



From the Womb to the World - A Girl Learns Her Mother's Story

Deidra Somerville

Keywords:

Author Biography: *Deidra Somerville* was born in Ramaytush Ohlone territory (San Francisco, CA). She is a mother, activist scholar and healer whose work is intentional in organizing, cooperative development, healing from trauma, and advancing decolonized principles and practices in organizational spaces. Her dissertation work, examining the strategies and networks of Black maternal activists in Chicago, has given her insight into the challenges, opportunities, and possibilities for communities to use disruptive practices while working with established systems to improve the quality of life in communities. Her work centers Black mothering, organizing and the indigenous knowledge that is drawn upon to resist and persist in the face of structural oppression and white supremacy. Her commitment to indigenous community-centered work are evident in her roles as founder of Esusu Chicago, her work as a ritual worker and diviner for Haji Healing Salon, and in her role as core team member of Cooperation for Liberation, a cooperative working and study group that promotes coop development in the Black tradition.

Recommended Citation: Somerville, D. (2022). From the Womb to the World - A Girl Learns Her Mother's Story, *Global Journal of Community Psychology Practice*, 13(1), 1 - 12. Retrieved Day/Month/Year, from (<http://www.gjcopp.org/>).

Corresponding Author: Deidra Somerville, Email:

From the Womb to the World - A Girl Learns Her Mother's Story

The article explores the continuity of the village through the experiences of four generations of women, each working within her own conscious knowledge of mothering, mothering practices, and her role in village life. The author tells the story as inheritor of indigenous ways of knowing passed on to her, the coloniality that disrupts and dismantles the practices she inherits and how decolonial praxis informs her voice, choices, and practices in response to coloniality. She contextualizes her family experiences through the motherline, the impact of coloniality on the motherline, and how each daughter sees herself in resistance to forces of coloniality and how their stories unfold. The motherline serves as a means through which mothers pass on to daughters strategies to resist coloniality and construct a narrative that centers her in her own womanhood. The author discusses potential ways to restore the motherline and heal connections to familial ways of knowing that have been weakened over many generations. She incorporates motherline theory and decolonial theoretical frameworks to explain how four generations of women reflect on mothering and healing and the act of finding and holding our space in the village.

Where is the house where the mouse is the leader?

~Kossula, as told to Zora Neale Hurston in *Barracoon: The Story of the Last Black Cargo*

All of our stories begin with our mother's story.

The stories of who we are, who we were and who we are to become are derived from what has been mapped onto the wombs, hearts, minds, and spirits of the identities of our mothers. The condition of our very humanity, both the process of becoming more human, and the actions that define humanity, arise from our notions of motherhood, experiences with our mothers, and retelling of our mother's stories. For their stories tell ours.

I am the daughter, granddaughter, great-granddaughter and great-great granddaughter of women born from practices that acknowledge the role of spirit, medicine, and prayer as part of childbirth. My grandmother recalls the stories of how my great-grandmother (her mother-in-law) was

her "treater" and "catcher", providing her with treated herbs and salves to ensure comfort and ease with childbirth, and overseeing my mother's birth. As my grandmother prepared to birth my mother into the world, my great-grandmother combed and styled my grandmother's hair, massaged her entire body from head to toe, and prayed with her. She treated the room with herbs to drive away impurities to the space and gave my grandmother warm food and teas, nothing cold. At the time of the birth, she kept the room lights low, letting very little natural sunlight into the space. After childbirth, my great-grandmother bound my grandmother's womb with a warm white cloth for 6 weeks and prayed with her every day. She said many prayers and sang many songs, some spirituals, some traditional songs from her lineage. My grandmother recalled that she didn't see sunlight for 6 weeks and was treated with the most tender care. "I didn't have to do anything but rest. I was made to lay there and sit there. I only got up to relieve myself and for her to do her work on me. That was it." My grandmother was 18 years old when she gave birth to my

mother.



When she greeted the sun and moon again, my grandmother was carried out with prayer and water while she held my mother and walked around to the four corners of their home. My great-grandmother recalled that my grandmother was not the same person and had to be reintroduced to the elements. She was reborn as she gave birth to my mother. Her space within that room in San Francisco's Hunter's Point community was more than just a room. It was a place where my grandmother experienced birthing a spiritual being and this process required her to transform in order for her body, mind and spirit to facilitate this process. She herself was in a womb, giving birth to promise, possibility, continuity, and possibly the return of an ancestor among them. This transference of power from the universe through the mother was understood as essential to the training my great-grandmother received in how she approached the journey of motherhood. Something happened in that space. My great-grandmother knew she was part of something much bigger than her

understanding. A woman with deep knowledge of people, spiritual energy, and how to facilitate hope and connection with people, she gave herself to a process and made herself an instrument of transformation. She did so with every birth she served as catcher or treater for. Each one is different, but the facilitation of this process established spiritual order, a call and response with the universe. An action and reaction.

I asked my grandmother to tell me this story repeatedly while growing up. I wanted to reconcile my grandmother's stories of her life coming into motherhood, with my own mother's life. This was my first introduction to praxis, applying her stories and insights to them to my mother's story, and ultimately, my own. This was how the motherline was established in my family, and now continues with me and my children. Their first engagement with praxis will not begin with what they are taught in a classroom, it will begin with what they learn from me. Re-establishing our motherline, the praxis of our mother's stories and experiences braided into our own existence, can be the first step to decolonize our actions and beliefs about the potential of the village to know itself, both past and present. The motherline is our tool of resistance that avails us the opportunity to reclaim what is ours and to assign it a meaning and purpose in our lives.

Andrea O'Reilly describes the motherline as a strategy through which a mother "gives her daughter strategies of resistance, and hence constructs an alternative script of coming into womanhood" (O'Reilly, 1998, p. 17). The motherline is a powerful tool that helps to fill the missing pieces of ourselves. Through motherline praxis, we can repair and braid together our collective memories and collective resolve to see ourselves through the eyes of our communities and not our oppressors. The motherline redirects how we

gain knowledge of ourselves, look for answers to questions, find remedies to heal ourselves.

Motherline stories ground a...daughter in a gender, a family, and a feminine history. They transform the experience of her female ancestors into maps she can refer to for warning or encouragement (Edelman, 1994, p.61).

Maldonado-Torres reminds us in the series of theses he pinned on coloniality, that a key component to ensure the persistence of coloniality is through use of modernity as “a form of metaphysical catastrophe that naturalizes war” (Maldonado-Torres, 2016, p.11). Metaphysical catastrophe occurs when the value systems, beliefs and rituals that support them are systematically destroyed through a campaign of corrective measures that serve to undermine our ways of knowing and make them far distant to our current and lived reality. This amounts to war - a war on our ways of being and knowledge generation of how to understand the world as connected, through body, mind, spirit and the universal principles that inform that connection. The destruction of the motherline and its function to maintain connectivity between mothers



Grandmother

and daughters, and with it, sacred rights and ways of knowing, is a casualty of the war on indigenous communities and the villages they strive to maintain. Western psychology is a tool of coloniality in this way, through its emphasis on the separation of daughters and mothers during adolescence as a “natural” phenomenon that should be encouraged and embraced (O’Reilly, 1998). The severance of the mother-daughter connection that is deemed a natural phenomenon occurs for indigenous peoples at the same time that daughters and sons are undergoing rites of passage, questing, training to become healers, and learning/determining their role/purpose within the village. This form of metaphysical catastrophe has cast the relationship of daughters to mothers into a strange place of uncertainty and dislocation. This disrupts the village and its continuity.

[Psychologist Bobby Wright](#) identifies this metaphysical catastrophe as “Mentacide”, defined as “a deliberate and systematic destruction of a group’s minds with the ultimate objective being extirpation of that group” (Wright, 1985, p. 17). Mentacide is a condition that has disrupted the motherline, which for generations served as a tool of resistance and defense for our villages. These tools of resistance are used by us to define ourselves, our needs, our strengths, our power, on our own terms. Modernity is a tool to perpetuate coloniality. In order to disrupt the effects of modernity on the motherline, we must first understand what modernity is, define and name its presence in our ways of being and knowing, and reclaim what we have lost, by finding, remending, and carrying forward the stories of our mothers and grandmothers.

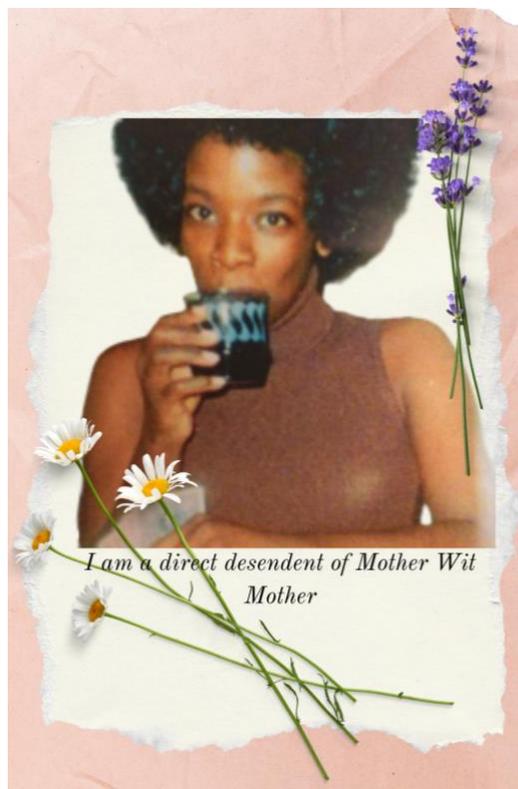
My great-grandmother was performing an act of resistance as she burned herbs, stirred liquids to a salve in her double boiler, and soaked leaves in oils and homemade vodka to treat my grandmother. She carried on

practices that are actively disrupted through licensing of doctors, midwives and nurses, and laws that take the means of production and connection to the land away from people. She was one of the migrants to California from the south who organized and petitioned to have her communities zoned for livestock during the 1940s and early 1950s in an area known as the Iron Triangle in Richmond California, where she settled after living in San Francisco's Hunter's Point neighborhood. This act of resistance to disruption of ways of life that created multiple dependencies of families on colonized ways of life impacted several generations that followed her walk on earth. She saw her sense of her own power as deeply connected to earth. She fought to make sure that this connection was retained.

Her efforts to maintain this connection were met with multiple attacks through colonization. The 1950s emerged as a time when mass production of baby formula disrupted breastfeeding practices. Science labs were used to test how to mass produce powder-based formulas that could be sold across the country, and eventually, across the world. Commoditization of breastfeeding was another tool to sever the motherline and to undermine folkways that maintained breastfeeding practices amongst indigenous peoples. Indigenous breastfeeding practices were supported with knowledge of maternal and infant health. Foods and herbs and lay midwifery supported knowledge of digestive health, mental/emotional stability, and reproductive health. The rise in pharmaceutical corporations during this time period successfully profited through this metaphysical catastrophe, severing a connection between my grandmother and mother.

My mother's story is tightly interwoven with this advance in industrialization. Once my grandmother left the womb created by the safety and sanctity within my great-

grandmother's home, she was told by her doctor that breastmilk, and by extension her breasts, were too unsanitary for my mother to receive nourishment from. She was not the only Black woman to be told this. Home Births were also severely restricted or outlawed in various states (Matthews & Zadak, 1991). This massive campaign disrupted generations of breastfeeding practices within the Black community, and the natural remedies that support this practice along with it. "They gave me a pill and said I had to take it immediately to dry up my milk. I listened to what my doctor said and took that pill. It worked. I couldn't nurse your mother after that." She was sick on that formula, but we gave it to her anyway. Mama would cry about it. She cried. I remember that." This disruption resulted in a persistent lack of support for mothers born into my generation who chose to breastfeed in my family.



My mother's story began with two generations of women being divided in a community context where the ways that women's bodies and connections to spirit were disrupted to "improve health outcomes" of infants. My mother was born small and vulnerable to death taking her. My great-grandmother foretold it, and based her work as a treater and catcher to ensure my mother's survival. She did not follow the prescriptions of doctors for her first granddaughter. As she told it, "I followed what my God told me to do. I followed His will". My mother lived. My grandmother recalled how my great-grandmother "oiled her up every day with her creams and prayed and laughed and sang with her. She never cried or was sad." I asked my great-grandmother to recall those stories, and she would never say she was saving my mother's life, she said she was never meant to die that way. Her spirit wanted to stay, so they did what was necessary to make sure she did. The doctors called it a miracle, inexplicable, even. My great-grandmother called it "divine order". She never asked permission from a doctor to treat her granddaughter. She was part of a group of activist lay midwives in the south, west and the north who fought against the limitations of medical practice and training to include their knowledge of spirit and its relationship to material existence and their divine assignment to act as a bridge between two worlds, distinct and connected.

My mother's choices to be centered in herself as a woman and mother came from a conflicted place. The values that informed her choices were from these two strands of reality: one that valued women as centered in a place of power and transference between the world of spirit and material existence to facilitate community healing, and the other that valued the ways we are forced to define progress and advancement that support the propagation of the power structures that disrupt and dismantle that centered place of

power.

My mother's story and the story of the village

Mother's story is the story of the village - torn apart by metaphysical catastrophe, disconnecting from the motherline, and looking for solutions using, in Audre Lorde's words, "the master's tools" which "will not dismantle the master's house". This dual existence, between the coloniality that we live and raise our children in and the world we left behind, are not reconcilable. The village has to recognize this is indeed the world we live in, one designed for "mentacide". As we reflect on the stories and past of our peoples, our villagers, we have to determine not only that these stories are no longer relevant to our current reality, but how and why they are no longer relevant. Can we still hear our elder's stories? The master's tools of modernity/coloniality deafen our ears to our elder's stories. They instruct us that these stories and ways of knowing have no place in a "modern" society. They are treated as fossilized relics that reflect a people and time that are not instructive to our lives today. The motherline is shaped by what we embrace here and now, as praxis for the village and its continuity. We have all been willing to leave the world of our elders behind, defining their stories as only being relevant to our past within our villages and not relevant to our current and present realities. This must change with us.

My mother marched forward in a world largely unfamiliar in many ways. With strong women and men in her home, raised by her grandmother and mother, father, grandfather and extended family, the worlds that existed outside of these highly defined spaces were peripheral to her knowledge of herself. She was encouraged to venture to the world less known to her, less known to her spirit and its ways of knowing. She left a tightly woven community and found her dark skin, hand woven and machine sewn clothes, and her lack of interest in the mundane to be at odds and oftentimes supplanted to ways

of thinking and knowing that invalidated her and her unfolding story. There was no road map for her to navigate this schism. Her bouts of depression went unrecognized, undiagnosed and untreated. She was not able to reclaim her personhood as different from her inability to navigate the foreign world she encountered daily.

The two worlds were forced to be fused together: her spiritual self that exuded confidence, wit, the gift as a seer, ritual singer, and masterful craftswoman with the woman navigating the external material world an asthmatic, diagnosed as bipolar, survivor of rape which led to my conception, and domestic violence, Christian, and [left this world by taking her own life at age 59](#). *Peace and light to her Spirit*. My mother gave birth to me at the age of 18.

My mother's journey from the spirit world, into material existence, and back to the spirit world is a cycle that affects my journey as her daughter and carrier of her story to the world. I have to navigate these same two worlds, often in conflict and at odds with one another. Our existence as casualties of a war waged through metaphysical catastrophe and mentacide forces this negotiation. Our mothers' navigational abilities help us to know and understand what it means to be centered in our sense of power, where it truly lies, and to recognize it and utilize it for what it is. Without knowledge of my mother's story and her mother's story, I would mistake strength as contextualized or framed as tools for colonization. Those tools serve to disrupt our motherline and displace my motherline power and elevate my ability to have successfully competed for and won a "good" job, "good" education, and material resources as evidence of my power and center of transformation. Colonization has served to confuse and distort our sense of centeredness as mothers, claiming that our centeredness lies in a patriarchal system and within the industrial complex that mechanizes our existence to ourselves, our bodies, our very humanity. Our ability to work

in jobs as cogs in wheels of an oppressive system of domination is not where the center of our power lies as mothers.

Our ability to be free from the ways in which our bodies and spirits work together to facilitate our ways of knowing and being, is not true freedom. Decolonization of our village will not be complete without a critical examination of our displacement of mother's power and place within our village. The continuity of the village depends upon it.

To find and heal the motherline in our own families and communities, we face down the bitterness that comes with oppression, racism, isolation and metaphysical depravity. To apply motherline work in praxis, we must gather these strands, acknowledge their damage in all forms we experience it and activate our compassion, love, and connections to our past and present, to comb through the entanglements that ensnare our hopes and ability to love and engage in community care. We must offer the patience, love, and care it takes, as our mothers did when we sat between their legs late into the night as they combed our coils and curls.

With our hands resting on their knees, our mothers would take the comb firmly in their hands and begin to comb our hair, from the tips, working slowly down to the roots. By starting at the tips, our mothers start at the place easiest to disentangle, and to comb through to the end. When working with mothers, children, and elders to re-establish our motherlines, we must start in a similar place, closest to the places in our ancestral memory we can reach. The stories we know and remember that remind us of the love and sense of community our families and homes do bring us. In her book on Black love, hooks reminds us that these stories are indeed part of Black community life, and should be unearthed and rediscovered to remind us that our communities are capable of providing us with love, care and support (hooks, 2000). She also reminds us that to heal strands of our family stories that reconnect us to a love ethic is also an

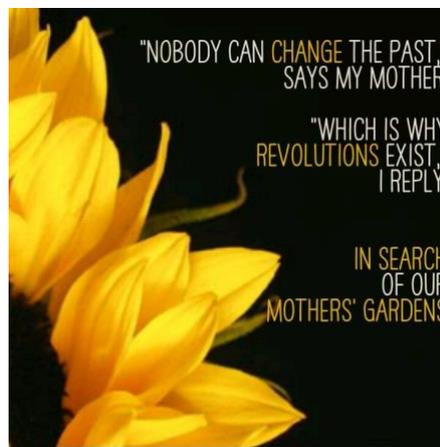
act of resistance to coloniality (hooks, 1990, 2000).

Grace Lee Boggs also acknowledges the absence of love as part of activism work and shares her interest in and hope for the work currently being done to change this. She writes:

However, since discovering that the personal is political, women activists have been abandoning the charismatic male, vertical, and vanguard party leadership patterns of the 1960s and creating more participatory, empowering, and horizontal kinds of leadership. Instead of modeling their organizing on the lives of men outside the home - for example, in the plant, or in the political arena - they are beginning to model it on the love, caring, healing and patience that, along with an appreciation of diversity and of strengths and weaknesses, go into raising a family (Boggs, 2013, p. 217).

The motherline is an essential part of our learning and transmitting the inherited wisdom that supports the new vision of activist leadership Boggs refers to. As motherline praxis further crystallizes the ways that we bring healing traditions of love and care that are community centered, we will begin to see clearly for ourselves how coloniality has attacked the core of our very being by destabilizing and undermining our relationship to love and its meaning to mothering and motherhood. We have been made to believe that our positionality as oppressed also compromises our capacity to give and receive love. By lifting up a love ethic as part of motherline praxis, we directly combat the metaphysical war being waged on our ability to love. Without acknowledgement of a love ethic forming the foundation of restoration of the motherline, movements that support restoration of mothering practices in communities will risk losing an essential element that can and will fuel such efforts. We do not have to look to other cultures to find and define a love culture in our communities. As we comb to the roots of our motherline, we use love and community care as

the means to recondition and satiate the strands of our motherline, healing the brittle and broken places that threaten to estrange mothers from daughters and mothers from their essential role in communities. The strands of the motherline will remain brittle, unhealthy, vulnerable to coloniality and destruction without it.



Sarason's work on the creation of settings also acknowledges the very essential, yet often overlooked role of "local and social histories" (Sarason, p. 141). As we lift up the contributions of the motherline to our family continuity, through prayers, marking of sacred spaces, family reunions or setting aside small plates of home cooked meals for departed ancestors on our dinner tables in acknowledgement of their presence among us, we ignite this idea of local and social history in a way that acknowledges that spark of divine that our foremothers left behind for us to carry with us, even as we eat meals together and reminisce and share loving memories together. With intention, these small acts to activate the connections we share with our departed ancestors bring their rightful presence and place into our families and our motherlines. Ultimately, they inform our resistance and activism.

As we work our way down the entangled strands, still combing to the roots, we continue to find patches that we know for sure no matter how softly or gently we attempt to comb them, we will feel pain. The

process of decolonizing our villages can and will find hurt places in our hearts, homes, and relationships that require space for healing. Re-centering our sacred practices in spaces where we are told they don't belong is painful. Coloniality ensures that pain is part of the process of decoloniality, challenging our ability to successfully resist. Like those late evenings while getting my hair combed as a child or combing my own daughter's hair, we know that if we choose to leave the tangles in place, they will only become more entangled and will make it harder for our comb, oils of love and community care, and patience to get through. To go around it is to go around an essential truth: to delay and defer the pain that we must go through does not lead to healing and resolution. Even when our patience is threadbare, we need to persist. We need to resist the call of modernity to abandon the journey we are taking to restore our motherlines. We have torchbearers that are helping to light our way when it grows dark, feed our wanting spirits when they are weary and tired. The torchbearers are pairing motherline work with activism, much in the way of my great-grandmother, establishing healing spaces for Black women to learn the ways of our traditions as healers - bridging work that combines spiritual practices with activism. We can begin with our own families, our own ancestral memories, at our own dinner tables, creating places of honor for our ancestors, serving our intention to honor our own resistance and activism, and reclaim our motherline.

References

- Boggs, G. L., & Kurashige, S. (2012). *The next American revolution: Sustainable activism for the twenty-first century*. Univ of California Press.
- Edelman, Hope. *Mothers Daughters: The Legacy of loss*.

- New York: Delta, 1994
- Hooks, B. (1990). *Homeplace: A site of resistance*.
- Hooks, B. (2000). *Feminist theory: From margin to center*. Pluto Press.
- Hurston, Z. (2018). *Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo"*, Edited and with an Introduction by Deborah G. Plant Amlstad/HarperCollins.
- Maldonado-Torres, N. (2016). *Outline of ten theses on coloniality and decoloniality*. Fondation Frantz Fanon.
- Mathews, J. J., & Zadak, K. (1991). The alternative birth movement in the United States: history and current status. *Women & health*, 17(1), 39-56.
- O'Reilly, A. (1998). Mothers, daughters, and feminism today: Empowerment, agency, narrative, and motherline. *Canadian Woman Studies*, 18(2).
- Sarason, S. B. (1972). *The creation of settings and the future societies*. Brookline Books.
- Wright, B. E. (1985). *The psychopathic racial personality and other essays*. Chicago: Third World Press.