Sky Woman Lives On

Contemporary Examples of Mothering the Nation

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Dans cet article l'auteure présente deux exemples du pouvoir du maternage de la nation tirés de sa propre histoire familiale. En pratiquant des formes de maternage, les femmes Oneida lancent un défi à l'idéologie patriarcale sur la maternité et affirme plutôt que la maternité est un acte de pouvoir politique. Dans ce processus elles se rappellent les enseignements des Sky Women et la Grande loi de la paix et réclament les importantes responsabilités tenues par les femmes de Haudenosaunee à l'intérieur de leur clan.

My Grandma, Dorothy Day, passed over two years ago. I remember her as a gentle, smiling woman who seemed happiest when surrounded by all her children and grandchildren. She often said that family was the most important thing and that we should try our best to see each other as often as we could, even if our lives demanded that we be physically far apart from each other. She kept reminding us that we must always be respectful of one another and to help family and friends in need. She lived her life according to those wise words. In doing so, she was well connected to the Native community in London, Ontario, to the Oneida Nation, and other friends within the broader London area. Her house was open to all of us in the family; I don't recall her door ever being locked. That is what Grandma Day wanted: for her home to be open to her family and friends who needed a comforting place. She had many friends; in fact whenever I say to others that I am her granddaughter, people have stories to tell and remind me of what a loving, caring woman she was. Grandma Day had a hard life, but that never hardened her or made her speak badly of those who caused her pain. She did not want bad energy to fill her heart and soul. She raised all her children on her own, helped to raise many grandchildren, and helped out with her great-grandchildren when needed. She worked hard and helped out in her community throughout her life, especially in the Native community, and with those who had challenges, as she herself had a vision disability.

Months after her passing, the N'Amerind Friendship Centre in London opened a new library and learning resource centre and named it the Dorothy Day Learning Centre. At the opening day ceremony, the executive members of N'Amerind explained that they decided to name it after my grandmother in order to remember and honour a lifelong member of the centre and community. She was remembered as someone who gave so much to the community, who loved all unconditionally, and who who wanted all Natives to feel proud of their identity and to cherish their culture. She was one of the original founders and a long-time volunteer at the centre. Like many other Native women, my grandma loved and nurtured the community and expected little in return. To be recognized through the naming of a new learning centre is suitable. Grandma Day believed the youth were our future and that they need to be nurtured. She believed we need proud youth, educated in Native worldviews, in order to build strong communities That is what the new learning centre has become: a place where all forms of knowledge are enriched and respected, and whose principle aim is to revitalize Native cultures and knowledge. My grandma is happy, I am sure of that. Her spirit lives in the centre with those who are learning everyday, guiding them into a good way. As a gentle, yet strong Oneida woman, she helped me to understand and appreciate the meaning of Native womanhood. Thank you, grandma. We love you and are carrying on as best as we can.

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Another remarkable Oneida woman is my aunt, Donna Phillips. About two years ago, her birthday party was held at the N'Amerind Friendship Centre so that all her beloved family and friends could be present. After all the food was eaten and the presents opened, a number of people said a few words about what aunt Donna meant to them. Her daughters spoke about her kindness, her unconditional love, her unwavering support throughout their lives, and of how their mother had been an inspiring role model for them. Other family members shared how

they learned from her how to be strong, caring, and proud of their Oneida ancestry. One community member spoke of how aunt Donna helped her throughout her life. This person learned to live as the Creator meant for us to live: by following the principles of respect, reciprocity, honesty, and caring. My aunt Donna has lived by these principles all her life and many people at the party shared examples of how she represents these principles. My aunt Donna is a well-recognized member of not only the Oneida community, but also of the larger Native community on Turtle Island. She has served her nation well. She has taught many people about the richness of our culture, the history of Oneida, and of women's role(s) in our communities. She has taken the responsibility of being an Oneida woman of the Turtle clan seriously, by being an activist for social justice for our people and for others who have suffered injustices. She has been an active member of the Native Women Association of Canada and other Native organizations in Canada. She has travelled across the globe to share and learn about Indigenous histories and cultures so that she could pass on that knowledge to the future generation. She has never been afraid of hard work, even if there has been, in turn, little financial reward or recognition. She does all of this because it needs to be done and because she loves her people. At her birthday party those present recognized her dedication to her community publicly and affirmed how she has been a positive role model for many, especially Native women. She is a good example of an Oneida woman or mother of our nation—someone who nurtures its members and inspires them to cherish the individual gifts they have been given by the Creator. Through her lived examples, we can learn to give back to our nation in our own unique way. I know that a large reason for my academic success is from having witnessed my Aunt Donna's strength, shared her vision, and watched her care for her people. This has instilled in me a sense of pride about my Oneida background, and a belief that the women in our communities are truly the heart of our nation. As the Sky Woman who fell from the Sky, both Aunt Donna and Grandma Day are typical mothers of our nation: they have shaped us into who we are and they guide us into reclaiming our independence and freedom as original peoples of beautiful Turtle Island.

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I wanted to share these two stories for this issue of *Canadian Woman Studies* in order to provide concrete examples of the strength that has existed within Oneida women despite the many forms of oppression they have had to endure. Many Indigenous scholars have analyzed the current conditions of Indigenous women and traced these back to a destructive colonial history (Anderson; Ladner; Laroque; Lawrence; Mihesuah; Monture-Angus; Stevenson; Voyageur). Although I will touch upon some of the negative legacies of colonialism that still invade our communities, the main purpose of this paper is to present positive empowering images of Indigenous women, specifically of the Oneida nation. Oneida Nation is one of the six Nations of the Haudenosaunee League, also known as the Six Nations or Iroquois Confederacy. I intend to show that Indigenous women's lives are rich with strength and determined spirit, gifts that the Creator has given them so that as warriors they can face the battles they encounter as they work toward pulling down barriers that impede them as women, as First Nations, as well as those that impede our communities.

Empowering Motherhood

Both my grandma and my aunt cared, nurtured, and fought for their loved ones and for their community as strong mothers of the nation. The way motherhood is understood here stands against the mainstream dominant ideology of patriarchal motherhood. Patriarchal motherhood is an ideology that has controlled, constrained, and degraded women (O'Reilly). This is because such an ideology constructs "good" mothers as ones who are "naturally" willing to put their family's needs first, at the expense of their own interests (O'Reilly). "Good" mothers sacrifice and conform to an institution of motherhood that is male-defined and a site of oppression (O'Reilly). Although my grandma and my aunt did love and care for their families, they also cared for their own lives and pursued their own interests. My aunt Donna's years of activism while a mother is an example of her not conforming to a patriarchal ideology of motherhood that expected her to push aside her own interests and needs. Motherhood did not imply a subservient and submissive role, rather it gave her strength to be a type of woman that her children, grandchildren, and all other Oneida people could look up to. An alternative to patriarchal motherhood has always existed in Indigenous communities, as Indigenous women "have historically, and continually, mothered in a way that is 'different' from the dominant culture, [and this] is not only empowering for our women, but is potentially empowering for all women" (Lavell-Harvard and Corbiere Lavell 3). This empowered mothering recognizes that when mothers practice mothering from a position of agency rather than of passivity, of authority rather than of submission, and of autonomy rather than of dependency, all, mothers and children alike, become empowered (O'Reilly Collins).

Consequently, motherhood becomes a political site, wherein mothers can effect social change and reduce the patriarchal nature of institutions (Collins). Acts taken by my grandma, for example, can be seen as political sites: offering her home to those in need was a political act, as her home came to be a refuge from the pain experienced by those surviving in an environment which was—and still is—hostile to Indigenous peoples. Her home was also a place where her loved ones knew that they were accepted as gifts from the Creator, even when acts by others made one question that reality. Being a "good" mother did not mean women had to push aside their own needs in order

to give exclusive attention to their children. Thus, the relationships formed by mothers and their children, and especially by mothers and daughters in Indigenous communities, are not characterized by oppressive patriarchy (O'Reilly). By being surrounded by strong and independent, yet still gentle and caring women, as children we learned to value the feminine spirit and to respect and treat women, our mothers, as equal to men (O'Reilly). From an Indigenous standpoint, this kind of mothering contains a commitment to "prepare and equip the next generation to bring about an indigenous resurgence based on indigenous interpretations of our traditions" (Simpson 26). Grandma and aunt's daughters witnessed the independence, autonomy, and strength of their mothers, and this provided them with the knowledge of the sacredness of Indigenous womanhood.

Indigenous women like my aunt and grandma have offered us the opportunity to grow and develop in a positive way by giving us a space—our family—of resistance against racism and colonialism. Home and family are spaces where our identity is affirmed and valued, and where healthy lives are constructed.

Mothering the Nation in the Case of Oneida Women

Often Indigenous women are negatively portrayed as the stereotypical "savage," who has been historically constructed from the early period of contact between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people (Acoose; Stevenson). Hence, encountering real women that are in opposition to the stereotypical images presented in a racist society is crucial for the development of a positive Indigenous identity for the daughters of Indigenous women. Meeting strong and independent Indigenous women provides younger women with the strength needed to live as Indigenous peoples in an environment that still does not accept them as equal. At my aunt's birthday party, those of us who expressed to her what a good role model she has been recognize that she has educated us about the value of Indigenous cultures that historically have been characterized by powerful Indigenous women. Indigenous women like my aunt and grandma have offered us the opportunity to grow and develop in a positive way by giving us a space—our family—of resistance against racism and colonialism.

As Patricia Hill Collins argues, in this type of mothering, home and family are not oppressive spaces for women, but spaces where our identity is affirmed and valued, and where healthy lives are constructed. Indeed, for Indigenous women, families are our "foundations of resistance" because they give us the strength needed to survive and defy oppressive experiences (Anderson). It is within our families that we come to learn and appreciate our Indigenous histories and cultures, and where we acquire the tools needed to fight against the negative images of Indigenous peoples that bombard mainstream Canadian society. As Kim Anderson maintains, "strong, independent female role models provide Native girls with the sense that they can overcome whatever obstacles they will inevitably encounter … the bond between Aboriginal girls and their grandmother is notably strong, and this relationship has taught many lessons about resistance" (118). This strong bond is one that is evident within my family: most girls are attached to their grandmothers, and in many cases, the grandmother is the primary caregiver, as both my grandmother and aunt have been. In families like this, "native girls witness both the social and the economic decision-making power of older women in their communities" (Anderson 118). What these girls have witnessed is women performing necessary and important work in the community so that it can survive and grow. As the example of my grandmother shows, Indigenous women have often been the ones who have helped to create urban organizations that serve the specific cultural needs of our nations' members. As Lee Maracle points out, "the majority of these women grew [up?] poor, under educated, and struggled with their schooling, [but nevertheless successfully] mothered children, built organizations and served the community while reclaiming culture, doing healing work on themselves and others" (56). This concept of mothering is one that is both empowering and culturally specific. Within an Oneida and other Haudenosaunee, and likely among other Indigenous worldviews, mothering refers to much more than simply bearing one's own biological children.

Similar to the way that Collins describes community mothering, Oneida women see mothering as a political act, as a way to participate in the sustainability of the self and the community. They do so by bearing and nurturing their own children, taking care of others' children, and providing for the whole community, in order to resist forms of racial discrimination and cultural genocide. In this way, they ensure our nations are healthy and strong. These various forms of mothering are political acts and can be traced back to the creation stories of our peoples. In our Oneida creation story, the origin of earth is attributed to Sky Woman, who fell from the sky carrying the seeds of creation (the three sisters of corn, squash, and bean, and the medicines of tobacco and strawberry) and after lying

on top of the turtle, created earth. Later she gave birth to the Lynx woman who eventually gave birth to the first humans created and born on Mother Earth. The story of Sky Woman is a testimony of the rich powerful roles held in our nation by women as Mothers of the Nation. This important responsibility was later reaffirmed in the way men and women share responsibilities in the leadership of our councils as spelled out in the Great Law of Peace that governs our nations.

Due to our creation story, in the Haudenosaunee socio-political structure, the hereditary line of the clans is passed through the females. Each Clan Mother assumes many responsibilities, such as holding title to the land, appointing/removing hereditary chiefs, adopting members to the nation, and overseeing the overall practice and transmission of culture. This gave Haudenosaunee women responsibility in all spheres of life as mothers of the nation, and set up matrilineal structures as governing principles. For Oneida women and other Haudenosaunee women, responsibility towards one's own clan members and one's own nation is central to their identity as woman/mother of the nation, as the examples of my grandmother and aunt also illustrate. As mothers of their nation they carried their responsibility to serve their community and to help maintain a strong Oneida culture despite attempts at cultural assimilation by mainstream society.

Some Dangers in the Ideology of Mothering the Nation

The identification of women as mothers of the nation extends beyond an Oneida context and, in many cases, the imagining of women as mothers of the nation is full of complexities and contradictions. Women as mothers and are often "called upon to literally and figuratively reproduce the nation" (Loomba 214). The complexity of this identification is seen in the ways in which as mothers of the nation, women can become either empowered or controlled and constrained (Banerjee; De Mel; Loomba; McClintock; Thapar-Bjorkert and Ryan; Yuval-Davis). As biological reproducers of the nation, as reproducers of national boundaries, as transmitters of culture, as symbolic signifiers of national differences, and as participants in nationalist struggles, women have held contradictory positions in nationalist movements. In some cases they have exerted agency and become empowered while transforming their own vision of the future nation, or fought together with their male nationalists, or attempted to open new conceptual spaces for women by moving into public space as mothers of the nation and negotiated and/or challenged existing notions of mothers and female roles.

Consequently women have responded in various ways to the construction of motherhood and their roles as mothers. As Ania Loomba points out, women have either appropriated the iconography of motherhood to pursue a previous male-dominated nationalist movement, but at other times, their "mothering the nation" role has become a justification for their oppression and control over their bodies, either because they have to ensure that the future children of their nation have "pure" blood, or they must abide by strict, fixed, and essentialist notions of culture and identity.

After years of colonialism and sexist patriarchy, we have seen changes in the image of Indigenous womanhood and traditional gender relations. A persistent negative legacy of colonialism is the sexism that now lives in many of our Native organizations and communities.

Conclusion

Mothering of the nation can be either an empowering or an oppressive act. Within an Oneida/Haudenosaunee perspective, it can, in fact, be both. As my examples and the narrative of the Sky Woman show, there are instances of an empowering feminine spirit that exists and nurtures the concept of mothering. Our creation story is a positive source of strength for women and for the whole community. Yet, after years of colonialism and sexist patriarchy, we have seen changes in the image of Indigenous womanhood and traditional gender relations (see Anderson; Ladner; Lawrence; Monture-Angus; Stevenson; Sunseri). A persistent negative legacy of colonialism is the sexism that now lives in many of our Native organizations and communities.

Through European influence, power was legally removed from Oneida and other Haudenosaunee clan mothers; as a result, the clan line was no longer passed through the female line in the *Indian Act*. This led to a devaluation of Indigenous womanhood and is at the heart of the unequal gender relations that currently exist in our communities. With regards to the concept of mothering and other "traditional" aspects of our cultures, we now see a "colonial" version of traditionalism that justifies the subordination of Indigenous women (Martin-Hill). This distorted traditionalism has stripped women of their historical roles and authority and devalued them. Tradition, rather than a source of strength, is now used to subordinate and silence women and to mainly serve

the interests of men. Sky Woman has been transformed into a "traditional" Indigenous woman who is silent and submissive (Martin-Hill).

However, as the lives of my grandmother and aunt illustrate, there still many empowered women who follow the teachings of the Sky Woman. These women are fulfilling their responsibility of mothering the nation by participating in the ongoing struggle of decolonization, by working for the revitalization of our cultures and political systems, and by nurturing our communities. In the process, when they deliver the message of Peace, as provided by the Creator, they recall the spirit of Sky Woman. Further, they assure that the symbols associated with the "mother of the nation" are not just rhetoric, but are expressed in the material reality of everyday life. Women have always done the work of mothering as asked of them through the creation stories, but often have not been recognized or valued accordingly. Yet, as the example of the new learning centre named after my grandmother and the testimony of those who attended my aunt's birthday show, people in our community are listening again to the drumbeat of our nation as it is sung by women. We still have much work to do to repair the damage that colonialism has done to our communities, but all of us together walking in balance can restore equal relations as the teachings of the Sky Woman story and the Great Law of Peace demand of us.

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