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Social Work, Motherhood, and Mothering: Critical Feminist Perspectives

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AND CHRISTINE WALSH

ohpikhâwasiw: kiskeyihtamowin âcimowin
(She Raises the Children: Sharing Our Knowledges from Stories)

The stories we braid within this article bring together narratives of Indigenous mothering, which highlight the importance of culture and kinship to support the healthy development, safety, and wellbeing of our children. In our motherwork, we resist colonial forces and counter child welfare practices and the profession of social work, which enforce Eurocentric parenting and enact racist policies that continue to remove Indigenous children from their families at a disproportionate rate—a continuation of assimilationist tactics and genocide of Indigenous peoples enacted during the residential school era, the Sixties Scoop, and ongoing genocidal policies. Our braided stories provide a counternarrative—one of resistance in (re)claiming Indigenous mothering, stories of resiliency in (re)webbing kinship systems and stories of hope in (re)membering our cultural identities. In (re)claiming, (re)connecting, and (re)webbing, we acknowledge being in different places in our journey of Indigenous mothering. Some of us have been born into the web of our kinship systems, whereas others have been on a journey of reattaching the threads to reassemble the intricate web of kinship, culture, and community. In the spirit of reconciliation and the decolonization of child welfare practices, our work serves as a counternarrative—liberating our realities from the dominant negative stereotypes imposed by colonial systems and oppressive forces—and provides insight into the power of Indigenous mothering. Indigenous mothering provides the love and nurturing, as well a web of kinship, that support and establish life-long relationships that will sustain the wellbeing, resurgence, and prosperity of our families and communities.

We come together to share our stories of Indigenous mothering to (re)claim practices, which have been condemned, displaced, and nearly eradicated due to historic and ongoing colonial violence embedded within government and

organizational structures and their processes (Simpson 245). In our mother-work, we resist colonial forces and counter child welfare practices and the profession of social work, which enforce Eurocentric parenting and enact racist policies that continue to remove Indigenous children from their families, communities, and culture (Blackstock 31; Cross et al. 8).

In 2011, 48 per cent of all children living in care were Indigenous, yet represented only 7 per cent of children in Canada (Statistics Canada). These high rates of Indigenous child removal from their families, termed the Millennium Scoop, are a continuation of assimilationist tactics and genocide of Indigenous peoples enacted during the Sixties Scoop and residential school era (Sinclair, "Identity Lost" 68). The Sixties Scoop, discussed in more detail below, refers to the vast number of Indigenous children removed from their families during the 1960s, in addition to the violent removal of Indigenous children from their homes during the residential school era, which spanned from the 1880s to 1996 (Sinclair, "Identity Lost" 67). The state- and church-run residential schools were designed to "kill the Indian in the child" by separating Indigenous children from their families and lifeways and immersing them into the dominant Euro-Christian culture often through draconian measures (TRC 376). The overrepresentation of Indigenous children in government care was declared a "humanitarian crisis" in 2017 by Minister Philpott (Barrera) and is "statistically improbable" without a racial bias (Sinclair, "The Indigenous Child" 14).

Indigenous children placed in state care are tragically disconnected from their mothers and other kinship ties and are frequently rehoused into foster homes, where they are exposed to additional traumas that significantly increase their risk of physical, social, and emotional health problems (Turney and Wildeman 5). As mainstream child welfare systems have failed to "improve the safety and well-being of the children" (Cross et al. 6), a radical reconceptualization of what is needed to ensure the wellbeing of Indigenous children, their families, and communities is necessary.

In the spirit of reconciliation and the decolonization of child welfare practices, we build on stories and narratives of Indigenous mothering—such as Kim Anderson's *Life Stages and Native Women*, and the work of Jeannine Carrière and Catherine Richardson's *Calling Our Families Home*—to acknowledge and celebrate Indigenous women and mothering by offering stories of resistance, resilience, and hope. In doing so, our work serves as a counternarrative—liberating our realities from the dominant negative stereotypes imposed by colonial systems and oppressive forces—and provides insight into the power of Indigenous mothering.

miskamasowin (Finding Our Truths)

As per Indigenous protocols, we begin by situating ourselves within our stories of Indigenous mothering to offer the reader insight into how our stories of mothering are rooted in our experiences and knowledge bundles. We are mothers from different regions of Turtle Island living in Calgary's urban setting located on Treaty 7, home to the Siksika, Piikani, and Kainai First Nations, Stoney Nakoda First Nation, Tsuu t'ina First Nation, and the Métis Nation of Alberta, Region III. As Indigenous women living in an urban centre, far from our traditional lands and kinship systems, we need develop and nurture urban kinship ties to ensure our wellbeing and continuity of our culture.

I am Natalie Nola St-Denis of mixed ancestry, with Acadian and Mi'kmaq ancestry and heritage on my mother's side, and Quebecois and Algonquin lineages, and Mohawk relations on my father's side. I am a mother to a daughter and auntie within my kinships. Throughout my academic and community work, I strive to support all my relations in their journey of healing, resistance, and resurgence.

I am Janis Lyn Favel originally from the Kawacatoose Cree Nation in Treaty 4 Territory. I have lived in the Treaty 7/Calgary area for most of my life. I am the mother of three wonderful boys and auntie to numerous nieces and nephews. I work towards healing within my own life, family, and community while striving to lend a helping hand to the families that I am privileged to work with.

I am Joanna Marie Moore, a proud Ojibwe woman and member of the Nigigoonsiminikaaning First Nation. I am a mother of seven beautiful children—from three years old to twenty-three-years old. I am a second-generation residential school survivor and I have fought my whole life to reclaim my culture, my traditions and my family. I share my story to help others understand what I went through. My hope is that it will help bring families together and keep families together.

I am Christine Ann Walsh, a white, feminist, settler who conducts community-based action-oriented research with Indigenous peoples, families, and communities. I am a mother of Erinn and Shaun and learning to grandmother Ellie. I honour the ways in which Indigenous mothering thrives in spite of oppressive colonial forces. As an ally, I have opened my heart and mind to the historical and current realities that affect Indigenous mothering and urge others to walk the pathway as shown to you by Indigenous mothers and their communities.

âcimowin (Our Stories)

Our work, grounded in Indigenous feminisms, addresses gender imbalances by evoking discourses on cultural identity, sovereignty, and decolonization. Indigenous feminisms responds to the oppression of Indigenous women enacted by colonialism, heteropatriarchy, and genocide (Barker 262; Green 10; Simpson 51; Starblanket 23) and embraces notions of resistance, (re) claiming, and resurgence to (re)establish Indigenous womanhood in relation to ourselves, our families, our communities and all of Creation. In (re)claiming Indigenous mothering, we are interconnected within a kinship system in which mothers, grandmothers, and aunties together play important roles in raising children as well as nurturing their families and communities at the political, social, economic, and spiritual levels (Anderson, *Life Stages* 38; Green 9).

The stories we braid within this chapter are connected to place and time as told from the perspective of each storyteller and thus do not reflect the experiences and diversity of Indigenous mothers across Turtle Island. Storytelling continues to be an important way of transmitting knowledge within a decolonizing framework. Stories embody Indigenous epistemologies, contain ancestral knowledges, validate experiences of Indigenous peoples, and play an important role in teaching, learning, and healing (Archibald 83; Kovach 95). The strands of our braid bring together stories of resistance in (re) claiming Indigenous mothering, stories of resiliency in (re)webbing kinship systems, and stories of hope in (re)membering our cultural identities. Our narratives for (re)claiming, (re)connecting, and (re)webbing suggests that we are all at different places in our journey of Indigenous mothering. Some of us have been born into the web of our kinship systems, whereas others have been on a journey of reattaching the strings that assemble the intricate web of kinship, culture, and community. Others, still, serve as allies in supporting this work.

(Re)claiming Indigenous Mothering

The disconnection from our lifeways has resulted in (re)claiming our roles and responsibilities as Indigenous mothers. With the resurgence of our teachings, knowledges around mothering are being passed down by Elders and knowledge holders who have carried and maintained these teachings. As Janis explains:

> The concept of motherhood was always part of my upbringing, but it really got focused when I became a woman. In our way, we say she's wakayos [menstruation], which comes with teachings as a life-giver. This formative year was a full year of learning about healthy relationships, understanding the birds and the bees, as well as the

> physical and emotional aspects of it, the financial responsibilities and the practical skills. So learning how to feed, hold, clothe, and love a child, how to sew a moss bag, change diapers, and sing songs—how to be a nurturer pretty much—all of those lessons from various women within my family were passed down to me.

Janis who supports Indigenous mothers in our urban community draws from the wisdom of her maternal lineage and teachings as well as her personal experiences as an Indigenous mother and the many roles and responsibilities this entails:

> My maternal great-grandmother, from Yellow Quill First Nation, was born during the era when it was mandatory for children to go to residential school, but she was one of the hidden children. She was never taken. As an adult, she was a mother, a midwife, a healer, and a ceremony-holder. A lot of knowledge was passed down through her. And even though my grandmother went to residential school, she was lucky enough to come home during the summer, where she learned our ways through ceremony, teachings, and visits with relatives. No matter the traumas she was experiencing at residential school, those few months every summer with her family gave her the resiliency she needed to get through some of the more difficult stuff.

Residential schools, which operated in Canada from the 1870s to 1996, were created by the Canadian Government to assimilate and indoctrinate Indigenous children into the colonial Euro-Christian society; over 150,000 Indigenous children were forced to attend these institutions (TRC, *Honouring the Truth* 3). Disconnected from their families and culture, a great number of children experienced physical, sexual, emotional, mental, and spiritual abuses (TRC, *What We Have Learned* 7). Furthermore, "kindness, gentleness, concern, curiosity, even humour—all qualities of good parenting—were disciplined from the children" while in residential schools (Juschka 22). This dark legacy has led to intergenerational trauma (Linklater 32) and a disconnection from cultural teachings as exemplified in Joanna's story. Joanna explains that her mother was severed from her culture and deprived of the loving and nurturing benefits of being mothered in our traditional ways:

> When my mother drank, she turned into a different person. And when the residential school experiences would come up, she would beat us and cry. I grew up having to look after children, my siblings, so I was basically on my own when I was six years old. I would often be left alone with my siblings, and I always wanted to make sure that they were getting the care they needed. I was trying to protect them.

Although Joanna did not grow up with Ojibwe knowledge, she has been on a

journey of (re)claiming her culture and teachings:

> Before my own children were taken by child welfare, I had looked everywhere for an Elder because I wanted my children to know their culture. So, even if I wasn't raised with my culture, it was always important to me. Today, I'm grateful to have Elders and ceremony in my life. It makes me feel connected, and I think it makes me a stronger woman and a better mother.

Natalie began to develop an understanding of Indigenous knowledges and mothering in her early forties when she started her journey as a social worker, working with Indigenous families and Elders. Through ceremony and following her own path of cultural resurgence, she has come to recognize the ways in which Indigenous social work embodies aspects of Indigenous mothering:

> As a social worker practicing in an urban setting, I visited families in their homes offering a wide range of supports. Many of the families that I worked with were facing challenging times, and my role as a helper often resembled those of an auntie or a grandmother. For instance, depending on circumstances, I assisted them with their grocery shopping, spent time in the home helping out with chores all while developing our relationships through the sharing of stories [and] building trust and community.

Natalie comes from a mixed ancestry, and although there is Indigenous ancestry on both sides of her family, these were not openly acknowledged while growing up, a result of internalized oppression, which led to the fear and shame associated with being Indigenous. However, Natalie offers that her social work practice with families is founded on her Acadian childhood models of mothering, which she has come to know are akin to Mi'kmaq ways, given intermarriages of Mi'kmaq women with Acadian men:

> I grew up around a large family and witnessed my mother and aunties always helping one another, even when living far apart. My maternal grandmother gave birth to sixteen children and also fostered three girls, and since my mother was one of the eldest, she stopped school after grade eight to help with the children, the farm, and household chores. In many aspects, my mother is like a second mother to her younger siblings. The idea that we are all connected and responsible for each other's wellbeing were part of my early teachings.

(Re)webbing Kinship Systems

Our stories illustrate the power of kinship systems within Indigenous communities. Kinship systems are crucial to the survival and prosperity of families and communities, and it is within this context that Indigenous mothering becomes a shared responsibility among community members (Carrière and Richardson, "From Longing" 55). Within many Indigenous communities, kinship ties, such as aunties, are not necessarily bound by blood; you become an auntie when a family sees you as a role model (Poitras 102). These bonds meant that "there was no such thing as a single mother, because Native women and their children lived and worked in extended kin networks" (Anderson, "Affirmations" 83). These kinship ties become especially important in urban settings where Indigenous families from different nations come together to create community. As Janis explains: "In my kinship network, my maternal aunts are second mothers. I learned early on that it's not just one person who's responsible for the children. It really is a kinship and a family and a village system. There's always other people that can step in when you need help."

Within this web of kinship, when parents are facing challenging times, there is always someone who can care for the children or offer support to parents in their struggles. This kinship system however becomes disrupted when child welfare workers become involved, especially when Indigenous children are removed from this essential network. As Janis elaborates:

> There have been quite a few cases of kinship (mis)placement that have come to my attention recently. A mother that I know well had her children apprehended after a relapse, and despite her putting forth a number of names to be considered for kinship placements, none of those people were ever contacted. And I have seen this over and over again. Child welfare has an obligation to find out who these kids are, who they are connected to, and find suitable kinship. Within our kinship systems, there are hundreds of relations, and child welfare needs to realize that there's a lot of strength in there and a lot of healing, power and knowledge. When you remove a child from their community, you're taking them away from all that beautiful love and important connections, which were vital to my own life.

The experience of losing one's children is deeply traumatizing. This violent disconnection is (re)traumatizing to children, mothers, fathers, and all our relations within our communities. Every time a child is removed from the community, it is experienced as another loss, another traumatic incident that builds on centuries of historical traumas. As Joanna explains:

> The first time child welfare came into my life, it was harsh. It was very

> judgmental and made me feel very discouraged. When they took my children, I was trying to end my life because I felt like a failure. Losing my children took my air away. I felt like I couldn't breathe. And that's when I ended up turning to an addiction. That's what happened, but then I finally realized: "What the hell am I doing? I'm no good to my kids if I'm dead." And that's the only reason I'm still here today.

Joanna goes further to identify the importance of traditional practices in preserving and nurturing community ties: "Having a connection with an Elder and other people and friends who are involved in ceremony and cultural activities gives me a community. This is really important to me because that's a really good foundation, and I now have supports that I never had before. It makes me feel good." Natalie echoes the devastating outcomes that she has witnessed in her practice when children are removed from the heart of their homes:

> It's devastating, absolutely devastating when a mother loses her children. The grief, the pain, the anger, the guilt—it's just too many overwhelming emotions to bare. And, so, I've witnessed many mothers bury their pain in addictions, and sometimes end their lives. It's just too hard to remain hopeful when the whole process is so dehumanizing, of having to prove that you are a fit parent based on a Western worldview and European family frameworks.

In her narrative, Natalie reinforces the role of kinship ties to support mothering practices in Indigenous social work:

> I often think that if I were to create an agency, I would hire aunties and grandmothers as helpers for the families who need supports, to be there for all of the little and big things that a family needs when they are going through a rough patch, especially within an urban setting, where many of the families' kin live far away. I believe that's what Indigenous social work is all about—helping one another with kindness, compassion and love—that's what we need for healing.

In this era of cultural resurgence, Indigenous mothers are taking a stand and asserting their rights to preserve kinship ties. However, as Indigenous women, we continue to grapple with the "larger struggles to challenge, subvert, deconstruct, and eventually break free from the oppressive structures of the racist, sexist, patriarchal society in which we find ourselves" (Lavell-Harvard and Anderson 2). As Joanna maintains:

> I fought and fought to get my children back, and I did. But when I gave birth to my fourth child, they were instantly apprehended

> because I had had contact with the father. My lawyer told me that all I could do was sign them over, that I had lost, PGO [permanent guardianship order]. That was the hardest day of my life. Oh my god, to sign those papers. Yeah, here are my kids that I would never see again. They were all waiting for me to sign, I just kept sitting there crying, and I had that pen in my hand, but I just couldn't do it. And then I ended up saying: "The only way I will sign this paper is if I can have contact with my children." My lawyer never told me that I could do this, but that was something I asked for. You know, when I had my children, my intention was to raise my children, not for me to give them to somebody else. That was never in my plan. And that's why I still have a relationship with them today. Had I just signed my children over, they wouldn't know who they are.

Many Indigenous families remain impacted by the legacy of historical and intergenerational traumas and as a consequence are bound to struggle at times and experience crisis; however, removing children from their families and communities is not the answer (Sinclair, "The Indigenous Child" 9). Between the late 1950s and early 1980s, approximately twenty thousand Indigenous children were removed from their homes (Wright-Cardinal, 1). This era also known as the Sixties Scoop, has led to several generations of Indigenous adoptees seeking to reconnect with their birth families and communities (Wright-Cardinal 26). As Joanna says:

> My mother had seven kids, and the first four were adopted out in the 1960s. She was a young mother. She had her addictions, but she said that she fought and fought, but they never gave her a chance. I can't imagine how it was for my mom. They probably just got taken away, and that was it. I imagine that's how it happened because my brothers and sisters were told that my mother died in a fire. Fortunately, we all reconnected twenty-five years later because they obviously knew they were Native, and they were able to find us through our band.

Terry Cross et al. advocate that "When a system fundamentally fails over many years to meet the needs of Indigenous children, you don't try to make it culturally appropriate – you build a new system" (6). Raven Sinclair also calls for the dismantling of the current child welfare system to "create a new system that more accurately reflects equitable nation-to-nation relationships and honours Indigenous children, families and culture" ("The Indigenous Child" 14).

From an Indigenous worldview, we are not only connected to the present but also to past and future generations. Our interconnection across time, place, and space to our ancestors and future generations is central to the wellness and livelihood of current and future families. Anderson adds that traditionally, the

bond "between elders and children were considered critical in terms of maintaining the life force and survival of the people" (*Life Stages* 168). Hence, (re)webbing and nurturing kinship ties ensure cultural continuity and wellness within our communities. However, when these ties are broken and children are completely disconnected from their circle, they are more likely to struggle with their self-esteem and cultural identity (Wright Cardinal 26).

(Re)membering Cultural Identities

Cultural identity, associated with a sense of belonging, is integral to the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual wellbeing of Indigenous peoples and their communities (Palmater, 67). Laurence Kirmayer et al. found that Indigenous peoples who struggled with their identity and self-esteem—associated with the loss of culture—had higher levels of emotional distress, depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and suicide (611). Indeed, many studies have shown that individual and collective wellbeing among Indigenous peoples are determined, in part, through cultural continuity, which includes engaging in culture, ceremony, and having knowledge of ancestral languages (Auger 10; McIvor et al. 13). As Janis explains:

> During the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings across Canada, I heard so many stories that demonstrated that having access to some of that cultural and Indigenous sense of belonging and identity—even if it took them half a lifetime to connect to—is what saved them. I know that it was the case for my grandmother who went to residential school. She once said that the more they forced Western ways on her, the more stubborn she became to hold on to our ways. For her, that was resilience.

Within the roles and responsibilities of Indigenous mothering is the ability to transfer cultural knowledge and languages. However, due to colonization and genocide, many of our families have been completely disconnected from Indigenous lifeways, and as a result, those of us who work as helpers in our communities take on the role of mothers, aunties, and kokums to nurture the reclamation of our ways. In essence, we are part of the larger circle "calling our families home" as Carrière and Richardson articulate (*Calling* 3). And, in doing so, we are honouring our "intergenerational responsibilities" (Anderson, *Life Stages* 177). This larger circle includes engaging in ceremony, which is key to (re)connecting with our cultural identities. As Natalie elaborates:

> I have experienced and witnessed the power of healing through traditional ways— through women's healing circles, sweat lodges, fasting ceremonies, and being on the land connecting with our nonhuman kin. Our ways of healing reaffirm our identities and our

> sense of belonging as Indigenous women and Indigenous mothers. They create an incredible bond between all of us, even if we are from different nations, are status or non-status. I think that as we all engage in our own healing journeys, we model what that can look like for one another and for the children around us. I see Indigenous social work, Indigenous mothering, and Indigenous healing as all interconnected. These are not separate from one another. They are an all-encompassing way of being.

Through storytelling, Janis supports urban Indigenous mothers from diverse nations in (re)claiming their ancestral knowledges while also sharing her own experiences and understanding of deeply entrenched systems of oppression:

> When I was growing up, my family did go through a lot of hardship. Understanding intergenerational trauma, but also poverty and discrimination, and the overall fear of Western systems. I understand that lived experience, and I use a lot of that when I'm first trying to build relationships with families because I get where they are coming from. I use storytelling by asking mothers if they have teachings or stories that were passed down in their family. Sometimes, it's helping a mother make that phone call, helping her ask those questions she didn't know how to ask. And then, I'm always offering tidbits of my own personal experience and knowledge that was passed on to me. Many mothers have grown up with a little bit of teachings, and when they connect those teachings to our culture, it makes them want to search deeper.

As Indigenous mothers (re)claim their culture, teachings, and traditions, they are in a better position to pass these knowledges down to their children. Although four of Joanna's children live with their adoptive parents in three different non-Indigenous homes, she organizes regular gatherings for all of her children to come together:

> When my children went PGO five years ago, my band stepped in and flew all of us back home so that my children could attend their naming ceremony. It was an amazing weekend. We had to take the boat across the lake to the Elder's sacred site on an island, where he holds ceremony. When we came back that night, the sky was full of stars. I was in my glory, feeling at peace. My kids are proud of their names and to know that they are Aboriginal. I try to teach them as much as I can and keep them connected to our culture. My daughter was learning about our people—the Ojibwe—at school, and so I gave her some wild rice from back home, so she could bring it to her school and tell her class all about it. In my community back home, the nine

> reserves come together every year to share in the harvest and roasting of our rice and that rice is then shared among the families.

The pathway to children developing strong cultural identities resides in their connection to culture and ceremony. Although ceremonies vary from Nation to Nation, many hold coming of age ceremonies for boys and girls because these ceremonies support the development, sustainability, and vitality of communities (Anderson, *Life Stages* 95). Janis shares the following:

> These ceremonies acknowledge the transformation from childhood into adulthood. They help kids understand what is happening to them—in terms of their energy and their hormones—and the new responsibilities that come with an adult body. This provides a sense of belonging and identity, of knowing your place and your role within your family and your community. During this transformation, family members help identify the young persons' gifts, and they help them develop those gifts. Traditionally, everybody had a place within the village and not one position was more important than another. We all had a role to play to support the community as a whole.

ahkameyimo (Don't Give Up)

We hope that in braiding our stories, we have provided a more highly nuanced and contextualized context to understand Indigenous mothering. This beginning awareness is critical for social workers that support Indigenous families. Although we agree with Sinclair that the current child welfare system needs to be dismantled ("The Indigenous Child" 15), we recognize that if it does occur, it will not happen right away. In the meantime, the need for change cannot wait. In light of this, we offer some suggestions on how to move forward in ways that support families in their healing journey and in maintaining connections within kinships and culture.

> Janis: You need to get rid of every single belief that you have about Indigenous peoples. Don't go in there with a savior complex, thinking that you have the answers and that you're going to save them. Go in there understanding that there is so much more to the story that you've been presented on your desk. You need to take the time to build relationships with the communities that you are serving. Relationships aren't built by one phone call; you have to go out there and actually become part of that community. It's about earning their trust. If you make that effort to get to know the people, they'll be more than willing to help you help families.
>
> Joanna: You need to keep an open mind and not be judgmental. You

> need to sit down and really figure out where this person is coming from and what they are going through. The workers that came into my home didn't know much, if anything, about my culture and our history. I felt judged and they just thought: "Oh, it's just another Indian." It feels like a lot of them don't like their job or know what they're doing. I say this because none of the workers really supported me when I was struggling. You have to understand because of our history that when child welfare is in your home, it's very traumatic.
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> Natalie: You have to remember that many of the families that you are working with were not parented themselves, and I see Indigenous social work as providing that parenting that was never experienced by the families we are serving. Handholding—providing empathy and compassion—is not enabling, it's bringing back the humanity in the work that we do as helpers. When working with mothers who are struggling with the debilitating effects of traumas, don't give them ultimatums on getting things done on a checklist; drive them to where they need to be, buy them a coffee on the way, go in to where they need to be, and be there for them, be an advocate if needed, catch them if they start falling, and help them take that next step.

Indigenous mothering is a well-founded and wholistic way of raising our children. It is the pathway to creating strong resilient and healthy Indigenous communities. Grounded in our lifeways, Indigenous mothering provides the love and nurturing, as well a web of kinship, that support and establish life-long relationships that will sustain the wellbeing, resurgence, and prosperity of our communities.

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