Colonialism and the Legacy of Patriarchy
Foreword. As non-indigenous winmin writing on colonialism from a gendered point of view, we recognize that we cannot completely understand the struggle indigenous winmin face because of our own privilege. We also wish to point out that there are differences in the struggle for liberation between indigenous and non-indigenous winmin. Indigenous winmin fight to reclaim the equality previously stolen from them because of forced patriarchalization during colonialism. To take this even further there are also differences between the struggles of white and non-white winmin for liberation. Only by recognizing and supporting each others unique situations can we attempt to destroy colonialism’s legacy.

While we recognize the huge diversity and complexity of indigenous cultures in the Americas we have chosen to make many basic generalizations for the purpose of this brief discussion of colonialism and patriarchy.

Our purpose in the spelling of “women” as “winmin” and “woman” as “womyn” is a deliberate rejection of the patriarchal origin of the word. The word “woman” is derived from the term “wife of man,” which implies that a womyn is non-existent without the presence of man.

We have included a few definitions of terms used frequently throughout this pamphlet:

- **colonialism**: the idea and policy of conquering an already established, autonomous community for economic advantage.
- **patriarchy**: a male-dominated social system.
- **egalitarian**: of or advocating equal social and political rights for all types of people.
- **autonomous**: acting or free to act independently.

The legacy of colonialism is also a legacy of patriarchy and domination culture in general. The European conquest of the Americas resulted in genocidal destruction of countless indigenous cultures, exploitation and destruction of the natural world, institutionalized patriarchy, slavery, hierarchy and the normalization of a worldview based on the desire to dominate and have control over, all living and non-living things.

**Indigenous Cultures Before the Arrival of Columbus/Europeans**

Hundreds of unique indigenous cultures had existed in the Americas for centuries before the arrival of Columbus and other Europeans. Although the tribes were very diverse, in general, they lived in egalitarian societies, with little hierarchy. Most of the cultures had a high respect for the earth and all living and non-living creatures and did not overexploit natural resources as the Europeans would eventually. They co-existed with one another and the earth and there was an understanding that actions had consequences.

Existence was seen as a circle and all forms of life were connected. Each creature in the world existed for its own unique purpose. This is the reason why the European concept of “owning” land was unthinkable.

Winmin were highly respected and played important roles in the tribes. They took part in tribal councils and made decisions affecting the future of the tribes. Women played a huge role in the famous Iroquois Confederation, which was a group of many tribes that came together to form an elaborate political system based on the ideals of direct democracy in which everyone participated. (This was occurring during the same time period that Europe was under the rule of monarchs, “appointed by god” through divine right.) Clan mothers had the power to nominate and remove chiefs. Women also made the decision of whether or not to go to war, and they had the final say in the matter.\(^1\) (Simultaneously in “advanced, civilized” Europe, winmin were considered to be incomplete, defective males, possessing no qualities of real worth to public life.) In general, rape and the abuse of women was not tolerated and there were harsh punishments for those who committed these atrocities.

Women played a large role in the Cherokee Nation as well. They had the right to choose who and whether to marry, the right to bear arms, the right to speak at men’s councils and they had a large influence in tribal decisions.\(^2\)

Although gender roles existed, they were far less rigid than those of the Europeans. It was widely acceptable for men to take on “feminine” traits or roles and for winmin to take on “masculine” traits or roles. There was a great deal more sexual freedom, including a general acceptance of homosexuality. In some tribes homosexuals were thought to have special spiritual powers.

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1 Mander, Gerry. *In the Absence of the Sacred.* 1991. (p. 236)
Individual expressions of gender roles and homosexuality were as diverse as the tribes themselves.

This entire way of life was threatened with the arrival of the first Europeans.

The Arrival of Columbus and Colonialism

As the Europeans began arriving in the late 1400's the Natives greeted them with friendliness and generosity, but the Europeans had different mindset. When Columbus arrived on the shores of Hispanola and encountered the Arawak people he commented on their kindness, “The Indians are so naïve and so free with their possessions that no one that has not witnessed them would believe it. When you ask for something they have, they never say no. To the contrary, they offer to share it with anyone... They would make fine servants. With fifty men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever they want.” Upon learning that the island had gold, Columbus demanded that they began to bring it to him. Anyone over the age of fourteen was required to bring him a certain quantity of gold, and those who did not meet this quota had their hands cut off and bled to death. He rounded up fifteen hundred Arawaks and sent a third of the strongest and best built to Spain as slaves. He burned the Natives alive in groups of thirteen as a sacrifice to Christ and his twelve apostles. Within two years the Arawak population of two hundred fifty thousand had been cut in half and by 1650 the Arawaks had become extinct.

Europeans justified these actions with the belief that these “savages” needed to become “civilized.” The Europeans believing that Native peoples had no religion began to force Christianity upon them. They used the Bible as evidence that a hierarchy was the natural way of life. With one male God at the top, man was created in his image, with womyn under man and the Earth and all of it’s other creatures at the very bottom. This world-view was in direct conflict with the indigenous belief that all life was connected.

Westerners believed in a male dominated, hierachical political and religious system in which land was owned, the Earth was raped for resources, and peoples were conquered. Every aspect of life was privately owned, fought over and purchased, including human beings. Wimmin had no status in Western life except as non-respected wives and mothers. Rape was a petty crime and any womyn that tried to speak her mind was considered a heretic.

Prior to the arrival of westerners, rape was not common or widespread in indigenous cultures. Instances of rape did occur before colonialism, but not at anywhere near the level that it did afterwards. White men used rape as a weapon against indigenous wimmin. The European men had an eroticized image of indigenous wimmin as “wild,” “savage,” “squaws” who did not meet the western standards of femininity. Because of this, indigenous wimmin were usually not even given the pretense of false respect that was given to white wimmin. White men treated indigenous wimmin with horrendous cruelty, often mutilating their sex organs after raping them.

A very large part of the “civilization” of Native peoples was to implement male dominance into these autonomous cultures so authority could be controlled by one male person, as it had been done in Western cultures for centuries.

Upon this forced patriarchalization of indigenous peoples, the status of wimmin in tribal affairs began to diminish. The Cherokee Nation in which wimmin had previously had power became modeled after Christian white society. Wimmin were devalued and blacks and other Natives were enslaved. In an effort to be allowed to remain on their land, some men of the Cherokee nation drafted a constitution where wimmin and blacks were denied rights. This attempt to assimilate was perhaps an effort to survive as a people, but in the end the Cherokee could not escape the fate of most indigenous

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2 Gunn, Paula Allen. The Sacred Hoop.
cultures. They were forced to move west, suffering a great loss in population.

Over the hundreds of years of colonialism, an attempt was made to exterminate all the native peoples of the continent. Great losses in population occurred. Before contact there was an estimated 125 million people living in the Americas. 400 years later over 90% of the indigenous people in the hemisphere had been wiped out. This was accomplished through introduction of disease (both intentional and unintentional), enslavement, murder, forced dispossession from the land, starvation and destruction of resources.

**Indigenous Influences on the Development of US Politics**

The U.S. Constitution was largely based on principles of the Iroquois Constitution, known as The Great Law. Ideas that the U.S. adopted from the Iroquois include, “…the establishment of a federation with separate powers for federal and state governments; provisions for the common defense; representative democracy at the federal and local levels; separate legislative branches that debate issues and reconcile disagreements; checks and balances; rights of popular nomination and recall; and universal suffrage (although this last provision took Americans another 150 years to achieve).”

Unfortunately the “forefathers” of the US only applied the ideals of freedom, liberty and justice to themselves and other privileged white males, denying any rights to winmin, indigenous peoples and non-whites.

At the very core of the American winmin’s suffrage movement are the influences of the Iroquois Confederacy. The white winmin saw that indigenous winmin had a voice in their political systems, and could influence important decisions concerning the future of their nations. They were respected and treated as equals. White winmin wanted to experience the right to make decisions for themselves.

**The Modern-day Legacy of Colonialism**

Current white male privilege, stemming from male domination brought by Westerners during colonialism, is still fundamental in our society. The process of dismantling hundreds of years old institutionalized patriarchy and colonialism is a difficult challenge. This is especially true as this process of colonialism has been repeated all over the world. Indigenous societies all over the world have been marginalized in favor of a white male world view that has become globalized.

It is crucial to the future of our very existence to relearn an indigenous way of life that challenges the domination mindset. If not, it could be suicidal to our species, and devastating to all other life. The destruction has gone on too long and it is up to us to create something better.

This legacy of Columbus, of colonialism, is the legacy of patriarchy, and the legacy of the domination culture we continue to resist to this very day.

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1 Mander, Gerry. In the Absence of the Sacred.