



Commentary

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aboriginal policy studies Vol. 9, no. 2, 2021, pp. 114-121

This article can be found at:

<http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/aps/article/view/28314>

ISSN: 1923-3299

Article DOI: 10.5663/aps.v9i2.29396

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I Want To Tell You A Story

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I want to tell you a story. It's about my brother. The story is about love, hope, survivance, and micro-resistance to the colonial project.

First, let me introduce you. This is Braden. He is from the Saddle Lake Cree Nation.



Like me, Braden was apprehended during the Sixties Scoop. He is the youngest of 10 children, and his birth parents named him “David Allen Cardinal” before “surrendering” him to Alberta’s child welfare system. My name is Tibetha, and I am a member of the Piapot Cree Nation. My mother, Annette, did not name me before I was taken from her. My birth records simply state “Baby Girl Stonechild.” We were adopted into a non-Indigenous household in the late 1970s and grew up in amiskwaciwâskahikan, or what is now known as the city of Edmonton.

There’s a lot of backstory about how two Indigenous children from different provinces and Nations ended up as siblings—too much to explain here in full detail, but I will do my best to contextualize how we came to be family.

As the Truth and Reconciliation Commission made clear in 2015, rather than being sent home once Indian residential schools started to close, the vast majority of First Nations children were held in “care” by the state because Indigenous parents, and their respective homes, were deemed “unfit.” Kanata would go on to assert its seemingly benign and altruistic concern for us by stating that sending Indigenous children home would place us at risk of being “neglected.” The painful irony that Kanata would make such an

assertion about the capacity of Indigenous parents then, and even now, is not lost on me. Kanata, who, wilfully and with precise calculation, neglected Indigenous children for over a century within schools and who continues to neglect them now, wants to give the illusion that it had our best interests in mind. But our best interests were never really their concern. Kanata had other plans.

Indeed, having carried out its destructive agenda on past generations of Indigenous peoples, Kanata wasn't done with us yet. Perhaps it still isn't. That's the thing about the colonial project—it shape-shifts. But during a period of wider global civil unrest throughout the 1960s when Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour fought for freedom, Kanata, with skilled sleight-of-hand, turned residential schools into de facto child welfare facilities where it advanced the assimilation agenda through forced removal and illusorily compassionate adoptions. But Kanata couldn't do it alone. It never could. We know now that Indian residential schools needed the help of the church, sweeping and enabling legislation, and policy. For the Sixties Scoop, we know that Kanata needed help from the provinces, enabling legislation, and uninterrupted standards of care that placed Indigenous parents and communities on the losing edge.

In his book *Native Children and the Child Welfare System* (1983), non-Indigenous researcher Patrick Johnston was among the first to name the problem and give contours to the magnitude of Indigenous child apprehensions across all provinces and territories. His carefully detailed work outlined the precision with which provincial child welfare authorities carried forward the colonial agenda by weaponizing our perceived well-being, their concern for our best interests, and what appeared to be a risk of “neglect.”

But it was the painstaking research on and analysis of First Nations child welfare data that would help us all come to know the brutal reality and the deeper manifestations of the structural and policy foundations that underpinned the “crisis” in First Nations child welfare then, and that would inform the foundations for the matter-of-course over-apprehension of Indigenous children that has manufactured the current “crisis” and Millennial Scoop today. Importantly, the research throughout this era would illuminate the plausible manifestations of the overwhelming number of Indigenous children in care. Principal among these were the ways in which provincial child welfare agencies misunderstood and misinterpreted Indigenous ways of life in general and Indigenous child-rearing practices in particular. Indeed, Indigenous children, who have for generations learned from watching and listening and from experimentation (afforded by parents who believed in non-interference), were viewed with suspicion. Their well-mannered and shy temperaments—and the emphasis Indigenous parents placed on forming the child's identity in relation to others as opposed to material or social abstractions—were according to Johnston (1983), viewed as too permissive and “interpreted as neglect” (73–74). But perhaps the most alarming aspect of this research was the examination of the ways in which the economic conditions Indigenous peoples endured as a result of centuries of deprivation and colonialism were interpreted as an individual problem as opposed to the systematic breakdown of the Indigenous family unit through the application of incongruent and unattainable materialistic standards of care (or ways of living and being) that determined the contours of acceptable parenting by child welfare authorities. Poverty, it would now seem, was the new colonialism.

In setting “standards of care” (Johnston 1983, 75) that would prevent a determination of neglect, provincial child welfare agencies restricted the definition of “care” to almost exclusively material standards—standards that, given the manufactured depths of poverty disproportionately experienced by Indigenous peoples, placed them at the greatest disadvantage. And so it was here, more than 40 years ago, that we learned not only why but also how the colonial project, with its tight focus on assimilation and material progress, moved its agenda forward. Kanata did little to step in front of child welfare authorities and did almost nothing to protect Indigenous ways of knowing and being, or our very way of life. As the saying goes, those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.

And so here we are. 2021. It is estimated that, of the 30,000 children in care across Canada today, more than 50% are Indigenous (Indigenous Services Canada 2020). A closer look at provincial statistics makes it painfully clear that we have not learned from history. In Alberta, for example, of the 8,213 children in care right now (Government of Alberta 2021), more than 71% are Indigenous, despite representing only 10% of the child population in the province. This number means that 2% more Indigenous children are in care than the year before, and 3% more are in care than three years ago. In Manitoba, the number of Indigenous children in care is so high that the problem can be described only as nothing short of a humanitarian crisis. According to a 2018 Government of Manitoba report, of the 11,000 children in care, more than 90% are Indigenous (Government of Manitoba 2018, 4). Ninety percent.

Whereas the colonial project once made sweeping advances towards its ultimate objective by clearing the plains (Daschuk 2019) or through the Indian residential school system, it is now doing so incrementally, one percentage point at a time. And I don’t mean to purely quantify the problem here, because behind these statistics are children. Indigenous children. Indigenous children, like Braden and I, whose childhoods and family bonds have been interrupted and broken apart.

But we are seeing signs that some provinces, such as Manitoba, are learning from history. Due in large part to Indigenous communities and Indigenous child welfare advocates in that province, sweeping and responsive recommendations were put forward in 2018 that made child apprehensions due to poverty or economic conditions impermissible. The *Transforming Child Welfare* report made the following recommendation:

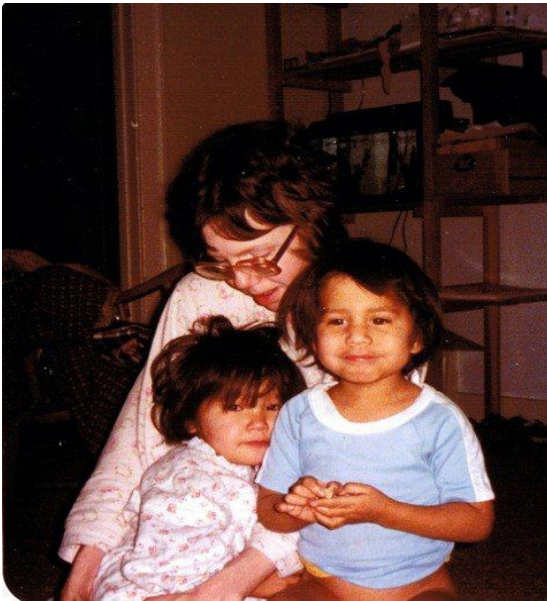
The decision to separate a child from her or his parents must be specific to the urgent safety of the child and a child **should not be separated due to poverty concerns or neglect that is caused by socio-economic conditions** (e.g., food insecurity or inadequate housing). The removal of a child should be based only on immediate harm or danger – not on an assessment of potential future risk. (Government of Manitoba 2018, 20; emphasis added)

This recommendation was later entrenched in the enabling child welfare legislation, the *Child and Family Services Act*, under s. 17(3), which states the following: “A child must not be found to be in need of protection only by reason of their parent or guardian—or if there is no parent or guardian, the person having full-time custody or charge of the child—lacking the same or similar economic and social advantages as others in Manitoba society” (Indigenous Services Canada 2020, 36).

So, what we know now is that the provinces and provincial child welfare agencies became willing accomplices in the colonial project. The Sixties Scoop is the outcome of the linked arms between the two levels of government towards a larger goal: assimilation; surrender. It carries forward today in all provinces and territories and in the western provinces in particular; weaponizing “neglect” and poverty within legislation enables the colonial project to move forward incrementally.

Now, having developed an understanding of the historical and social foundations of what brought us together, I recognize that Braden and I, and thousands of other First Nations children, are the living manifestations of Kanata’s failure to make us into the Indians they had in mind. We are a testament to the strength and survivance of Indigenous peoples. We survived. But surviving isn’t an outcome. No one wins here. While we may have survived physically, parts of us have been broken apart. And there are those who didn’t survive at all. Here I speak of the thousands of Indigenous children who died while in the “care” of the state, or while trying to find their way home—whose memories live on in the enduring hearts of our mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, kohkums, mosoms, and communities as a whole, whose presence both while living and in death are a reminder to Kanata of our immutable presence.

But here we are, Braden and I. Brought together by colonialism; piecing our lives together and carving out a future for our children where they can live free from the looming, hand-wringing presence of the state.



Back to Braden.

Like most siblings, we’ve had our ups and downs. No matter what, we’ve always stuck together. I can’t recall precisely when or how this came to be, but I have always deeply loved Braden and his kind and gentle spirit. As a child, my attention was always laser-focused on him, and, for reasons I am still trying to understand, I vowed to protect him

forever. But, with age and with the independence and identity-forming pre-teen years, we drifted apart. He lived his life, I lived mine. And, after the death of our adoptive mother when we were teenagers, we spiralled further away from each other and have only, over the last 15 years or so, slowly come back together.

Our lives are different and have always been. He's always seemed to have a rougher go of things and has long struggled with addiction, homelessness, unemployment, and discrimination. Sadly, these are not uncommon experiences for Indigenous men and women, but society, and perhaps life in general, has always been harder on him than on me.

But even in the face of relentless struggle and oppression, my brother has an endless reserve of hope and perseverance. He has fought for everything he has. He never gives up. Never. He hustles for everything. He makes sure his kids have what they need before meeting his own needs. He sacrifices. He is generous. He is humble. He is wildly curious and unbelievably smart. But, more than anything, he is kind. He is the kind of "kind person" you hope to be someday. I can't say I've ever seen him be unkind to anyone, and I wish I were more like him. In fact, I wish more people were like him.

One of the most persistent problems Braden has faced throughout his life is stable and affordable housing. The precariousness of housing has been an ever-present reality for him, both when he was a young man and even more so now that he is a man. Over the years, he's come to live with us for weeks, months, and even years at a time when his housing insecurity became overwhelming or a safety issue. At the core of it all, stable and affordable housing was painfully out of reach.

Sometimes, he'd find a place, and then the landlord would meet him, find out he's Indigenous and deny his application. Other times, they would rent to him only to pull the rug out from under him months later. Or they would rent to him then raise the rent to unsustainable levels so he would be forced back out onto the street within a few short weeks or months. There have also been times when there was no other option but to rent a ramshackle room so he would have a place to rest his head for a day or two at a time. Through it all, my home has been a stable force, allowing him time and space to gather himself, rest, and recuperate. But my brother is human after all and craves independence, autonomy, and agency. No matter how much we insisted he stay as long as he needed, he would invariably head back out into the Thunderdome of the rental market, only to come back a few months or years later. He never had permanency.

And while I love him endlessly and welcomed him into my home whenever he needed it, we needed to find a permanent solution.

And then something happened.

In mid-2020, once the Sixties Scoop Class Action was settled, we were awarded our settlement monies. At first, we were both wide-eyed at the possibility and speed with which these monies could alleviate some dis-ease. Braden, having lived hand-to-mouth his entire adult life, immediately wanted the sense of freedom, autonomy, and agency that the illusion of money provides. Having never had disposable income before, he lunged at the opportunity to spend. I did too. We're human after all, and capitalism is capitalism. It runs through the veins. But I was cautious about the Sixties Scoop settlement monies from the very start.

What became clear to me was that the federal government was trying to redress the harm it caused in an embarrassingly facile way by assuming that money would somehow make us whole again. After all, that is the purpose of settlements: *to make whole again*. But I also know that payments made to other survivors of Kanata's ongoing colonial atrocities have made almost no progress in making us whole again. So, the task before Braden and I was to do something different. To resist. We would need to resist the illusion of wholeness that the settlement promised and use colonialism against itself to make ourselves stronger.

Then, I made Braden a proposition. This was it: As hard of a time as it was for all of us during COVID, Braden and I would each reserve part of our settlement monies. Actually, we set aside a lot of money. We'd use this money as a down payment for a condo. A permanent home.

The important part was that we had to carefully plan how much to save so that the down payment would create a mortgage payment of less than \$400/month.

In total, we needed to plan so that his monthly housing costs, including insurance and condo fees, would be \$700 total. This number was crucial. It meant that, even if he lost his job, he could afford it with unemployment insurance or some other form of social support.

It meant that, for the next 25 years, while he paid down what he owed on his property, the property's value and his income would increase. He would slowly be amassing equity. He would be generating a foundation for intergenerational wealth. He would be setting the stage to leverage his own capital for his children, and his children's children.

The purpose was to ensure that he and his children could live, not merely survive.

So, we did some math and saved what we needed. I held it in trust for us both, and I called a friend who was also a realtor. I also called my bank and my lawyer. My realtor searched and searched and found a few places. We viewed, we pondered. Our bank walked in step with us the whole way, and, while Braden didn't have strong-enough credit, he leaned on mine, and we applied for a mortgage together. After a few months of looking, we found a perfect one-bedroom condo.

It's in a safe building, in a safe neighbourhood. It has en-suite laundry and a walk-out into a large green space so his son can run around. It has secure underground parking. It has a gym. The condo fees included all utilities. Yes: all.

And then we made an offer. They accepted.

On October 31, 2020, Braden and I moved all his stuff from my house into his. Just me and him. We laughed a lot that day. We laughed mostly at my misjudgement at the size of the moving truck I rented. Turns out I accidentally rented a truck roughly the size of a city bus and the height of an 18-wheeler. All he really needed was a minivan. We laughed at the way the engine roared. We laughed at the thundering boom of the horn. We laughed at the fact that a rental agency would rent something this size out to the general public at all. We laughed all day long about it.

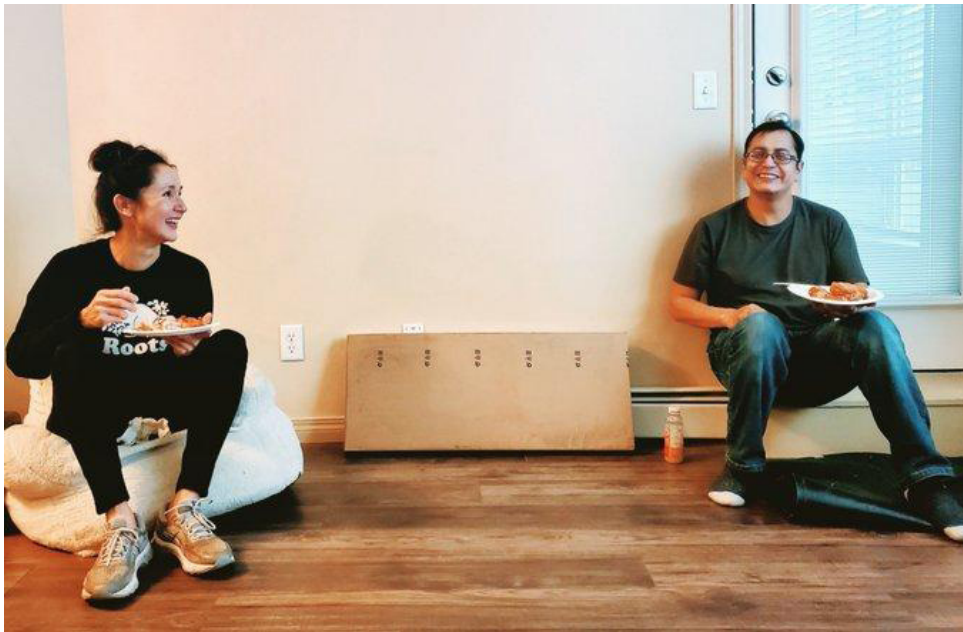
We also spent a lot of time in silence. There was something profound about this whole process and experience.

Because you see, the colonial project always wanted us to give in, give away. Surrender, if you will. But we fought back.

Instead of using the settlement monies—which were released during the hardest financial time amid the COVID pandemic—on short-term and immediate needs, we saved them.

Instead of subsidizing the federal government's failures and the long-term effects of colonialism (i.e., poverty) by spending on immediate and manufactured needs, we planned. We calculated every move.

Because, you know what? Colonialism is slippery. But resourcefulness has always been in our bones.



And so, here we are. Just Braden and me, in the house he now owns, which will one day be the foundation upon which he can build wealth and security for his own children.

There is no going back now. We made it. We survived. They can't take this from us. Now, go live. Kisâkihitin, nistês.

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