

## Race, Nation and Gender: 19th Century Representations of Native and White Women in the Pacific Northwest

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Given their position outside bureaucratic circuits of state power and the masculine domains of economics and industry, in what ways did women settlers engage with the ideology of British imperialism in Canada's Pacific Northwest? Anglo settler women, many of whom were wives and daughters of civil servants, did participate in the material and ideological transformation of Britain's most westerly 'frontier' between 1858 and 1900. By subscribing to popular discourses of scientific racism, inscribed in the Canadian federal legislation known as the Indian Act, they fostered the repressive practices of formal state and masculine power.

The sexual politics that revolve around issues of maternalism are illuminating. The promotion of an ideal of maternal competency was key to the racial and nationalist vision of British rule in the crown colonies of Vancouver Island and British Columbia. As Rooke and Schnell have demonstrated, middle-class Anglo women set the public standards of ideal morality, family values and social reform (Rooke and Schnell 1982a; 1982b). Is there a way to trace how the social values promoted by these women impact upon public policy regarding the discriminatory treatment of native women and children?

Traditional interpretations of western 'frontier' history have focused exclusively on white upper and middle-class women as importers of civilizing values, leaving the experiences of non-white and working-class women under-reported. Scholars such as Sylvia Van Kirk (1980) and Jennifer Brown (1980) corrected one aspect of this blindness, arguing that mixed-race co-habitations and alliances were critical to the success of the pre-settlement fur trade economy (Van Kirk 1980; Brown 1980). Chinese women were also absent from the historical record possibly because of their scarcity in the Northwest throughout the early settlement period. But the political implications of the absence of Chinese women is significant. Restrictions on the entry of Asian women were due to racially-exclusive immigration policies designed to prevent the population growth of Asian residents (Adelman 1984). The ideal immigrants sought for the crown colonies were British white men and women, not the families of the Chinese men who arrived as indentured labourers. In the eyes of the colonial ruling class, Asians were always considered sojourners rather than potential settlers.<sup>1</sup>

A sense of a homogeneous community of settlers was dependent on the emergence and collective acceptance of fixed social categories of racial and cultural

difference. These definitions were applied to the bodies and actions of persons excluded from the dominant ruling classes. During the early settlement period Anglo settler women were actively defining roles for themselves as women and mothers. Native women, however, were not party to such a process. These women bore the brunt of aggressive social and legislated discrimination. Their roles were being defined by virtue of informal acts of social discrimination and, most significantly, via the Indian Act. Indigenous women were increasingly excluded from the category of the natural female and competent mother.

With the advent in popularity of the family photographic portrait, Anglo settler women, particularly in more urbanized areas, discovered a vehicle for the production of ideas about themselves and their concepts of family. Settler use of photographic culture illuminates the concern with the inclusion or exclusion of certain women from the various topical categories of identity - virtuous motherhood, femininity, Britishness, whiteness or Indianness. Photography was employed as a device to scrutinize social and cultural differences between the self and others unlike the self. Photographic culture played a role in the informal social discrimination enacted by settlers towards Native women. In visual images and written text Native women were consistently represented as outsiders or social non-conformists. They failed to measure up when compared to the ideals of feminine and maternal competency adopted and celebrated by the settler population.

Prior to democratization of the technology, photography affirmed the ways of seeing and knowing the world peculiar to the male Euro-American newcomer. During the early settlement period photography was in the service of colonial public ceremonial, church missionaries, Indian agents, surveyors, tourists, anthropologists and commercial entrepreneurs, proving to be an integral tool of colonial management. As a 'modern' technology, photography served both a bureaucratic and, by century's end, popular appetite for a detailed visual grammar of the social body that "would conform physically and representationally to the knowledge produced by these powerful institutions" (Foucault 1977: 25). Employed as a documentary record of state interest, photography had implications for the struggle for political and social dominance waged between the incoming settlers and the Indians. The non-white colonial subject was made legible through the photographic object, which subsequently could be classified and exchanged. Indians, in remote coastal villages, were continuous subjects of the colonial gaze. As such they grew quickly familiar with the results of the photographic encounter.

As is well documented, Euro-Americans of all classes held cultural misconceptions about North American Indians. Misapprehensions were reproduced not only in written reports and immigration manuals but within the pictorial space of the photograph. The public interpretations of Indians, as intellectually under-developed, as pagans, or uncivilized resulted in the affirmation of a cohesive identity for the white settler who, in comparison, was normative in social disposition, moral character and intelligence. Ann Stoler notes how the formation of a classed social identity has been consistently developed upon sets of identities diametrically opposed:

There was no bourgeois identity that was not contingent on a changing set of Others who were at once desired and repugnant, forbidden and subservient, cast as wholly different but also the same (Stoler 1995: 192-3).

<sup>1</sup> The discussion of immigration policies as they were applied to Asian women settlers is abbreviated due to space restrictions.

Settler women were conventionally portrayed in regal, lush studio interiors. The backdrops or sets replicated the architectural space of a Victorian living room. The woman was joined by sisters, babies, children or husbands, the hierarchy or kin relations clearly announced by clothing or seating arrangement. When white women were posed 'in situ' they stood in front of homes with other family members. Often a servant stood in the background at the ready. This genre I term photographic "boosterism." The images captured the success of those who had chosen to risk their fortunes in the new world. Sent home in letters to relatives in Britain, these photographs highlighted the upward social mobility enabled by colonial immigration.

The 1880s' photographic portraits of babies, women, and children produced by commercial photographer Hannah Maynard similarly capitalized on the bourgeois desires for boosterism. Maynard ran a successful business in Victoria between 1868-1918 catering to a growing demand for evidence of maternal pride amongst middle-class women. The family photograph was a means of generating and exchanging meanings about women's social status and mobility. A self-valourizing display of bourgeois women as mothers and wives, the portrait showcased attributes most sought after: refined beauty, virtue, fertility and social respectability. The idealized representations of woman as a madonna figure, so common among white or assimilated women, was infrequently applied to individual native women (see illustration 4). Only the early twentieth century photographs of Benjamin Leeson in Quatsino, presented native women as kindly or loving maternal figures.<sup>5</sup> However, the captions of the Leeson images remained judgemental to underscore the moral disapproval of traditional Salish cultural practices of head-flattening which were visible in the physiognomy of the older generation.<sup>6</sup> The caption for the photograph titled *Grandmother and Baby* evoked the potential of modern child-rearing techniques for the new generation: "this little native won't have the painful experience of its grandmother, who, at the same age, had her head bound to improve her beauty. 'Up to day' her head will not be bound up like her grandmothers" (see illustration 5). Leeson's interest in the subject obviously stemmed from the "passing" favor of this cultural practice.

Throughout the century white middle-class women were held up as the representatives of moral uplift and maternal competency whereas the physical appearance, hygiene and social behaviour of Indian women were the subject of derision in travel journals, missionary and government reports. Male narrators aggrandized their own kinship structures and forms of social organization. European modes of child-

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin Leeson gained a reputation for his portraits of Kwakwaka'wakw women with flattened heads. This photo was taken from an album in the Vancouver City Archives compiled by archivist Major Matthews. 45 of Leeson's photographs were included in an album presented to the Governor General in 1941. They were taken when Leeson was a resident in the village of Winter Harbour on Quatsino Sound. He lived and worked in Quatsino Sound for over 40 years as a custom officer.

<sup>6</sup> The Coast Salish practise of head-flattening of infants was observed and discussed by numerous writers. Although the writers make no direct criticism of native women as mothers, their criticisms of this practise assumes the tone of moral disgust. Their obsession with the procedure, and the possible threat it poses to the intellect of the child by implication condemns the child-rearing methods of these Salish women. The Salish practise of head-binding was generally used to exemplify the bad character of Native women as mothers. It is not difficult to understand how residential schools became compulsory given this monolithic myth of Native women as maternally incompetent. See Kane (1968, first edition 1859); Mayne (1962, first edition 1862); Madrie (1972, first edition 1865); Sproul (1987, first edition 1868).

rearing, piety, and monogamy as well as Caucasian 'beauty' were always hailed as superior.

Hannah Maynard's portraits exemplify the ways Anglo women were encoding themselves as ideal maternal servants to the imperial agenda. Moreover, between 1882-1898 Hannah Maynard produced a series of less-conventional, lucrative, novelty items called the GEMS OF BRITISH COLUMBIA. Maynard cut out the faces or bodies from previously shot individual client portraits of children and babies, then mounted these together forming intricate designs or motifs. Re-photographed and printed as a seamless image, the GEMS were originally conceived as a one-off promotion gimmick, "presented to everyone of her patrons who had a child in the picture... serving two excellent purposes and splendid advertisement and a valuable souvenir for the parents."<sup>8</sup>

The meanings encoded in Hannah Maynard's photographic GEMS transcended sentimentality. With the GEMS Maynard fulfilled her patriotic duty for the Empire. As Ann Stoler has noted

within this racialized economy of sex, European women and men won respectability by steering their desires to legitimate paternity and intensive maternal care, to family and conjugal love... to be truly European was to cultivate of a bourgeois self in which familial and national obligations were a priority and sex was held in check... (1995: 182).

The GEMS generated an imaginary population of largely white women and children, or women and children of mixed ancestry, in numbers that exceeded the actual census figures of Anglo settlers in Victoria at the time. As Catherine Hall has convincingly argued, nation-building demands the service of representation:

national communities... are imagined communities... while sometimes appearing natural they have always been constructed through elaborate ideological and political work which produces a sense of nation and national identity (1992: 205).

Hannah's layout of the baby faces into motifs such as the GEM in the shape of an English crown, or the flag motif as border, articulate the act of fertility, reproduction and child-rearing with nationalism (see illustration 6).

The Maynard Gems and studio portraits offered an indication of the results of white women's sexual activities. These women reproduced on behalf of the nation, engaged in a form of patriotic procreation. Native women, on the other hand, were the antithesis of the white middle-class woman showcased in the studio portraits. Unless controlled her sexual activity had the potential to be politically subversive. If she had sexual relations with another status Indian, the Native woman could produce more Indians, individuals who claimed rights to land desired by Euro-Americans for settlement and development. When she engaged in exogamous relations, she risked

<sup>7</sup> See the previous footnote. All of these authors conform to these kinds of derogatory descriptions of Native women.

<sup>8</sup> Editors comments, *St. Louis and Canadian Photographer*, (September 1885: 284).

losing her legal status but this was beneficial for the state. In conformity to the strategies of assimilation her marital attachment to a non-Indian was rewarded by enfranchisement into Canadian society. Seen in this light the Act was an intrusive legal code which arbitrated over Native women's human rights and reproductive freedoms policing with whom she ought, or ought not to, marry or have sex.

The Maynard GEMS and studio portraits of Anglo settler women and children represent a widespread national trend of late century in which middle-class women publicly voiced concern for the health and hygiene of Anglo-Saxon children.<sup>9</sup> The overwhelming positive response *The St. Louis and Canadian Photographer* received upon the publication of Hannah Maynard's 1885 GEM indicated the transnational appeal of these images. Baby worship was not merely a localized phenomena. The widespread popularity, marketability and interest in these images reflect the broadening currency of maternalist values. Colonial maternalism was further complicated by regional race relations. Situated within the imperialist discourse of the British Empire, which required that the superior race displace the Indian, the reproductive patriotism of Anglo-American women proved essential for the success of Pacific Northwest colonial settlement.

Captions for figures reproduced sequentially on the following pages:

Figure 1: Haida Washerwoman Mary. Hannah Maynard Studio, c. 1865-66. Reproduced by permission of British Columbia Archives and Records Service. Photograph No. F-09011.

Figure 2: Unidentified Native group in studio interior. Hannah Maynard Studio, c. 1860s - 1870s. Reproduced by permission of British Columbia Archives and Records Service. Photograph No. 08994.

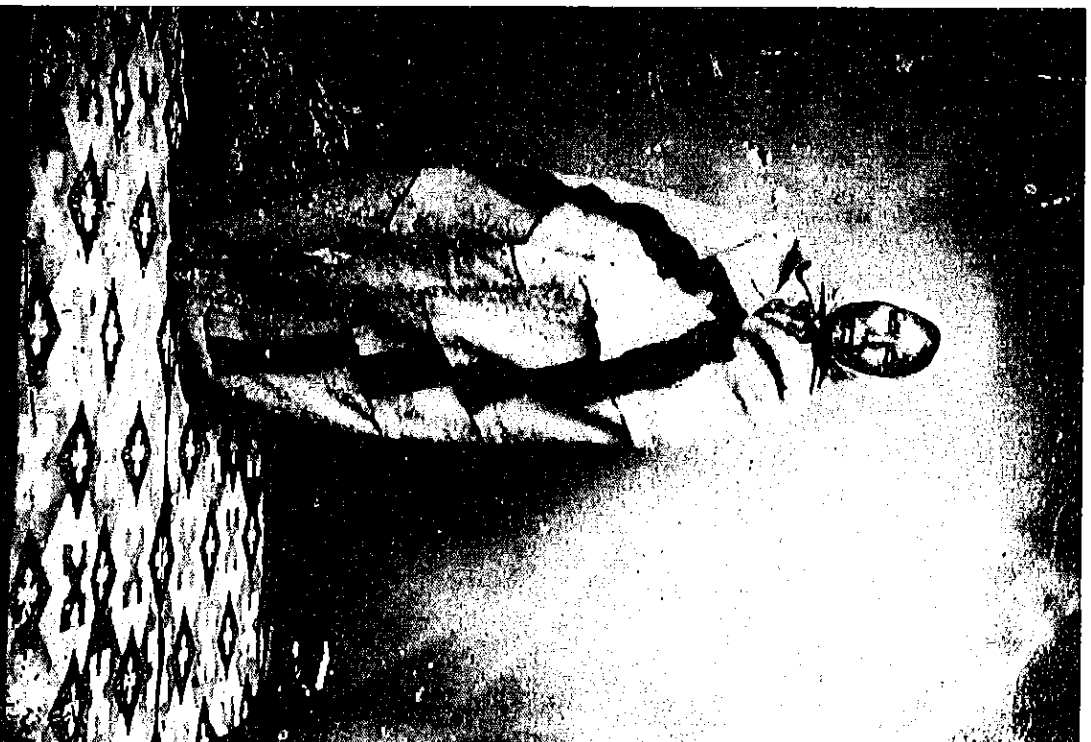
Figure 3: Untitled. B. W. Leeson, active in Quatsino 1889-1910. Photo courtesy of the Vancouver Public Library. Photo number 14078.

Figure 4: Martha Harris (nee Douglas) and baby. Hannah Maynard Studio, c. 1880s. Reproduced by permission of British Columbia Archives and Records Service. Photograph No. C-9269.

Figure 5: Grandmother and baby. From B. W. Leeson, *Portraits of the Indians of Quatsino*. Caption in album reads: "Grandmother and child; this baby was one of the first generations not to have her head bound to improve her beauty." Photo courtesy of the Vancouver Public Library. Photo number 14037.

Figure 6: British Columbia Gem, 1887. Photo by Hannah Maynard. Reproduced by permission of British Columbia Archives and Records Service. Photograph No. F-05089.

<sup>9</sup> See Bacchi (1983: 104-117); Valverde (1991: 1992)





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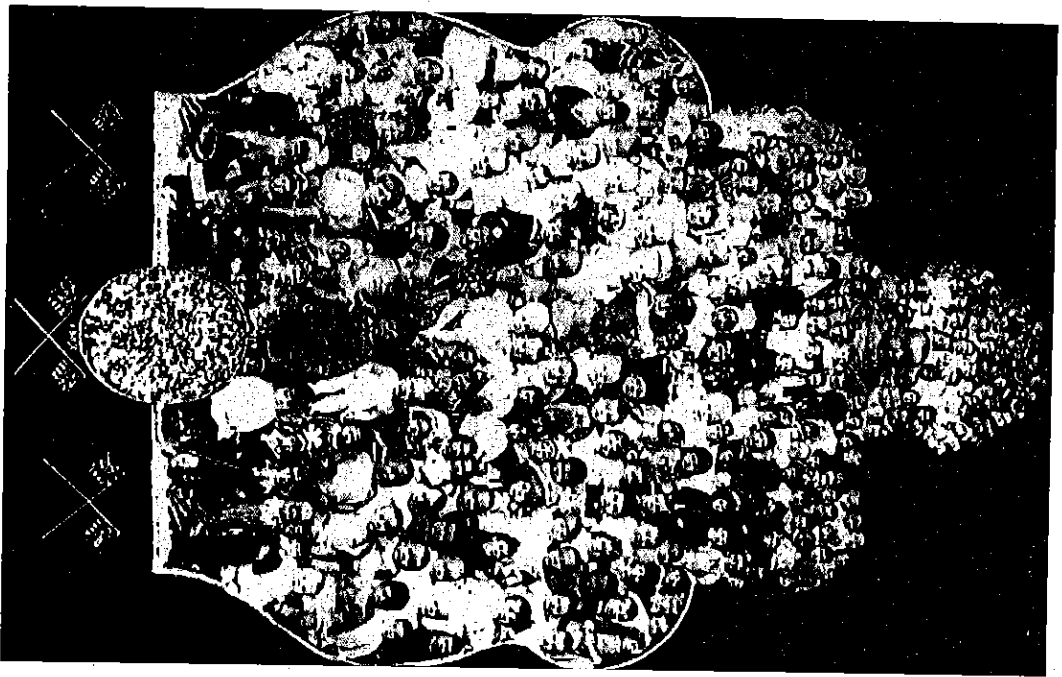
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