

Fostering Indigeneity

The Role of Aboriginal Mothers and Aboriginal Early Child Care in Responses to Colonial Foster-Care Interventions

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This paper begins and is located in the two quite personal realms of the authors. First, the paper is focused in part on the lived realities of Aboriginal¹ mothers in Canada, an experiential place of one author who is a Cree woman and the mother of three. Secondly, the paper is located and draws from lived realities in the small communities in northern British Columbia where we (both authors) have for many years worked and made our homes. These two realms meet in the question of how, by fostering Indigenous ways of knowing and being in Aboriginal mothers and their children, one might begin to address the growing and disquieting use of child welfare discourses and programs as a means by which the state (territorial, provincial, and federal governments in Canada) intervenes into Aboriginal families. This question has particular resonance for northern and rural communities, particularly if they are reserve communities, because of the proportionally higher rates of child welfare interventions experienced in such communities as compared with their urban, southern, or primarily non-Aboriginal counterparts. Throughout the paper, then, are woven the personal (and by association, political and cultural) concerns of the authors, both of us who are concerned about ongoing colonial narratives towards Aboriginal peoples in Canada and both of us who are interested in the possibilities of changing inherently Euro-colonialist biases towards Aboriginal families, many of which are headed by single mothers. The purpose of this paper is both to document the temporal trends of child protection interventions into the lives of Aboriginal families (often headed by a lone female parent) and to propose possible women and community focused solutions for reducing such interventions.

Aboriginal families have been caring for each other and for their children since time immemorial. Euro-colonial interventions into the lands now known as Canada, however, dismissed the socio-cultural structures (including families) of Aboriginal peoples, characterizing such structures as inherently flawed when positioned against European and colonial practices and norms. The processes and practices of colonialism, while often contradictory and by no means uniform in

application (Thomas), operated through means of discourse and material interventions in order to construct, reconstruct, and conceptualize Aboriginal peoples as “othered” in reference to (colonially defined) “normalcy.”

As practices of discourse, colonial imaginations about Aboriginal peoples might best be conceptualized as amalgamations of singular statements or iterations that came to shape and form meanings and knowledges understood as commonly-held (Beier) toward Indigenous peoples. Discourses, as Michel Foucault reminds us, are more than “groups of signs ... but ... [are] practices that systematically *form* the objects of which they speak” (49 [our emphasis]). In Canada, colonial imaginations about Indigenous peoples were circulated and inscribed through mediums such as missionary materials, popular media, curriculum, and the arts, all of which developed and perpetuated a discourse of Aboriginal peoples being uncivilized, irrational, subordinate, and heathenistic² (Raibmon). As material interventions, the practices of colonialism operated through institutions such as residential schools (Milloy; Furniss; Haig-Brown), through discriminatory land and territory allocations such as “Indian” reserves (Harris 2002, 2004), and through legal policies or laws such as the Indian Act and ongoing litigation findings that deny Aboriginal histories or claims, particularly in the areas of self-government and resource allocation³ (Armitage). What is important to remember, then, is that both through means of discursive constructions and through marital interventions, the lives of Aboriginal people in Canada were both interceded into and (re)constructed by Euro-colonial presences. These intercedings and (re)constructions were not innocent to the site of the Aboriginal family. Indeed, both the family and Aboriginal women’s bodies were heavily implicated in colonial agendas, typified in Duncan Campbell Scott, the Deputy Superintendent of the Department of Indian Affairs between 1913 and 1932, statements that 1) “the happiest future for the Indian race is absorption into the general [white] population, and this is the object of the policy of our government” and that 2) “the great forces of intermarriage and education will finally overcome the lingering traces of native custom and tradition” (qtd. in Titley 34). In Campbell Scott’s statements the collision of colonial agendas and Aboriginal families (via women’s bodies) becomes transparent. As Julia Emberley observes, the family was the site of paramount focus in imperialist and colonialist interventions during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: “the [Aboriginal] family emerged as a material force in the [colonial] destruction of kinship societies and their subordination, socially and economically, to the colonial and imperial nations” (n.p.).

Through most of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Government of Canada intervened in Aboriginal families through the removal of children and the placement of those children in residential schools. These interventions were established in policy through the 1876 *Indian Act* but were consolidated in 1879 by Nicolas Flood Davin’s *Report on Industrial Schools for Indians and Half-Breeds*

in which he noted that the “call of the wigwam” would only be circumvented with Aboriginal children’s removal from families and their placement into long-term boarding schools which would provide the “care of a mother” in the form of “circles of civilized care.” By the late twentieth century, however, residential schools (as distinctly feminized spaces deigned to subordinate and substitute Aboriginal mother’s parenting roles) were on the wane. The state’s interest of intervening into Aboriginal families, however, had not abated; instead the means or apparatuses of intervention simply shifted from residential schools to child welfare programs. Indeed, the Government of Canada’s 1996 *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (RCAP) observed that:

Increased activity on the part of child welfare agencies corresponded with the federal government’s decision to expand its role in funding social welfare services and to phase out residential schools which, in the 1960s had increasingly assumed the role of caring for children in “social need.”

In 1983, Patrick Johnston developed and employed the expression the “sixties scoop” in reference to a sustained duration during which child welfare programming intervened into Aboriginal families and apprehended their children. Specifically, Johnston reported that, in the years leading up to his publication of *Native Children and the Child Welfare System*, representation of First Nations children in British Columbia’s child welfare system had increased from a 1955 low of less than one percent to a total of 34.2 percent in 1964. Johnston argued that this increase was a pattern underway across Canada, concluding that the proportion of Aboriginal children in care was significantly higher than that of non-Aboriginal children. In 1980-1981, 4.6 percent of Aboriginal children were in agency care, as opposed to under one percent of the general Canadian child population. In 1981-82, the percentage of Aboriginal children in care (as a percentage of all children in care) varied across Canada, with a low of 2.6 percent in Quebec to a high of 63 percent in Saskatchewan.

These trends have not abated. In 2005 The First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada observed both that “one in ten Status Indian children in three sample provinces were in child welfare care ... compared with one in two hundred non-Aboriginal children” and that “national data suggests there are three times the number of Aboriginal children in care than there were at the height of residential schooling operations” (7). In 1999 the Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children (CCRC) evaluated Canada’s success (or lack thereof) in meeting the United Nations *Convention Article 19* on the rights of the child. The CCRC concluded that, although national statistics were difficult to obtain due to provincial/territorial discrepancies in reporting, available data suggests that child neglect (as opposed to abuse) accounts for “the significant majority of child welfare

caseloads in Canada” and that “poverty and despair provide a fertile soil for child ... neglect and the social problems suffered by families across the country tend to be even more concentrated in Aboriginal communities” (n.p.). This concentration is due to Aboriginal peoples in Canada being far more likely to live in poverty than members of the general Canadian population (Stout, Kipling and Stout). In other words, Indigenous children account for a disproportionately high percentage of children in care across Canada, their representation is not decreasing over time, and it is very feasible to conclude that their representation is not linked to abuse within the family but rather by a system which views impoverishment as neglectful and thus apprehends children into the “care” of the state.

Aboriginal families are operating under a triple jeopardy in Canada. Prevailing discourses (both historically and contemporarily) in Canada have; 1) constructed Indigenous peoples as deficient and (consequently) in want of Euro-Canadian intervention; 2) maligned Indigenous peoples through systematic discursive and institutional interventions, resulting in socio-cultural and economic marginalization; and 3) conflated poverty issues with neglectful parenting practices and thus opened Aboriginal families to the full spectrum of Canadian child welfare policies. The child welfare system in Canada, almost by design, is predisposed to focus on Aboriginal families. Unfortunately, the triple jeopardy is magnified with reference to Aboriginal mothers in Canada who are the majority of single parents, who are much more likely to be lone parents than non-Aboriginal women, and who face increased levels of poverty.

According to Statistics Canada, in 2001 19 percent of Aboriginal women aged 15 and over were heading families on their own, compared with eight percent of non-Aboriginal women. Furthermore, lone-parent families headed by Aboriginal women tend to be larger than those headed by their non-Aboriginal counterparts. In 2001, 22 percent of Aboriginal female lone parents had three or more children, more than twice the figure for their non-Aboriginal counterparts, just ten percent of whom had three or more children. According to Statistics Canada’s Low-Income Cut-offs (LICOs), 17.9 percent of all Canadians live in poverty. Women, however, fare below average: whereas 16 percent of men live in poverty, 19 percent of women do. The most disadvantaged of the populations are single, divorced, widowed, or separated women over 65 years of age (43.4 percent of women who live in poverty) and lone mothers under 65 years of age (57.2 percent of women living in poverty). With specific consideration to Aboriginal women, the profile of poverty is even more disconcerting: although the rate of unemployment for non-Aboriginal women in Canada is 9.7 percent, 21 percent of Aboriginal women are unemployed. Furthermore, Aboriginal women who are employed are more likely than their non-Aboriginal counterpart to find part-time or seasonal employment, thus resulting in the simultaneous need for childcare needs while facing economic challenges associated with paying for that childcare⁴ (Stout *et al.*).

First Peoples in Canada have voiced, for some time now, significant opposition to the ongoing state initiated and sponsored efforts to intervene into Aboriginal families. In 1991, the Government of Manitoba's Aboriginal Justice Implementation Commission undertook a full review of the province's criminal justice system. The Inquiry "repeatedly heard ... that any overhaul of the justice system in Manitoba must include a re-examination of the child welfare system" (n.p.) because Aboriginal peoples understood that the apprehension of their children, and the fostering of those children into (primarily) non-Aboriginal households, had detrimental effects on child development which disproportionately propelled Aboriginal children and youth toward the criminal justice system. In 1992, but published in 1998 within the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) (Government of Canada, Indian and Northern Affairs), Josephine Sandy of the Ojibway Tribal Family Services testified that she and her community had for years been mobilizing against child welfare interventions because:

I have watched the pain and suffering that resulted as non-Indian law came to control more and more of our lives and our traditional lands. I have watched my people struggle to survive in the face of this foreign law. Nowhere has this pain been more difficult to experience than in the area of family life. I and all other Anishnabe people of my generation have seen the pain and humiliation created by non-Indian child welfare agencies removing hundreds of our children from our communities....

What then, might be the possible solutions to Canada's (and more pronouncedly, Indigenous peoples' and mothers') challenge of apprehending Aboriginal children? In previous publications (Greenwood, Tagalik and de Leeuw; de Leeuw and Greenwood) we have advocated the need to recognize existent capacity and strength in Aboriginal communities. This is not to overlook the tremendous socio-economic hardships present in Aboriginal communities but, instead, to realize that any groups who have withstood sustained (and aggressive) efforts to assimilate them must, at some level, harbour immense resiliency and social capital. It is this resiliency and social capital, particularly in the areas of cultural capacity, Indigenous knowledges, and Aboriginal ways of knowing and being, which we will now turn to as referents for possible intervention solutions into the child welfare crisis in Canada.

Michael Chandler and Christopher Lalonde (forthcoming; see also Chandler, Lalonde and Sokol) have produced strong evidence that cultural capacity and cultural continuity are deterrents against high-risk behaviours, including youth suicide. To build and rehabilitate cultural capacity in Aboriginal communities, argue Chandler and Lalonde, requires a variety of infrastructural interventions: settlement (or addressing) of land claim issues; implementation of self-governance

(at some level); development of educational, fire, health and police services; and growth of cultural facilities. Similarly, Marie Battiste has suggested that colonization has simultaneously disenfranchised First Nations peoples as Canadian citizens but disallowed and ignored citizenship in their sovereign First Nations structures. The solution to building citizenship capacity, argues Battiste, is to reclaim and rebuild Indigenous ways of knowing and being, thus producing whole and healthy First Nations citizens (Battiste and Semaganis).

Indigenous ways of knowing and being are as diverse as Indigenous peoples themselves. There do exist, however, some commonalities (Little Bear) that, when taken together, form a foundational referent from which localized or specific forms of Indigenous capacity building might begin. Indigenous philosophies are underlain by a worldview that recognizes interrelationships among the spiritual, the natural, and the self. These relationships form the beginnings of Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and relating to the world and self (Ermine). A “theology of place” (Cajete 1999) is often used as a description for Indigenous socio-cultural philosophies that anchor relationships wherein “the land has become an extension of Indian thought and being because, in the words of a Pueblo Elder, ‘It is this place that holds our memories and the bones of our people... This is the place that made us’” (qtd. in Cajete 2000: 3). Indigenous knowledges and ways of being build upon knowledges that have passed intact through generations. These knowledges sit with a context of language and orality and are evident in storytelling and ceremonies. One cannot, according to Cora Weber-Pillwax, understate the role of Indigenous languages in the preservations, restoration, and manifestation of new Indigenous knowledges and ways of being/relating with the world. For many Indigenous peoples, stories transmit and teach Indigenous knowledges and it is thus through stories that cultural teachings are passed and become imbedded within a living history. The foundations of Indigeneity are: values that privilege the interrelationships among the spiritual, the natural and the self; a sacred orientation to place and space; a fluidity of knowledge exchange between past, present, and future; and an honouring of language and orality as an important means of knowledge transmission.

The Government of Canada is increasingly recognizing the importance of building capacity in Aboriginal communities through early childhood programs which incorporate Indigenous knowledges and which are both inclusive of community members and based on bottom-up planning approaches reflective of community-driven process (such as those utilized in the *Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder Framework for Action* [Government of Canada 2003]). Women continue to comprise the majority of early childhood workers in Canada⁵ and, in Aboriginal communities, Indigenous women and Elders tend to be the most valuable asset of any early childhood centre or program. The links and opportunities between Aboriginal early childhood programming and efforts to diminish child apprehen-

sions could, in some ways, not be clearer. Research demonstrates that Canada is committing a significant injustice towards Aboriginal peoples through the apprehension of children under a flawed paradigm of child welfare programming. These interventions disproportionately affect Aboriginal mothers and their children. Research also demonstrates that (re)building cultural capacity in Aboriginal communities, through a focus on fluency in areas of Indigenous knowledges and ways of being, leads to increased socio-cultural resiliency and decreased social risk factors. Structures currently exist, in the form of early childhood development and education programs, which have imbedded within them curricular frameworks to promote Indigeneity and which inherently support and draw upon Aboriginal women and mothers. If, then, a solution is to be at hand to the state's increasing incursion into Aboriginal mothers' families, it seems eminently possible that the solution might exist in bridging Aboriginal early childhood education and development programming with programming that supports and fosters Indigeneity in Aboriginal mothers.

We began our discussion by locating ourselves in questions surrounding child welfare interventions into the lives and families of Aboriginal mothers in Canada. In rural and northern British Columbia, we witness on a daily basis these incursions and their socio-cultural ramifications in Aboriginal communities. In our work in and with First Nations communities and with fellow Aboriginal mothers, we hear stories of pain surrounding child apprehensions and of the ensuing bureaucratic confusion which mothers face in efforts to have their children returned. We have also witnessed, in our ongoing relationship with an Aboriginal Head Start Program located in a northern community, examples of inspiring successes during which Aboriginal mothers, because of their involvement in their children's programs, achieve life goals previously thought unattainable. Over a decade, eight Aboriginal mothers involved in this northern early childhood program achieved their undergraduate degrees; other mothers became involved in boards of directors, in research projects, and in participatory program evaluation processes. Ultimately these skills led to increased competency levels and senses of self.

Canada has a very problematic legacy when it comes to the treatment of the county's First Peoples. This legacy has not abated in the realm of child apprehensions. If the nation has an interest in stemming this legacy, resources and attention should likely converge both in redressing problematic discursive conceptualizations of Aboriginal peoples and in supporting existing Aboriginal early childhood programs as means through which to foster Indigeneity in Aboriginal mothers. This latter will surely increase existing socio-cultural capital and capacity in Aboriginal communities and families, thus facilitating Aboriginal mothers' abilities to exercise strength and control in advocating for themselves and their children. Through fostering Indigeneity in Aboriginal mothers, then, there exists

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the potential to counteract the state's ongoing child welfare intervention into Aboriginal mothers' families. The final outcome might well be healthier Aboriginal mothers and children of tomorrow

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¹Throughout this paper we use the terms Aboriginal and Indigenous interchangeably to denote Canada's First Peoples, including First Nations and Inuit peoples, and to denote Métis people in Canada. Where applicable, we use the names of specific First Nations (i.e. Nisga'a) or we make specific reference to Inuit, Métis, or First Nations.

²For historic materials that demonstrate such language, see for instance: Tate; Welcome; Government of Canada and Davin.

³For further information on the means through which Canada's legal system systematically negates Aboriginality, see for instance: Bell and Michael Asch; Green.

⁴The links between 1) state intervention into lone-parent Aboriginal mother led families; and 2) menial employment are neither well researched nor well established. If, however, Aboriginal children are apprehended principally on grounds of neglect, and if their mothers (when employed) are both ineligible for social service supports for child care and unable to pay for child care independently, it follows that moments arise when children are likely come under the gaze of child welfare programs as a result of their mothers seeking and/or finding employment.

⁵For more information on the recruitment and retention of early childcare workers in Canada, and their demographics, see Ferguson and Miller.

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