POWER IN MY BLOOD: A MOONTIME MANIFESTO

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Abstract

Blood. A paradoxical representation of life and death. This paper examines Indigenous epistomologies of menstruation as complex weavings of ceremony, maternal indicators, corporeal sovereignty, power, gender relations and reimaginings of "womanhood," femininity, and mothering. Through the analysis of the character Tarsa'DeShae in Daniel Heath Justice's (Cherokee) trilogy, *Kinship* and personal embodied experiences, this paper explores the historical and contemporary Indigenous understandings of moontime. Moontime teachings and ceremonies are critical elements continue the vital discourse on finding solution to address the oppression of, and end to the genocide against, Indigenous women, girls, and genderful[1] people.

Résumé

Le sang. Une représentation paradoxale de la vie et de la mort. Cet article examine les épistomologies autochtones de la menstruation en tant que tissage complexe de cérémonies, d'indicateurs maternels, de souveraineté corporelle, de pouvoir, de relations entre les sexes et de réimaginations de la « féminité », de la féminité et du maternage. À travers l'analyse du personnage de Tarsa'DeShae dans la trilogie de Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee), Kinship, et des expériences incarnées personnelles, cet article explore les compréhensions autochtones historiques et contemporaines du moontime. Les enseignements et les cérémonies du moontime sont des éléments essentiels qui poursuivent le discours vital sur la recherche de solutions pour lutter contre l'oppression des femmes, des filles et des personnes sexuées autochtones et mettre fin au génocide dont elles sont victimes.

> "[C]ulture is happy to speak about and objectify the parts of the body that can be sexually consumed by others, but the moment we talk about

[1] Genderful: A term used to indicate that gender is on a spectrum and not a restricted male female gender binary. Genderful is used to describe those who identify as transgender, gender nonconforming, gender neutral, bi-gender, intersex, and gender fluid. For the purposes of this paper, I use genderful most often when discussing missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. Our gender identities do not conform to Western binaries, and this results in increased violence. I recognize that there are missing and murdered Indigenous people who are neither male or female. Genderfuls is the pluralization of genderful.

> something that is not for the enjoyment of others, like a period, everyone becomes deeply uncomfortable." Kiran Gandhi[2] (12)

Blood. A paradoxical representation of life and death. For many Indigenous People, moontime is a complex weaving of ceremony, maternal indicators, corporeal sovereignty, power, gender relations and reimaginings of 'womanhood', femininity, and mothering. Moontime teachings and ceremonies are critical topics of discussion and an exploration of both transgression and transcendence meant to continue the vital discourse on finding solution to address the oppression of, and end to the genocide against, Indigenous women, girls, and genderful people. This paper explores the historical and contemporary Indigenous understandings of moontime; and through these biological processes demonstrates how our bodies are sites of potential and power, and a site to challenge oppressive gender practices. Could menstruation be a liberating process through which Indigenous women, girls, and genderful people can become powerful agents of their own bodies? What are the possibilities of realizing the power of moontime? Embracing this aspect of ourselves enables women, girls and genderfuls to bring together *all* facets of themselves – a union of mind, body, and spirit. The powerful cycle of moontime has the potential to be an energy grounding us in our bodies and centering ourselves within our cycles. This power that women have has been eroded and suppressed by Christian theological influences,[3] along with the perspective that menstrual cycles are ritually unclean and contaminating. The rejection of moontime is a direct rejection of our own autonomy and corporeal sovereignty as Indigenous Peoples.

The exclusionary tactics of denying, silencing, and denigrating my body – including my beautifully powerful internal rhythms – in ceremony and within cultural teachings are oppressive and unacceptable. This paper is an inquiry into often forgotten ways of thinking about, celebrating, and fearing moontime. Yes. Fear. These considerations may challenge the life-affirming, motherhood-indicating, and consequent nation-building standard of Western heterocolonial discourse. This research demonstrates that moontime is not only a sign of the capacity to give life, but also signifies the power to take life. The representation of Justice's character Tarsa in the first book of a trilogy called *Kynship* suggests what my body and mind had long suspected: that there is a profound power in moontime. As well, Indigenous peoples across Turtle Island held varying beliefs about moontime, they often honoured this important moment with coming-of-age or puberty ceremonies, like the strawberry or berry ceremony. The strawberry ceremony is also known as the Berry Fasting ceremony. In fact, according to Kim Anderson's (Cree/Métis) article on puberty ceremonies, the berry fasting ceremony has many elements, including the participants – prepubescent girls – abstaining from any berry products, even artificially flavoured ones, for an entire year (166). This fasting is symbolic; it is not just a representation of dedication. This ceremony is viewed as a critical teaching leading to the lifelong practices of "industry, self-reliance, self-restraint and connection to the spirit" (Anderson 87). These practices extend across

[2] Kiran Gandhi is a Harvard MBA, and marathon runner who made history by running the London Marathon in 2015 while 'free bleeding'. She ran without pads or tampons (aka sanitary napkins or feminine products) through the entire race making headlines across the globe.

[3] Christians are not the only ones who have deemed menstruation a negative. Other religions, such as Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, have all placed restrictions and prohibitions on menstruating women (Guterman et al. 2007).

the girls' entire lives. Renee Mzinegiizhigo-kwe Bedard (Anishnaabe) relates, "Women's[4] cycles or blood time, especially the first, are considered powerful medicines. It is during the moontime when women are the strongest and release that blood from their bodies that is most sacred" (2008). The puberty and coming-of-age ceremonies for young women are working to restore the knowledge and practice that speak to the relationships and responsibilities of women to the land and to future generations. For most Indigenous peoples in the past, and for many who are celebrating and practicing moontime ceremonies today, menstruation is not seen as shameful or dirty, nor is it a curse. Anderson shares:

Contact with Europeans was to change this thinking. Judeo-Christian culture saw menstruation not as a manifestation of female power, but as a manifestation of female sin, contamination, and inferiority. Missionaries did not understand menstruation as a sacred gift; rather, they taught women to see it from Western eyes, as a "curse." (75)

Kehteyak ('the old ones that know') have shared many moontime teachings and I am told that moontime is bound to power, that iskwewak[5] were honoured and respected for their ability to cleanse themselves and reconnect with the land every month. Iskwewak are given two gifts that men do not have; they can bring life into the world, and they bleed. When an iskwew[6] bleeds, she reconnects to the land, and she purifies herself with the cycles of the moon much like the tides purify the beaches. An iskwew's moon cycle a time of power; a river whose current changes direction every 28 days. She is open to spirit purification and deep healing in ways that men are not. If a woman honours this ceremony, she is restored, and may find new healing and medicine. An iskwew's time is during the darkness of night and the new moon is her time of deepest ceremony and healing. Moontime is a ceremony, and there are grandmothers across generations and across the globe who hold moon lodges that celebrate this ceremony.

The influence of patriarchal colonialism altered and corrupted Indigenous understandings of sexuality and gender which undermined the agency and responsibilities of Indigenous women, girls and genderfuls. Indigenous "traditions" that prohibit specific people from participating in ceremony derives from the invasion of the colonial narrative that demands the homogenization of a heterosexual patriarchal normative. Emma LaRocque warns us:

> As women we must be circumspect in our recall of tradition. We must ask ourselves whether and to what extent tradition is liberating to us as women … There are indications of male violence and sexism in some Aboriginal societies prior to European contact. … As Native women … we are challenged to change, create, and embrace "traditions" consistent with contemporary and international human rights standards. (14)

The only bodies relatively free from restrictions and subjugation are white heterosexual cis male[7] bodies. Any deviation or transgression from this heterosexual patriarchal normative seemingly waives any body's right to sovereignty. Dawn Martin Hill (Mohawk, Wolf Clan) shares, "In many Native communities these Christian gender roles have been

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[4] I understand and respect deeply that there are people (not seen or identify as 'women') who also menstruate. I am using the language of the teachings of Kehteyak. In my own words, I use the term 'genderful'.

[5] Cree word meaning 'women'.

[6] Cree word meaning 'woman'.

[7] Oskâpew says, "Cis-gender, or cis-male/cis-female are males and females whose self-identification conforms with their biological sex."

adopted and rebranded as 'traditional', excluding women from ceremonies and placing cultural restrictions on their behaviors" (107). We must critically examine, question, and investigate the use of tradition, or risk recreating the colonial mentalities of the restrictive heteropatriarchal paradigm ourselves; we must ask ourselves the question, are they liberating or oppressive? Craig Womack (Creek Cherokee) and his influential work *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism*, argues for the need to evaluate our claims of tradition to "legitimize present action" (385) and asks, "Let us say that a group of elders could assert confidently that traditionally Blackfoot men *did* used to hit women, would that mean that Blackfoot men should continue to hit women today?" (385). As well, Joanne Barker (Lenni-Lenape – Delaware Tribe of Indians) shares this powerful quote from Maliseet Elder Shirley Bear, who recalls the attitude of bands and the NIB (National Indian Brotherhood) as Indigenous women fought to secure gender equity: "They even stated…, 'It is our tradition and our culture if we want to discriminate against women'" (Barker 142).

Today, the vast majority of the population label menstruation as a curse, and/or a simple biological function indicating the ability to bear children. This section reveals the role of menstruation and blood, its cultural meanings, and societal indications, and how these aspects relate to power. The reimagining and revisiting of moontime traditions serve to reconnect us to each other through the power of ceremony and kinship and provides alternative perceptions and practices of gender and sexuality. That puberty ceremonies are experiencing a cultural renaissance and indicates that menstruating genderfuls of all ages, not just pubescent persons, wish to learn and celebrate the teachings of moontime. Indigenous genderfuls are seeking out old and new knowledges to recreate new ceremonial practices. The growth of these ceremonies signals the willingness to blend contemporary understandings and historical traditions to reimagine these ceremonies for our women, girls and genderfuls. Anderson explains, "Today certain rites of passage are now experiencing a rebirth in our communities, and they are being practiced in such a way that they support the needs of contemporary Aboriginal youth" (384).

Marla Powers indicates that the entire Oglala Sioux community was involved in the Buffalo ceremony of first blood (64). She explains, "Nowhere in the data is there any evidence that practices associated with menstruation are in any way considered a sign of defilement or degradation toward the menstruating female" (65). She reveals that menstruation was not considered polluting or unclean, and that rituals related to puberty ceremonies also taught tribal rules of sexual conduct. Passing on knowledge about taboos and sexual conduct played a large part in the puberty ceremonies of the Great Plains societies. Although many Great Plains cultures viewed menstruation as a time of power for women, cultural restrictions on contemporary women, girls, and genderfuls in their moontime restrict them from participating in ceremony. Kehteyak have told me that power is needed from our ancestors and the Creator to infuse our ceremonies with power and knowledge. I have often received conflicting messages with regard to this power. Other Kehteyak say that if a menstruating iskwew is even physically near ceremony or any sacred objects, they attract the power of the ceremony with their moontime power. Due moontime being unimaginably powerful, the Spirits are overwhelmed by this power and the ceremony is rendered impotent. Historian Theda Perdue's research on Cherokee women's power and menstruation argues that Cherokee people believed that all blood consisted of a spirit and had life. This meant that not only was ritual care taken during a person's moontime, but those who hunted or engaged in warfare (which usually included someone's blood) also had guidelines of seclusion, purification, and prayer (4).

The following compelling examples indicating that the vagina and moontime have become a source of danger for Indigenous men. The first story shares the experience of Shannon Thunderbird, a drum keeper, Anishnaabe Elder, and self-proclaimed "radical minority when it comes to Women and Ceremony" who has written on her website about problems with paternalism. She titles one such piece, "An amusing speech from Anishnaabe Elder Warren at the University of Waterloo Protest, on September 27th, 2014." She writes, "My story is in three parts – believe me, you have to find this funny....
He said, 'women are not to sit at the big drums … blah, blah too powerful, blah blah', the usual clap trap. However, he continued, 'If you are going to sit there, then you must sit sideways with knees pressed modestly together. If you sit directly facing the drum, then your power will destroy it.' I assume he is talking about the power of the Vagina! He actually couldn't really decide if we were to sit or not sit in his world, can't have it both ways, son" (Thunderbird).

The words from this Indigenous male Elder are particularly troubling in the way his speech – under the guise of cultural teachings – reverberates with colonial misogynistic expectations of women, girls and genderfuls's bodies. Within my own experiences, and stories like Shannon's, I feel the irrefragable presence of the oppressor within our cultural ceremonies and activities. Anderson believes that the reimagining of puberty ceremonies like berry fasting is a way to counter this oppression. She states, "For young women who are beginning to encounter their oppression as females, it gives them an alternative story. It is the difference between conceptualizing their bodies' cycles as *The Blood of the People,* as opposed to *The Curse*" (391). Anderson's "Blood of the People" refers to those kinship ties allowed to flourish within the embodied erotic spaces of ceremonies. With her permission, I want to tell you about my friend Erin Konsmo, who worked as the Media Arts Justice & Projects Coordinator at the Native Youth Sexual Health Network. Erin's artistic talents, energy, and creativity capture the interest and attention of Indigenous youth across the globe. Still a youth themself then, Erin had the aura of a well-loved auntie, and they generously shared the wisdom and knowledge they gathered from older aunties and Elders. The moontime teachings Erin shares with youth involve the making of a moontime bracelet. Youth are given coloured beads and a piece of leather or twine to string them together; each bead signifies a different phase in the menstrual cycle. As the group sits in a circle, and Erin talks about the connection between our bodies and the lunar cycle, the young people string together corresponding beads to form a bracelet. Erin's simple but potent embodied experience actively engages both body and mind and is a very real example of reimagining and remaking cultural traditions.

Indigenous women, girls and genderfuls experience gender oppression and violence at the hands of all ages, races of men, including Indigenous men. The following sections share further experiences of Shannon Thunderbird and the Thunderbird Women's Big Drum group. Listen to these women warrior voices that challenge and confront ongoing colonial, patriarchal practices. On September 27th, 2014, the University of Waterloo hosted its annual powwow. Weeks earlier, Shannon Thunderbird and the women's Big Drum Group of the drum "Moonstone" had been invited to come and play. But on August 26th a private meeting convened to discuss the invitation of the woman's drum called Moonstone and its place at the powwow. According to Shannon Thunderbird's website, the Waterloo Paper and the Daily Grrr! (Grand River Media Collective blog) several drum groups (all male) did not believe that women had the right to use the big drum. The women were threatened with violence. Thunderbird asserts that there were many threats of violence. 1) Thunderbird herself was threatened by a male drummer (whose drum group was also invited) with "forcible removal or worse" if she attended the powwow with Moonstone; 2) a graduate student of the University of Waterloo was told "she would not walk again if she attended";

3) in the meeting, when a woman defended the rights of the women's group to attend with Moonstone, Mark Lavallee, keeper of Chippewa Traveller's big drum said, "If a Cree man were sitting here, he would get up and punch you in the face." Eventually the University of Waterloo rescinded their offer to the women to attend the main event, offering instead a place to drum outside the main forum. How appropriate for a historically marginalized population to be on the margins once again. While the rescinded offer may seem just a small insult, these "small" gestures create a mindset condoning violence against Indigenous women (Thunderbird). One of the absolute requirements of decolonization includes the removal of distorted colonial values from Indigenous cultures and values. It is not enough for *only* Indigenous women, girls, and genderful folk to insist on the removal of patriarchal colonialism; we need Indigenous men to speak and to act.

Napewak[8] Kiskinowasihta[9]
You berate me, you try shame me.
You tell me to wear a skirt to cover myself, close my legs together chastely in ceremony. Should I close my eyes, too? Should I close my eyes tight, never witnessing the violence committed against my sisters? Should I close my mouth, too? Should I shut my hands and do nothing as 1,800 sisters go missing or murdered? Should I shut my mouth when I am left out of our pipe ceremonies – not because it is a man's pipe; I respect that, we have women's pipes too! – but because you say the circle is too big and we don't have enough time for everyone? Sorry. we. do. not. have. enough. time.
Don't you know that it is the circle that makes us strong?

*I know **who** I come from; ohci*

Remember who you come from – ohci!

Mothers, aunties, grandmothers, sisters!

We are your mothers

you are our sons.

***make** the time.*

I constantly assert that moontime is a powerful state for women, girls and genderfuls. However, I continue to witness Indigenous males (and sometimes others) distort this idea of power; they believe moontime has negative effects that do not support or add to the power of ceremony. Iskwewak are so powerful in their moontime, I have been told, that their power detracts from the ceremony. The spirits and ancestors that are called to a ceremony will not attend the pipe, sacred bundle, or sacred objects; they are attracted to the power of the blood from the menstruating people. Prayers cannot be answered, as the spirits are distracted by the overwhelming power of menstrual blood. Distorted moontime perspectives have varying restrictions and consequences. These range from the desecration of a sacred object by the mere viewing of said object by a menstruating person, to the prohibition on female presenting people from entering a building where a ceremony is being held.

> *During a meeting with provincial government officials, university staff (including me), and community members from several First Nations*

[8] Cree for 'men'
[9] Cree for, 'Listen carefully, so that you'll know and remember after.'

> *communities in Treaty Six Territory, I was ordered by an Elder to leave a four-storey office building. A pipe ceremony was about to begin. While it was difficult to imagine that I was the sole menstruating person in the busy office building, I acquiesced to the demand[10]. As I sat in my car, Emma LaRocque's critique of tradition came to mind, and I ask myself, "To what extent is tradition liberating to us as women, girls and genderfuls? Wherein lie our sources of empowerment?" (14). Nowhere in this scenario was I respected or honoured. Often, just the threat of moontime is enough to restrict women, girls and genderfuls from participating in and/or celebrating ceremonies. The removal of a person during their moontime from a four-storey building due to the possibility of the desecration of a ceremony is deeply disturbing; and I argue that the insidious nature of colonialism alters and denigrates the ceremonies of our bodies.*

The current heteropatriarchal racist system reproduces narrow colonial images of Indigenous Peoples, and these images continue to perpetuate sexual violence against vulnerable Indigenous populations including women, children, genderfuls. The following is one of many examples of how Indigenous people internalize Euro-Christian attitudes of shame and self-loathing of our bodies and natural biological rhythms and weaken our balance with cultural traditions. We now speak the colonizer's language fluently and we are skilled at turning it against ourselves. For example, the RCMP have a website in outlining a "Native Spirituality Guidebook" that contains troubling ideas surrounding the moontime of women.

This guidebook was created for the RCMP by a group of Elders to help police officers understand Native ceremonies and belief systems. The guide states that if a (sacred object) bundle must be searched, a male officer should conduct the search, just in case a female officer is menstruating. The guide states, "This is due to the belief that women, during their 'moon time', are spiritually far more powerful than men **and the simple act of viewing the items will cause them to be desecrated**" (11). Think about the English term *desecrate* for a brief moment. A powerful word. The definition of desecrate is "to damage (a holy place or object)" or "to treat (a holy place or object) with disrespect" (Merriam-Webster). As these enforcements of cultural "traditions" prove, Indigenous peoples have **not been vigilant in our recall of tradition.**

Tarsa'Deshae

Before we meet Tarsa, let me tell you a little about Daniel Heath Justice. Having spent time with Justice on different occasions, including conducting an interview with him, I wish to introduce you to him. In his article *Fear of a Changeling Moon,* Justice discusses his childhood and his overwhelming need to delve into the fantasy worlds of Oz, Krynn, and Middle-earth. These were places in which he could understand and accept himself, he says:

> The realm of the fantastic was a safe place for the weird kids like me. A fluid understanding of gender and identity, together with a love of the myths, fairy talks and legends of faraway

[10] You might wonder how the Elder knew about my moontime? I was standing in the hallway outside the room that the ceremony would take place. When asked to come in and join the ceremony, I said I could not at this time. In my experience, this subtle wording is enough for the ceremonialists to realize that a woman has her moontime. Nothing more is usually said. But, the Elder continued and asked if I had my moontime, once I said yes and I was promptly banished from the entire building.

> places and people combined to create imaginative possibilities far beyond the realities of the fading little mining town I called home. (92)

Through the genre of fantasy, Justice introduces readers to emergent characters, characters who transcend current feminine or masculine tropes and offer up new worlds of alternative understandings of gender and sexuality. Further, the genre of fantasy also became a safe access point for me as a Nehiyaw'iskwew to a Cherokee-centred worldview. While the Cherokee and Nehiyawak may have many similarities (spiritual worldviews, peoplehood, egalitarian societies, war/peace chiefs, warrior women, and comparable experiences of dispossession and displacement of land through colonization), we are diverse nations. By using Justice's fantasy world of Everland, I hope to circumvent the dangers of forcing my Nehiyaw'iskwew perspective upon Creek worldviews. In this way I try avoiding misrepresenting or essentializing the complex richness of the Cherokee/Creek existence as some pan-Indian experience.

I share Justice's *Kynship* as this text offers alternative frames of moontime, sexuality, and gender and manages to demonstrate alternative ways of envisioning the past, present, and future. My interpretations are explored in two parts: 1) we delve into the power of moontime, a time Justice describes as a "burning with life's fire" (15) and look into the representation of symbols of power and strength; 2) we explore Tarsa's experiences with genderfuls and are introduced to new, gender-ambiguous characters called zhe-Kyn (a different category than the binaries of she-Kyn and he-Kyn).

Studying moontime and reflecting on the character of Tarsa'Deshae, I hope to avoid a monolithic analytic lens, but rather expand the ways in which we think about moontime, gender and sexuality by examining emerging expressions of Indigenous writers. In this first book of the series *Kynship,*[11] called *The Way of Thorn and Thunder*, Justice delivers a powerful reimagining of moontime through the adventures of the Redthorn warrior Tarsa'Deshae. The following passages from *Kynship,* along with Justice's own words from an interview, storytelling, and embodied experiences provide important platforms for 1) further acknowledging moontime as powerful and healing, a cycle that benefits all Indigenous nations; and 2) unsettling settler-inspired logics that have inculcated dangerous aberrations in "traditional" understandings of moontime, and being critical about essentialist claims that menstrual blood signals the ability to create life and therefore fulfills the primary element of womanhood.

Readers, for those of you unused to the genre of fantasy, remember Justice's words: "imaginative possibilities far beyond the realities of …" (92). For Justice, *Kynship* offers a fantasy-world version of the historical and contemporary colonization of Indigenous societies of North America. *Kynship* presents the opportunity for us to leave the "realities of [a] fading little mining town" (92) – or whatever our realities may be – and enter a realm of "imaginative possibilities" (92). This fantastical world begins with a battle scene, and here Justice introduces us to the story's main protagonist, the she-Kyn Tarsa. She is a member of the Redthorn warriors, who are in the midst of a battle with a creature of death called Wears-Stones-For-Skin (also known as the Feaster). As the name implies, Wears-Stones-For-Skin is deadly and has skin so strong it is almost indestructible, with very few vulnerable areas. Wears-Stones-For-Skin is an ancient warrior who always leaves a trail of destruction and devastation in his wake. His lengthy experience has taught him to consider the Kyn villagers as easy prey, and Wears-Stones-For-Skin is looking forward to feasting on the folk of Everland on the day we meet him (13–14). He smells the fear of the he-Kyn at the upper rim of the narrow gorge, but as he turns the corner, he is confronted by a lone she-

[11] This trilogy has since been published as an omnibus.

Kyn standing in the middle of the path. Recognizing her as a Redthorn warrior, Wears-Stones-For-Skin is not worried, because to him, she is small and inconsequential. But suddenly there is a change in the air, and his stampede towards her slides to a stop:

> *Something was wrong. It wasn't the Redthorn's determined stance that unnerved him. It was something else that fluttered moth-like around his thoughts, elusive but vital. Then he knew, and his blood became ice: he'd never smelled her.* (14)

Wears-Stones-For-Skin doesn't smell the Redthorn warriors because he doesn't recognize their smell. The scent of moontime and power is not part of his memories. This ancient creature has never battled warriors like this before; their power, like the lack of scent, is alien to him. He feels a terror creeping upon him as six other she-Kyn step onto the path behind him:

> All were in their moon-time, like the solitary figure who now stood at his back. Unlike the four town matrons who also walked toward the cringing Feaster, the Redthorn warriors were fully trained in blood and battle. But this cyclical power made all the she-Kyn doubly powerful. (15)

In this passage, Justice uses powerful imagery of Indigenous warriors at the height of their strength and power – during their menstrual cycles. He writes, "He was death's shadow – they burned with life's fire" (15). The "life's fire" of these Redthorn warriors may be imagined as a signal of their ability to bring forth life. However, this "life's fire" does not refer to pregnancy or childbirth, and is not the case with the Redthorn Warriors. Their "life's fire" refers to the *taking* of life. Redthorn warriors face a formidable beast of old; for these warriors, menstrual blood foreshadows death. Wears- Stones-For-Skin is described as "a Feaster, one of the Eaters of old, and his thick gray skin was dense with thousands of jagged stones that protected him from most wounds" and with "his massive bulk – twenty feet high, and at least half that wide … [he] walk[ed] with the ease of a two-legged panther" (12–13).

The terror that Feaster feels at the sight of the warrior weakens him: "His ancient might, the bindings that kept his spirit whole, were scattered on the wind by [the Redthorns'] strength" (15). The creature is irreversibly weakened by his fear of the she-Kyn warriors: "the she-Kyn were stronger still. Their blood-time was power beyond bearing for a creature of death, and he was more terrified now than he'd ever been" (15); the he-Kyn warriors are thus able to help dispatch the beast. Without the power of female blood, Wears-Stones-For-Skin would have destroyed the village and all its inhabitants. The Redthorns' moontime is a power beyond childbearing and fertility, and signals menstrual blood as a bearer of both life and of death. The Redthorn warriors bring destruction and death upon creatures from ancient stories, and in doing so they ensure the continuity of life. Prior to the battle, the Feaster refers to any of the Kyn as "[t]hose wisdom keepers who had once challenged him [Wears-Stones-For-Skin] and his kind"; he notes that "they were rare these days, driven from these lowlands by their own people, and their teachings lay hidden in the dark, secret places, leaving his ravenous path clear" (12).

The "wisdom keepers" are the followers of the old ways of the Deep Green and would represent those Indigenous people who hold and follow very old teachings and traditions. In this loose allegory, Justice uses the term "Celestials" (who are the "Civilized Ones") to refer to the colonizers. The Feaster refers to them as "others – bright-eyed, hairy creatures with sharp iron and a hunger almost as greedy as his own" (12). As the Kyn population had begun to move farther

from the Deep Green[12] and was increasingly influenced by the Celestial Path,[13] all Greenwalkers, kith and kin alike, were banished from their towns and families.

Both Justice connects the power of moontime with a crucial event immersed in death and destruction. The she-Kyn warriors are not celebrated as life-givers; their menstrual blood does not represent the ability to create life. Their blood-time is a symbol of power that has the capacity to bring death. For a moment, let us return to the story that Shannon Thunderbird shared about the male Elder and the drum. In that telling, the male Elder was terribly concerned about the destructive power of moontime (and vaginas) and their threat to the drum. How does the killing scene Stoneskin (as Wears-Stones-For-Skin is called) differ? I suggest that the difference between the two scenarios of moontime is agency. The Redthorn warriors are aware of the power they hold and use this power to benefit their people. The male Elder in Thunderbird's story saw only a threat of female power, a power that would not strengthen the people, but weaken the men. Justice has presented readers with female characters whose menstrual cycles do not celebrate the ability to give birth or represent a "readiness" for marriage and motherhood. With proficiency and awareness, the she-Kyn warriors strategically plan their blood cycles to coincide *with* the battle with Wears-Stones-For-Skin.

The synchronization of the she-Kyn warriors' blood time not only reveals their premeditated strategy for battle and agency but is also a direct consequence of their kinship ties. The harmonization of their moontime cycle is a strong yet subtle reminder to us of the importance of kinship. For Indigenous Peoples the concept of kinship is complex; there is an integral connection between this synchronization of she-Kyn menstrual cycles and relationships that is worth mentioning here. The Redthorn warriors are bound by blood and battle, but they have strong relationships that tie them together as they train for battle, eat, sleep, and socialize. Most menstruating females (and anyone else who lives with them) understand that close proximity to each other (either living in the same household or spending significant amounts of time together) leads to the synchronization of menstrual cycles. The connection between the she-Kyn Redthorn warriors links them together in ways of sisterhood that their he-Kyn counterparts will never experience.

The veneration of Indigenous motherhood as the *sole* source of power negates and silences other domains of power that women, girls and genderfuls have. Motherhood is not a box to be checked off to become a fulfilled person. As the murdered and missing statistics on Indigenous women can attest, motherhood does not guarantee or even necessarily garner any respect for women's bodies, much less guaranteeing corporeal sovereignty. Tarsa and the Redthorn warriors step firmly outside the boundaries of many Indigenous traditional paradigms that limit the potential of women, girls and genderfuls by focusing solely on their capacity to create life. In Kim Anderson's book *Until Our Hearts Are on the Ground: Aboriginal Mothering, Oppression, Resistance and Rebirth*, and particularly the chapter "New Life Stirring," there are examples and

[12] The Deep Green is 'the ancient ceremonial and kinship traditions of the Eld Green; maintained by the Wielders. Also known as the Old Ways' (Justice 245). The Eld Green is "[t]he lush, ancient world of the Folk before the arrival of Men' (Justice 245). It is a loose representation of Indigenous spirituality – that may or may not include concepts like 'all my relations.

[13] Justice explains that '[t]he Celestial Path are the philosophical principles of Luran-Worship, descended from Dreyd teachings brought by the Proselytors who accompanied the first Human traders into the Everland. The Path is characterized by a denial of the flesh and an emphasis on the power of the purified mind, a commitment to hierarchy and obedience, a rejection of the *wyr* and the relational values of the Way of Deep Green, and an embrace of the individualistic and commercial values of Humanity" (244).

personal stories of celebrating Aboriginal women for their fertility, motherhood, and life-giving abilities.[14] I believe that these stories remain important to celebrate and share, but there is a danger in these idealized generalizations of Indigenous people. I suggest we respect, acknowledge, and celebrate moontime as a powerful aspect of being. It represents the fact that an Indigenous body is their own; their power is their own. As characters like Tarsa and the zhe/kyn demonstrate, motherhood is only one role of many that a person can choose to assume in order to fulfill themselves. Situated within a Cherokee paradigm, Daniel Heath Justice celebrates his heritage and the stories of his relations with complex characters that extend beyond idealized or simplified versions of our cultures.

Back to Justice's story. After the battle, the he-Kyn stand away from the women's power: "The he-Kyn stood apart from the moon-time females and praised their bravery from a safe distance" (18). Until this point in the story, you may understand moontime to be a powerful event; a natural occurrence that is integral to defeating bloodthirsty killers like Feasters. So why do the he-Kyn stand at "a safe distance"? You may wonder whether they are compelled by the same fear felt by the Stoneskin – the same fear felt by the male Elder in Thunderbird's story.

I want to take a moment from the battle to share some of my cultural teachings on emotion and explain how differences (like the ones between the he-Kyn and Feaster) function. Kehteyak have told me countless times that there are really only two pure emotions, fear, and love. Every other emotion stem from these two feelings; fear precipitates hate, greed, jealousy, and anger – as much as love embodies trust, respect, courage, and joy. Among the oldest and strongest kinds of fear is fear of the unknown. While the Stoneskin's fear of the she-Kyn's moontime stems from the unknown, the he-Kyn's distancing does not – for they embody the erotic and share a deep respect that stems from the kinship they share *in their community* and as warriors. The he-Kyn's actions demonstrate their respect for the power of the she-Kyn warriors; they do not fear for their lives, as the Stoneskin does. I think right now is a good time to pull into our conversation a couple of teachings that Oglala Lakota teacher Russell Means received from his Elder, Chief Luther Standing Bear. Means shares these thoughts on the topic of patriarchy, fear, and women, "We teach men how to nurture and if you don't know how to nurture then you are going to be afraid." Russell quotes his ancestor, Chief Luther Standing Bear, "If you don't know the forest, you will come to fear the forest, and what you fear, you will want to destroy." Russell goes on to say, "That's patriarchy. Cause you're out of balance. The first living thing that they fear, are their women. Cause they have no understanding of women." (Means)

Stoneskin is a representation of the influence of patriarchy. The maintenance of the patriarchal structure feeds on fear, just like Stoneskin does. Consider these words from Chickasaw artist and curator John G. Hampton:

> One of these support-structures [for patriarchy] was the male-dominated hierarchy required to maintain the patrilineal inheritance model that is so crucial to retaining ownership over conquered lands. In order for Native communities to accept colonial domination, colonists needed to impose upon them an acceptance of patriarchal social structures, replete with normalized gender-binary structures and hierarchy. (3)

[14] As well, Kim Anderson's article 'Honouring the Blood of Our People: Berry Fasting in the Twenty-first Century,' discusses the 'old days' and how the coming-of-age ceremonies or puberty ceremonies once indicated a readiness for marriage and childbearing (*Expressions in Native Studies,* 387)."

The he-Kyn and Stoneskin remind us of two paths. The Stoneskin revels in a place of greed and hate, until the fear becomes his own, while the he-Kyn reveal how kinship leads to a place of respect and understanding, "The he-Kyn stood apart from the moon-time females and praised their bravery from a safe distance" (18). As Indigenous people, we need to reject colonial domination embedded in fear. Means explains how Oglala men are encouraged to understand Oglala Lakota women:

> And so, our ceremonies here on this earth are to celebrate womanhood, to learn minutely. So, we go to the *enipy*, the purification lodge, and the sauna so we can feel and have some little notion of what it is like to be purified. And we go through the Sundance and tear our flesh and create the blood because we want to have a minimal understanding at least of what childbirth is all about when she tears her flesh and gives her blood to create life. (Means)

Oglala men are required to understand a woman's bloodtime, and without this knowledge, the unknown can easily lead to fear, and fear leads to hate and destruction. Thus the "standing apart" of he-Kyn demonstrates an understanding for – and therefore a respect (as with Oglala men) for – the power of menstrual blood. Through their own ceremonies and teachings, they are taught to embrace, understand, and achieve balance with all genders within their tribe.

> After the battle, Tarsa revels with her sisters in the slaying of the beast, but her happiness does not last. The story of Tarsa takes an abrupt turn, as Justice injects a familiar storyline, we all recognize. Tarsa is torn between the call of the Deep Green (representing Indigenous spirituality) and the Celestial Path of the Greenwalkers[15] (representing the foreign religious organizations of the church). We meet Tarsa again when the *z*he-Kyn Fa'alik sings a healing song, and through this ceremony and the preceding battle, something is awakened within Tarsa: "It was the voice of the Stoneskin.… It was an ancient song that twisted into her blood, driving deep, calling down to sing into being the secrets that pulsed there" (19). In this passage, Tarsa has been chosen to become part of a society of women called the Greenwalkers. It is through her blood that she is called to become something more than a Redthorn warrior; a higher power calls her to be a Wielder (29). Tarsa is set apart from others. Her menstrual blood symbolizes power, but also reveals her unique ability to become a Wielder, and part of the Deep Green. Triggered by her central role in Wears-Stones-For-Skin's death, Tarsa feels the pull of power: Yet, amazingly, something new now tugged at the burning tide in her body, and Tarsa responded instantly … she didn't recognize the sensation, but it had a hint of familiarity, like a lingering taste on the tongue of something she'd once known and treasured. (31)

Her aunt, Unahi, an experienced Wielder but an outcast,[16] is summoned to help Tarsa survive the bloodsong coursing through her veins and guide her into the Deep Green (45). But Tarsa's Celestial education has set her mind against the Deep Green. Influenced by her conservative (or anti-erotic) upbringing, Tarsa rejects the call embodied in the Greenwalker term "bloodsong call":

> Unahi smiled. "You've been given a powerful gift, niece."
> Tarsa flushed. "It's not a gift to me," she corrected. "It's a curse. I don't want it." *(*41)

[15] Greenwalkers are 'adherents of the Way of Deep Green' (Justice 247).
[16] Unahi had been exiled twenty-six years earlier from her place of birth, Red Cedar Town.

We will explore this short sentence a little more. First, notice how Tarsa uses the word "curse" to describe her "gift"; second, observe Tarsa's refusal of the "bloodsong call[17]." "The curse" is one of the many negative terms commonly used to describe moontime. Puritanical ideologies and Christian values surrounding the "curse" of menstruation have many women regarding moontime as shameful. The curse is seen as pollution or contamination, and a function of a woman's body that must be contained, controlled, and hidden. Tarsa's rejection can be seen as a negation of the corpus of values integrated with the spiritual and ceremonial life of Indigenous peoples (sweat lodge, Sun Dance, potlatch), many of which were prohibited in Canada for many years through the Indian Act. Tarsa's refusal to accept her gift represents how the spiritual practices of Indigenous peoples have been assaulted and destabilized by colonial tactics. As Indigenous people, we internalize the shame and hatred perpetuated by the colonizer and use practices of "tradition" born of self-loathing to justify sexual and gendered violence.

Tarsa's struggle with the bloodsong and Unahi's dispossession of place are so significant! Let us slow down and reflect more on moontime. We will return to Tarsa and her current situation after I share some compelling stories with you. I want to continue by sharing these powerful words from Maria Campbell: "Near the end, the non-Native system that fucked me up fucked our men even worse. The missionaries had impressed upon us the feeling that women were a source of evil" (96). The missionaries' conclusion that Indigenous women were "a source of evil" *allowed* the colonial state to enact genocidal policies on Indigenous women's bodies. But *our internalization* of this so-called evil keeps us locked in fear. We learn (as do our Indigenous communities learn) to fear our bodies, ourselves. Our acceptance of this label disempowers us; Lorde argues, "The fear that we cannot grow beyond whatever distortions we may find within ourselves keeps us docile and loyal and obedient, externally defined, and leads us to accept many facets of our oppression as women" (Lorde). Through the upcoming trials and tribulations of Tarsa, I hope you will reflect on Campbell's words on how missionaries (and the Canadian state) believed Indigenous women were a "source of evil" (96). Tarsa's experiences outline for us a symbolic connection between Indigenous women's bodies and land and the colonial strategies to displace, dispossess, and eliminate the threat of Indigenous women's bodies for the purposes of colonizing the land.

Justice Speaks

These passages set the tone for Daniel Heath Justice's entire trilogy, in which I see parallels drawn between the Celestials colonizing the Indigenous population of Everland and the ongoing colonizing process in North America. The following story is the result of an interview with Daniel Heath Justice:

> I had the pleasure of spending half the afternoon on a cold January day in the presence of Cherokee author Daniel Heath Justice. After a carnivorous lunch at Pampa and full of enough meat to choke a wolf,[18] I was able to sit with him and talk about the Kynship trilogy and the relationship between these books and its characters and his Cherokee background.

[17] The Bloodsong is the connection felt within the body with the Deep Green (aka Mother Nature)."

[18] In case you were wondering, an average grey wolf can eat up to 10 kgs of meat in one sitting (International Wolf Center). We did not eat that much, but it was close.

> My question concerned the use of menstruating warrior women, and I wondered whether this was a part of his Cherokee traditions. He said absolutely that he did draw upon some of the Cherokee and Southeastern Mississippi tradition. Daniel related the Cherokee story of Stonejacket as the muse for his character, Wears-Stones-For-Skin.
>
> Daniel relates, "The story is, so we have a few ogre-like cannibal creatures and one of them is a hideous witch woman called Spearfinger and another one is her relative called Stonejacket. And they are cannibal monsters, predators, and can take the form of banal people and then they reveal themselves as hideous monsters. Stonejacket is an ogre with stones embedded in his skin; the stone is so hard that weapons can't pierce it. And a medicine man figures out how to defeat him. Stonejacket is on his way to a village to raid it and the medicine man puts seven menstruating women on the path in Stonejacket's way, and every time he passes one of these women, he makes some comment about how sick the woman is or how ill she is due to her smell. But he gets progressively weaker and then, when he reaches the last woman, he collapses and the male warriors from the community pin him down with sourwood stakes and kill him. And then his body is burned, and as he burns, he sings the medicine songs we continue to use to this day. So that would be the story of Stonejacket roughly." (Justice 2012)

I asked Justice how he felt about delving using the world of Cherokee women and whether he felt any trepidation as a male storyteller utilizing female sexuality in his story. He says:

> I was nervous! And I didn't want to necessarily write about something that might not be appropriate, and I was nervous about that. I showed it to a number of women in my family and none of them had a problem with that. So, I said okay, and even some of them said, "Hey, that's kinda cool," so I said yeah, good. Let's include it in the story. (Justice 2012)

The nervousness that Justice feels can be understood through his relationships and obligations to his family and to the Cherokee nation. Justice is accountable to his community, and he bears the responsibility to be a good member of it. As he invokes his Cherokee ways of being in the world, his role as a tribal member extends into his professional domain as well. He practices relational accountability and thereby demonstrates a deep respect for the oral narratives of Cherokee women.The concept that once stories are told, they can't be taken back reveals why Indigenous people often express cautiousness regarding how stories are told, when they are told, and by whom. For example, many Nehiyawak refrain from telling stories about Wisakejack[19] when the snow has left the ground. It is only in winter, when the spirits are resting, that these stories are told. To a non-Indigenous writer, the genre of fantasy/sci-fi literature is a zone in which there are fewer rules and restrictions regarding historical accuracy. While *Kynship* is fantasy/sci-fi literature, Justice's tribal connection binds him to another level of attention and consideration. His accountability as a Cherokee storyteller motivates Justice to get the approval of female family members before he shares his version of the story of Stonejacket. In my writing of *Power in My Blood*, I, too, remain accountable and "careful with the stories I tell" (10) as a sister of WWOS.

In comparison to Justice's recounted interview version of Stonejacket, I notice slight differences about the women and the character Wears-Stones-For-Skin in *Kynship*. I consider that

[19] Wisahkecahk, also known sometimes as Older Brother, is a Nehiyawe trickster. Crossing boundaries and breaking societal rules, the trickster is responsible for the way the world has come to be. The trickster creates and destroys, and is at the centre of many sacred stories.

perhaps Justice's version of the Stonejacket story in our interview was somewhat shortened. But I can't help but wonder if Justice purposefully reimagined the paradigm of moontime. The leader of the attack on Stonejacket is a medicine man who employs menstruating women, seen as ill or sick, to weaken Stonejacket. Male warriors are then sent in to kill the diminished creature. This version has the women as minor characters whose menstrual cycle is so contaminating and their smell so repulsive that it sickens the great beast to the point of death.

In the *Kynship* version, the warriors are women, belonging to the Redthorn warrior society. Their moontime is their power; it has no scent, and Wears-Stones-For-Skin smells nothing. He is able to smell the fear of the he-Kyn, but smells nothing on the menstruating women. The he-Kyn are afraid of Wears-Stones-For-Skin, and they hang back; they stay on the cliff above, hurling rocks and boulders onto the creature. The Redthorn warriors, synchronized by the moon, are on the front line. The only ones who can ultimately defeat the monster are the female warriors. The he-Kyn are the minor characters. *Kynship* reveals women and their moontime as a positive strength and power. Why does Justice make changes to the Stonejacket story? To understand this remaking of story, I turn to Paula Gunn Allen, who suggests that "[a]ll storytellers shape these traditional and historical facts within the aesthetic matrices to form significances that carry us beyond (while including) the political, the historical, the sociological, or the psychological" (9).

Justice retains the main outcome of the story of Stonejacket, but he changes one critical element. He establishes moontime as a symbol of positive woman power. He is representing a "reimagined" time, prior to contact, when menstrual blood was not seen as a pollutant or a sickness. Allen claims that storytelling shapes and moulds our histories and traditions to embody, inform and work with our current circumstances. Seemingly a small detail, this change is significant. Justice maintains that moontime is indeed powerful, but in *Kynship* he disrupts colonial settler discourse about menstruation and compels readers to view women's moontime in a different light.

Indigenous authors adding to the corpus of non-fiction are integrating teachings and stories from their own unique cultural traditions. Paula Gunn Allen asserts that "Native writers write out of tribal traditions, and into them" (5). Indigenous writings and art about moontime are a positive manifestation of the power and strength of women, girls and genderfuls but are rarities rather than the rule. I hope *Power in My Blood* will add to this small corpus and hope to see more work done that celebrates our moontime and the power we hold within. Our current circumstances as Indigenous women, girls, genderfuls and Indigenous nations demand it, and our future generations depend on it.

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