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Tribal Mothering as Portrayed in Paula Gunn Allen's *Spider Woman's Granddaughters*

As the story unfolds, it becomes a part of their present. As you imagine and visualize in the mind's eye, how could you not become a part of it and it a part of you? There is no separation. The story and the words contain the epistemological webbing. (Kawagley, 1998: 3)

The challenge undertaken in this paper is to tease out elements of motherhood from within the matrix of Native American culture. Adding difficulty to this task is that the culture is ever changing, not static. Paula Gunn Allen has, by collecting such a variety of stories, exposed the fluid and circular nature of women's roles in tribal culture and challenged the reader to search for commonalities that belie the traditional.

Native stories fulfill the roles of history, literature, education, entertainment, and art. They are not readily comparable to western¹ fiction or non-fiction essays. They differ in structure, language, and culture. The stories don't have building conflict or an individual protagonist; their coherence is from a common understanding. Where western writers write as individuals, making up their creative ideas which have a coherence of place, person and time, Native writers write from a collective tribal unconsciousness (Gunn Allen, 1989: 5).

Language limits understanding of Native stories. Linguists teach that a language embodies the culture it belongs to. Philosophers caution that the oral and written words are potentially misleading representations of reality. Assumptions and orientation are built into the vocabulary and structure.

The word "warrior," for example, within most Native traditions connotes a person, woman or man, living an honourable and correct life as opposed to the English meaning of soldier or fighting man. One of my Quileyute mentors often lamented her inability to explain to me knowledge about reality, as she

understood it, because she could not make English words create Native ideas. Gunn Allen states that “certain ideas and concepts that are implicit in the structure of an Indian language are not possible in English” (1986: 225).

Ursula Le Guin (1989) also speaks to the deficiencies of English when reading Native stories. “Reading an oral piece translated from its original language to English, and from voice to print, is like reading a musical score: you have to know a lot before you can hear what’s happening” (2). This is particularly pertinent in “Oshkikwe’s Baby.” Delia Oshogay (1989) moves comfortably amongst ideas that to the Western reader represent the different realms of physical, spiritual and temporal reality. Details of the story, such as travel through a small hole in the ground, are more meaningful with knowledge of Anishinabe culture and world views.

Traditional values addressed in the book, *Spider Woman’s Granddaughters: Traditional Tales and Contemporary Writing by Native American Women* are harmony, connectedness, community, balance, relationships, and dignity. Traditional systems focus on social responsibility rather than privilege, and social control is achieved with an absence of punitiveness. Joking and embarrassment is used to change a person’s behaviors. Harmony and balance are to be striven for within all aspects of life and mothers are to maintain harmony around them and their children. A critical task of life, of which parents are expected to teach their children, is to know oneself (Kawagley, 1998).

Connectedness, community, family. relationships

How was I to know the depth of my traditional beliefs? Mother, though raised within reservation culture, had moved far away from that life—physically, emotionally, culturally—long before I was born. My childhood was small-town U.S.A with no talk of our Native heritage. Mother had worked hard to achieve a separation from her own childhood which was darkened with prejudice and limited opportunities. She wanted better for her children.

Two years ago, my husband was asked to take an administrative position in Alaska. Although we had often talked of going to the wild northern state, the discussions had diminished as the children were born and grew. We settled in a small community just north of Seattle, within an hour’s drive of my parents and all my siblings’ homes. My only complaint had been the urban lifestyle; my dream was to move back to a small town or rural area. Alaska fit the bill and so we began planning the move.

Rare have been my forays away from my family. A short year in New York City for college when I was just out of high school was all unless you count my parents’ three-year move to Virginia when I was thirty. The New York experience was overwhelming but somewhat expected for an eighteen-year-old small-town girl. I didn’t share my distress when my parents left. After all, I was grown and married and had children of my own. Periodically it would wash over me as an intense sadness. I was just there, not grounded, attached to nothing.

In Alaska I live with my husband and youngest daughter. At home are two

daughters, parents, four brothers and a sister, aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, and nephews enough to fill a trilogy of novels. I work at a fulfilling job and I take classes from stimulating teachers but my life rings hollow like footfalls in an empty hall.

Paula Gunn Allen

The stories in *Spider Woman's Granddaughters* come from a variety of traditions, time periods, and personal experiences. Their commonalities are that they are women's war stories or women warrior stories (Gunn Allen, 1989: 21). They speak of women in battle and women living the life of warriors and contained within them are many truths about Native traditions. They also tell us about the writers and their experiences, for as Joseph Campbell (1972) says, stories are living entities which change with each telling. A story tells as much about its speaker as it does its message. Campbell makes this point by comparing various bible stories and how they have changed over time. The genesis story written in the ninth-century BCE claims that God made man and woman together after animals, whereas the second-century AD genesis story has men being created before animals, and woman coming later from man's rib. Although, for the most part, this is the same story, there is a clear change in focus regarding the relationship between women and men (1972: 7).

The reader should keep this in mind when reading the seemingly traditional stories, such as Ella Cara Deloria's, "Blue Bird's Offering" (1989). Although the story includes many elements of Sioux life, it reads like a genre romance. Gunn Allen warns that westernization of the oral tradition pollutes from a patriarchal bias that discounts, degrades, or conceals gynocratic features or recontextualizes these features so they will appear patriarchal (1986: 4). The last stories in the *Spider Woman's Granddaughters* are current and utilize modern settings but incorporate traditional beliefs and structure. They leave the reader with a haunting image of the life-ways of Native peoples.

Traditional Native American culture, values, and beliefs can be easily delineated but to understand the profoundly different worldview is nearly impossible. Native tribal people share a different consciousness than Europeans. Imagine a Native American—European culture continuum. Those of the dominant culture envision this continuum as a line with their culture on one end. Now imagine that you are standing on this line and turn around, away from the dominant culture end. As you come around you find yourself not facing the other end of the line, but within a circle. This circle is tribal culture. Within it are future and past, physical reality and spiritual reality, the individual and all humans, animals, plants, rocks, planets, stars, ad infinitum. Everything within the circle is connected with something English has no words to describe. Louise Erdrich (1989) speaks about this as a "web" in her story "American Horse":

She took a quick shallow breath and her face went strange and tight.
She saw the black veins in the wings of the butterfly, roads burnt into

a map, and then she was located somewhere in the net of veins and sinew that was the tragic complexity of the world so she did not see Officer Brackett and Vicki Koob rushing toward her, but felt them instead like flies caught in the same web, rocking it (59).

All children are valued and bonded with their entire communities. As a corollary to this, all people are valued as equals and seen to complement one another. Women are central to the tribe and share responsibilities equally with the men. Tribal lifestyles are often gynocratic and never patriarchal. Women and men have different roles but both are essential to the well-being of the tribe. And, openly recognized is that women don't have much knowledge of men's roles, nor men of women's roles. Expected behaviors are based on realities of the human condition. Children are accepted for what they are—still making mistakes, still learning. Adults anticipate “childishness” and accommodate it. People are not compelled to conform to a social fiction (Gunn Allen, 1986; Kawagley, 1989).

Communal parenting, dignity, empowerment

One-and-a-half years ago, two of our three daughters moved to Alaska with my husband and I. Violet, then twenty and a sophomore in college, felt comfortable staying behind to continue her studies. She got an apartment with friends but her favorite uncle was just a few miles away to handle emergencies and be available. She went to family gatherings for birthdays and small holidays while we would only hear about them long distance. Decisions about summer jobs, classes, and how to fix the car were dealt with by my brothers, sister, and parents. And I would get a phone call.

In Alaska all was new. Without their lifelong friends, the girls started riding lessons, flute lessons and after school activities—things they hadn't done much at home. We became two full-time working parents juggling jobs, carpools, and home chores. In lieu of family get-togethers we spent weekends traveling around the state. It was fun.

Julia lasted one year, then said she was going home to finish high school with her buddies. She didn't ask, just let us know her plans. It sounded good to me and I was more than ready to move back home, but Kale then twelve, asserted herself and refused to go back “just because Julia wants to.” My husband was enjoying this new lifestyle and had no intention of returning.

I still had the option—return home to my family and be with my two oldest daughters or stay in Alaska to mother the youngest who, if I left would have only her father and he worked long hours and was frequently out of town. The choice was there but...

I asked non-Native friends for advice but mostly got ultimatums and power positioning. “Just tell her she has to stay” (or go, depending on the girl in question). Or belittling, “I can't believe you'd let Julia and Violet live alone together. They don't even like each other.” My family was supportive, offering

any help the girls might need and encouraging their move to independence and maturity. No one was without a strongly-felt opinion and when I was not completely oppressed by my pending decision, I enjoyed an intellectual appreciation of cultural values and beliefs at work.

Paula Gunn Allen

In Native culture parenting is a communal activity with mothers acknowledged as the primary caregivers. The ideal role models for children are decisive, self-directed females and nurturing, pacifist males (Gunn Allen, 1986: 2). We see these role models portrayed in a number of the stories in *Spider Woman's Granddaughters* as well as in Mourning Dove's, *Coyote Stories* (1990). Parenting is accomplished through active role modeling and storytelling. Stories teach the young how to live as well as teach the adults how to parent. Teaching what to model and how to parent is a strong theme ranging from the very traditional in Delia Oshogay's, "Oshkikwe's Baby" (1989) to very current in Vicki Sears' story, "Grace."

Parenting is learned and many of the elder generation of Native parents learned their roles not from traditional family but by others—boarding school teachers, Christian missionaries, tuberculosis sanitarium nurses and doctors, government agents, non-Native foster parents. These elders saw models of abuse, neglect, terrorization, genocide, starvation, and humiliation (Gunn Allen, 1986). Native tradition teaches that it takes seven generations to move beyond an event and this is very evident in parenting. Pieces of tradition endure along with elements of the colonizing culture and elements of pure dysfunction. Today's Native parents struggle with the conflicting messages.

(Im)balance, (dis)harmony, mother, daughter, sister, wife, teacher, learner

"Well, Fuck You!" Violet sneered into the phone. "Thanks a fucking lot! Good-bye!"

My part of the conversation was easy; few words were expected after I said a rare, "No" to her request for her 32-year-old friend to use my phone card. She was obviously distraught when she called and rebuffed my efforts to explore solutions to her latest earth-shattering problem. Violet doesn't do mellow.

I am already unsettled. Two large tasks for which I have little experience await me at work. I must write a large final exam without the aid of an instructor's manual. Who would have thought writing tests would be as difficult as taking them? Plus I must give two presentations about our grant to a statewide audience at the Egan Center. Much as I convince myself that it will be no different than the lectures I give every week, nerves all over my body are firing randomly like little fire crackers.

I want to call my mother but dare not mention my daughter's appalling behavior. Dad would be supportive but he's most likely asleep by now. I share with my husband. He, too, feels like he's been hit. We stand at the stove

waiting for tea water to boil wondering, “What did we do wrong?” Knowing that such thoughts are a dead end, we try to make it positive and personal.

“Her anger always makes me feel so bad,” my husband says.

“I wish I knew what was bothering her,” I counter. “I wish she knew.”

He has his nightly herbal tea and I my ice water and we both sleep badly.

Tuesday morning I’m very tired. My head feels like it is not well-attached to my leaden body as I shower and eat my toast. Somehow I make it to work a little early and begin that routine—turn on the desk lamp, light the scented candle, turn on the computer, start the tape of Yo Yo Ma playing Bach. Only one benign voice message from a student thanking me for something or other; many emails about Lushootseed, the Native language I am learning and one from Violet, sent this morning, all cheerful, like nothing had happened. I close my door and cry.

My brother has my name in our family Christmas gift exchange and I guiltily burden him with my wish list by email. All I want for Christmas is something to help me deal with my oldest daughter. He is like a second father to her and much more patient than I. He has been through it all with me. I know he will understand. All the same, I feel it is unfair. I send it.

The encroachment of Western civilization in the Yupiaq world changed a people that did not seek changing. (Kawagley, 1998: 5)

¹Throughout this paper several authors are quoted, each with their own terminology of cultures and groups of people. Native American, tribal native and traditional all refer to the culture of the people indigenous to North America. Western, European and dominant describe the culture and heritage of the colonizing peoples.

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Jeanette Busbnell

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