

Erin Lee Antonak

Survivance



Mother and Child, 2021, red cornhusk, fermented corn plastic (PLA), 9 ½"x 13"x1 ½"

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I was raised in my mother's culture. I am Wolf Clan, from the Oneida Indian Nation of New York, a member of the Iroquois Confederacy. My young life was full of upheaval and instability. My parents were young and broke when they had me and my older brother. My younger brother and sister arrived 10 years later. My father was (is) a heroin addict and alcoholic. I left home at age 15, traveled the world and took care of myself. My mother had a stroke that left her paralyzed from the neck down when she was 50 years old, and I was 26. I took in my younger brother and helped care for my mother at her home. My mother lived paralyzed for 13 years.

This was an incredibly difficult time. Anxiety, worry, hopelessness, loneliness, and depression were constants in my life. During this particularly difficult period, I saw many people I loved come undone by the unrelenting stress. Following my mother's stroke, she was inducted into a secretive healing group, the Little Water Society, after another healer had a vision about her. I was asked to make a *gadjeesa*, cornhusk mask for her ceremony, something I hadn't done since I was a teenager. My mother also made traditional Iroquois crafts for museums and I decided to complete her unfinished projects since she no longer could. These crafts were also something I had not done much of since leaving home at 15 years old. While braiding the cornhusk for the mask, using the crafting techniques I had learned as a child and during the different ceremonies for my mother's healing, I found brief moments of peace and clarity that were rare and elusive and very welcome in those years. With the birth of my children, I understood that I needed to find healthy coping and healing mechanisms not only for my own sake, but for them as well. I felt there was something powerful in the hand work I was doing and looked to that for healing. I am only now beginning to understand why I was so impacted by it.

Our main stress hormones, cortisol and adrenaline, are activated during moments of stress. Normally, this cascade of hormones is directly related to a threat, for example-a wild animal approaching us. This raises our heart rate, blood pressure and prepares us to run or to fight. Once the threat is gone our bodies naturally come back into homeostasis, heart rate drops, and blood pressure normalizes (Mayo Clinic). In modern times our stressors are different. Often our lives are full of things that cause our bodies to respond as if we are being attacked by an animal, when in fact it is just a work deadline around the corner. When we are in this state of heightened physiological arousal constantly, known as Fight or Flight Syndrome, our bodies never have an opportunity to normalize. This is bad. Overexposure to cortisol and adrenaline decreases immunity and increases one's risk of negative physical and emotional consequences like anxiety, depression, digestive issues, headaches, heart disease, sleep problems, weight gain and memory and concentration impairment (Scott).

Within my community (and other Native American communities) there is the added layer of intense Historical Trauma. The theory of Historical Trauma for Native Americans was first described by Dr. Maria Yellow Horse Braveheart in the 1980's. Historical Trauma, as it applies to the Native American experience, refers to the colonization of the Americas, the theft of land, residential schools, the forced removal and relocation of communities. It was a cultural genocide and included loss of language, cultural practices, social structures, and spiritual beliefs (Bassett). The science of epigenetics suggests that within our genes exist indexical marks of trauma passed from our ancestors that influence how we, ourselves, react to trauma and stress. This makes us more vulnerable to the negative effects of stress at a physical, biological level (Pember 3). During this cultural genocide, the Native people were not allowed to access their own traditional rituals and means of mourning, healing and community building and this unresolved grief has led to the intensification of normal emotions such as anger, guilt, sadness, and helplessness which continues to be intensified over generations. According to Bonnie Duran, Associate Professor in the Department of Health Services at the University of Washington School of Public Health and Director for Indigenous Health Research at the Indigenous Wellness Research Institute, "Many present-day health disparities (between Native and non-Native communities) can be traced back through epigenetics to a 'colonial health deficit', the result of colonization and its aftermath" (Duran 347). Some of these disparities are addiction, suicide, mental illness, sexual violence, heart disease, hypertension, and diabetes, all of which occur in extremely high rates in Native communities.

While I understand that family dysfunction tends to be cyclical and that trauma can be inherited, I often wonder about the other side of this. What else is cyclical and inherited through generations? Are there methods of coping and resilience that are passed on as well? If so, what are they and how can we identify, revive, strengthen, and promote them to help heal ourselves and by doing so begin to rebuild our healthy communities?

My personal search to calm my constantly heightened anxiety led me to Flow Theory. Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has dedicated his research to the study of this phenomenon. Csikszentmihalyi describes Flow as "a state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience is so enjoyable that people will continue to do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it" (Csikszentmihalyi 4). It is Csikszentmihalyi's belief that people are happiest when in this state (Erstling). There are four key elements needed in combination to set the conditions for flow: 1. A balance must be struck between the challenge of the task and the skill of the performer. If the task is too easy or too difficult the performer can become anxious/ frustrated or bored. 2. Clear objectives 3. Frequent feedback 4. Focus and concentration (minimal distractions) (Francis).

I believe that traditional domestic crafts are an easy way to elicit flow in daily life. Flow can help people “dampen internal chaos” and offers a “non-pharmaceutical means to self-regulate emotions such as anger and obsessional phobias” (Gutman 76). Studies of the flow state have shown that activity, such as craft, is crucial to our well-being, emotional health, emotional self-control, and it induces a homeostasis promoting, relaxation response (Gutman 76, 78). I suggest that with the loss of making at the heart of our home lives we have lost a key to our contentment, physical health, and our mental/spiritual health. For most of human existence we made the things we needed or traded with our neighbors for them in exchange for things we made or cultivated. Our home life was centered on the making of these things or the cultivation of them. We learned these skills from our parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles or through a direct apprenticeship with an artisan. Some of these domestic crafts include sewing, knitting, crocheting, farming, basketmaking, weaving, working with clay, braiding, cooking and even cleaning. They create community and connectedness through the ways they are taught and shared, which is also important for human happiness.

In the 1980's while discussing ways to heal Native American's trauma, Brave Heart argued that “the most effective methods of healing must emerge from within tribal communities and draw from traditional ways of knowing and spirituality” (Pember). For me, the traditional family craft of cornhusk braiding that my mother had passed down to me that the women in my family have done for generations was a way of entering this flow state and a creating a space for healing. I often look at my hands when I am braiding and think about how the DNA that has designed my hands are the result of women's hands braiding, weaving, and sewing cornhusk over many, many generations. More than just a practical task that results in a beautiful object, this technique is one of the things that ties me to my lineage. It is a sort of active meditation that allows me to create a space to recognize my humanness and my connectedness to the past and the future. It represents knowledge about life and healing sent through time from my ancestral mothers. An unnamed Native combat veteran suffering from PTSD shares similar feelings after reengaging with traditional practices as a means of healing, he says “... It reached deep into my soul and just made me feel real. And, I mean, this is real. This is from the old people, you know. They've come back to help, to talk, to be with, to share, you know. Even to laugh a little bit. It was just incredible” (Bassett). What else is there to learn from our ancestors about happiness, healing and perseverance and how do we learn more?

Our very physical existence is an extension of our ancestors. We have been physically, spiritually, and mentally shaped by the people in our past, whether we ever met them or not. Our DNA is made of theirs; our body parts are replicas of theirs. What we consider traditions are really just remnants of things that our direct ancestors saw as means of coping, surviving, and finding joy, which were so important and effective they were

passed on for centuries. There is more to a culture specific object, such as a bowl, than just its utilitarian purpose. Its proportions, materials, and specific way of making it say so much about that culture's belief system. Is it large for many people to share from, small for the individual only? Is it made from mud, wood, or grass? If it is made from wood, is it created from a cut log or carved from a living tree in a way that the tree does not die in the process? So many of these specifics have been lost or hidden purposefully as our world cultures flatten and homogenize at a rapid pace. By allowing these things to be forgotten we are dismissing so much hard-earned, deep knowledge about living and being human. I believe that by considering more carefully the daily rituals, techniques, materials, and craft objects of our ancestors we will find coded messages of healing and knowledge about life and happiness that have been quietly passed down for centuries and this is what my work aims to do.

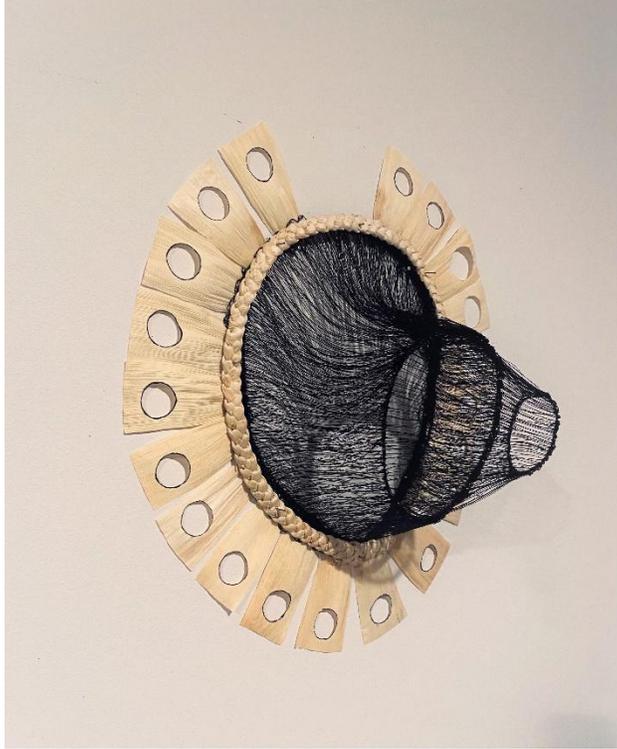
My work explores these traditional ways of crafting. I have been recreating traditional Iroquois objects such as salt bottles, masks, elm bark baskets as sketches of sorts to warm up my brain and hands. I have then been looking at modernizing the techniques, movements, and materials to make them more relevant to my own life and time. I am also looking to expand the discussion of what constitutes "Native Craft".

For this body of work, I am focusing on corn products as my main materials. I am using a polylactic acid (thermoplastic polyester also called PLA) derived from fermented corn. As corn is an Indigenous crop of the Americas, I declare this PLA to be an Indigenous material. Combining this modern corn invention with raw cornhusk, corn kernels, corn cobs and ancient cornhusk, beading and basket making techniques, I am having a conversation with my ancestors and with my future relatives for whom I will be the ancestor.



Future Ancestor, 2021, cornhusk, fermented corn plastic (PLA), 11"x7"x6"

These final works are a fusion of the PLA plastic, which is lightweight, translucent, flexible, and futuristic-looking combined with the organic corn materials: coarse opaque and hand sewn cornhusks, cobs, and rough kernels. The marriage of these materials speaks of modern-day indigeneity; deep roots in tradition and looking forward to a future while not losing sight of the past. Mixing these materials and techniques has led to the creation of a series of contemporary and futuristic healing objects in the form of wall hangings and vessels.



Wormhole, 2020, cornhusk, fermented corn plastic (PLA), 25"x 23"x 10"



Corn bottle, 2021, cornhusk, corn kernels, fermented corn plastic (PLA), 15"x 11"x 9"

I approach the work as I would when making traditional craft. I prepare my workspace and my mind and sit down to focus with intention. I use repetitive movements while working (no matter which material I am using) and allow myself this time to focus on the past, the future, my family. I speak to my current self, my future self, and my past self. I speak to my deceased mother and grandmothers. I ask a lot of questions. After I determine the process I will use in that sitting, I find my hands work on autopilot and am often surprised by the shapes that my work begins taking. I make many smaller elements in this way and then when I have amassed a dozen or so in different materials and techniques, I begin puzzling the small pieces together focusing on form and weight. I then embellish these assembled works playing with color, texture and pattern. I see these creations as figures with their own spirits. At some point they take on a life of their own and my decisions of what to add or take away become obvious. I am constantly taking apart and reassembling my work, I never consider a piece as finished until it leaves my studio.



Pregnant Vessel, 2021, fermented corn plastic (PLA), 9"x 10"x 26 ½"



Tswente (mom), 2021, whole red corn, corn kernels, fermented corn plastic (PLA), 19"x 8"x 9"

When making objects, I am keenly aware of the concept of *Orenna*. *Orenna* is the "extraordinary invisible power believed by the Iroquois Native Americans to pervade in varying degrees in all animate and inanimate natural objects as a transmissible spiritual energy capable of being exerted according to the will of its possessor" (Hewitt). I was taught that when Iroquois women work with corn, we are putting some of our power and healing energy into it. When shaping this corn in circular motifs we began harnessing power from the wind. Objects made in this way transcend the materials and contain parts of our own spiritual energy, we are giving birth to living things which become exponentially more powerful and can heal.

The act of making is the only way I am able to access and understand these concepts in-depth. While working, I enter a sort of flow state accompanied by a full-body relaxation. I can see my connection to the past and the future. I can see my hands, my mother's hands, my grandmother's hands, my great-grandmother's hands. I can see myself in my work. I make these objects with specific people in mind, often people I love

who are struggling. Sometimes the person receives the object, sometimes just the objects brief existence in the world is enough. They are a recognition of my place in time and history as a link in a chain of Iroquois crafters. They tell the story of my families survivance and the love handed down from mother to child since ancient times.



Daughters of Daughters, 2021, cornhusk, fermented corn plastic (PLA), 11"x 5"x 6"

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Erin Lee Antonak | Artist Statement

I am Wolf Clan, from the Oneida Indian Nation of New York, a member of the Iroquois Confederacy. I often consider the things we pass down between generations. I grew up learning Iroquois craft techniques from my mother, aunts, and grandparents. I look at my hands when I am working with corn using traditional techniques and think about how they are the result of women's hands working in the same way over many, many generations. Working with corn husk and corn products ties me to my lineage and it allows for a meditative state that creates space for me to consider my humanness and my connectedness to the past and the future. It represents knowledge about life and healing sent through time from my ancestral mothers. While working I reflect on the lives of my matrilineal ancestors, who they were and the challenges they faced. It is comforting and empowering to know my own life is proof of their ability to persevere through extraordinarily difficult circumstances. I gain strength and healing from acknowledging their presence in me and my life.

Corn is an Indigenous crop and was of great importance in all native cultures. Working primarily in corn: cornhusk, corn kernels, corn cobs, and fermented corn plastic (PLA), I mix traditional techniques and materials with very modern ones. My artwork is a portrait of what it is to be a modern Iroquois woman and claims my place in the great chain of Iroquois women before and after me. These current works, created using only corn products, reference portals, openings to other worlds and other possibilities, wormholes to the past and future.