

## “Force Fields” of Motherhood and Maternal Empowerment

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### An Indigenous Mother in Canada Engages the Narratives of African Caribbean Mothers in Barbados

*Isabel is a grandmother from a northern Cree community in Saskatchewan. As she copes with temporarily losing custody of her young grandson, she engages with the stories of two mothers from the eastern Caribbean, one who lives a similar life to hers and one from over two hundred years ago. This article presents that narrative engagement and argues that it constitutes a force field of maternal affinity that allows Isabel to recollect her own grandmother’s strength and perseverance. This kind of maternal affinity—extending across geographical distance, cultural divides, and historical periods—can be a source for maternal empowerment in three ways. First, it establishes a motherline that is significant in times of distress. Second, it gives rise to redemptive narratives that help mothers living with HIV and addiction navigate and mitigate the intruding forces of marginalization and disruption. Third, it creates a sense of longevity and safety that can be a much needed reprieve from the oppressive surveillance and scrutiny that Indigenous mothers in Canada face.*

All mothering occurs amid a force field of relationships. I first encountered this metaphor in Wednesday Martin’s book on stepmothers, and it has intrigued me for some time. In science fiction, a force field refers to a protective barrier that is impenetrable to attack. This barrier, however, acts to contain and constrain as well as to protect. Jerrold Marsden and Anthony Tromba explain that, in physics, a force field consists of noncontact forces that act on individual particles. The nature and extent of the forces depend on the position of the particles within the field. And in the social sciences, force field analysis was introduced by psychologist Kurt Lewin in the mid-twentieth century to refer to the helping and hindering forces that shape individual as well as collective motives, values,

needs, goals, anxieties, and ideals. Taken together, these understandings of force fields provide a useful analytical framework for understanding motherhood as an ever-changing social institution, a site of multiple experiences, and the source of personal and collective identities.

In this article, I engage generally with the force field metaphor to explore how the story of two mothers in the eastern Caribbean resonated with an Indigenous mother in prairie Canada, and how a relationship of affinity was temporarily forged across cultural and temporal contexts. Isabel<sup>1</sup> is a Cree grandmother living in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, who lost custody of her grandson for four months. Her struggle to regain guardianship rights was difficult, and she grew increasingly depressed and discouraged. She found a connection with Delia, an African Caribbean woman in Barbados. Isabel and Delia live very different lives in very different places. There are, however, important parallels that bring them together. Both women are HIV-positive with histories of addiction. They endure similarly intense state surveillance of their mothering and ongoing threats of child apprehension. Yet they both find intergenerational inspiration by recalling stories of strong women who represent individual and cultural survival. I argue that a motherline was created when Isabel drew on memories of her grandmother after engaging with Delia's personal story as well as the story Delia tells of a historical slave mother in Barbados. This provided Isabel with a reflective moment in which she rekindled her fighting spirit and continued her struggle to regain custody of her grandson and to claim her place as a loving and capable grandmother. This reflective moment, then, was one of maternal empowerment.

I draw on two separate ethnographic and community-based projects to explore the affinity between Isabel and Delia. The first was undertaken in Barbados between 1999 and 2004. I worked with twenty-two women in an underserved and poor neighbourhood in the capital city of Bridgetown as well as another eighteen women in a middle-class and well-served community on the west coast of the island. All forty women were of African Caribbean heritage and share an ancestral history marked by slavery and poverty. The objective of the research was to explore how women experience and respond to anxiety and fatigue. Not surprisingly, motherhood was central to the women's narratives of fatigue and fret. Just as unsurprisingly, motherhood was also central to the women's narratives of community and empowerment—narratives that the women insisted be told to balance those of struggle and stress.

The second project that I draw on here was undertaken in partnership with AIDS Saskatoon between 2008 and 2013. I worked with thirty mothers in Saskatchewan who live with or are affected by HIV/AIDS. Although there is a strong body of literature on mother-to-infant HIV transmission, there is far less work being done on what it means to be a mother in the context

of HIV. This project, therefore, aimed to explore how women mother their children (and the children of others) while negotiating a maternal identity amid the addictions, racism, and poverty associated with the HIV epidemic in Saskatchewan. The provincial HIV rates at the time of this research were almost three times higher than the national rates; the number of new infections among women of childbearing age outpaced most other demographic groups (Government of Saskatchewan). As a legacy of the cultural uprootedness wrought by European colonialism, Indigenous communities were, and remain, particularly hard hit by the epidemic, with rates soaring to nine times that of Canada overall. Injection drug use and heterosexual sex account for much of Saskatchewan’s HIV transmission, a profile quite distinct from that of most urban centres across the country (Saskatoon District Health). The mothers with whom I worked in this AIDS Saskatoon project, therefore, are often confronted by racism as well as addiction-related stigma in their lives. Twenty-six of the thirty research participants identified as Indigenous: Cree, Dene, and Métis. Across both projects, a total of 161 interviews were conducted, which produced over six thousand pages of transcripts. Inductive and thematic coding were used to identify patterns in expressions and experiences addressing the primary research objectives.<sup>2</sup>

### A Telling of Four Mothers: Isabel, Delia, Henrietta, and Kohkum

Isabel was granted custody of her seven-year-old grandson, Mark, when her daughter (and Mark’s mother) was undergoing hepatitis C treatment. The harsh side effects of the treatment in combination with antiretroviral therapy (ART) for HIV had proven unbearable. Isabel’s daughter returned to injecting opioid drugs. As a result, Mark was removed from her care by the Saskatoon Tribal Council’s Child and Family Services (CFS). Isabel saw this as patently unfair. She believed that her daughter was unduly targeted by childcare policies biased against young, Indigenous mothers. However, Isabel also cherished her role as Mark’s *kohkum* (grandmother) and embraced the opportunity “to be a Cree family. All of us taking care of each other.”

Because of Isabel’s own HIV status and history of addiction, CFS conducted regular visits to ensure Mark’s safety. On one occasion, the visit came without warning. Knowing that she would be late from work, Isabel confirmed that her cousin, Serena, would be at home directly across the street from Isabel’s house. When the case workers arrived, Mark was on Serena’s front stoop waiting for her to unlatch the door. He was happy and calm. He knew that Serena had a batch of cookies waiting for him. However, the case workers interpreted the situation as one of neglect. Isabel explained that “They called me, saying, ‘you left him alone’ and ‘he had no place to go.’ But none of that

was true. My cousin was there; she was just slow getting to the door.” Mark was placed in emergency foster care while CFS arranged a follow-up home assessment.

In the weeks that followed, Isabel was wracked with worry. She was not eating well nor was she sleeping much. She was forgetting to take her ART medications, and her health was deteriorating. As a survivor of Canada’s residential school system, Isabel had been one of thousands of Indigenous children taken away from her home community and sent to government and religious educational institutions. Guided by the discriminatory 1876 Indian Act of Canada, these institutions were designed to force assimilation with English and French colonial societies by weakening Indigenous families and communities through the uprooting of children and indoctrinating them into European ways of life. The proceedings of Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission document the testimonies of over six thousand witnesses and former residential school students who described heart wrenching occurrences of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, the suffering from which was exacerbated by forced cultural dislocation.

The rationale for apprehending children and placing them in the schools’ care often focused on the Indigenous mothers themselves. Reports that children were left unsupervised, that they were too often left in the care of extended kin, that their families were too large, and that their mothers were fundamentally unfit were as common as they were unfounded. These reports provided the government with the justification to remove children from their home communities. Reports such as these continued into the mid-twentieth century. While residential schools were still in operation, Indigenous children were also taken into state care during “the sixties scoop.” Children were apprehended from their homes and placed with Euro-Canadian and Euro-American foster and adoptive families throughout North America. In some cases, accusations of wrongdoing were substantiated by Indigenous and colonial authorities alike. In other cases, however, “the charges of parental abuse and neglect were flimsy at best and reflected long-standing racist biases towards Aboriginal communities and their residents” (Downe, “Intersecting” 23).

It is with this history that Isabel responded to what she saw as the unjustified apprehension of Mark. She withdrew from her friends at AIDS Saskatoon. She grew increasingly distrustful of anyone outside her small group of close confidantes. The weight of what seemed like ever-present surveillance bore down on her as she met with social workers, opened her home to their assessment, and repeatedly explained the diligence she took in caring for Mark. This level of surveillance would be unbearable for any mother, but it is particularly so for women who live with the oppressive history of residential schools, the sixties scoop, and other forms of unwarranted child apprehension. As Randi

Cull explains, “Aboriginal mothers live their lives under a state-controlled microscope and no one’s life or behaviours look acceptable under that type of unnatural and unjust scrutiny” (153).

When I ran into Isabel at AIDS Saskatoon and asked how she was doing, she started to cry: “How am I supposed to keep going while I’m getting strangled like this? They’re squeezing me so hard, I feel like I can’t breathe.” I asked if she had a source of hope, a lifeline of sorts, that could help protect her from the foreboding sense of defeat. Could she find inspiration and strength from another mother or grandmother who faced similar adversity? She shook her head, no. Stories of maternal grief and her own mother’s suicide were “too loud in my ears,” she said. Memories of Delia, a mother of four children who was central in the Barbados research, came quickly to mind. Like Isabel, Delia was living with HIV and had a history of addiction. Also like Isabel, Delia endured the marginalizing forces that rendered her mothering suspect.

When Isabel and I met at her house a few days later, I began talking about Delia. She had been fifteen when her first child was born. Although young mothers in the Caribbean do not face the vilification that Barrie Glassner describes young mothers in Canada and the United States as facing, Delia was still subjected to harsh judgment and social sanction. The increasing cultural criticism of teen mothers in the Caribbean joined the well-established discriminatory forces against HIV and drug use, and it took a toll. Delia explained: “I was crushed. Crushed hard. The pastor be yelling at me. My boyfriend’s father be chasing me off. It be a crushing time.” Shortly after her first child was born, Delia recalled that at the urging of some of her fellow churchgoers, representatives from what is now the Barbadian Ministry of Social Care, Constituency Empowerment, and Community Development began to investigate her maternal fitness. “I think the church mothers be worried that I no be good for the baby. That I be too sick with addiction,” she explained. It was a terrifying time for Delia, as she worried constantly that she might lose custody of her son. When her second child was born the following year, her sense of vulnerability grew stronger: “Now [Ministry officials] be coming almost every day. I be so fretful. I thought for sure that they be taking my babies. What a terrifying time that be.”

Delia’s mother, though poor and facing her own struggles with addiction as well as domestic abuse, was a source of great strength. “My mother got a strong spine,” Delia proudly explained. “She always be taking care of me and helping with my babies whenever she could.” Importantly, Delia’s mother also told her stories about the young slave mothers who came to represent maternal strength and perseverance among the research participants. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere:

In most accepted historical accounts ... the young slave mothers, who endured sexual assault and exploitation, were fundamental in achieving community cohesion, administering care, and creating inter-plantation alliances among slaves. In times of extreme stress, the stories of these young mothers' strength and leadership offer inspiration and consolation to women ... who feel disempowered by the desperation of their community. (Downe, "Memorializing" 141)

One of the most consistent stories that Delia's mother would tell, and one that Delia subsequently shared regularly with her own children, was of Henrietta Hutson, a slave mother from the late-nineteenth century Orange Hill plantation. "Henrietta was a survivor," Delia began. She stressed that although the story may be told different ways and details may vary, the story always begins with reference to Henrietta's survival. "Henrietta loved her children and wept when her oldest son died when he not even be a full year. But the tears did not weigh her down. She got up, like all strong Black mothers, she got up. Got up strong." In Delia's telling of it, the story continued to describe Henrietta's tireless work in the sugarcane fields, her subsequent pregnancies, and her sorrow when her children were sold to other plantation owners. Despite her grief, Henrietta would softly sing as she worked in the plantations, comforting those who laboured alongside her. Her beautiful songs would shore up the spirit of the other enslaved women and men. Recognizing that Henrietta was central to the workers' morale, the field manager was particularly violent toward her, but Henrietta's strength prevailed: "He knew it was young Henrietta's song that was going to cause trouble 'cause the spirit of our people just weren't breaking. Night after night, he'd bring Henrietta to the canes, force himself on her and torture her in ways not fitting to recall. But that just made Henrietta love her babies and her fellow workers all the more" (Downe, "Memorializing" 142). Delia concluded the story by emphasizing that "We got lots of Henriettas here. Strong girls finding themselves when they find their mother-right. Young strength is good strength and it makes for a strong future."

This narrative is clearly one that serves an important function in Delia's life and in the lives of other participants in the Barbados research. The veneration of young motherhood and of slave mothers who endure the colonial forces of violence, misogyny, and racism guides the research participants as they summon the voice and strength to claim their "mother-right" and stand up to forces of oppression. Indeed, as Diane Goldstein explains, stories are persuasive and meaningful when readers and listeners see themselves represented in the narrative and, in turn, use that story to influence their own behaviours. Narratives "take truth claims and hegemonic constructions and make them a culture's own (or not), twisting them and turning them in ways that force

them to make cultural sense” (Goldstein 172). The “truth claim” that young mothers are more irresponsible than older mothers was—and in many ways still is—gaining traction in Barbadian society. It is this claim, therefore, that the story of Henrietta Hutson twists so as to illustrate the historical importance of young mothers to the history and power of Black Barbadian motherhood.

I did not intend to go into so much detail about Delia and the Barbados research when I spoke with Isabel, but she was intensely interested in the story. She asked about the relationship between the African slaves and the Indigenous peoples on the island. Because the Indigenous Carib population in Barbados was small when the first colonists arrived in the eighteenth century, there is very little record of contemporary intercultural relations. Today, there is virtually no Indigenous presence on the island. “So the slaves are the ones who worked the land,” Isabel concluded. There was a long pause in our conversation. Isabel was clearly lost in thought. Without prompting, she then began to tell me about her grandmother, a talented trapper who was one of the few women who would join the men in the bush during the spring:

*She had to leave her kids with their kobbums in the village and go off with the men, but she'd come home with lots of fur. Her kids were always doing real good when she got home. So far as I know, nobody never accused her of neglect or nothing like that. They just saw a good mother doing good by her children the Cree way, working hard on the trap lines with the men. But the government police came anyways.*

Isabel paused and took a deep breath. She went on to describe how her grandmother's children were taken from her care and sent to residential school. “My grandmother fought so hard for her,” Isabel explained. “[She] stopped going to the trap lines so she could stay and fight for my mother. She won, too. My mother finally came home, after two and a half years in the school. But I guess she wasn't never the same. The school broke her.”

Isabel's grandmother figured frequently in our interviews but never as prominently as on that afternoon. Isabel went on to list all the things that her grandmother had tried to do in order for her daughter to heal from the traumas of residential school. Although Isabel's mother suffered from addiction-related illnesses all her adult life, and she ultimately succumbed to them, she was adamant that her children would know and live with their grandmother. As a child, Isabel was herself sent to residential school after her grandmother's home was deemed to be too crowded and the living conditions unacceptable. Once again, Isabel's grandmother began to fight. “She came to the school every week to argue with the principal to let me go home with her,” Isabel recalled. “She was so old but I remember the fire in her eyes!” When Isabel was in grade nine,

she was allowed to leave the school to attend her grandmother's funeral. She never returned. "I just started running, I guess. And nobody never found me."

As Isabel spoke about her grandmother, she often referred back to Delia and her story of Henrietta Hutson. "I don't recall kohkum singing much," she said, having considered Henrietta's gift for inspirational song. "But she sure loved the beat of the drum." Henrietta's resistance to the field manager's sexual assault and abuse reminded Isabel of the ways in which her grandmother tried to mitigate the traumatic effects of residential school with which Isabel's mother struggled. "Kohkum loved all her children, but especially my mother, I think. She tried to love the hate away by keeping her people real close." And Isabel connected with the cultural veneration of youthful motherhood among the Barbadian women by wishing that her grandmother could have received similar appreciation:

*Kohkum was real young when she had her babies. She said that was a good thing because she was strong when she was young. Her kids had their babies young. And I had my daughter when I was eighteen. She had Mark when she was seventeen. I wish I could tell [my grandmother] that there are places in the world where that's ok, where kids don't get taken away because you're too young, where being a young mom is ok... She'd like to hear that, I think.*

We spoke for over two hours that afternoon. There was great affinity between Delia's story of Henrietta Hutson and Isabel's recollections of her grandmother. In turn, there was a connection, albeit vicarious, between Delia and Isabel. "Does [Delia] ever come visit you here in Saskatoon?" she asked. No, I explained. Delia does not have the money to visit and, as far as I was aware, was not interested in making the journey. "Too bad. I bet she and I would have lots to talk about. I'm not up to meeting anybody new but I'd meet her if she was here." Isabel's engagement with Delia's story was strong enough that she imagined Delia as a friend, someone who even in these times of distrust and anxiety would be a welcomed visitor.

### Force Fields and Maternal Empowerment

Delia and Isabel live very different lives in very different places. Yet Delia's story of Henrietta Hutson sparked Isabel's memory of her grandmother's strength and perseverance. Henrietta's youth and loyalty became meaningful for Isabel because it connected to the experiences of women across four generations of Isabel's family. Importantly, the resonance of this narrative is significant because Isabel otherwise felt deafened by stories of grief and loss. It created a reflective moment wherein Isabel drew an intergenerational motherline with

her grandmother. This proved to be a source of strength and inspiration that paralleled what Delia drew from her stories of Henrietta. These intergenerational ties extend not only vertically through time but laterally across cultural and geographic space to connect Isabel and Delia in ways that Isabel found significant.

What are the structural forces that intersect to create the field that renders Delia and her story of Henrietta so meaningful to Isabel? In his work with HIV patients in Haiti, anthropologist and physician Paul Farmer notes that the patients may not “share personal or psychological attributes. They do not share culture or language or a certain race. What they share, rather, is the experience of occupying the bottom rung on the social ladder in inegalitarian societies” (31). Perhaps it is this bottom rung position that despite the different colonial histories, allowed Isabel to seek and find connection with Delia and Henrietta. These stories offered a sense of longevity and survival that, in turn, created a field of safety. Alison Quaggin Harkin conjures a similar sense of longevity and safety through her conversation with a fictional mother who lived a hundred years before her. Both mothers have sons with disabilities. Both women feel the weight of mother-blame for their children’s disabilities despite the different historical periods and personal circumstances that separate them. Harkin’s work is a beautiful illustration that stories are powerful practice, giving “voice to those who have typically been denied one, and they demonstrate the value of devalued lives. Perhaps they even connect us to those who have had lived experiences more similar to our own than we might first realize” (286-87).

Maternal affinity across geographical distance, cultural divides, and historical periods can provide a catalyst for redemptive narratives that help mothers navigate and mitigate the intruding forces of marginalization and disruption. This kind of affinity may be temporary. After Mark was brought home to Isabel and life in her busy and loving household resumed, we stopped talking about Delia and Henrietta. But the maternal affinity was palpable and important in the moment. In Isabel’s case, it created a sense of narrative proximity that emboldened her reflection on a heritage of survival and perseverance. It quietened the stories of loss and grief that were “ringing too loudly in her ears.” It brought a sense of comfort.

Andrea O’Reilly argues that maternal empowerment “is best understood as an oppositional stance that seeks to counter and correct the many ways in which patriarchal motherhood causes mothering to be limiting or oppressive to women” (20). The ongoing apprehension of Indigenous children and the casting of Indigenous mothers and grandmothers as unfit are longstanding strategies of patriarchal and racist oppression in Canada. After summoning perseverance and courage through recollections of her grandmother’s strength, Isabel continued to fight for her custodial rights as Mark’s *kohkum*. This was

a fight to advance a redemptive narrative in which she held a place of responsibility and cultural significance. In so doing, she enacted a form of maternal empowerment. It may not be the explicitly feminist or rebellious kind of empowerment envisioned by Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels (331) as they imagine the public exorcism of the “new momism” that demonizes mothers who do not embody social privilege. However, the force field of motherhood that connected Delia’s and Isabel’s stories gave Isabel a moment of critical and empowering reflection. The stories of maternal strength that Isabel shared in response to Delia’s response were, in Isabel’s words, “like an energy drink.”

There are always risks, of course. Identifying force fields of affinity can run the risk of essentializing motherhood, rendering it as constituted by the same institutional practices regardless of cultural, historical, and political contexts. Feminist scholars have long criticized what Linda Alcoff calls the foolhardy generalizations that assume alliances among women and mothers that may not, in fact, be there. However, there are also risks in not attending to force fields of affinity among mothers. As neoliberal policies erode social welfare nets and increase burdens of individual responsibility and as motherhood across the Americas becomes more ensnared by these policies, there is a very real risk that mothers will be held more to blame for circumstances well beyond their control. Mothers who are marginalized and who struggle to be seen as worthy and fit face the greatest vulnerability. Perhaps identifying force fields of maternal affinity may provide ways for there to be strength in numbers and in longevity.

Wednesday Martin’s claim that mothering occurs amid force field of relationships is an evocative one. The affinity that Isabel forged with Delia and Henrietta evinces that these relationships need not be interpersonal. They can also be narrative. In all their forms, the relationships that constitute the force fields of motherhood establish terrains of camaraderie, protection, and connection. They are the grounds on which mothers navigate forces that exacerbate vulnerability and those that provide protection. I have not had the opportunity to share Isabel’s story with Delia, although Isabel was anxious that I do so. I cannot therefore draw conclusions regarding the extent to which this field of affinity is truly shared between Delia and Isabel. However, it is possible to say that for the week that Isabel considered the resonance of Delia’s and Henrietta’s stories with her own, she reached through time and across distance to conclude that “kohkum would have liked Henrietta. She would have taken her to the trap lines.”

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Names of all participants used in this article are pseudonyms.

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