

From Historical Memories to Contemporary Visions

Honouring Indigenous Maternal Histories

This essay will highlight the importance of knowing our Indigenous maternal histories and reconnecting new generations of women with these cultural traditions. While contemporary realities of Indigenous mothering are often described in terms of disheartening statistical facts that may be understood as part of a colonial legacy, this article describes the empowerment that can be gathered through a revivification of maternal traditions. The article will take the reader through a journey that draws attention to the strength and resilience of our ancestors, and the decolonizing legacy they have left us through blood memory, and cultural teachings. The decolonization of current maternal realities is also described making note of contemporary movements that share cultural teachings with Aboriginal women through literature. The belief that we need to know where we come from in order to know where we are going is integral to contemporary visions of empowered Indigenous motherhood. As Leanne Simpson writes decolonizing future generations begins with conception; we must begin to decolonize our birthing and maternal experiences. Thus, reconnecting the first teachers of our youngest generations with their maternal histories is essential to strengthening Indigenous families and communities.

Women were born awake. In their bodies lived the memories of their star-nation mother's moment with Westwind. In their blood coursed traces of old agreements. These traces nagged them until story awakened them. Through story, each generation of women schooled the next to solve crises, to enter into relationship with others, eyes wide open and hearts optimistic. . . . Through these stories the women learned to search the world for responses. They emulated the beings around them, and dodems were born. Helpers were acquired in the dark of huts made of sinew, in which red-hot stones

sang extraordinary answers. Systems were born in this way. Successful strategies were repeated in stories, shaping customs and beliefs into systems. The humans gained confidence through their endless discussions about direction and their successful speculation in response to problems. Belief in one another achieved a majesty all its own. Turtle island women had no reason to fear other humans. —Lee Maracle

I begin with the above words from Lee Maracle's *Daughters Are Forever* because I believe they are inspired by Indigenous historical traditions on mothering the nation and replenishing life and well-being within communities across Turtle Island. They express the beauty and power Indigenous women hold in their ability to bring forth life and pass down teachings, through story, from one generation to the next. These words connect us back to the pre-contact years when the spiritual nature of Indigenous maternal traditions remained untouched and as Maracle signified a time before these traditions became attacked by the newcomers to this land. This fictional rendition captures the essence of the egalitarian societies that honoured the sacredness of birthing traditions and expresses the vital role of the helpers (midwives) who also guided the "birth" of the systems that governed the life of Indigenous communities.

This chapter will highlight the importance of knowing our Indigenous maternal histories and reconnecting new generations of women to these cultural traditions. While contemporary realities of Indigenous mothering are often described in terms of disheartening statistical facts that may be understood as part of a colonial legacy, this article describes the empowerment that can be gathered through a revivification of maternal traditions. This article will take the reader through a journey that draws attention to the strength and resilience of our ancestors, and the decolonizing legacy they have left us through blood memory, and cultural teachings. The decolonization of current maternal realities is also described making note of contemporary movements that share cultural teachings with Aboriginal women. The belief that we need to know where we come from in order to know where we are going is integral to contemporary visions of empowered Indigenous motherhood (Anderson 2007). This very sentiment is expressed in the voices of our grandmothers and their commitment to pass on these teachings. As Leanne Simpson so powerfully expressed, decolonizing future generations begins with conception; we must begin to decolonize our birthing and maternal experiences. The power of this statement reflects the maternal teachings that begin from the very first moment of conception, and the care that is taken to honour the spirit of new life. Reconnecting the first teachers of our youngest generations with their maternal histories is essential to the future well-being and strengthening of Indigenous families and communities.

I am honoured to contribute to this collection on histories of motherhood by offering my understandings of Indigenous maternal histories. Such a collection cannot leave out the “story medicines” (Anderson 2011) and historical realities that have influenced contemporary maternal understandings. This article is also a valuable contribution as it serves to connect the reader to the maternal connections of this land known to the Indigenous peoples as Turtle Island, and the earth as Mother Earth. It is often said that land is our first teacher, much like mothers are the first teachers to their new born. Connecting both of these expressions, land is mother, and indeed our first teacher, and therefore to understand the historical maternal teachings of this land we must go back to this very basic sentiment. These historical traditions must be understood within colonialist agendas, including a significant repression of the mothering role; arguably an attack on the right for Aboriginal women to mother their own children. These colonial forces significantly altered the ways in which “story medicine” was delivered. Indigenous mothering traditions are therefore deeply rooted in historical memory. These traditions have been carried silently in the hearts of women and creatively passed on to younger generations for the survival of Indigenous nations. That are traditions are still alive is testament to the love, strength, and resiliency of the grandmothers who nurtured them, as cultural carriers, to ensure that they could be revived today.

Before delving into the historical legacy of Indigenous grandmothers, it is also important to consider the influence that their maternal histories have had on the overall contemporary practices of motherhood. Today while we are seeing a comeback of Indigenous maternal traditions within contemporary Native families, we are also seeing many of the values that stem from these maternal traditions influencing non-Indigenous maternal practices. The moss bag or cradle board, for example, are similar to modern day swaddling techniques. Today we also see trends towards the use of baby carriers and slings that keep infants close and secure. There is more support and encouragement of extended breastfeeding despite the early Jesuit writings that “sexualized” this natural practice among Aboriginal mothers and the subsequent western push of bottle feeding (Jansen).

The work of John Raulston Saul prompts us to consider the influence that Aboriginal people had on the developing “civilization” of Canada. In his book *A Fair Country: Telling Truths About Canada* his statement “we are a Métis civilization” is explained by his expression of the deep Aboriginal roots he finds within “how we imagine ourselves, how we govern, how we live together in communities.” He continued by pointing out that “whatever our family tree may look like, our intuitions and common sense as a civilization are more Aboriginal than European” (3). As an Indigenous woman living within this “civilization” that Saul defines as Métis, my dissension rests in the ongoing

colonization of Aboriginal mothering. While I do not believe Canada can be defined as a Métis civilization, I draw on Saul's work to accentuate the evidence that Indigenous maternal traditions have influenced contemporary, albeit alternative, movements in mothering practices. This statement is reflected in the modern shifts in motherhood practices that encourage midwifery, prolonged breastfeeding, attachment parenting, positive reinforcement and so on. Interestingly enough, these emerging trends among non-Aboriginal families can be linked to the Indigenous maternal practices and parenting styles that were deemed "savage" throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century. While some modern day mothering techniques may be described as akin to traditional Aboriginal parenting practices, the realities of Indigenous mothering today must be understood within the historical and contemporary context that led to the dismantling of these customs. Unfortunately issues of privilege and cultural appropriation also come in to play as many Aboriginal mothers no longer have access to some of these teachings that have now influenced non-Aboriginal parenting practices.

The Repression of Aboriginal Mothering

"When colonialism hijacked our pregnancies and births, it also stole our power and our sovereignty as Indigenous women. And when colonialism stole that power from us it undermined our sacred responsibilities as life-givers" (Simpson 28). Simpson's work sheds light on how the powerful system of birthing so evident in Lee Maracle's quote was replaced by the western medical model that isolated women from the "helpers" and the birthing ceremonies that honoured and celebrated new life:

Our midwives, aunts, and grandmothers were not allowed in delivery rooms, and neither were our medicines, our singing, our drumming, and our birthing knowledge. We were strapped flat on our backs on hospital beds, not allowed to use our knowledge of birthing which told us which positions to use, ways of minimizing pain, and ways of birthing naturally and safely. (28)

Today birthing stories of Indigenous women can be described as taking place in distant locations from their support systems (Olsen). While these realities remove the sacredness of the birthing experience they are also described as negative and associated with feelings of loneliness. Extending the negative implications of assimilating birth experiences, Simpson pointed out that the invasion of western medicalization has led to feelings of powerlessness. As she explained, "it made us afraid of ourselves. It made us question our body's

knowledge and our grandmothers' and aunties' knowledge, and our ability to bring forth new life" (28). This fear is also expressed in Maria Campbell's foreword to Kim Anderson's book *Life Stages and Native Women: Memory, Teachings, and Story Medicine*:

I knew where babies came from, as my nohkoms were midwives, but I believed you got them from kissing boys. You can guess my anxiety after my first kiss. I jumped off the barn and galloped my horse recklessly around the countryside because I'd heard one of the old ladies say a woman miscarried because she rode horseback. It has always been amazing to me how, as a little girl and young woman, I was taught so much about birthing, life, and death but nothing about the actual act of sexual intercourse and its role in giving life. Perhaps it was because the old way of being put out on the land for your first moon cycle was no longer practised when I was young, at least not in my community. And perhaps because the old women whose job it was to put us out were no longer able to do that, and so our "period" was dealt with by our Catholic mothers who shamefully whispered the barest of information and the whole thing was kept a secret where once it would have been a time of rejoicing and celebration. The fear of the church was deeply ingrained and, for many families, it was best to leave those old ways alone because they didn't want their children to suffer the consequences. It is hard to understand this unless one knows the history of the churches and their absolute power in the lives of our peoples. (xvii)

In honour of Maria Campbell's words I include this lengthy quote so that I do not misrepresent her story. I also include it here as it reflects the message that must be conveyed about how these maternal traditions were repressed, and the role of that fear that was so deeply ingrained. Her story also speaks to the power of the Indigenous women who so bravely and cautiously kept these traditions alive.

My Own Grandmothers Have No Names...

Indeed, as Saul asserted, Canada's early development as a "Nation" cannot be understood without knowledge of the influence of Indigenous social structures. In many ways, however, the colonial project was aimed to not only enforce an assimilationist agenda, but also to repress the power of Indigenous women as a way to keep settler women "under control." As Smith explained, settler women were in awe of the matrilineal social structures and the power of women

within Indigenous societies. Because women were held in such high esteem in pre-contact societies, their community status threatened the patriarchal social structure that permeated the settler mindset of the time. Aboriginal women were seen as a threat to the newcomer's vision of patriarchal dominance and expansion (Smith). The demonization of Aboriginal womanhood, therefore, also served to protect and enforce the patriarchal family structure. Understood within this context, attacking the women, specifically through their role as mothers, was an intentional move that satisfied the colonial invasion of this land. By removing the right for Indigenous women to bring life to their communities, a nation could no longer thrive. With the expansion of the colonial invasion, patriarchal forces seeped into Indigenous communities and severely altered the egalitarian roles that were prevalent across Turtle Island. The role of Indigenous women as mothers, aunts, and grandmothers became merely an old backdrop within newly defined landscapes. This context provides insight into the poetry of Indigenous women that draws attention to the lack of credit, acknowledgement, and voice given to Indigenous women, mothers, and grandmothers.

As an Indigenous mother who grew up with the understanding of the powerful role of women as the backbone of our communities and their status in the governance of our nations, I was curious about the lack of mention of Indigenous women throughout history. This sentiment is reflected in a poem by Marcie Rendon in which she wrote:

My own grandmothers have no names, their heroic actions erased from history's page. Freedom stories left untold...shared only in the deepest dreams. In lessons to the world, the enemy has recorded our greatest warriors' names: Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull, Geronimo, Cochise. Resistance fighters all . . . yet my own grandmothers have no names, their heroic actions erased from history's page. (46)

Kim Anderson also revealed this yearning and the need for the recognition of our grandmothers by drawing attention to the missing pieces within history texts:

Where are the stories of kokum (granny) teaching the four-year-old how to hunt; the depictions of infants in moss bags watching siblings and female relatives pick berries or Seneca root; the puberty fasts; the fiddle dances and the Sun Dances; the women's councils; the old woman doctoring with plant medicine? (2011: 16)

Chrysto's poem "I'm Making You Up" expressed a different yearning for

“Grandma” as she writes:

Grandma we all need partially deaf & busy with weaving listens
 through a thick blanket of years & sore feet....
 Grandma who died long before I was born
 Come back
 Come back

While her words express a longing for “Grandma” and her “sympathy warm & comforting” they also trace the maternal spirit that can be felt within the story medicines that Kim Anderson (2011) wrote about in *Life Stages and Native Women: Memory, Teachings, and Story Medicine*. These untold stories hold our sacred maternal traditions that bring healing and wellness to the life continuum of Indigenous nations.

Historical Memories and Story Medicine

Kim Anderson described story medicine as the traditional teachings that are passed on through stories. Kim shares her work of “digging up the medicines” through interviews with “Oral Historian Participants” to pass on historical knowledge about life stages, particularly the life cycle of girls and women and the “customs related to pregnancy, childbirth, infant care, and ceremonies that honour children’s life passages” (2011: 6). By passing on this story medicine through her book, and making this knowledge accessible, her work contributes to the rebuilding and strengthening of our communities.

These teachings, however, are not as accessible as they once were as a result of the colonial attacks on Indigenous mothering practices. Anderson explained, “The continuation of these ceremonies demonstrates the value that some families placed on marking this life transition, in spite of pressures to abandon their practices” (90). Anderson wrote that families who continued these traditions such as puberty rites ceremonies, for example, often did so in secrecy. Indeed it took steady persistence, a strong commitment, and an ability to transcend extensive cultural invasions so that our grandmothers could pass on these teachings. As Catherine McCarty wrote, this is something to celebrate:

Let us celebrate that we, as Aboriginal women, have been able to live on and into the new millennium—due to the perseverance of our grandmothers. They understood and accepted consequences, and still continued to pass on traditions to ensure the future of our birthrights and cultures today. (7)

These excerpts shed light on the commitment of Indigenous grandmothers to pass teachings on to future generations. In honour of this commitment it is important to keep Indigenous maternal teachings alive by passing down these story medicines and applying them for the well-being of our families and communities.

Sharing Story Medicine...

My grandmother used to say, “Ho, takoza, un’a ded iyotaka. Takuku ociyakin kte.” That means, “My granddaughter, come here, let me talk to you. I’m going to tell you these things so then you can tell your takoza, your grandchildren.” (Penman 50)

The above words of Stella Pretty Sounding Flute, Wahpekute-Hunkpati Dakota highlight the importance that was placed on sharing cultural teachings and the emphasis that was placed on the generations to come. Cultural teachings were passed on in such a way that rooted Indigenous ways of life with the many generations that came before to the many future generations to come. I imagine this as an invisible lifeline that connects the power and strength of our ancestors to the sacredness of new life to come. In a compilation entitled *Honor the Grandmothers*, Sarah Penman shared the stories of Dakota and Lakota women as they were told to her. Stella Pretty Sounding Flute was one of the women interviewed. Her own life story expresses this deep connection among past, present and future. Stella, who was born in a tent, surrounded by her grandmothers (midwives) shares her birth story as it was shared to her. She described her lifelong bond with her grandmothers that began in that tent:

My teachers were my grandmothers; my mother was too busy with raising seven boys. They taught me how to dry corn, pound cherries, and dry plums, and gather medicine and the wild fruits along the rivers, and they’d take me to the prairie and tell me about the medicines out there. (58)

Penman also documented the story of Iola Columbus who developed a Grandmother’s society that encouraged older women to pass on their traditional knowledge to the younger generations. Columbus also described her story of being raised by her grandmother on a small reservation in South Dakota:

I was raised in the traditional way, and by that I mean when I was about three or four years old my grandparents wanted to raise me ... to pass on their knowledge of our culture, the traditions and things,

to one of the grandchildren. When I think of it that's quite an honor. I didn't know it at the time, but that was the beginning of learning all our ways. (117)

Iola shared about the practical survival skills she learned about digging roots and picking medicine, tanning hides along with the teachings of how to pick medicines that entail the values of reciprocity and giving thanks. She learned through storytelling, and of stories that could only be told in the winter. Iola explained that spending that time with her grandmother also instilled values of having respect for all people as well as herself, for animals and for creation, teachings about the need to be humble for always making time for visitors and offering tea. Iola described her strong feelings towards the need to preserve cultural teachings and pass them on to the younger generations and shares this as her reason for organizing the grandmother's society. She acknowledged that a lot of our younger generations were not raised with these traditions:

It isn't so much that I think they should learn how to bead or these things. It would help them to know what an Indian turnip looks like, or what cherries look like, and how to preserve those things, but more important is our value system. I think that's why we've survived as a nation. (142)

Iola described the importance of knowing these values and instilling them within the youth and connects this to community survival. Expressing her commitment to passing on these values she explained "I believe that through that, our young people will begin to appreciate their identity. That's the purpose of this Grandmother's society" (143). The above examples, along with Iola's story, showcase the role Indigenous grandmothers delivered by "mothering the nation." Historically, Indigenous women's roles in "mothering the nation" took many forms and left a strong legacy of guidance that nurtured the future generations and also the life of the community.

Connecting to the Teachings...

"In Mohawk there is no word for "aunt." Most people refer to their mother's sisters as Istah or Mother just as they would refer to their own mother.... You start out with many mothers. That's just how it is." (Brant and Laronde i, para.4)

The above words shared in the opening to the anthology *Sweetgrass Grows All Around Her* (Brant and Laronde) capture the power of the histories of

Indigenous mothering. The well-being of the community stemmed from this power of maternal support that was embedded within all aspects of community life. These understandings are intertwined within Indigenous teachings and these teachings and the sharing of them are in and of themselves an expression of Indigenous culture as a maternally-based culture. As Leanne Simpson pointed out:

Our grandmothers tell us that the answers lie within our own cultures, ways of knowing and being, and in our languages. When I listen to them talk about pregnancy, childbirth, and mothering, I hear revolutionary teachings with the power to bring about radical changes in our families, communities, and nations. (Simpson 26)

Leanne Simpson described her birthing experiences as times when she came to a deep understanding of “the transformative power of the Anishnaabeg birth ceremony, and the responsibilities of mothering grounded in Anishnaabeg values” (25). She continued by describing the power these ceremonies had on her, causing “a radical shift in both my spiritual and political consciousness” (25). Connecting Indigenous maternal teachings to our first mother, Mother Earth, Simpson wrote, “our earth mother gives and gives and gives, and I am not sure how much we are giving back” (31). She connected this to the knowledge our ancestors have passed on about giving back to our first mother. These include teachings about not over consuming, and to only take what you need and leave the rest. This takes us full circle where Indigenous maternal teachings, honour our Mother Earth and the reciprocal role Indigenous women traditionally hold as care takers of the earth. Simpson’s spiritual awakening through her birthing experiences connect to an understanding of the need to pass these teachings on to our children so they can learn how to give thanks, how to give back to Mother Earth and honour the life forces all around us. Everything from eating traditional food to supporting a healthy environment (physically and emotionally) is tied to these original teachings. According to many Indigenous maternal teachings, as I have come to understand them, all of these principles and values are interrelated.

Katsi Cook, Mohawk midwife, childbirth educator, and Project Director of the Akwesasne Mother’s Milk Project refers to Mothers as the first environment. Cook explained “in pregnancy, our bodies sustain life. At the breast of women, the generations are nourished” (1993: 22). Her work also speaks to the understanding of land as mother that I described earlier. Bringing more insight into this understanding her work connects women (mothers as the first environment to their children) and Mother Earth as the first environment to all of humanity. This is expressed further in the following:

Our Native American traditions tell us that our unborn see through our eyes and hear through our ears. In the dream days just before their births, they learn from our thoughts and our emotions. And now, when they are born, they inherit a body burned with toxic contaminants. (22)

How beautiful does Cook start off in the above statement only to present a stark reality that shares a contemporary truth about the shift of “the first environment.” Her work connects these two environments documenting the way colonial invasion has altered them. In this way we see a connection between the toxins and contaminants that are found in the water, air, soil and food that Mother Earth provides to sustain and nourish us all, and the toxins that are then excreted through pregnancy and lactation and passed from a woman’s body to her baby. The work of Cook and the Akwesasne Mother’s Milk Project aims to educate about these issues as she advocates for environmental justice in connection to Indigenous maternal health.

In another article, Cook explained how the strawberry teachings are related to Indigenous teachings on family planning and sustaining life. Again, this shows how cultural teachings related to mothering are embedded within the teachings that Mother Earth provides. In *The Spirit of the Berry Speaks to Us Still*, Cook describes the strawberry spirit:

It is sacred food because we understand and fulfill our relationship to it as human beings. We remember its protective power in our linguistics and we still share the stories ... of the berry spirit. The central theme of those stories always has to do with the power of love in healing and maintaining harmonious relations. One of our names for the wild strawberry is “heart-berry,” special among the berry people for its very essence: the way it smells, the way it looks, the way it tastes, the way it makes us feel when we eat it. Even the way it sends out red runners along the ground to reproduce itself inspires us to think of the regeneration of our own families (2004: 61).

This connects to not only the ways in which Mother Earth nurtures sustains and endlessly gives, but also to the very teaching that can be found in the life continuum of the strawberry plant. These “red runners” can be connected with Anderson’s description of the “joy new life represented” (2011: 39). Anderson pointed out that, “new life was celebrated because it meant the continuation of the people” (39). This sentiment is reflected in the communal nature of child rearing practices as they laid the foundation for a strong community. With “the regeneration of our own families” in mind, as connected to the beauty of

Mother Earth and the teachings she provides, the sacredness of new life within Indigenous communities can be better understood.

Honouring New Life Within the Community

Pregnancy was viewed as a sacred time, one in which the spirit of new life coming was celebrated from the earliest moments. Mothers were held in high esteem for their role in bringing new life to the community. They were honoured and special care was given during this sacred time (Anderson, 2011). Anderson explained:

Many of the pregnancy protocols had to do with protecting and enhancing the emotional, spiritual, mental, and physical health of the child. The vigilance that a pregnant woman was expected to observe during pregnancy was part of the training and discipline that both she and her baby would need to live a long and healthy life (45).

Extending this understanding of the sacredness of the pregnancy I draw attention to the teachings of Tom Porter. I would first like to point out that in sharing these teachings that he learned from his grandmother, Tom encourages the passing down of these Mohawk traditions much like the Lakota and Dakota grandmothers whose stories were described earlier and the Oral Historians who shared their work with Kim Anderson. As Tom declared:

You may spread the word to your relatives, to cousins you have or whoever. So that they may know this as well. And then our tradition will be strong. Because if our tradition is strong, our children are also strong. (243)

Tom Porter shared teachings about the sacredness of those nine months baby is in the womb, reminding us to honour these teachings right from conception. He described the protocols around hunting and fishing, and pointed out that these activities are forbidden during pregnancy. He also explained that his Grandma and Elders use to teach him that pregnant (women and men) are not to put anything around their neck, not to put on a neck tie or button up the top button on their shirt. As he shared, this is connected to the umbilical cord, or “birth cord” that connects the mother and baby. If a neck tie or choker gives the mother or father an uncomfortable feeling it is believed that the baby will feel that too. He also shared specific teachings about protocols that teach pregnant couples to not stand or rest in the doorway during pregnancy or walk up a flight of stairs and return halfway if you realized you forgot something.

These are related to the baby's journey down the birth canal. I share a few of his teachings here to provide a deeper understanding of the sacredness of the birthing time and the special care that was given to ensure it was a smooth process for both the mother and the baby.

Anderson's work also described the ceremonies and protocols of the earliest life stages that follow pregnancy traditions. Anderson explained that, "Elders in the community had a particularly important role in connecting with the new life right from the beginning" (2011: 53). Throughout her book these traditions are explained including the Elders and grandmothers' role in naming ceremonies and the emphasis that was placed on care for the placenta and the umbilical cord. The meticulous care given to these perinatal and postnatal events show the value of childbirth, and the understanding that birth, as an early life stage, must be nurtured to establish a lifelong foundation and connection with the grandmothers and extended families who are integral to the mothering role. These examples also showcase the spiritual connection between motherhood and Mother Earth. Through sacred teachings that are found in the life forms all around us, Mother Earth expresses a distinct mothering role by offering lessons that can be seen and nurturing that can be felt. As Katsi Cook explained:

It is no wonder that the wild strawberry plant is dug up whole from the field in the fall, stored in a root cellar or other dry, dark place, and utilized by family elders in restoring the blood after childbirth, particularly for recovery from post-partum hemorrhage or caesarean section. The iron and minerals in the berries, leaves, roots and runners of the wild strawberry make this favorite berry plant a valuable blood remedy. (2004: 61).

Much like the teachings of the strawberry, Mother Earth has provided the maternal lessons we need to understand to nurture our own children. These lessons sustain life of our sacred birthing and mothering traditions. In turn, the ability to bring forth new life, grounded within our traditions, nurture and replenish the well-being within our families. Thus, contemporary ways to revive them is integral to the future well-being of our nation.

This knowledge was carried by the grandmothers whose integral role as midwives physically delivered new life to the communities. Carroll and Benoit described the vital role of Aboriginal midwives historically and documented the spiritual nature of Aboriginal midwifery practices according to the Elders who participated in their focus groups. As they pointed out, the role of the Aboriginal midwife was viewed as the "Creator's work." Midwives "had to be trained in recognizing the 'birth energy'"—the special communication between

the labouring woman and her baby” (267). They explained:

Aboriginal midwives followed a continuous and holistic approach to childbirth and gave considerable time and attention to each client through pregnancy, birth, and the postpartum period. Their role was to counsel and instruct women on how to care for themselves while pregnant and as new mothers. (267)

This vital role of midwives that extends the birthing ceremony was also articulated throughout Anderson’s work on life stages. Anderson described midwives as “managers of the life continuum” who “had lifelong relationships with the babies they delivered” (56). Anderson continued by writing about the Algonquian protocols related to the first stage of life noting “the sacredness of new life and how they took great measures to foster and protect it” (63).

Child Rearing Traditions

If we look at the Anishnaabe teachings of Mosôm Danny, Basil Johnston, and others, it becomes clear that infants and toddlers were seen as bringing hope, happiness, and a sense of potential to families and communities. The teachings tell us that new life was cherished, and at one point in time pregnant woman, infants, and toddlers were nurtured and cared for in that spirit. All community members had roles to play in preparing for new life and ensuring that the proper care was given to the pregnant woman and the newborn. As Danny points out, this sense of identity and belonging began as early as conception and was fostered through infancy, so that from the youngest age, community members knew their place and developed a sense of trust. (Anderson 2011: 38)

Anderson drew on the words shared by Mosôm Danny Musqua to explain that nurturing a sense of belonging in the newest members of a community began at conception and continued throughout the subsequent life stages of development. Childrearing techniques involved storytelling, positive role modeling, and rites of passage ceremonies. Children were also viewed as a collective responsibility of a community (Anderson 2011). There were many instances when the grandparents spent a lot of time with the youngest and instilled values through activities such as berry picking and storytelling. The grandparents were the teachers of the youngest community members. Much like Stella Pretty Sounding Flute shared in her narrative, Anderson pointed out that some children were chosen to spend extensive periods as “apprentices” with their grandparents. During these

periods children learned valuable knowledge that they could apply later in life and pass down to their own grandchildren. While the younger children spent a lot of time learning from their grandparents, older children worked with their parents, uncles and aunties to learn more about survival skills such as tanning hides. Anderson's description makes it evident that the work of "mothering" was familial, and communal. Members of the extended family played significant roles in childrearing. In this way the child had a foundation, through a network of support, that nurtured his or her well-being. This is a very different reality from the overburdened mothers we see today.

The connections between identity and belonging are evidenced in the work of Kim Anderson and Sarah Penman. Kim drew on the story medicines of Mosôm Danny Musqua who described the first point of fostering identity and belonging as the time of conception. Sarah described Iola Columbus's commitment to pass on teachings through the Grandmother's society as a way to instill a strong sense of identity within "our young people." These story medicines accentuate the power of reconnecting to Indigenous maternal traditions. They also draw attention to just how much is missing today and the extent of that loss so deeply expressed in Marcie Rendon's words "My grandmothers have no names" and Chrysto's "I'm Making You Up."

Sharing Story Medicine through Indigenous Women's Literature

While Indigenous women's poetry serves as a form of resistance by drawing attention to the diminishment of Indigenous women's voice, it also exists as a valuable teaching tool that reclaims Aboriginal women's voice by sharing stories and traditions. In this way it reconnects Indigenous women to their traditional maternal teachings, and in doing so expresses the potential of re-establishing the communal spirit of supporting mothering. In my own work I write about the connection between Indigenous women's literature and Indigenous maternal pedagogy. I draw on the extensive body of literature including short stories, memoirs, and poetry that pass on teachings about Indigenous maternal history (Brant). In the preface to *My Home As I Remember*, an anthology of Native women's poetry, artwork and short story, Lee Maracle wrote, "In our memory is housed our history. We are an oral people: history, law, politics, sociology, the self, and or relationship to the world are all contained in our memory" (Maracle and Laronde i). Indigenous women's literature has become a new way to share these teachings and memories that "housed our history." Connie Fife expressed the connection between our traditions of the past, the present, and future by noting that this connection can come through within the literary tradition serving as a contemporary tool for Indigenous peoples of an oral tradition:

Our past, the present and the future come together through words that are “living” from their first conception to the time when the reader finds her own meaning in them. Within the pages of this anthology are words that carry their own life, having been birthed through the voices of Indigenous women who have chosen to re-invent how we resist, how we refuse to be silenced, and how we use contemporary tools to express old beliefs in order to lay the seeds for future generations.

I draw on her words to express that our maternal traditions can, and now are, passed down in this way as we see maternal teachings within Indigenous women’s literature. Much like Fife articulated the written word is very much part of Indigenous resurgence of maternal teachings. The revivification of the old ways within contemporary literature ensures that these teachings are accessible to our future generations. Story medicine, therefore, shared within a contemporary context, carries on through the oral tradition but also moves us to express these traditions within the written word. In this way, Indigenous maternal teachings can also become accessible to many of the Indigenous families who are searching for these traditions. I draw on the words of Maria Campbell expressed in the foreword of Kim Anderson’s book to highlight the importance of sharing stories through contemporary literature “in that spirit of rebuilding”. She shared “I am sure our first grandmother Notokwe Ahtyokan is walking with us on this journey as we do the work of communicating our family histories and community laws in new ways” (xix).

Conclusion

Indigenous women come from a strong people. Our grandmothers have left us with a very powerful legacy of maternal power. They were survivors. Our very existence is testament to their strength. Our cultural continuity is testament to the gifts they nurtured and held sacred so that we could learn from them and revive them today. From a time when our ways of life were outlawed—particularly our ceremonies of bringing new life into this land—our grandmothers held on to them; providing us with “story medicine” that awakens our sacred birthing ceremonies today during a time of Indigenous resurgence. As Indigenous women, we have survived years of attacks on our maternal legacies. Our very right to mother our own children was taken through the residential school system, the eugenics movement, and the sixties scoop. We see this continue today with the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in state care and the continued removal of childbirth from our communities. It is important for us to understand this history as we work towards decolonizing ourselves, our families, and our communities.

Infused throughout our maternal legacy is a strong line of blood memory. Indeed, there is strength in our blood memory. This is empowering for the women of our communities who are the first teachers to the youngest and fastest generation. The task of raising up the next generation is a huge role. Aboriginal women are doing this against numerous odds. Understanding this maternal legacy and the strength of our blood memory as we return to our historical teachings of bringing forth new life and of mothering is empowering for new moms as they take on the role of regenerating Indigenous families and communities.

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