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Hadigeodönyöh (They Tell Stories)

Uniting the Hodínöhšö:ni:h Community by Performing and Reimagining the Creation Story

BY MELISSA BORGIA-ASKEY

Although the cosmology of the Creation Story, as it has been shared in various Hodínöhšö:ni:h [Haudenosaunee] communities, is arguably very old, it still deserves our attention. The Creation Story retains value and relevance, because as scholar John C. Mohawk claimed, the versions transmit “elaborate lessons unknown” outside of their contexts and communities and are “sources of universal human enlightenment” that existed long ago (Mohawk 2005, iii, v). The Creation Story is the story of the “forces of the universe,” according to Mohawk, told differently by different tellers at different times across Hodínöhšö:ni:h communities (vi). According to Mohawk, “each makes valuable contributions to our understanding” of the lifeways of Hodínöhšö:ni:h communities, as new facets of the story “continue to surface” (iv). Mohawk noted a connection between the Creation Story and ceremonies, and of thanksgiving for all the gifts bestowed by the Creator. This practice of giving thanks which stemmed from the Creation Story is an invocation known as the Ganönyök, or the Thanksgiving Address, recited by individuals and at public gatherings.

Storytellers and practitioners share Mohawk’s view. Throughout Hodínöhšö:ni:h communities, this story—and storytelling, in general—is enjoying a revival, according to Bill Crouse, director of the Allegany River

Indian Dancers and the Skywoman Iroquois Dance Theater. He noted that the Creation Story and countless other stories serve a key role in reviving the languages, songs, and dances of Hodínöhšö:ni:h culture and continue to keep children active participants in their communities (Crouse 2019).

Crouse, like Mohawk, said that the Creation Story stands out even among a multitude of old and cherished stories because of its link to ceremonies. He said that it explains, through ceremony, the things people are supposed to do: “Even the Gáíwi:yo:h contains elements of the Creation Story” (Crouse 2019). The Gáíwi:yo:h is the Good Message, or Code of Handsome Lake, the teachings of Seneca leader Ganyodaiyo’, recited and followed by Longhouse practitioners.

The Creation Story, which encodes details of the Gáíwi:yo:h, is the message of the “cosmic family” to the Hodínöhšö:ni:h of the past as well as the present (Mohawk 2005, vii). Although an individual life may not be permanent, the story just might be.

Oral Narratives in Print

For a long view of the study of the Creation Story, archaeologist and historian Anthony Wonderley offered a contextual analysis in a collection featuring Oneida and bilingual translations. He traced the story’s

origins and cited Abler’s dating at 350 years old, recounted in 40 versions. The number of versions is debated by scholars, but there is no argument that there is a multitude. Wonderley characterized this story as one of the most documented, tracing accounts as early as the 1620s–1630s of Hurons, as documented by French missionaries; Dutch–Mohawk accounts around the mid-1640s; James Dean’s pre-1815 account, arguably drawn from a 1770s-era recollection from living among the Oneida; an 1816 diary by John Norton (Joseph Brant’s adopted son); and Tuscarora David Cusick’s in 1825, the first one “written by a [N]ative person” (Wonderley 2000, 9).

Wonderley categorized three basic sections of the story: the initial Skyworld, the world on turtle’s back, and the world of the “good” twin and people. In its most basic form, it is a story of a Skyworld populated by original beings and a sacred tree. When the tree is uprooted, Skywoman falls through the hole it creates into a watery world below, is rescued by animals and placed on a great turtle’s back. She gives birth to a woman who subsequently dies in childbirth. Her twin sons, forever at odds with each other, grow to create all the elements of the world, including human beings. Wonderley traced a plot shift in the early 1800s, with the earlier tales featuring a kindly brother and evil



Kari Kennedy. Photo courtesy of Kari Kennedy.

grandmother, and later iterations featuring good and bad twins (Wonderley 2000).

Scholars have long debated whether there is a more “authentic” version of the story. Kevin J. White, Mohawk professor of Native American and American studies, promotes the collection of cosmologies documented by Tuscarora ethnologist and linguist J. N. B. Hewitt (1903, 1928), over the more accepted views by Arthur C. Parker (1923 [1989]) and William Fenton (1962), who endorsed using a single authoritative version. Hewitt’s collection, gathered from Onondaga, Mohawk, and Seneca speakers, was printed in two parts, in 1903 and 1928, by the Bureau of

American Ethnology. Hewitt’s work featured diversity and a detailed complexity of metaphors.

White critiqued Fenton for oversimplifying the story to “nine plot points” (White 2013, 87) from a single narrative from Arthur C. Parker and Frederick Waugh. He further claimed that this narration is analyzed through a Western lens, much like the earlier Jesuits’ investigations. He noted that narrators told versions to academics, by using metaphors that they could understand: “Each narrator told each audience what they, as a group, needed to hear, in keeping with cultural thinking that the narrator ‘holds

the story’ for the people” (White 2013, 91). White claimed that his research was intended to “decolonize” Hewitt’s works. He also argued that accepted versions elevate the past over the present in their quest to claim versions that are “more authentic” (White 2013, 92).

Turning from authenticity toward diversity, White pointed to the ways that viewing more detailed versions across eras, speakers, and Nations shows how the culture deals with change. He stressed the importance of viewing various stories and their nuances between each Nation, era, clan, community, and narrator, and toward the specific audience, medium, and event. He valued these stories as more than mere “folklore, myth, or ritualized ceremonial,” showing “the unique philosophical worldview” of the *Hodínöhšö:ni:h* (White 2013, 89).

All of these trends and contexts that White noted in Hewitt’s work can be seen in communities today, as they continue the practice of telling and performing the Creation Story. The interpretations of the Creation Story follow the same general progression, but each has its own worth. Mohawk explained why the abundance of renditions makes sense, and why no one version is thought to be the most authentic. The “search for a single authoritarian version is not only futile because such a version does not exist and, in the context of dozens or even hundreds of indigenous communities such as existed at the time of contact certainly never existed” (Mohawk 2005, iv). White also called for a “return to the communities for further discussion” (White 2013, 89).

Below are just a few of the versions that are circulated in today’s communities, with emphasis on the new media of performance and its value to revitalizing *Hodínöhšö:ni:h* culture, language, and community unity.

John C. Mohawk’s *The Myth of the Earth Grasper*

Mohawk reinterpreted a rendition of the story, transcribed by Hewitt from his recordings of Onondaga Chief John Arthur Gibson’s telling at Grand River in the 1890s. Mohawk explained that Gibson was one of



Bill Crouse. Photo courtesy of Bill Crouse

the last remaining storytellers trained to tell it at that time. Hewitt did not publish the work until 1928, although it has been reprinted several times since. Mohawk reinterpreted it to remove some of the archaic language and structures and elements, “which were clearly added following contact with Europeans,” and yet, he still wanted to preserve Gibson’s telling of it because of who Chief Gibson was (Mohawk 2005, ii).

In this rendition, an older man lives with his sister, Elder Woman, and her two children, a boy and a girl. He keeps them in seclusion to increase their power and goodness. He tells them to place his body at the top of the tree in a bark coffin after he dies. At this point, Hoda”he, the Guardian of the Standing Tree, sends someone to tell the Elder Woman to attend a feast at a place where the Sun, Moon, Stars, Waters, Three Sisters

(corn, beans, and squash), Tobacco, and other beings have visited. Later, Elder Woman’s daughter, Mature Blossom, sees her uncle who tells her to attend the feast and bring a chestnut mush. She was told that while cooking hot mush, it would spatter on her skin, but two dogs would appear to lick it off. After they eat, Mature Blossom and Hoda”he witness a lacrosse game in the field. Mature Blossom goes to fetch water, and ignoring instructions, lets a lacrosse player have a drink. She returns to see her mother, who brings a huckleberry cornbread to offer the Guardian, so Elder Woman and Hoda”he could signify his marriage to Mature Blossom. She passes several tests by resisting several animals, including Bear, Fox, and Wolf, who take the form of her husband, and then she becomes pregnant. Hoda”he holds another feast, this time asking attendees to guess his

vision. After making a few incorrect guesses, including junberries and tobacco, Fire Dragon correctly guesses the vision as the uprooting of the tree. The attendees uproot it; Hoda”he sits with Mature Blossom to eat at the edge of the hole, and he pushes her down. Fire Dragon comes to her aid, bringing dried meat and corn. He turns back, she hears a pumpkin rattle, and water creatures including Loon and Duck help her to glide down. Muskrat comes up dead, with earth in his paws, and Beaver places the earth on Turtle’s back. Later, Mature Blossom gives birth to a girl. The girl grows and one day sees a man in yellow watching her. He asks her to marry him, but she goes to her mother for advice. Mature Blossom tells her not to do it, because he is a fox. This scenario happens again, but this time, it is Turtle Man. He places the arrows on her, and she becomes pregnant. She hears her twins, who will become Skyholder and Flint, making plans while they are still in the womb. One of them, Flint, emerges at her armpit, killing her.

In this telling of the story, the grandmother has differential feelings toward the twins, like in Tom Porter’s version that we examine next. She makes Flint a bow and arrow, but when Skyholder asks for one, she at first tells them to share and will only give him leftover food. On a subsequent hunting trip, he encounters a water-dwelling man who says he will provide him with things his grandmother will not provide. Skyholder leaves her home to create grass, sunflowers, red willows, strawberries, huckleberries, and mulberries.

Compare the grandmother’s treatment of the twins between Mohawk’s Earth Grasper with Porter’s text. Mohawk’s version makes the argument directly:

Mature Blossoms loved her grandsons to different degrees. She loved Flint very much, but her love for Skyholder was reserved. As soon as Skyholder had left the lodge, Elder Woman said to Flint, “I have very little food and I don’t know when or how I will be able to get more. You and I will share what I have. Every day our situation is becoming more serious.”

“I will go and look for something for us to eat,” Flint replied.

“Whenever your brother leaves, you and I will eat. Whatever is left over we will give to him,” she said. (Mohawk 2005, 17)

Porter’s version explains the moment when the grandmother heard Shawískara’s (Flint’s) lies about the origin of their mother’s death during childbirth. This lie is what causes her to favor him over his brother, Teharonhiawá:kon (Skyholder). The revelation happens while the grandmother is grooming her grandsons’ hair:

She had the one little boy, Shawískara, kneeling in between her legs while she was fixing his long hair. I don’t know if she was braiding it or taking snarls or burdocks out or what.

And all of a sudden he said, “My grandmother, do you remember what happened?”

And she said, “What are you talking about?”

He said, “Remember that time when me and my brother were born?”

She said, “Yeah, that’s when I lost my daughter. The one I love so much.”

So the little boy Shawískara said, “Yeah, that’s right. And did you know that it was my brother, Teharonhiawá:kon? He’s the one who hit and scratched and bit until he broke my mother’s side. And that’s where he came out. That’s why my mother died.”

That’s what he said. He blamed it on his brother even though he himself was the one who did that.

And then his grandmother said, “I didn’t ever think about that. I didn’t know that. Oh ... So that’s what happened. And right away, she got really mad. And you know from that day on, she never ever fixed Teharonhiawá:kon’s hair again. She never groomed him. She never bathed him anymore like she did the other one. She didn’t take care of him. And whenever she had food, it was like you give a dog food. She put it in a dish and that was that. “Eat it.” (Porter 2008, 60–1)

Returning to Mohawk’s iteration, in the second part of the story, Skyholder makes and cooks corn. Flint smells it and asks for

some, but Skyholder tells him to wait. Flint tells their grandmother. They keep visiting Skyholder, as he keeps making more plants and animals, but he only shares a little with them. In his attempt to get more control for himself and his grandmother, Flint traps animals in a cave. Skyholder discovers this, and they start releasing and killing the animals for food. Skyholder does not like living with his brother and grandmother, though, so he makes his own island. Flint tries to make his own animals, but they are imperfect, such as moths, flies, and thistle. At this point, Skyholder contacts the Elder Brother, who becomes the Sun, who makes human beings. Flint tried as well but made mistakes that became monkeys and other game animals. Skyholder traps Flint’s mistakes in the cave, and he makes man and woman—Youngtree and Inseparable Flower, and gives instructions for creating more humanity. And in this version, it is grandmother who spoils some of the creations, such as throwing ashes on apples to make crab apples that are only good for animals to eat. She challenges him to a game of fortune, which is still played today as the Bowl Game, Gayë.dowa:nëh. The winner prevails over the earth. If the grandmother won, she had planned to destroy Skyholder’s creations, but Skyholder wins the game. He tells Youngtree to be “the first to offer thanksgiving” (Mohawk 2005, 51).

The story continues with the young humans having children and following Skyholder’s instructions to ward off Flint’s power. Skyholder has a conflict with a being called Face, a power equivalent to the Great Defender in Parker’s version, who says he created the Earth, and they have a contest to see who can move a mountain. Skyholder not only wins, but as in Parker’s version, he damages Face, who concedes by agreeing to help humans when they need healing power, if they carve his likeness in wooden forms made of white pine.

The story goes on at length to describe a battle between Skyholder and Flint and their grandmother for the head of the twins’ mother, which had been hanging from a tree since her death. Skyholder enlists all the animals, who meet with varying success

depending on their characteristics. They give the mother new life and a new duty to help humans, childbirth, and nature, and she becomes Grandmother the Moon. The twins’ grandmother becomes at peace once this happens. Skyholder is surprised, however, to discover that Flint is angry with this chain of events, so they battle. Skyholder uses daylight for power, and Flint uses darkness. Flint loses, and Skyholder creates stars, including Morning Star, to aid the moon and brighten the darkness. Grandmother agrees that it is her time to throw herself onto the fire and ascend to the sky, and from that point, only the thoughts of humans will be able to ascend, up with the smoke. The only other time humans can mingle with the sky is after they die, when they become stars. Animals can pass on this way, too. Stars increase so they are too numerous to count, and a pathway, indicative of the twins’ division, will be visible at night. It will divide if people come to a point when they cannot live in peace.

Skyholder departs and instructs humans to use sacred tobacco to call upon him. He also asks them to call upon the Thunderers from the west and offer thanksgiving as well as the Four Ceremonies—Great Feather Dance, Thanksgiving Drum Dance, Personal Chant, and Bowl Game, and in each dance, proceed in a circle only in one direction with the right side facing outward. He explains all that they should be thankful for in their ceremony, resulting in “peace of mind” (Mohawk 2005, 80). He adds that they should have strawberry drink during the time of the Feather Dance, mulberry at the time of the Green Corn Festival, and maple sap when it is ready.

In the last section, this story describes the origins of clans. It begins with a time of trouble, with gossip, insanity, sickness, death, and murder afflicting the people. People neglected the ceremonies. Flint’s power over the people caused peace to dwindle. Skyholder introduces the Four Messengers, as well as the medicines, which only certain people have the gift of remembering. Many of these story elements are carried on today in ceremonies and dances.

Tom Porter, Akwesasne Mohawk spiritual leader, told a five-part Creation story in his

book, *And Grandma Said*. Porter deemed the story the most important one that he tells in his book, because it is "fundamental" (Porter 2008, 40). In this version, he added personal detail and interpretation.

In Part 1, he shared the same story of Turtle Island and Skywoman. He said that this story "impacts our people and our concepts of the world perhaps more than any Iroquois realizes," but that it is one that is fragmented, often told in "bits and pieces" (Porter 2008, 40). He noted that it took him over 30 years to put all of the pieces together.

Porter explained that people who remain close to their original teachings can read minds. He said that this is how the people were in the story of Skyworld, a dark world with a luminous tree bearing all fruits. The people in the Skyworld cannot interfere with the tree but should wait for the fruit to fall off.

In Porter's rendering, Skywoman, "the flower that has matured" (Porter 2008, 43), is pregnant, but she is also afflicted with mood swings. She asks her husband to make a root tea for her, but he protests, because they are not to disturb the tree. She insists, and he reluctantly agrees to, a move that Porter attributed to fear or love, or perhaps both. When the husband gets close to the tree, he sees a bottomless hole near its base. Scared, he returns home, but she scolds him and goes to investigate it herself.

Porter details the incident in colorful language:

So he looked at that tree, and he went a little bit closer, but he didn't touch it. He looked. And right close to the base of the tree, there was a hole that appeared from nowhere, from nothing. It just appeared. And he looked at that. And "Geez," he says, "you can't see the bottom of it."

And he wasn't gonna get any closer. *That's enough*, he thought. It was enough for him. And he backed off. So he went back home, back to his house or his lodge or whatever.

And she says, Hátskwi. Shá:wi ken thí:ken ohtè:ra? Shá:wi ken thí:ken onónhkwa? *You got that medicine or that root?*



In the beginning of time, a woman Sky Dweller was going to have a baby. She craved roots from the tree of life in the center of the Skyworld. All illustrations in this article are courtesy of Bill Crouse.



A flock of birds flew up and saved the Skywoman as she fell. They flew close together and brought her down gently.

And he says:
Í:iah teiotón:'on. [I couldn't do it.]

And she hollers at him, "What's wrong wit' you?" She says, "I shoulda known not to send you over there. You got no backbone. You got no courage. You're *lazy*." She said that to him, made him feel bad. She wouldn't give him a chance

to explain anything, either. (Porter 2008, 45-6)

At this point, Porter discussed the disagreement about whether she fell or was pushed through the hole. He told his readers to make that choice themselves. As she



The Skywoman's daughter gave her life bringing twin boys into this world. From her grave grew the sustainers of life—corn, beans, and squash.



The Great Turtle offered his back as a resting place for the Skywoman.

As her body was sinking through the darkness she saw Fire Dragon (Comet) and he seized her body in flight. “Are you traveling?” he said. “I will aid you as best as I can in all things so that you can survive when you arrive below. The reason I am doing this is that your former husband accused me of those things for which he cast you from the Sky World. He accuses me of trying to frustrate the fulfillment of his vision. I am bringing with me what you will need live in this new place.” (Mohawk 2005, 11)

In Porter's version, all animals are water dwellers. The birds that help to rescue her are described as either blue herons or geese, to which Porter explained that his grandmother advised him to just call them “water birds” (Porter 2008, 48). They try to fly her back up to the Skyworld, but they do not have enough power. One of the birds screams at the other water dwellers for help. They all have a council, with the turtle in attendance, who offers his back. All the other animals, which Porter described as “nosy” (Porter 2008, 50), come to observe the creature on Turtle's back. They discover that she has a strawberry plant in her hand. Porter connected this detail with the reason why Longhouse ceremonies usually provide strawberry drink.

Since the plant has no soil in which to grow, the animals remember that their grandfathers said there is dirt below the water. Several of the animals die in their attempts. Muskrat is successful, and he does not die in his attempt:

And so he ran along the top of that turtle's back. And he jumped and dove in. *Splash*, the water came up. And down he went. Geez, he was gone longer than *every one* of those animals.

All of a sudden, his little old scroungy body came popping up on top. His eyes were closed. And there was no movement in his body whatsoever. And he, it appeared, had gone as well. He didn't make it

So the other animals, they went over there and grabbed him. They dragged him up on top of the turtle's back to examine him, to see if he was dead. They touched him all over, and he was cold as

falls, she clutches at the roots and grabs a strawberry plant and other fruit seeds.

Compare to Mohawk's recounting of the events, when the people were gathered by the Standing Tree for a feast. They uprooted it to appease Hoda"he. He addressed the gathering:

“Now you and I shall eat together, as is required.” When they had eaten, he stood and turned to his wife. “Now you must depart from here,” he said, and he thrust her into the chasm and she disappeared from sight. The man-beings then replanted the Tree of Light.

ice. Every indication that he was dead. But finally when they touched around his chest, they felt a little warmth and a little movement. A movement *so* faint ... but he was living. (Porter 2008, 51–2)

In Mohawk's text, Muskrat is not as fortunate:

Then Hanoghye (Muskrat) said, "I will dive to the bottom of the water to bring earth for her. It is well known to us that she has creative power and can use this earth."

Hanoghye disappeared beneath the water and was gone a long time. Finally, as the woman circled overhead on the bodies of the Water Fowl Beings, Hanoghye came to the surface. He was already long dead, and the others pressed forward for the cause of his death. Nagayagih (Beaver) came forward to try to help. He searched Hanoghye and found he held earth in both paws and in his mouth. (Mohawk 2005, 12)

Returning to Porter's iteration, he noted that Skywoman chants the words that are still contained in the Great Feather Dance. She moves counterclockwise in her dance, which explains why dances always move in this direction (excepting the part of death rituals). This chant is what makes life multiply from the dirt and the turtle grow larger (Porter 2008).

In Part 2, Porter continued at the point when Skywoman is about to give birth to a daughter. The daughter grows and explores the island. During her trek, she notices a cloud in the form of a man and faints at the strange sight. He places two arrows crossways over her body, which explains the origin of the four sacred winds. This action also causes her to become pregnant, which Porter described as "a spiritual conception" (Porter 2008, 56). She has a vision that tells her that she will have twins. These twins begin to fight, even inside their mother's womb.

One twin was born naturally, but the other one came out of her side, killing her during his birth, similar to Parker's version. Grandmother buries the daughter, signifying the origin of the term "Mother Earth." From



The Skywoman gave birth to a daughter. Together, they danced on the Turtle's shell. Every time they danced in a circle, the world grew a little more.

her body grows the Three Sisters and other wild plants. From her heart grows sacred Tobacco. Porter explained that it is burned during ceremonies, because the smoke will get the Creator's attention.

As discussed previously, Porter next described an incident when the grandmother is taking care of the twins, with the one twin, Shawiskara, blaming the mother's death on his brother, and as a result, the other twin being shunned by his grandmother. He lived an unhappy life, his brother constantly causing problems for him. Even so, the shunned brother, Teharonhiawá:kon, made the medicine we call sweet flag, a move that made his brother jealous. In response, the other brother, Shawiskara, made medicine that looks like sweet flag but makes people ill; he made ginseng which is so "temperamental" that it must be kept in the shed and not in the house (Porter 2008, 63). His brother made roses and berry canes, but his mischievous twin adorned them with thorns. These events explain why there are good and bad medicines. Porter made a point not to call one of the brothers good and the other one evil, perhaps an indication that it predates Wonderley's plot shift.

In sync with most of the other versions, however, one brother made good creatures like deer, causing the other brother to be jealous, and so he made other creatures such as the wolf to go after the good creatures. Porter's tale shared with other iterations a bit about the rivers being twisted and rocky, owing to Shawiskara's work, adding that it is the same origin of Niagara Falls and the Grand Canyon. And like John Bierhorst's (1993) tale, the rivers once flowed both ways, but again owing to the troublemaker's efforts, they now only flow one way. This is the same reason why half of our lives is easier, with the other half harder.

Porter embellished his stories with lots of little personal anecdotes. At this point in the story, he explained how his grandfather was not a member of the Longhouse, but rather a Christian and even so, he still listened to the Creation Story, using it to warn young Tom that there is an area near the reservation, up in Akwesasne along the St. Regis River near Cornwall, which has dangerous rapids created by the mischievous twin. Such is the strength of the Creation Story in bringing different factions of the community together.



The Left-handed Twin and the Right-handed Twin battled to decide who would rule the world.

Part 3 begins with the making of humans, this time starting with the troublemaker. Using his brother as a pattern, he makes a man and a woman. He, in fact, makes several pairs, cooking them in a fire. The length of time they spend in the fire explains the different skin tones of humans, with Indigenous people being cooked “just right” and whites being the baby siblings, since they are undercooked, and thus, immature (Porter 2008, 72). Porter explained that many people do not like this part of the story, and that he himself did not like to tell it.

The Creator, happy with everything that the twins created, granted them each a wish. The troublemaking brother asks for a barrier between himself and his brother. When it was the other brother’s turn to make a wish, he thought for days and decides instead to thank the Creator for all of the foods,

medicines, water, and everything else, signifying the Ganönyök.

His brother, angry and jealous of his thoughtfulness and thankfulness, starts to fight him. The thoughtful brother has a chance to kill his twin, but he lets him go. Their grandmother intervenes, but having only seen the end of the fight, she blames the thoughtful brother for constantly causing trouble. Tired of being blamed by her for everything, he takes her by the hair and swings her up into the sky, where she remains today as Grandmother the Moon. And then the Creator honors the request of the mischievous brother and separates them. His brother then becomes the Sun, which is why he is still referred to as the Elder Brother the Sun. His brother becomes the ruler of the dark. The Creator gives them and everyone else the original instructions to follow “as long as the grass grows, and as long as the rivers

flow,” language that is repeated in treaties (Porter 2008, 78).

In Part 4, Porter explained that the act of counting from 1 to 10 is the same as recounting the Creation Story. One is attributed to Skywoman, two for the twins, three for the middle of the turtle’s back, four for the human beings, five for the mischievous brother, six for when the original woman crossed over to the Earth, seven for the power of the sacredness of the human body, eight for the balance between two sides, nine for the way it was, and ten for the proper and the correct way. Parts of the story are encoded in the language itself.

He called Part 5 “Endnotes” to the Creation Story, describing how Grandmother the Moon stays mostly with the dark brother at night, but occasionally visits the Elder Brother the Sun during the day. He also talked about how lacrosse comes from the Creation Story.

Most notably, his version of the Creation Story is long because he wanted to show how it affects our lives, giving it the power to reveal “universal truths” (Porter 2008, 89).

Other Media

Many other narratives, printed books, and short stories about Skywoman and Creation populate minds and bookshelves across Indigenous communities. Other versions include animated films, dance performances, and museum exhibits. White noted, “the medium conveying the story may also shape the interpretation of the narrative” (White 2013, 102). In testimony to the popularity and longevity of the story, performances and exhibits are enjoying a resurgence.

Joanne Shenandoah and G. Peter Jemison, The Iroquois Creation Story

Joanne Shenandoah, author and Grammy-winning Oneida songwriter-musician, penned a children’s book, *Skywoman: Legends of the Iroquois* and composed a symphony of this story and several other legends. She performed the work, “SkyWoman,” at Convention Days of the National Women’s Rights Historical Park at Seneca Falls in 2018.

She also took part in a 16-minute animated film, *The Iroquois Creation Story*, collaborating with project spearhead and Ganondagan State Historic Site's manager, G. Peter Jemison (2015), as well as Friends of Ganondagan, Garth Fagan Dance, and the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) School of Film and Animation.

Shenandoah narrates the story, with performances by the Iroquois Social Dancers and Garth Fagan Dancers, original artwork by Jemison, and music by composer Brent Michael Davids. The film is now a permanent feature of the Seneca Art & Culture Center at Ganondagan.

This version of the story is based on Mohawk's *The Myth of the Earth Grasper* in 2005, outlined here. According to Shenandoah's Facebook post announcing the film, in this version of the story, far above Earth in Sky World, the Great Celestial Tree providing light and food for the Sky World inhabitants begins to fade. The keeper of the tree dreams that the people uproot the Great Tree, renewing their world. When the Great Tree is uprooted, a large hole is produced through which a young pregnant woman falls, landing on the back of a turtle. A new world, Turtle Island, is created. Eventually, Sky Woman's grandsons, twins Flint and Sky Holder, create everything on Earth and then battle for control. The story has many truths that apply to contemporary society. (Shenandoah 2015).

Onöhsagwë:de' Culture Center Museum Exhibit

At the Onöhsagwë:de' Culture Center in Salamanca, New York, the "Tödawahsa:wë' (When It Began)" exhibit displays yet another version, attributed to John Armstrong in 1896, and beginning with Sgëöyadh, "on the other side of the sky" and containing the tree of many fruits and light. In this story, the chief's wife already had the child, making the chief jealous and lonely. Here the story offers two possible interpretations: in one, the chief has a "dream feast" in which he gathers other men who understand the instructions of the dream to mean they must uproot the tree, and in the other, the wife is

still pregnant and either she or he digs up the tree. Either way, she falls through the hole created by the uprooting, roots in her hand.

Next, Awëöha'i, Mature Blossoms, falls and is caught by Gaöhjöje:ta', the "fire dragon spirit," banished from the Sky World. He can only carry her part of the way, and this time, it is herons that carry her toward the water, where the animals decide that the turtle is the strongest to hold the new Earth. Muskrat appears again with the mud, and her roots are planted. She again walks counterclockwise in a portion of the story, attributed to Phyllis Eileen Williams Bardeau. Sky Woman gives birth to girl who becomes Ya:gögwe'da:se:', Young Woman. Here, the story diverges again: one unnamed version says that she marries Turtle Man, and this man also crosses two arrows over her abdomen, and in the other, Armstrong's version, the winds cause her pregnancy.

In the next frame of the exhibit, Skywoman becomes Akso:d (grandmother) when her daughter gives birth, and again, the twins are already at odds in the womb. This time, she's killed when the one twin comes out unnaturally; this time, it's through her navel. The "good-minded" twin is called Ha:gëöya'gewa'kö (Sky Holder), and the other one, Otögwë'da' (Flint). Sky Holder makes sustaining gifts, and Flint makes "ugly and mean" creations. Sky Holder takes over Flint, and "life goes on."

Another gift Sky Holder creates is the stars to assist the new moon in the darkness. He talks over his plans with his father: He wants a star, T'ëdë:tawi:ta', "He Brings the Morning with Him," to appear even before Elder Brother the Sun, to encourage people to give thanks for the new day. He also creates a navigational star, Yoëjade'gayanö'ta', or Earth Maker, and the cluster of seven, Haditgwa'da:', whose mid-winter appearance directly overhead signals people to gather for midwinter ceremonies. He also summons the Hadiwënodajë's, or the Thunderers, from the West to herald the spring growing season and to keep creatures in their caves. All of the Deyökiyë'nyadö', or Sky-world beings, protect and guide the Ögwë'öweh, or the first real humans, for eternity.

The exhibit uses public spaces to transmit the lessons, language, and culture to wider audiences within and outside the community. Its adaptations in museums denote its lingering importance to the people and their desire to share their worldview.

Skywoman Iroquois Dance Theater

Perhaps, one of the newest renditions of a public Creation Story display is the Skywoman Iroquois Dance Theater, conceived and directed by the multi-talented performer, Bill Crouse. Crouse considered doing a theatrical performance of the story for a few years and started performing it this year.

Crouse shares a personal history of his background as a storyteller. He grew up hearing stories told by his mother and other elders. His uncle would stay for a few days during winter and entertain the family with tales. Crouse says that there also was a community storyteller who would attend events at the community center to share ghost stories and other types, a practice that still takes place at the Seneca Allegany Community Center. And there were community elders there, who would always share their own and more widely known stories—people such as George Heron and Avery Jimerson (Crouse 2019).

Storytelling at any time other than winter was verboten. Crouse explains that since the animals only understood the Ögwë'öwe:kha' languages, if people told stories during summer, birds might neglect to fly south, and other animals might forget to store food for the winter. Now stories are heard throughout the year. Crouse once asked George Heron why summer storytelling is permissible, and Heron explained that since we now share the stories in English, the animals cannot understand them, and so the animals are safe from distraction (Crouse 2019).

Crouse started storytelling himself when he taught tribal Head Start classes. He began using his artistic talent to draw story cards to illustrate them. He says that stories are still a good way to transmit language and culture. Some of his work is featured at the Onöhsagwë:de' Culture Center. His favorite stories are the "ones pertaining to ceremonies. They're sacred in that context. All have

some underlying lesson—a moral to the story.” He remarks that some of the ceremonies have been lost over time, such as the mulberry dance, yet many remain (Crouse 2019).

For the Skywoman Iroquois Dance Theater, he blends a combination of different versions. He likes Hewitt’s material, because it uses the names of the characters such as Skyholder and Flint. This theatrical-style presentation of the story blends his experience as a choreographer with the American Indian Dance Theater and work in Niagara Falls, performing for bus tours with his singing, dancing, and artistic background, creating the soundtrack to accompany the storyline. He keeps some of the grim details out of the story to make it more appropriate for younger viewers; instead, the dancers use movement to communicate some of these elements by dancing off the stage when a character dies, for example (Crouse 2019).

Kari Kennedy portrays Skywoman for the dance theater. She reminisces that her Grandma often told funny or scary stories. Kennedy eventually stopped hearing them, as members of the community stopped using the language. Now her grandmother has started to revitalize her language use and storytelling as part of the Akso:d (grandmother) program. Kennedy started to hear more stories, not coincidentally from Crouse, when he taught culture and language in the middle school, where she remembers learning about the Creation Story. She went on to join Crouse’s Seneca Youth Dancers troupe when she was 12 and has danced with his groups ever since (Kennedy 2019).

Kennedy attended and helped to perform at the scary stories night at the museum, performing character parts, writing scripts, and designing costumes in the community’s favorite stories such as the Flying Head. These sessions were well attended but were not always received with enthusiasm in all corners of the community. Some people are uncomfortable with “putting it out there,” she says, but others see value in bringing the culture to wider audiences and also in connecting with their own youth to encourage revitalization. They try not to “cross boundaries” and avoid certain sacred and ceremonial aspects of the

stories for popular audiences at events (Kennedy 2019).

Crouse maintains that we need to keep these stories going. “There are so many stories that need to be seen. Maybe people will pick up a book or ask questions” to build their understanding of their importance in uniting the communities (Crouse 2019). As long as Hodinöhsö:ni:h people share an identity in their communities, as Mohawk asserts, “they will remember this story” (Mohawk 2005, v).

Da:ne’hoh Nëyögwa’ Nigo’dë:ök (So Let It Be That Way In Our Minds). ▼

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