainstream women’s movement, which has remained grounded in neo-conservative national narratives. These hegemonic nationalising narratives crystallise a national feminist agenda that marginalises certain issues and groups of people who do not belong to the *imagined community*. “The feminist movement is not situated outside Anglo-Canadian hegemony but, as a hegemonic project itself, is located within discourses and practices of hegemonic nationalism” (Lee and Cardinal 1998, 217). The construction of a national voice for women brings forward the nationalising desire to unify all women under a single Anglo-Canadian banner.

Method

This article draws on archival and interview data from a larger qualitative study of organisational power relations, entitlement and nation-building within VSW. The study engages with the making of the RCSW by analysing data from archival documents and key participants’ narratives using an intersectional critical race feminist analysis. Archival research involved locating primary

documents and engaging in textual and discourse feminist analysis. Primary documents included newspaper articles and photographs, the RCSW Report, meeting minutes, annual reports and other correspondence. Archival documents were accessed at multiple sites including the University of British Columbia (UBC) Rare Books and Special Collections, the UBC Law Library, CBC Digital Archives, and VSW onsite and offsite storages.

The larger research interviewed 31 women who had worked in some capacity as a staff or board/coordinating collective member at VSW between 1971 and 2008. Participants were identified, contacted and recruited through key organisational records and contacts, snowball procedures, and names found in organisational documents (such as annual reports, financial records and meeting minutes). Of the 31 participants interviewed, I am drawing on six participants who significantly articulated their knowledge of the RCSW and the era in which it was embedded. Pseudonyms were used and personal identifiers were removed to keep some level of confidentiality. Barbara, Laura, Flo, and Charlotte, who were middle-class educated women, and Sydney, who identified as working-class, were active in the 1970s (one identified as a woman of colour, and one white woman identified as a lesbian). Lovena, another participant during the late 1990s and early 2000s identified as queer, working-class and racialised.

Findings

The Intersections of Paternalism, Racialisation and Essentialism of Indigenous Women

The majority of the submissions and appearances to the RCSW were by white middle-class women who brought forth concerns regarding equal pay, marital property, abortion, access to birth control, and the lack of childcare services. The emphasis on equal opportunity with white men by the liberal feminist movement did not challenge the historical, systemic and institutional intersectional structures of patriarchy, colonialism and capitalism. Turpel-Lafond's article (1997) examines the RCSW's misrepresentation and essentialising of Indigenous women and their concerns and needs. She explains that "equality" is not necessarily the most important or central organising political or social concept in Indigenous communities.¹ Turpel-Lafond makes contributions to discourses of

¹ Turpel-Lafond asserts that "equality is not the most important political or social concept [for the Cree], as it is in industrialized society ... Our communities do not have a cultural or social history of disentanglement of women from political or productive life ... First Nations women have always been the hearts of our communities. This is

intersectionality by explaining that complex interpretations and concerns cannot be analysed only through gender as an isolated category. She (Turpel-Lafond 1997, 72) brings to the forefront the interlocking nature of her experience as an Indigenous woman while critically challenging the notion of “equality”:

To look only to an objective of equality with men is clearly insufficient for First Nation women’s struggles and continued identities because it cannot encompass our aspirations to become as distinct, albeit dynamic, cultures. I cannot separate my gender from my culture. I am not a woman at some times and a Cree at others.

The RCSW, according to Turpel-Lafond, was disappointing as it engaged in paternalistic attempts to “help” Indigenous women in Canada while marginalising the monolithic “Indian.” She also points out that no Indigenous person sat as a commissioner nor staffed any of the studies on Indigenous Peoples. Jacques Henripin, one of the commissioners, is acknowledged by Turpel-Lafond as somebody who was genuinely concerned with the conditions and situations of Indigenous women to the extent that he was capable. In a separate submission, Henripin (cited in Turpel-Lafond 1997, 74) suggested:

The privations endured by (First Nations) people in many areas—health, education, standards of living—are shocking. Undoubtedly, we all feel that every means should be taken to improve conditions for this neglected group of Canadians. However, the subject is outside the Commission’s terms of reference. Furthermore, the Commission is not qualified to deal with the complex problems which arise when attempting to introduce social and economic changes in cultures which are so very different from ours. *Goodwill in these matters is often, and sometimes quite rightly, interpreted as a form of paternalism or as a more or less conscious attempt to destroy these cultures.* I very much fear that some of the recommendations (Nos. 90–97) advanced by the Commission in this section may have been drawn up a little too hastily.

Turpel-Lafond recognises the worthiness of the Report, but considers it to be inadequate as it did not consider the concerns of Indigenous women in Canada.

In her book, *The Satellite Sex* (2001), Freeman analyses media constructions of several Indigenous women presenters to the Commission. One of the most powerful briefs, presented by the Alberta Native Women’s Conference, shifted the discourse of white women’s concern regarding equal pay

different than equality with men. Presuming equality is the prime feminist objective, why would First Nations women want to be like you?” (1997, 69).

and day care towards Indigenous women's concern regarding healthcare, education, poverty, residential schools, and housing. This particular brief made a strong demand affirming Indigenous women's right to self-determination and agency. The brief presenters discussed (Freeman 2001, 194) how

[t]hey were tired of federal interferences in their lives and of seeing their families torn apart when their children were sent to residential schools away from their reserves/villages while having their language and heritage being stripped away from them ... They asked for better living conditions on the reserves ... for halfway houses in the city and specified that they should be run by "Indian counsellors ... otherwise it will be just another do good program."

Another brief was presented to the Commission on May 3, 1968 by Mrs Mary Ann Lavallee from the Cowessess First Nation (90 miles East of Regina), who spoke about the struggles and conditions of Indigenous women on the reserve ("Status of Aboriginal Women" 1968). This is the only clip of an Indigenous woman on the CBC Digital Archives website that is accessible for viewing by the general public. It is also apparent that this particular brief by Mrs Lavallee was chosen to represent the one and only voice of Indigenous women during the RCSW era, constructing the token generic voice of the "Indian woman." CBC reporter Ed Reid described Mary Ann Lavallee as "the short Indian woman in the simple, purple dress" ("Status of Aboriginal Women" 1968). Lavallee surprised the CBC reporter when Reid commented to her that "it must have taken a lot of work to write it" and she responded, "no ... I wrote it last night, I told the truth." Reid described Lavallee's speech as "the most eloquent brief of the week ... it was a fighting speech" and noted that "many women in the audience were in tears" ("Status of Aboriginal Women" 1968). This examination of the media's interaction with Lavallee reinforces Turpel-Lafond's concerns of infantilisation of and paternalism imposed upon Indigenous women.

At least two briefs by Indigenous women that focused on the exclusion of birthrights embedded in the Indian Act were presented to the commissioners. A delegation of 30 Mohawk women argued that the Act revoked from them and their children treaty status if they married non-status men (see Figure 1). This group of women included Charlene Bourque, a 15-year-old mixed-raced young woman, who was constructed by mainstream media "as a youthful advocate of Aboriginal pride" as well as an "Indian Princess" (Freeman 2001, 197). During the proceedings, she wore a headband as did the other delegates, and they were described as "sporting headbands and feathers" (Freeman

2001, 197). Again, demonstrated here is the reproduction of nationalist discourses of the “Indian Other” as inferior or exotic, and different from white women.



Figure 1: Mohawk women presenting Brief 245 to the Commission²

Much of the hegemonic media discourses on the Indigenous women’s presentations focused on mainstream societies’ concerns of high birth rates, illegitimate children, living common-law, multiple partners, young girls quitting school, pregnancies, health concerns, and hygiene within the “Indian” communities (*Winnipeg Free Press* 1968, 19). The era of the RCSW largely reflected earlier discourses of the nation’s anxieties regarding sexual and moral behaviour and the need to save young women from moral decline (Sacco 2002; Sangster 1996; Valverde 1991). Young Indigenous girls were constructed as *out of sexual control* and engaging in promiscuity. There was clearly an absence and silence in acknowledging the presence and reinforcement of legislated poverty and exclusion experienced by Indigenous communities within settler-colonial discourses. Here, it is clear that the RCSW, as a colonial project, entailed reproducing liberal ideologies of the social purity movement and desires of the 1920s and 1930s to enforce moral regulation upon poor racialised communities.

² Photograph accompanying “Mohawk Women Addressing the Commission,” *The Ottawa Citizen*, October 3, 1968.

The Entrenchment of the RCSW within Vancouver Status of Women

RCSW fabrications and reproductions of racialisation, essentialism and nation-building can be further examined in the conception of VSW by drawing on organisational archival data and narratives of women participants. The narratives speak to struggles of the mainstream liberal women's movement in relation to Indigenous women's exclusion. By early 1971, women across the country began to organise around the RCSW Report, including women in Vancouver. Laura, an interview participant, recalled submitting a brief to the Royal Commission on the Status of Women. She specifically recalled receiving a letter from Laura Sabia (discussed earlier) letting women know that the RCSW Report would soon be released and to encourage women to start a group and work on promoting the recommendations of the Report. Due to strong encouragement from particular women, such as Grace MacInnis (the only woman MP at the time of the RCSW) and Laura Sabia, Vancouver organised the first follow-up conference on January 30, 1971, within a month of the Report being tabled, with Florence Bird as the keynote speaker (Vancouver Status of Women Fonds).

Barbara, a research participant, remembered that the conference of January 30, 1971 included delegates from "traditional women's groups, everyone that you could imagine, a lot of anti-poverty groups ... and very vocal ... Aboriginal women ... [T]his was the first time they were all brought together, on the very right we had representatives of church groups, political groups, various women's groups that raised money for this event, and then the more radical." Both Barbara and Flo, research participants, recalled the participation of Rose Charlie, president of the Indian Homemakers Association, and Hattie Ferguson, of the Coqualeetza Fellowship Club (also known as the Indian Centre and later the Aboriginal Friendship Society). A copy of Florence Bird's speech as well as the conference proceedings of January 30, 1971 were immediately circulated after the conference to women's organisations, particularly those who attended the conference. The circulation of Bird's speech was intended to "provide organizations with a unified approach to the status of women of Vancouver" (Vancouver Status of Women Fonds, 1–39). Based on Bird's articulation of the RCSW, we better understand why VSW prioritised certain issues for the next 10 years (1971–1982). This was further reinforced and reproduced by funders and funder criteria, which solidified liberal women's ideologies in the movement that continue to be at play to this day.

In 1975, VSW was a main organiser for the Women Rally for Action that took place in Victoria, British Columbia. Women Rally for Action was both a brief document presented to BC provincial Ministers of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) and a rally on March 22, 1976. On this particular day, hundreds of women from BC converged in Victoria; it was described as “one of the most organized and large-scale action ever undertaken by the women’s movement of B.C.” (Women Rally for Action 1976, iv). One of the organisers, Sydney, highlighted the process of gathering women’s issues across the province. What appeared to be a complete list of women’s issues was contested during several community meetings. Sydney disclosed how such omissions were brought forth:

We have our great seminar and we’re going through our issues that we’ve laid out [that] we got from every woman in the province. But I know this Native woman that I have brought in, because I’ve met her as a result of something else, I don’t remember, and she’s a great woman, and she stands up and says, “*you haven’t talked about land claims.*” Well we never thought of that as a women’s issue, but she is telling us that it is, so we don’t know what to do, and we are huddled there as organizers ... All right well, we’ll have a meeting. And then another woman ... stands up and says, “*there are no lesbian rights issues in this pamphlet!*” Well now we are panicked ... so we said we’ll have a meeting at the back there, and so we have a meeting in the back of the room with the Native woman and with [other woman], and so we immediately form a committee and we said, yes we’ve omitted them, but we’ve put them in and we add them to our stuff, and we get them into the lobbying. So, we realized we just missed it.

This particular piece of Sydney’s narrative highlights the process of not only constructing legitimate women’s issues, but also those not considered women’s issues, such as *sexual orientation*. The dispossession of Indigenous women and theft of Indigenous lands were not seen as women’s struggles, nor were lesbian issues. During the interview, Sydney explained:

The land claims [issue] was a surprise because we had violence against women, we had issues we thought would touch women from every culture, but we never thought land claims, which I *still* don’t think is specifically a women’s issue ... but we let it go, but then the lesbian rights, definitely we missed it.

This further brings forth the complexity of adding issues as an attempt to be inclusive of all women across the province, but it did not necessarily signify that the BC women’s movement was invested in a complex understanding that would validate such issues *as* women’s issues. Such discourses of legitimisation are further reproduced 34 years later during Sydney’s interview when she explained that she *still* does not see land claims as a women’s issue. This signifies how deeply

entrenched liberal colonial nation-building discourses are within the women's movement and the continuing inability to understand racialised women's histories and struggles as women's issues.

Sydney agreed that it was a complete oversight to have left out lesbian rights from the document, and it was eventually added as an addendum. She discussed this oversight in juxtaposition to land claims and engaged in what Fellows and Razack (1998) discuss as the race to innocence, where lesbian issues are seen as women's issues but Indigenous women's experiences and struggles in relation to land claims are not. This illustrates the power of those who determine what is valid and legitimate based on their knowledge system and ideologies. This further dictated what would be the most important women's struggles worthy of lobbying and legislative changes. Unfortunately, lesbian issues were also constructed within whiteness and rarely considered racialised lesbians' experiences of exclusion.

In particular, the "Native Indian Women of British Columbia" addendum that was added to the brief was submitted and written by the Indian Homemakers Association of BC. The addendum indicated that the Indian Homemakers Association recognised the living conditions of all women in the province and explicitly stated its solidarity with all women while recognising the need to work together. It also discussed how Indigenous women have suffered in relation to poverty, discrimination, poor housing, medical services, nutrition, unemployment and education opportunities/advancement. It (Women Rally for Action 1976, 36) further stated:

We know that the new Minister of Labour and Indian Affairs ... has commenced work on the Indian cut-off lands, but we have not been invited to meet with him concerning all of the other serious and urgent native Indian problems. We want a number of meetings with him so that he and the government will become aware and become ready to put forth policies and actions to make this "Beautiful B.C." a part of our feeling. British Columbia to most of the Indian people is a place of discrimination, poverty and injustice.

Discourses on violence were also omitted from the Report, which has been heavily critiqued by anti-violence feminists. Many years after the RCSW, Bird (1997, 194) explains and justifies this omission by stating:

We did not, however, hear as much about violence as people do today because it was not a subject that was discussed as openly as it is now. I myself, at a private, confidential meeting, heard a

shocking story about violence against Inuit women perpetrated by men working on the Dew Line. After I told the commissioners about this, they decided that they had some doubts whether our terms of reference would justify our undertaking the study of such a complicated legal and moral issue.

The above admission not only discusses the absence of violence within the Report but also demonstrates the complexities of how Inuit women's experiences of violence became invisible, omitted and disregarded due to being constructed as "a complicated legal and moral issue."

Nation-building discourses rising from such institutional intersections highlight the processes of racialisation, including the lack of participation of Indigenous women and women of colour, and the lack of working-class/poor, queer, ability, citizenship, and immigrant struggles and analyses. By applying Hage's (2000) notion of accumulation of national capital and Thobani's (2007) theory of exaltation, I argue that the making of VSW was very much about the "making of exaltation" and the accumulation of national capital for white middle-class women in regards to education and employment. Middle-class women of colour also benefited from this accumulation of national capital, but differently. As Hage explains, there are those who are seen to accumulate *naturally* such national capital based on the *field of whiteness* as national power. Yet, there are also those who only can accumulate national capital through processes of struggle and negotiations within the imagined *white fantasy* under the management of *natural* white national subjects. Hage (2000, 62) explains:

just as the dominant aim to naturalise the value of their capital, so they also attempt to naturalise their hold on it. ... While the naturalisation of the dominant capital works to undermine the legitimacy of any other aspiring capital, the naturalisation of the privileged hold the dominant group has on the dominant capital aims at creating symbolic barriers to its accumulation by the less capital-endowed groups. ... Regardless of how much national capital one accumulates, how one accumulates it will make an important difference to its capacity to be converted into national recognition and legitimacy.

Hence, I also argue that the accumulation of national capital further grants national entitlements and national belonging to white middle-class women while also creating the exalted national feminist of the nation.

Charlotte, another research participant, articulated the differences amongst the women involved in

the early period of the organisation based on their political ideologies, which were stretched along the continuum of those who were more liberal and those who were more progressive. She also demonstrated how the Ombudservice impacted the organisation by bringing forth and exposing the harsh realities of women's experiences. Charlotte explained:

Well it speaks to the difference between [women involved in VSW] ... what I observed of the more liberal, political liberal women and other women from the University Women's Club. And a very fast ... change when Rosemary [Brown, a Black feminist,] came on board as the Ombudswoman ... [S]he brought, I believe, quite a different political angle to things. And as well, the Ombudservice, very quickly took VSW into the reality of women's lives—out of a Report [RCSW] and into the reality.

Charlotte further explained that although the RCSW Report did not speak to violence, VSW's Ombudservice exposed the overwhelming violence experienced by women, something the organisation was not prepared for. Charlotte's continuing commitment to the RCSW is apparent when she responded to why the RCSW omitted the issue of violence against women:

Well it was dealing with policy and legislation, it was dealing with what could be done in that particular field, so thinking back again to the Royal Commission Report and how it identified with or how ... VSW identified with that, there was this sort of, I'll use the word *cohort* of women who really believed that all we needed to do was keep on getting legislation change, you know, keep on trying to change the laws and this kind of thing. And for sure, a lot of that work needed to be done.

The continuing discourse of justifying why some issues were included and why some were excluded becomes embedded in VSW's organisational culture. This is precisely what took place during the RCSW era: the state-sponsored commissioners determined what would be included and what would not be included in the RCSW Report. Hence, a historical embedding of discourses of what was considered legitimate, worthy, relevant and manageable was both invoked by the RCSW and VSW within liberal and nation-building aspirations.

The Making of a White Hetero Feminist Nation: Racialisation and Exclusion

In her article, "Reminiscences of the Commission Chair" (1997), Bird shares her recollection as chair during the Commission public hearings. She recalls one of the presentations in Vancouver by 17-year-old students from Templeton High School, whom she describes as "exceedingly eloquent" and who "presented a brief prepared by 35 different ethnic groups. They were speaking on behalf of their mothers, who were immigrants and could not speak English much" (Bird 1997,

189). The two high school students, Loredana d'Elia and Alida Bianchi, were refugees from the Italian-speaking area of Yugoslavia (see Figure 2) (*The Gazette*, 1968, 24). These students requested English-language classes and technical training for their immigrant mothers so that they may access employment.



Figure 2: Templeton High School Students Presenting Brief 275³

It is important to take note that the majority of immigrant women who entered Canada in the post-war years until the late 1960s were predominately preferred immigrants from Europe and the United States. There were also those who were less desirable and who were not considered *white* or who experienced a process of racialisation differently from Anglo Canadians (and also immigrants of colour). These included the following groups of immigrants: Ukrainian, Polish, Jewish, Italian, Greek, Irish, Romanian, Hungarian, Czech and German immigrants (Knowles 2007). These immigrants experienced unique processes of racialisation imposed by Anglo dominance embedded in the material and discursive formation of the nation.

Bird (1997, 190) recalls one of the young women's comments to the commissioners:

³ Photograph accompanying "Italian-Canadian Girls and Teachers," *The Vancouver Sun*, 19 April 1968. B. Kent, photographer.

An immigrant woman is like a bird in a cage. If you let it out, it would not be able to survive. Our mothers cannot read English, and if they go into a store they do not know what to buy, what cans or what packages, and they are afraid of being laughed at. They cannot read the street names, or understand how to pronounce them. Something should be done to teach them the language when they arrived in Canada because they are perfectly intelligent, but they have to stay in the home and they know nothing about the customs of this new country which is going to be their country.

The majority of the media coverage regarding this brief stereotyped immigrant mothers, regardless of racial background and experience as “peasant stock, timid, isolated, deferential to their husbands and desperately in need of education and training” (Freeman 2001, 151). It is also important to recognise that immigrant women of colour such as the Japanese, South Asian and Chinese were already present within Canada even though they experienced immigration restrictions until 1967. Their presence, although limited, was entirely excluded from the discourse of immigrant women within the Royal Commission.

According to Thobani, “the category ‘immigrant’ is a racially coded one which has come to be a referent for all people of color within Canada regardless of their citizenship or actual legal status in the country” (Thobani 2003, 408). The term “immigrant women” has become constructed by its relationship to the state as representing bodies of colour that are *seen* as immigrants by dominant national subjects, therefore not belonging or belonging differently regardless of one’s formal legal status. Ng, since the 1980s, has provided feminists with an important understanding of the construction of immigrant women as a discourse that is sustained by the Canadian nation and the state. Ng argues that immigrant women’s problems “are the products of Canadian society, and have little to do with their cultural backgrounds. The institutions of Canada, notably our legal system, are important determinants of the unequal status of immigrant women” (Ng 1992, 20). Hence, state constructions of immigrant women are embedded in racial, gender, and class biases which are rooted in the legal and economic processes of society, such as Canada’s immigration policy.

Scholars have discussed their deep concern for how racialised women who occupy multiple identities have been constructed as the generic monolithic “immigrant woman” (Lee and Cardinal 1998; Ng 1992; St. Lewis 1997). St. Lewis explains that the Commission reduced “immigrant” women’s concerns to language barriers while constructing a homogeneous group of people with

“tremendous integration problems” (St. Lewis 1997, 245). Racialised female bodies are perceived to be restricted and disadvantaged solely due to their English language abilities, which then translate into deficits not only in terms of cognitive capabilities but also in relation to Hage’s concept of the accumulation of national capital within the nation (Hage 2000). Hence, racialised immigrant women are perceived to be not only lacking national capital but also as unable to accumulate it.

It is additionally relevant to acknowledge the RCSW as heterocentric since it omitted and silenced lesbian, gay, two-spirit, transgendered, bisexual, and intersexed experiences and concerns. According to Arscott, the silence around queer/trans/two-spirit/intersex experiences and realities reproduced by the commissioners was because “sexuality was considered a private matter at the time” (1996, 111). During the same era of the RCSW, the Criminal Code was revised (in 1969) and certain sexual acts committed by two consenting adults in private were no longer considered gross indecency, which removed homosexual acts from the Criminal Code. Heteronormativity was not questioned by the commissioners, who according to Arscott were pre-occupied with ensuring that the recommendations were palatable enough for the House of Commons. By 1970, when the Report was tabled, the House of Commons was composed of 264 men and one woman. While Arscott’s critiques are important, they also fail to acknowledge the intersectionality of queerness and racialisation.

Laura Sabia, as mentioned earlier, a white woman activist who actively lobbied for the RCSW, shares her thoughts about the Royal Commission (“Canadian Feminists Fight for Change” 1967). Sabia’s CBC interview was broadcast on March 28, 1967. She affirmed that Royal Commissions are not necessarily the end-all or do not necessarily produce the best recommendations but rather could be an “educative force,” bringing about a level of education that was necessary in Canadian society regarding women’s status. As Sabia challenged systemic sexist discrimination, she also engaged in the exclusion of racialised women from the category of women when she compared the “negro” to women, suggesting that Black women are not women. Sabia stated, “you know, we women have accepted things that have been said about us that no Negro would have ever accepted” (“Canadian Feminists Fight for Change” 1967). Such a statement not only reinforces essentialist notions of the *monolithic* woman in the Royal Commission but also that *the* woman of the RCSW

was not a racialised (Black) women but a white woman. Again, this oral archive may appear to be counter-hegemonic, but when reading it against the grain, it reinforces notions of grand narratives of nationhood, which exclude the racialised Other. Where do Black women fit within the category of “woman” in the RCSW?

Conclusion

I demonstrate how essentialism was reinforced through the RCSW era and further permeated Canadian history by homogenising or constructing the generic “woman,” which reinforced processes of exclusion. The RCSW attempts to represent certain groups at a precise historical moment, while failing to represent the intersectionalities and complexities within and across group experiences. St. Lewis (1997), Turpel-Lafond (1997), and Lee and Cardinal (1998) all critically speak to the dangers of essentialism in constructing discourses of unbelonging and the outsider. Higginbotham explains that the construction of the universal woman by white feminists has failed to see “white women’s own investment and complicity in the oppression of other groups of men and women” (Higginbotham 1992, 255). Hence, racialised women continue to experience the consequences resulting from uncritical thinking of the monolithic “Indian/Native” or “immigrant woman” experience. It is important to critically examine the interworkings and colonial encounters of multiple identities and experiences in the construction of the racialised Other while examining how contexts and landscapes have also been racialised. Discourses of nation-building are reinforced by presenting the needs of and specifically catering to women who are constructed as *nation-builders* and who fit into the national identity of the rightful *Canadian* woman. This articulation demonstrates discourses and constructions of inclusion/exclusion, citizen/non-citizen, belonging/non-belonging, which have long-term implications for women who do not fit into the generic definition of woman represented in the Commission Report. Therefore, the diversity, complexity, and multiplicity of racialised women’s intersectional identities become erased, invisible, denied, and rejected.

It is meaningful to understand the complexities and contradictions that emerged as liberal feminist ideologies of the RCSW were being entrenched and contested within Vancouver Status of Women, as it allows us to further comprehend how we are continually haunted by liberal discourses of the nation within the women’s movement. How these discourses then materialise and deploy

themselves onto the bodies within such an organisation as VSW must be examined. It is only through this process of analysis and articulation of the making of VSW that we begin to consider how to engage in the process of unmaking nationalist spaces and discourses. The study of such workings provides the intellectual and political explanation of how spaces of politicisation and depoliticisation can be both hegemonic and non-hegemonic. Lovena, a racialised working-class lesbian who joined VSW as full-time staff in 1999, further contributed to this analysis by expressing that

[VSW] is still living with the constraints of the origins of the organization. The constraints and the everyday struggle and the kinds of ... the disjunction between where it started and where it is today. They're at odds. They're fighting again with each other, in the bodies of the women who are working [at VSW].

As Lovena and I critically thought through how the RCSW era is continually being invoked within the organisation of VSW, I added:

For me I continue to share with the women who came after me that we are part of the Royal Commission, we inherit that, we may not have agreed with parts of it or what happened, but it is part of our history and you have to learn to live with it, because then that's how you move from it. The distance gets further the moment we understand it and that it was part of trying to be in something mainstream ...

By reading the RCSW and its making against the grain, we can fully engage in interrupting its contributions to processes of racialisation, exclusion, and nation-building and reflect on the voices of those who were denied, omitted, silenced and misrepresented. In particular, by applying an intersectional critical race feminist analysis to the voices and concerns of racialised women in the RCSW, this article illustrates how the RCSW embraced discourses of essentialism and false unity by erasing the positionalities of racialised women. Racialised women occupy multiple simultaneous locations across queerness, indigeneity, racialisation, ethnicity/band/tribal membership, class, age, geography, "Indian" status, citizenship status, birthplace, presence of children, motherhood, extended family, marital status, language, occupational status, employment status, education, and other specific experiences.

By investigating the RCSW as a hegemonic document, I articulate the nation-building processes embedded within the liberal women's movement as brought forth from an intersectional critical

race feminist discourse analysis of the archives and narratives. Such an analysis was used to examine the language and meanings that are ingrained in both texts, including media, and oral histories in the making of the RCSW era (1967–1971) and the *making* of VSW, while considering the reproduction of nation-building, racialisation, and exclusion discourses. Both archival research and interviews interact to bring forth an increased breadth and depth in understanding the implications of this Royal Commission as a project of the colonial state. This article captures VSW’s *birth* within the women’s movement as well as the nation. Its *birth* is ultimately through a project approved and sanctioned by Canada, a colonial nation-state, through the RCSW. Liberal ideologies and discourses regarding women’s equality become the fabric of the making and marking of VSW while constructing the imagined rightful feminist of the nation. I conclude with the reaffirmation of the RCSW as a colonial archive that contributed to the marginalisation and invisibility of the intersectional voices and needs of racialised women in Canada, which was further transmitted to and crystallised within VSW.

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