

The Ultimate Betrayal: Claiming and Re-Claiming Cultural Identity

Tamara Kulusic

ABSTRACT

This paper explores issues relating to Aboriginal people and child welfare programs. It includes a creative non-fiction testimonial about the author's experiences as an adoptee. This experience is placed within the broader colonial and political historical context of Canada. Concerns about the current state of child welfare programs are raised.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article explore les questions reliées aux autochtones et les programmes de bien-être social pour l'enfance. Il comprend un témoignage non-actif, créatif au sujet des expériences de l'auteure en tant qu'enfant adoptée. Cette expérience est mise dans un contexte colonial, politique et historique plus général au Canada. Des questions au sujet de l'état courant des programmes de bien-être social pour l'enfant sont soulevées.

In what has come to be known as the "sixties scoop," thousands of Aboriginal children across Canada were removed from their communities in the 1960s and placed in the care of white parents through adoption and foster care programs. I was one of those children.

My mother told me:

When she was filling out the adoption papers she ticked the "racially mixed" box because she wanted a baby not a dog so it didn't have to come with a pedigree. She didn't mind if her baby was not pure.

My mother told me,
that I was a Half-breed.
My brother called me that "lovingly."
He wasn't a Half-breed -
He was a real Indian.

My mother told me,
that he was an Apple -
You know - White on the inside but red on the outside.
She said this like it was her grand accomplishment.
"she made him an Apple."

She meant well.

My mother told me,

that I was lucky that I did not grow up on a Reserve.
Bad things happen there.

When I was in grade three I learned this little ditty:

"Where I walk to school each day
Indian children used to play."

I told my teacher that I was an Indian.
She said, "Don't tell lies- it's not nice."
I told my teacher that I was an Indian
- well a half-breed.
She shook her head
as she said, "I'll talk to you after school."
She phoned my mom.
My mother told her
that I was a Half-breed.
The teacher never did discuss that again.

When I was a teenager
I worked in a fast food restaurant.
I met another Indian there -
I told my mom that I thought I might be friends
with her.
My mother told me,
"Don't tell her your birthday - *they*'ll find you too
easily."
My mother didn't tell me who *they* were,
She didn't need to.
I knew who *they* were -

They were the Indian family who my mother feared
 would find me
 and steal me away from her.
 They found my brother.
 His *they*.

My mother told me,
 "You and your brother are not related"
 (biologically - well, she never said it that way
 that was not the language of the house
 and she was always sure to add
 that blood did not matter anyway).
 His *they* were not my *they*.

My mother told me,
 "You and your brother are both from the Island
 but the Island is big - you are from different Bands."
 I always believed that.
 His *they* were not my *they*.

I remember when *they* found him.
 It stung.
 My mother told me,
 "Your brother met his sister today."
 I felt it like a ton of rocks crashing through me.
 "What do you mean he met his sister- I am his
 sister."

My mother told me,
 "You are a status Indian.
 When you grow up you can have
 Free medical, free dental and free education
 But not if you marry a White man."

My brother told me
 "You are lucky - you can pass,
 you get all of the free stuff but none of the
 garbage."
 He hated being an Indian.

I married a White man
 And became a White wife
 before I ever heard an elder speak
 before I ever felt the beating of the drum
 before I knew of the songs of the Long House
 before I learned to wrap myself proudly in the spirit
 of the ancestors.

Our White Mom died
 we miss her dearly

Ottawa told me,
 "Though the Island is big, the world is small.
 You are from the same Nation as your brother."
 I cried.

I went "*home*" for a Potlatch
 I met my brother's brother.
 He is my brother too now.
 His *they* are my *they*.

I am from the Snuneymuxw First Nation
 on Vancouver Island in British Columbia (BC). I
 was raised in the Greater Vancouver area, merely a
 two-hour ferry ride across the ocean - but a world
 away from my community. Much of what I learned
 about being First Nations while I was growing up
 was based upon the conflicting messages I received.
 Today my understanding has changed. As an adult
 I have begun to understand how colonial practices
 and assimilation efforts impacted Aboriginal
 communities across Canada and in turn the lives of
 individuals like my brother and me.

From the beginnings of the colonization of
 what is now Canada until the 1970s, government
 policies were based upon efforts to assimilate all
 Aboriginal people into the expanding new order.
 Education was a key component of the
 government's assimilation policies and a network of
 church-run residential schools was established in
 the mid 1800s. The residential school system
 reached its peak in the 1930s with more than eighty
 schools operating in Canada where approximately
 one in three Aboriginal children between the ages of
 six and fifteen spent most of the year away from
 their families (Fournier and Crey 1998; Kellington
 2001). By the 1960s almost half of all Canadian
 Aboriginal people had spent part of their lives in a
 residential school (Armitage 1993 cited in
 Kellington 2001). The residential school system has
 become synonymous with reports of cruelty and
 abuse. Recent reports have exposed the extensive
 physical and sexual abuse that many Native
 children suffered at the hands of school and church
 staff while in these institutions. These children at
 best were alienated from their culture through
 prolonged separations and at worst were among the
 large number who died before they graduated.

The closure of the residential school system began in the 1960s. The dismantling of this system coalesced with an acceleration of the removal of children from their own communities by child welfare agencies. In 1959 only one percent of children in government care were Native. By the end of the 1960s, however, this had increased to thirty to forty percent of all children in care being Native (Fournier and Crey 1998). Journalist Geoffrey York (1992) argues that "In a way, the child welfare system simply replaced the residential school system - producing the same kind of damaging effects...It became the new method of colonizing Indian people, after the residential schools were finally discredited" (214-15). Ernie Crey (1993), who experienced the "sixties scoop" as a foster child, notes that while residential school conditions were abhorrent, "at least the parents of children knew where they were" (156). Children also knew where their parents were and who their parents were during the residential school era because they usually returned home for summers. This was to change dramatically in the sixties and seventies. Many children were placed in homes in distant communities and exported to other provinces or across the United States (US) border to the homes of middle class white families.

Aboriginal groups in Manitoba lost many children to their US neighbours following the passage of the 1978 *Indian Child Welfare Act* in the US that "cut off the supply of aboriginal children there" (Fournier and Grey 1998, 89). Between the 1960s and the early 1980s approximately three thousand Native children from Manitoba were adopted into homes outside of the province (York 1992). In 1982 the Manitoba government imposed a moratorium on the export of Aboriginal children out of the province. Manitoba judge Edwin Kimelman headed a provincial inquiry into the mass exportation. Justice Kimelman concluded that, "cultural genocide had been taking place in a systematic routine manner" (Fournier and Crey 1998, 88). Such systematic discrepancies during 1981 led to fifty-five percent of Native babies being adopted outside of the province while only seven percent of Caucasian babies met such fate (Fournier and Crey 1998). In the years since this inquiry many measures have been developed to prevent the cross border adoptions.

The reasons that so many children entered the system in such a short period of time are numerous. The reasons ranged from a lack of understanding among social workers of the role of the extended family in child-rearing practices in Aboriginal groups to growth in the industry of Native child welfare by a growing army of social workers. Fournier and Crey (1998) note that once responsibility for the welfare of Aboriginal children was transferred from the Federal government to the provinces and a payment for each apprehended child was guaranteed, the number of children in care increased dramatically. As noted above, in 1959 only one percent of children in care were Native; however, within a decade thirty to forty percent of all children in care in Canada were Native (1998, 83). Kimelman found that social workers were unfamiliar with Native culture and wrongly regarded Natives "as carriers of the symptoms of social pathology rather than as fully rounded human beings with weaknesses and strengths" (cited in York 1992, 216). Patrick Johnston, who coined the phrase "the sixties scoop" after conducting a study of Native children in the Canadian welfare system in the early 1980s, also found that the ways in which social workers looked for problems in Native families influenced the rates of child apprehension (York 1992). For example, social workers were more likely to find problems such as alcohol use in Native families because they expected to find such problems there. Johnston argues that "provincial social workers would literally scoop children from reserves on the slightest pretext in order to 'save' them from what the social workers thought to be poor living conditions" (cited in Timpson 1995, 529).

Poverty was at the root of many apprehensions of Aboriginal children. Poor economic development and weak socio-economic situations on reserves were creating the appearance of material and physical deprivation among Aboriginal children (Timpson 1995). Social workers concluded that children living in these conditions required apprehension rather than the provision of supports or service to Native families. Poor access to services such as running water, sewage and medical treatment on reserves put Native families at risk of losing their children. York (1992) notes that some families lost babies who required medical care not because they had

neglected or mistreated these children in any way but because these children simply were not returned to their families after their stays in foster homes that facilitated treatment at hospitals. Power, privilege and poverty are complexly related to the disproportionate number of Aboriginal children who were removed from their own communities. The systematic power imbalance between Aboriginal families and the child welfare system, and the economic inequality between Aboriginal families and white middle-class families, cannot be ignored. Colonial ideology and practice have become entrenched in the modern era. Today, similar problems persist and Aboriginal children remain over-represented in child-care services.

There is still a very large number of Aboriginal children in this country involved in the child welfare system. In BC forty percent of the children in care are Aboriginal while Aboriginal people account for only five percent of the population according to the 1996 census. Less than three percent of these children are placed in the care of Aboriginal relatives or foster care providers (Kellington 2001). Aboriginal peoples are increasingly becoming involved in child welfare planning and most provincial legislation requires that a child's culture be considered when making decisions about the child's "best interests" (Timpson 1995). However, there is still no clearly integrated plan between the various levels of government (Federal, Provincial and First Nation) to address the current circumstances (Kellington 2001). While cultural consideration is seen as important, only thirty percent of children in care have a legally mandated cultural plan in place by which children maintain contact with their Nation and learn about their unique cultural heritage (Morton 1998 cited in Kellington 2001, 27). Moreover, many Aboriginal children are placed for adoption and although relatives or Native adoptive parents are sought, the majority of these children are still adopted into non-Native homes. "Cross cultural" adoptions and childcare placements wreak havoc on children's abilities to develop an identity as a member of an Aboriginal community.

CROSS-CULTURAL ADOPTION THROUGH AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL LENS

In a commentary on the lack of anthropological research on adoption, Terrell and Modell, who are adoptive parents themselves, discuss the ways in which adoption is practised and understood in different cultures. They argue that in North America adoption is thought of "as a second best way of becoming a family" (1994, 155). They note that adoption is thought of as risky for all members involved: the adoptive parents, the adopted child and the birth parents, particularly when the child looks different. Transracial adoptions are especially problematic because children lose their "real" family, their cultural heritage and their true identity. Terrell and Modell discuss an article by Marshall in which he "confirms the extent to which kinship is not 'natural' but 'cultural' representing an intense experience of love and obligation between individuals" (157). Terrell and Modell argue that adoption in Western society is in a category between categories where individuals are both kin and non-kin at the same time, leading to the creation of "fictive kin" (158). They recognize that adoption is an important area of study as yet undeveloped. They also note that adoption is "about power, privilege and poverty" (160).

The extensive trade in babies from Aboriginal groups to white middle-class families in the past decades is a frightening example of how power and privilege operate in adoption practices. The "sixties scoop" led to many transracial adoptions, many of which had bad outcomes. York cites officials in Pennsylvania who reported that ninety percent of adopted Native children required professional help because of difficulties in adjusting to their white homes (1992, 218). Aboriginal children in these circumstances experienced "a sense of social isolation greater than that which they had experienced in the church-run schools" (Crey 1993). In addition, these children experienced profound racism and were in a sense in a "limbo between two cultures - uncertain of who they are, unsure of where they belong" (York 1992, 218). However some children's experiences were characterized by "an intense experience of love." Through this experience the relationships with

fictive kin are very influential. Such a relationship has the power to steal the hearts and minds of Aboriginal children in ways that earlier systems failed. The lived relationship as parent and child, the "*fictive kin*" created out of this new sense of belonging that comes with the reinvention of family is very powerful indeed. Family from a child's home community is erased through the reinvention of family as "*fictive kin*."

Recent court cases have been fought on the pretext of *fictive kin*. Two Native girls, members of the Sto:lo First Nation in BC, say that the white foster parents whom they have been living with for the past thirteen years "are the only ones who have ever given them a loving home" (Fournier 2003). The girls have been featured in media recently because they have gone to court to prevent their Nation from "repatriating" them. Instead, the girls want to stay in the home that they have always known with their "*fictive kin*." Although transracial foster and adoptive arrangements may be risky for all members involved, if they provide children with "an intense experience of love" children may choose to reject their cultural heritage and true identity in favour of honouring the relationship with their "*fictive kin*." In this way the risk extends to include a potential risk of permanent loss to the Nation. My own experience as a child within a family tenuously connected through a relationship of "*fictive kin*" made the idea of reclaiming my pre-adoptive cultural identity one of ultimate betrayal. I believed that claiming an original "true identity" was negating the creation of "*fictive kin*." Such heartfelt convictions are powerful. Indeed as I write this I continue to feel that I am betraying the family that was created through adoption and the foster care work that my mother so lovingly committed herself to.

I am not alone in this conflicted position. Shandra Spears, author of "Strong Spirit, Fractured Identity: An Ojibway Adoptee's Journey to Wholeness" (2003), provides an account of her personal journey through the process of transracial adoption. Her experience, like my own, was characterized by a sense of belonging, where she felt she was a "real" daughter in the home she grew up in with her Mom and Dad, despite knowing that she was adopted. She, however, also realizes that much of her story is connected to a broader colonial and political history. Spears points out that the

dominant discourse regarding the history of the maltreatment of *individual* Aboriginal children in residential schools and child welfare programs overshadows the experience of many others and disconnects their experience from the "larger aspects of politics and history" (81). She discusses transracial adoption as a "genocidal blow" and a form of "cultural warfare that attacks the hearts and minds of vulnerable children"(82). Spears notes that the ability of adoptive parents to provide for the cultural, spiritual and emotional needs of their Native children is hampered by the ways in which history is told (i.e., the conquest of Native people). Accurate information is not widely available or easily accessible in Canada. Instead, the dominant discourse provides myths that justify transracial adoption as a form of rescue of these children. The "sixties scoop" was an attempt at "cultural genocide, (and is) recognized as such by the United Nations" (91). Spears argues that contextualizing her own experience within this broader history is important. It allows her to make connections between herself and the ways in which other colonial practices such as the residential school programs systematically intervened in the transmission of language, culture and connections between generations. The power of these practices and processes continues to intervene in the life course of many Aboriginal families in this country.

The current circumstances of the welfare of Aboriginal children in BC are dire. The number of children in care is great and the majority of these children are under the age of twelve, which means that the number will increase in the future (Kellington 2001). Few of these children have cultural plans in place to help them understand the importance of their heritage or the importance of their future role in their Nations. Fewer still are being raised in Aboriginal homes. Only as an adult, through College and University education, have I come to realize how profound these circumstances are. I have also learned to read my own history through new understandings of power imbalances between cultural groups. I have realized, though, that the specifics of how I ended where I was raised do not really matter. Instead I have realized that I am but one of many, many children who ended up growing into adulthood away from their own cultural communities. Through child welfare programs, virtually every family within every

Aboriginal community in this country has lost a member; some families have lost many more. Some communities have lost almost an entire generation. Despite the overwhelming numbers of children lost during the "scoop," Aboriginal communities are reclaiming their children as many of the children of the sixties and seventies are finding their way "home" again. We must continue to look for ways to develop and implement meaningful cultural plans and broader access to information about the history of Aboriginal people in this country to reach the numerous children who remain in care or lost to their communities. This will enable many more of the lost children, like me, to make informed decisions about the value and importance of our heritage.

I count myself among those who are on a life-long journey home. On this journey my older brother has been my beacon and my guiding light. He has paved the route home for me. We are from different families within our Nation and though he knows his and I have yet to find mine, we have reinvented the fictive kinship of our childhood to carry us home together.

REFERENCES

- Crey, Ernie. "The Children of Tomorrow's Great Potlatch," In *Celebration of Our Survival: The First Nations of British Columbia*, Doreen Jensen and Cheryl Brooks, eds. Vancouver: UBC Press, 1993, pp. 150-59.
- Fournier, Suzanne and Ernie Crey. *Stolen from Our Embrace: The Abduction of First Nations Children and the Restoration of Aboriginal Communities*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1998.
- Fournier, Suzanne. "Native Girls Want Band to Let Them Be," *The Vancouver Sun* (23 October 2003), p. A-14.
- Kellington, Stephanie. "Missing Voices: Mothers at Risk For or Experiencing Apprehension in the Child Welfare System in BC," National Action Committee on the Status of Women- BC Region [2001] accessed at http://www.nac-cca.ca/about/regions/bc/Final_Report2.pdf in January 2003.
- Spears, Shandra. "Strong Spirit, Fractured Identity: An Ojibway Adoptee's Journey to Wholeness," *Strong Women Stories: Native Vision and Community Survival*, Kim Anderson and Bonita Lawrence, eds. Toronto: Sumach Press, 2003, pp. 81-94.
- Terrell, John and Judith Modell. "Anthropology and Adoption," *American Anthropologist* 96.1 (1994.): 155-61.
- Timpson, Joyce. "Four Decades of Literature on Native Canadian Child Welfare: Changing Themes," *Child Welfare* 74.3 (1995): 525-46.
- York, Geoffrey. *The Dispossessed: Life and Death in Native Canada*. Toronto: Little Brown and Company, 1992.