

A Call For Mother Law

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ORIGINS

Mother Law is a concept originating from condoled Bear Clan Mother “Mommabear” Wakerakats:te (Mohawk) reaching into the Motherline, within and beyond her Haudenosaunee tradition. Together, we honor all the women, and all of the people, named and unnamed who have carried Mother Law through the world, across time.

This article was inspired by a collective of women who convened on Oneida lands in December 2023 to explore the concept and invitation of Mother Law. Convened by Michelle Schenandoah (Oneida) of Rematriation and Sarah Bradley & Brittany Koteles of Land Justice Futures, this gathering was anchored in the wisdom, teachings, and “proposals of Spirit” of Mommabear (Mohawk), Beverly Jacobs (Mohawk), Pat McCabe “Woman Stands Shining” (Diné), and Faithkeeper Diane Schenandoah (Oneida). We are grateful to all the women who joined us and shared, and with whom we continue to gather and find new understanding and possibility — this larger collective of women has inspired these words.

*We have to live
differently*

*or we
will die
in the same*

old ways.¹

¹ Walker, Alice. “Calling All Grand Mothers.” *Hard Times Require Furious Dancing: New Poems*, New World Library, 2010.

As the Earth burns, floods, and rages, humanity is at a crossroads: transformation or extinction.² In these surreal and calamitous times, who will answer the prayer for change?

This is a letter of love and quickening for all who carry the impulse to nurture life. Whether in our dreams or in our fears, in quiet moments or among loved ones, we know: we are out of balance, humanity is unwell, something sacred and vital forgotten. Here, we name that sacred and vital force as the Mother, the archetype of power and love. The Mother is the safeguard of the young; the life-bearer and life-nurturer; the Grandmother's Council.³ Whether or not we are women or mothers ourselves, there is a certain force that we all know as mother-ness — and it has been dislodged from its seat of authority in our culture. Now is the time to reinstate it.

Over generations, that impulse to nurture life has been overcome by paradigms trying to control and dominate it. But as institutions begin to crumble around us, a swell of feminine power is rising and ready to uproot the wayward projects of supremacy and exploitation. We are alive in a time that calls on women and all who, as Alice Walker would say, possess the “Grand Mother Spirit,” to put life back at the center of everything we do. The sacred task before us is to untie the knots of control and, from their frayed fibers, reweave a paradigm that tends and cares for life.

Feminist scholar Maria Mies describes the core of the feminine archetype as the power to “make things grow.”⁴ In innumerable cosmologies, Earth began as, was created by, or simply *is* a mother. Women and life-bringers have walked the surface of the Earth *as Earth was creating herself anew* — both creator and created, caregiver for the land and the land herself. This archetype is alive in cultures around the globe, from the world's largest matrilineal society in Sumatra to the forgotten, mother-centered religions of Europe; from Sky Woman of the Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee cosmologies to the Orisha Oshun of the Yoruba tradition, who finished creation by filling the Earth with beauty, love, and everything needed to live; to Mother Earth herself. While the dominant world paradigm has suppressed so many of these cosmologies, their seeds remain with us, waiting to grow.

Mommabear Wakerakats:te, Bear Clan Mother of the Mohawk Nation, carries one of these seeds, named “Mother Law” by her and her contemporaries. Composed of the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora nations, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy is the oldest

² The Red Nation. *The Red Deal: Indigenous Action to Save Our Earth*, Common Notions, 2021.

³ While the archetype of “mother” is infinitely varied in its expression and embodiment, we chose to maintain its association with feminine power, in alignment with the Indigenous perspectives that inform this work. Many Indigenous worldviews offer a more expansive lens on gender than what is popularly referenced in the overculture. Additionally, queer and trans leadership — across cultures and eras — models a wider world of gender that debunks the binary, resists its weaponization, and supports the liberation of us all. Ultimately, the call to Mother Law is for all of humanity. Over the course of this essay, we invite readers into a reimagining of what and who is “feminine,” and who are “mothers.”

⁴ Shiva, Vandana, and Maria Mies. *Ecofeminism*, Zed Books, 2014.

continuous democracy in the world — standing for over 1,000 years. Its constitution, known as the Great Law of Peace, deeply influenced the Founding Fathers’ [design of U.S. democracy](#), and 100 years later, served as inspiration for the [women’s suffrage movement](#)⁵. In the Haudenosaunee context, Mother Law speaks to a specific cultural, social, and legal tradition of matrilineal authority. With “life-bearers” placed in the center of society, Haudenosaunee governance stems from the inherent authority and autonomy of women. Clan mothers are the sovereign decision-makers regarding the use and stewardship of land, waters, and resources, as well as the authorization of war, and bear the sole authority to raise, select, and recall male chiefs. On a spiritual level, Mother Law is the “law beneath the law,”⁶ in which an unbroken lineage of women sustain kinship, belonging, and authority on behalf of all life.

The Haudenosaunee Creation Story, an oral and evolving tradition, is the cosmology from which this specific call to Mother Law arises. It begins with Sky Woman who fell from Sky World among the stars, pregnant with her daughter. As she approached a world covered in water, the geese caught her and carried her safely to a turtle’s back. A muskrat, giving its life, grasped a fistful of silt from the bottom of the ocean for Sky Woman to place on the turtle’s shell. Dancing upon that clay, she made the mud of the Earth grow into Turtle Island. Later, Sky Woman’s twin grandsons created the world around us, with one making human beings out of the earth and breathing life into them. Within the Creation Story, we see a natural world free of hierarchy, and a motherline that holds the continuity of human life on Earth.⁷

With this tradition, Wakerakats:te carries a powerful antidote to the death-dealing forces around us. Now, she is making a call to us all: to let this concept be a springboard for our own remembering, to awaken the seeds of Mother Law in our own cultures and lineages, and to reclaim an inalienable authority on behalf of life. By uniting under a universal call to Mother Law, we can find our way toward right relationship and “put life back at the center of all we do.”⁸

Haudenosaunee women still carry out the same dance of Sky Woman, reaffirming their life-giving gift. Perhaps, if humanity learns how to reclaim and reawaken the seeds of Mother

⁵To learn about the connections between the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the abolitionist movement, and the early women’s suffrage movement, we recommend *The Women’s Suffrage Movement*, edited by Sally Roesch Wagner. As Wagner’s work illustrates, what started as a truly intersectional women’s rights movement in the late 19th century was later co-opted by centrist forces that catered to suffrage for white women. In this call for Mother Law, we seek to honor the unfinished, multiracial work of women’s liberation.

⁶ Iakoiane Wakerakats:te.

⁷ Rodriguez, Jeanette and Iakoiane Wakerakats:te. *A Clanmother’s Call: Reconstructing Haudenosaunee Cultural Memory*. SUNY Press, 2017.

⁸ McCabe, Pat. “Woman Stands Shining on Humanity’s Becoming.” *For the Wild* podcast. September 15, 2021.

Law, we can rebuild the foundations of a nurturing society. Together, we must dance our inner authority awake.

The Long & Violent Campaign to Control Life

Today, a man-made strategy to control life supersedes the ancient impulse to tend it. Over the last five thousand years, humanity was slowly allured by the Lie: that humans are separate from nature, and that men are destined to dominate it. Men learned to claim power through violence, hierarchy, and a worldview that reduced the living Earth to property parcels and “natural resources.” Over time, a dualistic logic of male superiority infiltrated all aspects of society, including laws, family lines, and the face of God “himself.” Validated by the “divine right of kings,” ruling European men ascended to unilateral power, while women, the land, and land-based cultures were subjugated to the realm of property.

To be clear, patriarchal cultures exist throughout human history and across the globe. Our modern power structure, however, has its roots in patriarchal, Christian Europe. There, the control and oppression of women, people of the Global South, and land *co-evolved* — creating an imperial capitalism and caste system that was codified, scaled, and violently imposed upon the rest of the world. In early medieval times, European kings, nobles and clergy began campaigns to “enclose” common lands into private property. An influx of stolen wealth from Africa and the Americas during the early colonial era further accelerated this campaign, forcing subsistence peasants into wage labor economies. As a tactic to suppress resistance, the state and Church began to persecute women in particular,⁹ condemning them as heretical and demonic, and burning them at the stake. The witch hunts set the continent aflame in a terror campaign, which forced women into domestic servitude and eradicated any remaining spheres of female power.

The Church provided the moral and political impetus for further conquest. In the 15th and 16th centuries, a famous triad of papal decrees, now known as the Doctrine of Discovery, urged the men of the Church to “vanquish, capture and subdue” all non-Christian people, and declared any non-Christian lands to be “empty” — open to be discovered and claimed by the flags of European kings. Under the cover of “sword and cross,” explorers tortured, killed, and enslaved “diabolical pagans” around the world, and then proceeded to plunder, claim, and commodify their homelands. Both in Europe and globally, many lands lost their connection to ceremony and loving stewardship. Entire languages, songs, medicines, and whole ways of living in harmony

⁹ Federici, Silvia. *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*. Autonomedia, 2004.

with the Earth were and remain lost. Both in Europe and in the lands that Europeans invaded, Indigenous cultures were transformed into colonial, Christian nation-states.

The rise of patriarchy violated, harmed, and diminished women, but it also wounded and warped the role of men. In the witch hunts, men were forced to be bystanders to the horrors inflicted on their mothers, sisters, daughters, and neighbors. Torn from their archetypal role to protect and provide for the community, men assumed the role of master.¹⁰ Through this internal violence and the colonial conquest that followed, more complex and varied understandings of gender were distorted by, or completely replaced with, a binary system of control — suppressing the medicines and spiritual capacities of gender that had been expressed in myriad cultures across centuries.

The logic of male, white Christian dominion over land, women, and “pagan” peoples, and its co-arising attendants of capitalism and colonialism, were violently forced upon cultures all over the world — and its impacts on our planet are clear. By the early 20th century, 84 percent of land on Earth had been colonized by European nations. While written centuries ago, the damages of the Doctrine cemented an ethic of European Christian superiority into a modern economy that hinges on the extraction of people and the Earth for the profit of a few. Consider that 98% of land in the U.S. is owned by people of European descent, that the white-to-Black racial wealth gap has reached a ratio of 1:16, and that 1,500 acres of land are developed everyday. Each of these is a modern consequence of the Doctrine.

In the words of Diné elder Pat McCabe, the Doctrine of Discovery wasn’t just a moral or ethical imposition — “it was the beginning of the destruction of this Mother Earth in her entirety.” In just a few thousand years, this domination logic — and its underlying subjugation of women, land-based peoples, and Mother Earth — has mutated into a militarized, monocultural, extractive global economy.

But just as humanity chose to create such a system, so too can we discard it. What was made up can be unmade and replaced.

¹⁰ This essay does not seek to equate “men” with “patriarchy.” Rather, we are addressing the ways that manifold societal roles have been twisted, coerced, and codified in order to serve a power-over paradigm. Daring to dream beyond these constraints, Mother Law represents an invitation to bring *every human* into their innate capacity to serve life.

From Colonial Law to Mother Law

Efforts to resist colonization have existed as long as colonization itself. Today, Indigenous people across the globe continue to defend their lands from theft and extraction: The Apache people are [fighting to save their sacred site](#), Oak Flat, from becoming a 2-mile-wide copper mine. The [Yanomami in the Amazon](#) are digging in against massive threats of deforestation. The [Ogiek people of Mount Elgon](#) are going up against the Kenyan government's land grabs for carbon credits. In all of these cases, the battle takes place both on the ground and in the courts; the literal occupation and defense of land is strategically paired with litigative attacks on colonial law from the inside.

Fighting inside the legal system is a necessary tactic for land defense. In courts and Congress, we can respond quickly to new threats, alleviate harm through incremental changes, and pave the way for cultural shifts. But alone, it is not enough. We must also push ourselves to dream beyond the confines of colonial law. We can ascribe to the alternative cultures of law that have existed for generations, and we can create new rules that put life at the center.

In these unprecedented times, we are called not only to fight, but to change how we think about the fight itself. Colonial law is fundamentally non-cooperative — it cannot nurture and sustain life. What if, instead of only fighting within its faulty foundations, we remove our consent from its reign? What if, where we have failed to assert our authority, we reclaim a shared commitment to Mother Law? If we were to stand in our authority, what kinds of actions, theologies, and new stories would give rise? What collective safety could we create so that people could finally “walk out and walk on” from our destructive-yet-addictive capitalist system?

This is the work of our time, for all whose life-bearing gifts and impulses have been suppressed. Mother Law is an invitation to meet these challenging times from a place of authority, humility, love, power, and solidarity. Together, we claim Mother Law as a pathway toward right relationship, led by women and the gender-liberated who seek healing from domination and the reclamation of their inheritance from the Earth herself.

To do this, we are called to:

1. Remove our consent from domination codes,¹¹
2. Reawaken the seeds of Mother Law that have been lost or suppressed, and
3. Stand in our power together.

¹¹ Newcomb, Steve. *The Doctrine of Discovery: Unmasking The Domination Code*. 38 Plus 2 Productions, 2014.

And while this is everyone's work, we call on the women to begin — to unite across race, class, religion, sexuality, and nationality, motivated by a deeper impulse toward life and wholeness.

It is time to address the consequences of domination logic: imperialism, patriarchy, colonization, and racist capitalism. The mothers of the world are calling the house to order.

Complicit No More: Removing Our Consent

If we wish to unmake this system, we must first learn to see our own entanglement, complicity, or consent to the system, however unconscious it might be.

This looks different for all of us. Some of us have been used as perpetrators or pawns in the system, from the white women who ran native boarding schools on the “frontier” to the wealthy women who write checks for “charity” but don't realize the way they make their money exploits poor people. Many Black communities, Indigenous communities, communities of color, and those in the Global South have actively resisted colonial systems for generations and have never been complicit. However, for many of us — across race and class lines — complicity can look like more subtle or insidious endorsements of Anti-Blackness, Indigenous erasure, xenophobia, or capitalist consumerism. And while these patterns exist in all our communities, white and lighter-skinned women in particular have been used as tools to further racism and colonization.

In theory, the invitation to remove our complicity sounds obvious, compelling, and perhaps even simple. In reality, so much of our consent to colonial systems is unconscious and invisible. For example, every time we interact with private property, we are upholding this worldview that “thingifies” and limits our relationship to the gift of living. When we sign a deed based on racist property laws, enter Indigenous lands without respect for protocol, put up a “no trespassing” sign, or call on armed police to protect our “property,” we are perpetuating the logic of domination.

While the previously discussed papal decrees may seem like an archaic accessory to a bygone era, the truth is that *the Doctrine of Discovery itself is the linchpin of modern property law* — and it has been since the very first land use case the Supreme Court took on. That 1823 case, *Johnson v. M'Intosh*, seared into law that “discovery is the foundation of title, and overlooks all proprietary rights in the natives.”

This is land theft wearing judges' robes. Through colonial law, land theft and supreme power were originally justified by a closed-loop fallacy that says, "God wills this, because we say so." To this day, this logic retains its stranglehold on the land, having been cited as recently as 2005 in a majority opinion that denied ancestral lands to the Oneida, written by Ruth Bader Ginsburg:

"Under the 'doctrine of discovery,' fee title to the lands occupied by Indians when the colonists arrived became vested in the sovereign—first the discovering European nation and later the original States and the United States." (City of Sherrill v. Oneida Indian Nation of New York).

That this widely celebrated champion of women's rights — and the first Jewish woman on the U.S. Supreme Court — would so blatantly cite the patriarchal logic of a discovery-era Pope reveals just how fully this ideology has embedded itself into the human imagination as something natural, implicit, and unquestionable. It is not. It is false, and relies on our consent to pose as truth.

The pervasiveness of this absurd logic can be demoralizing and downright heartbreaking. However, once we learn how to see the water we're swimming in, we can learn to counteract it with precision, camaraderie, and commitment. The history we've inherited isn't our fault — but it *is* our responsibility to unravel these forces and their grip on our lives. To not be complicit — to remove our consent — is to *actively* endeavor to know our real history, to change the rules, to restore honor to our relationships.

Together, we must remove our consent from the codes of domination: the spiritual, psychological, and emotional, as well as material, social, and political. We must join the voices of women who have been dissenting for generations, the voices who resisted enslavement and attempted genocide, the voices of women whose grandmothers were persecuted for dissent, and the voices of women who were promised protection by the Lie and are now waking up. **Adding our voices to a grandmothers' council, with the authority of Mother Earth, we must say: no more.**

We will be complicit to this cult of destruction no more. We will be bystanders no more. We will be subjugated, silenced, and oppressed no more. We will stand for Earth and for life with all of our vested authority. We will respond to the call to be "Complicit No More" — breaking the chains of domination and joining in the dance of life.

Reawakening the Seeds of Mother Law

Today, many people perceive the growing Landback movement to be focused on the literal return of stolen “things”: deeds to land, sacred objects, the bones of ancestors. While this is critical, the spiritual core of the movement speaks to something much deeper: the restoration of relationships that were interrupted by force. This includes relationship with place, plants, creatures, the cosmos, and one another; relationship through song, story, language, religion, and ceremony. In service of this broader vision, many have begun to shift the language of “repatriation” to the feminine-rooted “*rematriation*,” signaling the all-encompassing return of the sacred to the Mother.¹²

Rematriation is not a one-way movement; it is not the transactional return of any one thing to any one people. Rematriation, at its core, is an invitation for all of us to be reclaimed by a wholeness that has been obscured by empire — the fruit of which is the return of life and land to a paradigm of animacy and kinship. To do this work — to reawaken the seeds of Mother Law — we must each find our own authentic connections with the lineage and authority of those who nurture life.

Across time, those who challenged the system have been subjugated, enslaved, killed, burned, evicted, or have been labeled as savage, naïve, heretical, dangerous, crazy, or lazy. But the authority of Mother Law is inalienable. However violently wrenched away our rights may have been and however long ago; however much our ancestors may have sought what they perceived as safety within the system; however many generations our mother tongues have been silenced, we each have a motherline that connects us to a time and place in which we — and our people — participated with care, responsibility, and integrity in the interdependent web of life.

Our work now is to reclaim those stories, to rebuild our relationships, and to find the seeds of Mother Law from our own lineages and cultivate them. It is time to return to the sacred places, find the old songs, and make new prayers. It is time we take on the responsibilities and healing that are ours to claim. It is time to practice, every single day, putting Life, and the dignity and flourishing of all Life, at the center of all that we do.

¹² Schenandoah, Michelle and Mommabear Wakerakats:te. *Rematriation*. <https://rematriation.com/>.

Standing In Power Together

There is a Mohawk idiom connected with Mother Law: “Kahnistenserah.” The etymologies of its roots translate roughly to, “*True - Mother - Strong - Always - All Over - This Is It.*”¹³ The authority of the mother and mothering ways is as eternal, supreme, and inalienable as any natural law. It cannot be taken away.

Or, said another way by Mommabear: “We don’t need feminism. We are the law.”

The work of Mother Law starts with unlearning and disavowing the ways of domination that seek to own, control, and hoard. Only then can we rebuild power around our innate and sacrosanct right to cultivate and protect life.

Ultimately, Mother Law is a call to faith — to believe that such a reclamation is necessary, possible, and beautiful, for each of us, and for all of us. It is certainly easier to shut down, give up, drown in grief, or numb out, but Mother Law means understanding “what time it is on the clock of the world.”

To be faithful to Mother Law means saying what must be said and doing what must be done — no matter who will oppose us, undermine us, or call us crazy, heretical, or unreasonable — for the sake of the people we love and the life all around us.

We will move our worldly possessions, our voices, our bodies, our reputations and our time toward the ongoing struggle to upend imperial structures and to overthrow the tyranny of our diseased systems and ways of being.

We will stand shoulder to shoulder with one another, dance our inner authority awake, and remember our capacity to hear direct instruction from the Source of Life.

Mother Law is reclaiming our seat of kinship in the circle of Creation, to radiate gratitude for all that is and “uphold the honor of being human being.”¹⁴

Let us cultivate an unshakeable faith in a healed and thriving future for the sake of our descendants and for our Mother Earth.

¹³ Wakerakats:te, Bear Clan. “Kahnistenserah: The Binding Strength of Mother Law.” 2024.

¹⁴ Pat McCabe.