Like all women, I am Sky Woman’s great-granddaughter. I come from a matrilineal culture, the Kanien’kehá:ka, or “people of the flint,” to whom Europeans gave the name Mohawk. In our oral history, we tell the story of Sky Woman; it is through the telling of her story that we learn about our roles and responsibilities as women. As we embody her life, and learn from our mothers, we are also passing on her knowledge.

The story opens in the Sky World at the beginning of time and tells of the relationship between the young Sky Woman, whom we know by the name Awe(n)ha’i’ (“mature blossoms”), and her family and the people of that world. It describes how she was treated because she was special and gifted, how she learned the ways of her people, and about her relationship and marriage to the keeper of the Tree of Light.¹ The story is the first place where the clans appear, ceremonies and songs, the medicine game of lacrosse, and where Sky Woman’s corruption takes place, leading to her descent to the earth world below. The challenges Sky Woman faces affect her both physically

¹ The Tree of Light refers to the life forces of nature. The keeper of that tree is essentially the power of creation, the source of all life.
and emotionally, throwing off her sense of balance. As she deals with each of these challenges through critical engagement with herself and those she loves, Sky Woman learns how to think for herself, how to be respectful of others, how to endure suffering. It prepares her for what is to come.

This first part of the story teaches us about creating a Sky World on earth, one where respect for all living things is enacted in daily life. The story teaches us that Sky Woman has a history, a family, and a place where she belongs. We are reminded that we come from somewhere and that the Sky World is very similar to the world as we know it. It is understood in our culture that to be healthy in body, mind, and spirit you have to have a sense of your own history and identity. My own version begins with Sky Woman's descent. She is pregnant, alone, scared, and bewildered. Yet she is acutely aware of her surroundings. This is her story.

**Sky Woman’s Story**

There are those who say I fell, was pushed, or jumped through a hole under the great tree and began my fall to the earth world below. Only I know the truth. This is the story as I lived it, and I am telling you what I remember.

It seemed like I fell a long time before anything happened. I opened my eyes, and I could see the water birds from the world below coming up to meet me. The Heron and the Loon were the leaders, with their wide wings expanded in full flight. All of their wings combined to create a large, soft cushion for me to land on. I could feel the softness of their feathers and the strength of their wings under my feet. I felt safe, but I was also shocked at my circumstances and how my life had suddenly changed. I wondered, what was to become of me? I was let loose, like a baby lynx in a briar patch, in a world I didn’t know. I felt no fear, only concern for the safety of my baby, mixed with sadness. I rubbed my belly and spoke to her.

“Little one,” I said, “I love you very much and I will protect you. We are now in a different world. You will never meet your grandmother or grandfather. You will never meet your father, but I am here and I will always love you and look after you.”

I kissed my fingertips and touched my belly softly as tears gently rolled down my cheeks and fell on her.

I went to the edge of the platform created by the birds’ wings and peered over the edge. Far below, my eyes were met with brilliant blue. The blue was from a great expanse of water reflecting the sunlight, and it was both
beautiful and almost too much to bear. There appeared to be no land. I wondered to myself, where I would stand in this world?

In the depths beneath us, I could see water animals grouped together, looking up and talking to one another. I knew that they were talking about me and wondering what to do. Suddenly Otter gasped for air and dove under the surface of the water. Much time passed, and eventually his body slowly rose. He was dead.

I gasped and cried out, “Oh, Otter has died trying to save me!”

I wanted to hold his soft head in my arms and tell him I was grateful he had given his life to try to save me. I felt helpless watching from above. Then I saw Beaver being take a gasp of air and go below the surface. A long time later, his body slowly surfaced. I cried out again, with fresh tears on my cheeks as I wept for Beaver. I wanted to hold him and thank him for giving up his life to try to save me.

Next, I saw Muskrat gasp for air and dive below. A long time later his body slowly rose to the surface. I closed my eyes and let the tears fall down my face into the folds of my dress. I felt so sad that these water beings had died trying to save me. I wondered again what was to become of me.

Suddenly from far below I heard a cheer erupt from the assembled animals. Muskrat had succeeded! In his lifeless paws were specks of dirt from the ocean floor. One of the animals pried the dirt from Muskrat’s clenched paws and gently placed the dirt on Turtle being’s back. Immediately, Turtle’s shell began to grow bigger. Soon the shell became big enough for me to stand on. I was gently lowered and my feet touched the first earth.

“Thank you, water beings, for saving me and my baby,” I said. “I am grateful to you all for what you have done and brought to this world.”

“I am going to sing you a song and dance for you, to show you how thankful I am for all that you have done.”

I readied myself, hummed a few bits of the first song in preparation. The animals gathered around me, their eyes wide and their ears open. The air was alive.

The Formation of Turtle Island

I began to dance the women’s shuffle dance and sing the planting songs I had learned from the women of the Sky World. I was heavy with child, but I still shuffled counter-clockwise, making the earth spread out on the Turtle being’s back. I placed the tobacco and strawberry plants in the soil.
“Hey ya, hey ya,” I sang in a loud clear voice. I wanted all the animals to know how grateful I was for what they had done for me, and for the earth to be patted down, firm and smooth.

My baby kicked, keeping the beat of the song inside me. I held my belly as I continued to dance. With each part of the song my voice grew louder and clearer. I turned my face up to Elder Brother Sun and let his loving smile warm my face. I looked up to the Sky World and sang for my mother and father. I sang for my husband, who had misunderstood me and challenged me as I tried to help interpret his dream. I sang for the fate I had been dealt. But we had arrived safely. As I sang and danced I felt stronger and stronger. I began to heal from my hurt and sorrow at being misunderstood by my husband. I understood him and was grateful for what he had given to me, my unborn baby.

The Turtle being’s shell continued to grow, and the earth spread out in all directions with my songs and dances. As I danced, the roots and seeds from the Sky World that were caught in my hair fell to the newly formed earth, while my dancing feet covered them over with good, black earth. Immediately tiny green shoots began to appear. New life was beginning on earth! It was as though my relatives in the Sky World were with me planting in my garden, ensuring that my baby and I wouldn’t starve.

I looked down and around me in wonder at the new life growing. Corn stalks began to appear, growing taller and forming silken hair that peered from their crowns. As the minutes went by, beans and squash also appeared. I could see all kinds of herbs, fruits, medicines in the ground around me. The air started to smell of the fragrant aromas of rich black soil and lush plant growth. I could see bright red strawberries and large flat tobacco leaves as well. I knew that as long as I had the sacred medicines, along with the corn, beans, and squash to eat, my baby and I would be fine.

The animals appeared and sniffed delicately at the new growth. I stood still and spread my arms out, welcoming the animals to taste what had come from the Sky World.

“Come and eat!” I said. “I have planted all the things we will need on this earth to survive. My relatives from the Sky World made sure we would not starve. I have planted them as we did together in the Sky World and I want to share them with you.”

Fox came forward and sniffed at the green leaves of a plant. He tasted them and then began to eat.
“Mmmm. These are good,” he said.

Rabbit, Bear, Wolf, and Deer all came forward and began to eat. For a time there was silence punctuated by sounds of smacking lips and grunts of happy feasting. I was exhausted. I lay down to take a nap and prepared for the birth of my daughter.

My Baby-Faced Lynx

I woke up to strong labour pains coursing through my back and belly. I was scared for the first time. The labour pains felt like a rope was tied tightly around my waist. I cried out for my mother.

“Mother,” I said, “I miss you! I wish you were here with me to help me, and to see your new grandchild come into this new world!”

After the shock of the first labour pains, my sensibilities kicked in. I had seen women give birth in the Sky World, so I knew what I had to do. I squatted over a pile of soft grasses. I made it through each contraction as it came to me, breathing with the pain, counting my breaths. I called out to my mother every once in a while so that she would hear me:

“Mother! Mother! She is coming!”

Then came the final pushes and I could feel the head of my baby come through. There was a loud gushing noise and then she fell into the softness beneath me. I bit the umbilical cord loose, birthed the placenta, and prepared to bury it, as was the custom of my ancestors. I looked around me for a tree near to where she had been born. As I dug the hole, I said some words and sang the song of creation. As a reminder to my daughter of where she came from, our mother the earth, I gently placed into the ground the sac which had nourished her.

“Hey ya, hey ya,” I sang in a loud clear voice. I wanted my relatives above to hear me and know of the birth of their granddaughter.

My little Baby-Faced Lynx, as I called her, was beautiful. She took to my breast right away, and nursed for a long time as she lay on my belly. I touched her hair; her soft head was so tiny in my palm. She had a nice little round soft bum and tiny toes which she flexed in pleasure as she drank my warm milk. I spoke to her:

“I love you, my little one. I will always look after you and give you food to eat. I will always try to make you happy. I will always do everything I can to heal you.”
I closed my eyes and we drifted off to sleep, I could feel her little quick heartbeat and her shallow breaths. We slept. When I awoke my daughter had grown. She grew fast and as time passed she became a young woman.

Life with My Daughter

My Baby-Faced Lynx loved to walk and explore the earth. As a child she had many playmates and her life was full of happiness. The animals would take on human form and play games with her. As she grew and became too old for child’s play, she began to explore the earth more widely. Sometimes I would not see her for a whole day. But she always came home.

When my daughter reached puberty, she was given the name Iakotsitionteh (One Flower Has Arisen). One night as I was sleeping, I had a dream in which Uncle appeared to me. He told me that I was to watch over Iakotsitionteh carefully. Three beings in human form would appear to her and want to marry her. I was to tell her that she was not to be tempted, but to wait for a fourth young man who would appear. This man was to be her husband.

I asked Uncle, “How will she know that this fourth man is the right one?”

“She will know because she waited and took her time.”

When I woke up the next morning, I talked with my daughter.

“My daughter, I love you. You are going to be a woman soon. I have to tell you that when you are out in the world wandering the earth, men will appear to you. They will want to be with you. You must come to me and ask my permission first.”

Iakotsitionteh said, “Yes, mother. I will do that.”

She’s a good girl.

One day my daughter came back from her wanderings and told me of a man she had met. He had asked her if she wanted him for a companion. She had told him that she had to ask me first. Upon hearing of this, I said no. This same thing happened two more times. I said no again and again.

One day the West Wind came to visit. He appeared in human male form. I watched as his eyes admired the beauty of my daughter. That night he appeared in my daughter’s dream and continued to do the same for two more nights. Each morning when she awoke she told me about her dream and the handsome young man who appeared to her. She told me she was in love with him and that they had agreed that they wanted to be life partners. I thought about this and about what Uncle had told me. I agreed to the marriage.
That night the West Wind came to Iakotsitionteh and lay beside her. In the morning I found two crossed arrows on her belly. I knew that my daughter was pregnant with twins. Iakotsitionteh awoke and gasped. Her belly began to swell as the babies grew rapidly inside her. I was so happy I was going to be a grandmother. I rubbed my daughter’s belly.

“My grandchildren, I love you. You are going to be arriving soon in this world. There is a lot to see. I will make sure you are happy and well fed. You will never need for anything at all. I will make sure you stay healthy and strong.”

My daughter rubbed her belly and smiled at me. The babies caused my daughter a lot of discomfort. It seemed like they were always in conflict. We could hear the two babies arguing and fighting inside her womb. I did all I could to help my Iakotsitionteh through her pregnancy and get ready for the birth.

One day I heard my daughter cry out in pain. I felt something in my gut that I had never felt before—apprehension. I ran to my daughter and helped her to lie down. Her belly had dropped and I could see her struggling through contractions. Suddenly she pushed and one baby came out the normal way, from between her legs and fell to the soft pile of leaves below. She groaned loudly as this happened. Then she opened her eyes wide, grabbed my hand, and fell over as the other baby came out of her armpit.

I helplessly watched my daughter, as she bled to death before me. The light faded from her eyes. I cried as I could do nothing to save her. I called out to my relatives in the Sky World for their help:

“Why have you done this? Why is my daughter dead? I have lost what I loved the most! Help us.”

I cried as I picked up the twin boys, washed them and wrapped them. They looked at me with their soft brown eyes, and I remembered my beautiful Baby-Faced Lynx and how she suckled in those first few minutes of her new life. Tears rolled down my face and fell into the folds of their coverings. I lay the babies down and then went to prepare my daughter for burial as I had seen my relatives do in the Sky World.

I lovingly washed my Iakotsitionteh and dressed her. I sang songs as I did this and spoke words of love.

“My daughter,” I said as tears fell down my face, “I loved you greatly. Many loved you greatly. You are going to be missed by me, and all others who had a chance to know you in your short time on this new earth. We watched you
as you were born and grew into a beautiful young woman. We watched you as you played on this earth and worked in the gardens tending to the plants with loving care.”

I stopped for a minute to think about my pretty little Baby-Faced Lynx daughter. The way she looked up to me as I taught her about the plants and medicines that grew around us. The memory of her innocent face brought tears to my eyes.

“Your presence on the earth will be missed. But you are going to a place where you will be loved. You will have warmth and life again in ten days’ time. Your ancestors in the Sky World will watch over you and care for you as I did. Your life there will be rich with happiness. Your body will nourish the earth and give life to the new plants and animals.”

With my words and songs I sent her on her way back to the Sky World. I buried her in a grave and prepared to look after my grandsons.

My Twin Grandsons Do Their Work

My boys, as I called them, looked alike, but were very different in their temperament. Many know them today as the right-handed and left-handed twins. One was kind and thoughtful, the right hand; the other was selfish and scheming, the left hand. Teharonhia:wakon, “He who grasps the sky with both hands,” was the kind one, and Sawiskera, “Flint crystal ice,” was the scheming one.

As I came to see later, the differing minds of the two boys came to characterize the two types of beings on the earth. There are those whose minds are solely turned toward the earth and bring disruptive influences to it and try to take control over it, like Sawiskera. There are those who always know where they come from and try to protect things on earth and always think of others first, like Teharonhia:wakon.

I misunderstood this aspect of my grandson, Teharonhia:wakon. His belief in letting people think for themselves and come to a conclusion on their own I mistook for a kind of apathy and uncaring. It made me angry and I began to favour my other grandson, Sawiskera. I did not think of the boys equally, which I realized much later was a misguided understanding. I had this fault, much like my husband in the Sky World.

Throughout their lives the two boys were in constant disagreement about many things. I told the boys, “Look, you two are frustrating me. Why don’t you work it out? Play a game to resolve things or find another solution.” I
shook my head and sighed, “Sometimes you boys remind me of your grandfather, who was so misguided.”

In those times I would think of my lakotsitionteh and peace would come back to me. I was reminded of my purpose, to be diligent and look after my grandsons. I began to look forward to the days we spent together. Life with my twins was also filled with happiness and laughter. We would go for long walks.

“What’s this, Tohta?” they would ask.²

I spent long periods explaining about the plants and animals on the earth and how they came to be there. I was filled with joy to see their young minds at work. The boys played with the little animals and made games for themselves. I encouraged them along as I could see their hunting and gathering skills developing. The boys also learned how to cultivate corn, beans, and squash as they helped in the garden. These earliest times with the boys were good ones.

Some time had passed and the boys were approaching adulthood. I was weeding my garden on a beautiful warm day when Sawiskera came to see me.

“Tohta, can you show me how to make a bow and arrow?” he asked with a mischievous grin.

So I made him a set just like the ones I had witnessed my relatives making in the Sky World.

“Now look, grandson, you are supposed to use this only for hunting food,” I told him.

But, a short time later, Teharonhia:wakon came to me and told me of what his brother had done with the bow and arrow. Teharonhia:wakon said, “My brother Sawiskera has been impatient with our mother. He has taken the sharp arrow you made him and cut off our mother’s head. He laid her head to the side of her body and she is not whole and not prepared for her travel back to the Sky World.”

He shook his head and looked at me with troubled eyes as he spoke, “Sawiskera was not thinking of her but of his own frustration at her death. I buried her in the ground again and new life has sprung up from her grave.” I sighed and closed my eyes for a minute. I had an image of my daughter

² Tohta is a term of endearment used to refer to one’s grandmother or grandfather. The word comes from the longer word Aksotha, meaning “all that I am,” with reference to one’s lineage.
before me. “Your brother is still troubled by your mother’s death,” I said, opening my eyes. “What he has done has caused you to do the right thing in return and because of this, your mother will always be remembered as She Who Always Leads.”

As I spoke Teharonhia:wakon leaned in to listen.

I went on, “Your mother, even though she didn’t live long, was the first being to be born on this earth. She visited this world only for a short time and now is on her return journey to where she came from. Before leaving, her body will bring forth new life, much like she did when she gave birth to you. In this way she shows us by example how the cycle of life is renewed. This is good.”

The troubled look on Teharonhia:wakon’s face disappeared and he looked at peace again. Teharonhia:wakon then asked me to make him a bow and arrow just like his brother’s. I did so. I tried to treat the two boys equally. At the same time, I knew how different they were, and I tried to keep them apart so that they could both develop their own gifts. It went on this way for some time. I grew older, and the twins grew into men.

One day after wandering the earth, my grandson Teharonhia:wakon came home with seeds. He spoke to me.

“It is time for me to do the work I have been destined to do. I will make sure that we always have food to eat.”

“I see that you have much work to do. I think you should be alone and away from me and your brother. This way we will not be in your way.”

I think Teharonhia:wakon took that to be my blessing, and he left and built a lodge on the other side of the Turtle Island. I watched him go with pride and sadness because he was a connection to my Iakotsitionteh. I still had one grandson nearby. Sawiskera, I could see, was troubled or different and needed my constant guidance.

Earth Is Created

Teharonhia:wakon spent time creating many beautiful things on the earth. From a distance I could see many changes in the world. New plants began to appear where there had been none before. Birds that sang beautiful songs could be heard in the trees. New animals named Moose and Buffalo began to wander through the forest. Other animals like the Porcupine and Raccoon began to appear. I looked out from my shelter and wondered what my grandson was doing. I decided to go and visit Teharonhia:wakon to see for myself.
When I arrived with my other grandson, Sawiskera, Teharonhia:wakon offered us something to eat. When we were done, he took us outside his lodge and showed us what he had created.

“All that you see here is for us to share in,” he said. “We have enough to survive, but we have to look after it.” I was impressed with the good work my grandson had done.

“You have created many great things,” I said, “wonderful sweet berries, healing herbs, and wonderful animals to eat. Your work is good.”

I could see that my other grandson was jealous. By his actions, Sawiskera challenged his brother to work toward perfection. Sawiskera hid the animals that his brother had created. He put all the four-legged animals in a cavern where they went in for hibernation. Now he had his own steady supply of food. One day Teharonhia:wakon came to me.

“Grandmother, have you seen all the animals that I created? I am hungry and would like to eat.”

“You should follow him to find out where he gets them from.”

Teharonhia:wakon did so and found out what his brother had done with the animals. He set them free, but before doing so, he made them wild so they wouldn’t be as easy to catch.

I continued to keep my distance to see if the twins could continue to sort out their differences. As they matured, I saw that the twins begin to share in each other’s gifts. Teharonhia:wakon gave Sawiskera food in exchange for half of his disruptive power; this diminished his power by half, and he could no longer change the work of his brother.

After a time Teharonhia:wakon created the men-kind and of course the women-kind out of the red clay and gave them a portion of his life, of his mind, and of his blood. Teharonhia:wakon gave Sawiskera half of his disruptive power; this diminished his power by half, and he could no longer change the work of his brother.

Sawiskera continued to make his own animals and plants, which were opposites of those created by his brother. Many were found to be harmful and poisonous to humans and the Onkwehonwe had to take care in their use. I took the time to teach the women-kind which plants were useful to
women’s work. I also taught them the planting cycles so their families would never go hungry.

In time Sawiskera created his own race of beings out of the red clay and the white foam of the sea, which gave his beings lighter skin. He did not have the same skills as his brother Teharonhia:wakon, and Sawiskera was unable to give them life. It was Teharonhia:wakon who gave these beings a bit of his life, his blood, and his mind. These beings Teharonhia:wakon said were not Onkwehonwe but would be called human beings and would be of two minds, two opposites, like the twins themselves.

One day Teharonhia:wakon had had enough of the deceitful actions of his brother, Sawiskera.

“Sawiskera, I am tired of your constantly undermining my work. Let’s have a game of dice to decide this once and for all.”

By this time I was too old and didn’t have enough energy to get involved. I thought that this was a good way to resolve their differences. As I understood it, the dice game would decide who would take care of the night and who would take care of the day and keep the boys out of each other’s way. The two brothers met on a mountaintop. Teharonhia:wakon was victorious.

Teharonhia:wakon took pity on his brother and built him a hut on the Sky Road. As the loser of the game of dice, Sawiskera was no longer allowed to come to earth during the daytime and disrupt the work of Teharonhia:wakon. With this, time was now split into day and night. It was now Sawiskera who controlled the night.

He had to watch all those who were spirits on their way to the Sky World pass before his door. When Sawiskera came out at night, he couldn’t see very well. And so he was not able to cause as much trouble. With this new arrangement Teharonhia:wakon happily continued his work of creation.

My Journey to the Sky Road

Day by day I could feel myself aging and weakening. I knew I would soon go back to my relatives in the Sky World. I looked forward to seeing my mother and father again, and my daughter, Baby-Faced Lynx. One day I tried to get up, but I was too weak. I lay for a long time listening to sounds of the animals and the winds rustling through the grasses outside my lodge. I felt at peace. I knew I had done all I could on this beautiful earth—I had brought the beginnings of life and planted them in the soil. I had birthed my daughter and looked after her babies after she was gone. I had tried to be a good
grandmother to Teharonhia:wakon and Sawiskera. I closed my eyes for the last time, took a deep breath, and fell asleep forever with a smile on my face.

My spirit remained on earth for ten days. In that time my grandson Teharonhia:wakon found my body and honoured me by putting my body in the night sky across the road from his brother Sawiskera. That way I could continue the good work that I had done during my lifetime and watch over Sawiskera to keep him from making too much trouble. This way I became grandmother moon. I gave Sawiskera a little light to work by at night. In this new lofty position, I also let women-kind know when to plant, when to do ceremonies, and when to birth. And most important, I keep women focused on their monthly cycles.

I don’t have to worry about Sawiskera anymore. In the daytime the Onkwehonwe have their councils and ceremonies, which only go from daybreak to sunset. They are pretty strict about doing that work during daylight hours. So Teharonhia:wakon takes care of that business very well. It is those things that one does at night that need to be balanced. In these hours things can go bad. As well, it is at night that our children are conceived. I know this because I watch over the women. And I keep an eye on the mischievous one, Sawiskera.

From my place on the Sky Road, I look over the earth where my daughter is buried, and her granddaughters and their daughters, and their daughters. My connection to my great-granddaughters continues. I made a promise to these women that they would see me every twenty-eight days. And so it is through their cycles that we have stayed in touch, all the way through time. This is what reminds them of their gifts and place on this earth.

**Discussion**

The writing of Sky Woman’s story took a few months to complete. The piece made me reflect upon my own life experiences and roles as mother, daughter, aunty, and sister. Putting myself in her place and envisioning what she must have felt and saw as she went through her life gave me special insight into my own experiences and that of the nine women living at Kahnawà:ke whom I was interviewing at the time. It helped me to understand the teachings better, and now I share them with you. This is my gift to my great-granddaughters.

I learned a certain way of being from my mother, of what it means to be a strong and independent woman, a community member, a mother: what it is to be Kanien’kehá:ka. The story of Sky Woman is told throughout the
Haudenosaunee confederacy, of which the Kanien’kehá:ka are a part.\textsuperscript{3} It is told to children and adults, written into books, painted, drawn, and woven into daily life. Although details of the story have shifted over time, certain basic elements remain the same and serve as the core of the Sky Woman narrative.\textsuperscript{4}

It is in the interactions between Sky Woman’s life as a theory of being and our life in actual practice that her experience provides special insights. As Sky Woman strives to create a heaven on earth, the corruption and the healing that she experiences move her and her world forward. She is to us mother, grandmother, peacemaker, mediator, elder, and finally Grandmother Moon, who watches over all women for time eternal. These roles represent Sky Woman’s outer identity. In the words of her story, however, we glimpse her inner identity: we see her as she sees herself because we are her and she is us.

Her story also shows us that Sky World is a place where animals, humans, and spirits coexisted in mutual respect and where everything was provided for our survival, just as it is on earth. The principles of respect and equality are foundational and crucial to our survival. These principles are also illustrated in Haudenosaunee cultural, social, and spiritual life—in the clan system, matrilineal descent, consensual decision making, the cycle of ceremonies, and traditional songs and dances, to name a few. They are also embodied in the language. For example, there are no words in the languages spoken among the Haudenosaunee to describe a concept such as hate. Instead of saying “I hate you,” we use the expression “ke ia ta kwa’swens” (“This person’s being repulses me and I withhold my respect”), which comes from the root word for “being” or “body.” In our language the root word for body and being is “iat.” When we speak about someone, our language most often refers in some way to the person’s body, mind, or spirit. The expression “ke ia ta

\textsuperscript{3} The name Haudenosaunee means “people of the long house.” The confederacy consists of six nations—the Oneida, Onondaga, Seneca, Cayuga, and Tuscarora, in addition to the Kanien’kehá:ka (or Mohawk, as they were formerly known)—that joined together in the spirit of peace and mutual coexistence.

\textsuperscript{4} In his book, \textit{The Rotinonshonni: A Traditional Iroquoian History Through the Eyes of Teharonhia:wako and Sawiskera} (Syracuse University Press, 2013), Brian Rice, a Kanien’kehá:ka (or Mohawk, as they were formerly known) that joined together in the spirit of peace and mutual coexistence, incorporates most known core elements of the Sky Woman story as part of his retelling of the larger epic of the establishment of the Haudenosaunee confederacy.
kwa’swens” focuses on the person’s state of mind while maintaining respect for the person as a whole. One can also find the themes of respect and equality in the social, spiritual, and material culture, where respect for all living things is depicted in family relationships, ceremonies, wampum belts, the design elements on clothing, and much more. Our concept of equality comes from the natural world. No one human, animal, or object is better than any other. Rather, we are all part of a whole. Through time, however, these core elements of respect and equality have changed and become distorted. Often, one has to look closely, and with someone’s guidance, to see them clearly.

Distortion is a major theme of Sky Woman’s story. And, as in Sky Woman’s story, the distortion of Haudenosaunee mother culture has taken place over centuries. This mother culture—the original culture, from which modern-day Haudenosaunee derive—speaks to the power of our women in our society. Kanien’kehá:ka women recognize that we have a closer tie to nature than men do, as we are the ones who bring forth new life and our spiritual, social, and societal responsibilities reflect this close connection. Our responsibilities work in counterbalance to those of men. Through the effects of colonization, however, our natural abilities and responsibilities have been eroded and our identities and self-perception have been negated, disregarded, re-visioned, and reconstituted according to the ideals of another people.5

Distortion in this context refers to the tendency of people to fall out of balance with themselves and the world. Being in balance in all things is referred to as having a “good mind.” As seen earlier, Kanien’kehá:ka language references the body, mind, and spirit of the individual. The social, spiritual, and political aspects of society work in harmony to maintain balance

5 In many cases, we have come to believe what someone else says of us and taken it on as our own “truth.” An example of this is seen in the idea of using blood quantum as a measure of how “Indian” one is. Many of our own people believe that this is an accurate measure of Indigenous identity when, in fact, as seen in old adoption practices of my ancestors, the notions of race and blood “purity” have no place in our traditional concept of identity and belonging. The adoption and integration of non-Kanien’kehá:ka people served to replenish and balance communities. The use of blood quantum as a measure of identity by our people reflects a changed thinking. Instead of relationships between all things being equal, they are now hierarchical. Therefore, as we became unbalanced, our families and communities became unbalanced.
within. As we saw, Sky Woman’s own mind undergoes a certain distortion and rebalancing as she goes through life. This is what is referred to at the beginning as corruption. It is from these events that we learn how to live our lives in balance.

The social and political distortion of the role of Indigenous women is seen in the earliest narratives written about our people. Euro–North American historical thought consciously programmed the story of Haudenosaunee women out of the colonial narrative. Our history is viewed in terms of two loci of European patriarchy: religion and politics. Thus women became invisible in external and internal political maneuvering. This comes from the European’s discomfort in dealing with women leaders and the authority and discretion of women’s councils, a discomfort that sought, successfully, to repress the true extent of our political influence. As a result, when colonists were confronted with examples of Haudenosaunee women’s influence and the threat it presented to the colonial project, they silenced and legislated away the legitimacy of our role, erasing it from historical documents and national histories. We are forced to mine these inaccurate documents for what they don’t say about women and fill the gaps by talking to our elders, guessing and looking at ourselves in relationship with the natural world.

My version of Sky Woman’s story in the first person actualizes Kanien’kehá:ka women’s lived experiences. Even though it was supposed to have taken place a long time ago, her story speaks to lived experiences that take place today. Each time I work on the story, I think of my own roles as mother, daughter, aunt, and community member. This work has enabled me to appreciate my own roles and understand them clearly. The writing of her story animates what I learn from women of my family and community. This is why her story is retold to our children. Her story brings to life the teachings from their families and other community members. Conversely, the rewriting of her story is augmented by the lives of the nine Kanien’kehá:ka women at the centre of my doctoral dissertation, which examines how Kahnawà:ke women express their Kanien’kehá:ka identity. The nine women I interviewed, who ranged in age from twenty-nine to eighty-six years, reflect a broad spectrum of women of this community. They are artists, educators, businesswomen, elders, and according to them, what is most important is that they are grandmothers, mothers, daughters, aunties, and sisters.

I used these stories to inform aspects of Sky Woman’s experiences that I have not experienced and could thus not personally relate. Sky Woman’s
feelings and reactions are imbued with their experiences. She is in these nine women, and they are in her. As a result, Sky Woman’s story resists or goes beyond feminism as a comment on colonial patriarchy and articulates a larger ideological framework of resilience. Her story, and its rearticulation, speaks to the idea of Indigenous womanism, in which traditional roles of women are empowered and valued. When asked whether they identified with feminism, most of the women of this study said no. Upon reflection of my own rejection of feminism, I have come to understand that what it is that Indigenous women are struggling with is not a social, spiritual, and political inequality with the opposite sex in our societies. Many of us see this as the purview of white Western feminism. We are dealing with the much larger struggle of the impacts of colonization in which sexism and patriarchy are a part. As we have awakened our own voices to this matter, white Western feminist theories no longer apply. At one time, we relied on feminism to enable us to articulate our struggle. We are now, however, working toward articulating our own theories and methods in combating colonialism through the broad spectrum of thinking called Indigenous womanism.

A reawakened Haudenosaunee womanhood leads to a second major theme of Sky Woman’s story—healing. Distortion appears in many forms throughout the story. In the end, we see how this serves to teach us a lesson about ourselves as the characters achieve balance. Over the course of her life, Sky Woman finds healing and happiness time and time again, and it is usually through the enactment of her role as mother and grandmother. At every point we see her give thanks to the natural world for what it provides and its role in sustaining life. Ultimately, it is through the characters’ journeys that foundational principles of the narrative are communicated. We learn that healing comes with balance and a good mind.

There is a definite view of the other in the Sky Woman story. In this case, it is the spirits who view Sky Woman as the outsider yet treat her as an equal. Even though she is different, she is given respect. In turn, she provides respect through her own actions. The idea of reciprocal respect can be seen in the historical record, where newcomers to the Americas were given food and shelter and taught how to survive in this land. As Sky Woman describes

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6 The principle of mutual co-existence was articulated in the Two Row Wampum Treaty of 1613, an agreement made between the Haudenosaunee and the Dutch government that became the foundation for the Haudenosaunee approach to all newcomers to North America. The agreement is based on peaceful co-existence,
her life, we gain understanding of the fundamental roles and responsibilities of Kanien’kehá:ka women. Women are recognized as different from men, with a different and equally significant purpose in life. Just as the Sky Woman story is a metaphor for Kanien’kehá:ka women, Kanien’kehá:ka women are a metaphor for Mother Earth, which provides everything necessary for survival. Through our ability to procreate, we represent the power of creation. This symbiotic relationship is articulated in traditional symbols, songs, and ceremonies of my people. Sky Woman’s story itself also presents stark evidence for a contrast in world views and values. It is used as a reminder of the distortion of Indigenous ways by colonization.

My version is written in the first person and as such is a performative interpretation of what Sky Woman saw and felt about her fall, the development of Turtle Island, and so on. I choose this method of telling her story specifically because it is our story, lived in distortion in our everyday lives and the lives of our children. Her life is our life, as we live it to this day. We are her great-granddaughters, but our story is no different. We became distorted and are now in the process of healing. This version has all these elements, but, more important, it contains teachings from the everyday lives of women who live in my community. Every woman’s story offers a clear connection, a path to the Sky Road where our Grandmother, Sky Woman, lives and watches over us. It is through this story that we reconnect with our ancestors in the Sky World.

Conclusion

Haudenosaunee women’s traditions derive from the narrative that begins in the Sky World. There are many different stories about how the earth was created. Creation stories reflect divergent world views and the varied elements interwoven in a people’s physical, ideological, and personal relationship with their environment. Built upon the basic need for survival, where everyone gets to be fed, to be happy, and to be healed, these stories tell how people created their own heaven on earth and provide a path to the future. The foundational principles of respect for the self and each other, equality, and personal responsibility for the future generations not yet born sharing, and reciprocity, in which neither party seeks to impose its ways on the other. The relationship is symbolized in wampum belts by two purple rows with a white row between them.
form the Haudenosaunee women’s tradition contained in this story. It is through this story that we come to understand and explore these principles at a theoretical level. And when we look around us at our communities, we see them in practice. If one looks closely, one can see that they continue to provide for the governance of the Haudenosaunee under the direction of the Mothers. This is what I saw as I explored the lives of the nine women in my original study.

Sky Woman’s story also shows us what is at the root of what it means to be a good Haudenosaunee woman. In today’s world, being a good woman is passed down intergenerationally in different ways, including the telling of this version of the narrative. Her story reminds us of our connection to our ancient mother who governs over us. As Sky Woman watches out for the cycles of birth, life, death, and rebirth, she ensures that we remain true to our feminine essence and integrate distortion and corruption into growth and healing.

The Sky Woman narrative provides many good examples of the good life and how corruption and distortion can be healed. We saw corruption when Sky Woman left the Sky World and healing when she was rescued by the water birds. We saw corruption when Muskrat died trying to get mud from the bottom of the ocean and healing when Sky Woman performed the first dance on Turtle’s back. We saw corruption when Baby-Faced Lynx died in childbirth and healing when Sky Woman took over the raising of her grandsons. By these examples and many others we learn from Sky Woman how to look after the plants and animals, the children, and our future generations. From her story, we learn how to turn adversity into healing and opportunity, how to be decent to one another, and how to be rational and deliberative human beings.

It is apparent that many of our women no longer remember fully what it means to walk the good path of womanhood. There are many influences on how we perceive our identity as Indigenous women that affect our ability to be good mothers and ultimately decent human beings. Our identity as Kanien’kehá:ka women became clouded by theories of individuality that worked to distort our self-perception and corrupted us to the point that we lost our way. The path that Sky Woman maintains has been obscured. Understanding what lies behind these influences will help us strip away prescribed and projected colonial identities. Over time, people have omitted women from the historical record and said unkind things about us. Little of it has to
do with us, as women, yet their work has served to structure the lives of not only Haudenosaunee women but all Indigenous women in such a way as to continue the destruction of mother culture. Yet, if one talks to our women today, they tell a version of their lived stories that is similar to the one Sky Woman handed down to us long ago. This tells us that somewhere she is alive in each and every one of us. This is where Sky Woman comes from in the first place and as long as Indigenous women exist, she'll be here trying to assert her essence.