

First Nations Experiences with Adoption and Reunification: A Family and Community
Process

by

Lenora Starr
B.S.W., Thompson Rivers University, 1997

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

This thesis, or storytelling journey, examines the stories of four First Nations adults who survived cross-cultural adoption into non-First Nations families and reunification with their birth families and/or communities. The methodology utilized for this research is Storytelling. The purpose and passion for storytelling in First Nations traditions are acknowledged and explained, helping to outline why storytelling methodology is a logical choice to honour and respect the storytellers' messages included in this thesis. An overview of the traditional First Nations family system and the impacts of genocidal government policies on such traditional family systems are explicated, specifically in relation to First Nations children adopted out of community in a cross cultural manner.

-Tákem nsnek'wnúk'w7a (All my relations)

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to those who struggle to find themselves as Indigenous people, and to those who have left this world carrying the burden of not knowing who they are nor where they came from.

I dedicate this work to my parents, Florence Billy & Kurt Aeschlimann, for the life they gave me and the choices they made. I know you are both with me. Momma, I hope you are proud of me.

I dedicate this work to my adoptive parents, Maureen & the late Julius Benko, for all the love, gentleness, firmness and guidance you have given me for the last 44 years. You have kept me alive in body and spirit. No matter what path I was on, you were both there beside me...simply loving me and encouraging me.

I dedicate this work to my boys, I'm hoping one day you will read this and understand a little more about your Mother and the obstacles I did my best to steer us through. Every choice I made was with love and respect for both of you, hoping you could be a little more connected and grounded than I was. I know my struggle was your struggle as well. I'm honoured that you have both been a part of my life's journey. I love you both, unconditionally and forever.

I dedicate this work to the birth parents of Sèsq'wez...both of whom passed away while this thesis was being created. Through their lesson came a grave reminder to cherish every moment and to keep moving forward, regardless of the obstacles. Now they can see you and travel with you, Sèsq'wez.

I dedicate this work to all of those adoptees out there, young or old. Be patient, be kind and be true to your heart and your journey will be as fulfilling as you allow it to be. You are loved and you belong, even if you haven't realized it yet.

*To be nobody but yourself - in a world doing its best,
night and day, to make you everybody else – means to
fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight;
and never stop fighting.*

- e.e. cummings

Chapter One

Introduction: Realizing the Depth of my Journey.

It was a warm summer day on the windy Alberta prairies as my adoptive Mother hustled her way through the crowds at the Calgary Stampede. As usual, she had several kids in tow, some of her own, some of the neighbours and there were always cousins that wanted to tag along. Every year she was determined to get us to the Indian¹ Village at the stampede. This was something she enjoyed and she believed it to be beneficial for all of us, but especially for my birth brother and me. Both of us are Native and were adopted into her Irish/Hungarian home together. She knew we needed cultural exposure and that is what she

¹ Before we begin this journey I need to offer clarity so as to avoid confusion. Throughout this thesis you will see a wide variety of words used interchangeably to represent Canada's First Indigenous peoples. I will typically use 'First Nation's' but there will be times that the following words will be implemented:

-Indian/Aboriginal/Indigenous/Native/First Peoples

The change in wording will typically be the result of a quotation that I am referencing or a reflection of the era in which I am speaking to in my writing. It should be noted that this clarity is being offered to allow for a general understanding by a larger population. These terminologies have been used throughout North America to divide and assimilate our people since the time of contact. I am resistant to all of these labels as they are not an accurate reflection of who we are as Indigenous peoples of the land.

In my own terms and language, I refer to my Indigenous group as *úcwalmicw* (People of the Land) or *St'at'imec* (being from *St'at'imc* Territory). Preferably, I would refer to all of our Indigenous populations as 'The Human Beings' as this is our original name from our stories of creation. However, to avoid confusion I will primarily use the words 'First Nations' even though it is not, in my eyes, an accurate reflection of who our Creator intended us, as *úcwalmicw*, to be.

As well, I use the term 'home fires' throughout the thesis. This is a term that is used to describe an Indigenous person's home community/territory and traditional teachings. In our teachings, sacred fires are lit for several reasons. One of which is to call a person home, either their spirit or their physical selves as a whole.

sought from this make-shift Indian village. At this time, I was around 6 years old and my brother was about 10 years old, we had been living with our adoptive family for almost my entire lifetime.

I recall her looking at some beaded items on a table as I held her hand, looking around in wonder. Right next to us was a teepee and I could see there were people inside. I wanted to go in so badly. She must have felt me leaning away from her and she saw where my attention was. She peeked inside the tee pee then smiled at me, “Go ahead” she said “I will be right here”. Her attention went back to the items on the table. I didn’t even hesitate, which was odd as I was a very shy child. I was entranced with all that my eyes were seeing in that teepee. There were necklaces and furs hanging from the poles inside and thick fuzzy hides on the ground. As my eyes continued looking all around me, I found a place to sit on the ground. I crossed my legs and seated myself down. “I better sit like an Indian in here” I thought quietly to myself. I was sitting on a buffalo hide, I had no idea what it was at the time, but I was astounded at the warmth and softness of it as I ran my fingers through its fur. It felt very welcoming, comfortable and somehow right. Soon after I sat down I noticed there was an Indian woman in the teepee with me, she was busy sewing something in her hands. She was beautiful, hair long and braided, in a beautiful dress with a million beads on it. She looked content and peaceful. All of a sudden, I noticed she was looking at me. She said nothing, just smiled warmly at me. I shyly smiled back to her. She went back to her sewing as I continued to look around in awe and comfort. It was at that moment that I had the purest and rawest moment of my life. I said to myself:

“Maybe if I sit here long enough, she will find me”.

I was referring to my birth mother, Florence. I had a simple understanding of the circumstances of my adoption. I knew my birth Mom was out there somewhere. Even though I was only three months old when she left us with my birth Dad. My draw and connection to her was real and innately strong.

I recall closing my eyes, taking about three deep breathes and waiting. I was hoping and praying as I trembled through each breath, delirious at the thought of her actually showing up. But she did not come and it was with a heavy heart I told myself:

“It mustn’t be the right time.”

I took three deeper breathes. I was still hoping as I fought back tears. In that moment, I came to realize something very profound. It was as though I went into that tee pee for this message:

“I’m going to have to be very patient,

It’s going to be a long time before we see each other again”.

This memory has stayed with me ever since. There were feelings of connectedness, calmness, loss and grief as I waited for my birth Mom in the tee pee that day. But also I recall the feeling of respect and gratitude for my adoptive Mom, and the comfort she brought me from our first day together, and I could see her, moving around outside the teepee while she waited for me.

I am still astonished when I revisit this memory, astonished at how deep my 6-year-old mind had to travel that day for the sake of coping and survival. This was a turning point for me in my adoptive life. I was willing to be where I was but was eager to find my way back to something familiar. I wanted my birth Mother, my culture and my language. At that

time, I didn't know the specifics of what I wanted, I just knew something was missing. As I grew older, I realized that I was also needing answers. I needed to know why I couldn't have been raised by my Mom in my community and living my culture. This began a life long journey to understanding what it was that made my birth Mother unable to care for me. Sadly, and unbeknownst to me for many years, my birth Mother passed away when I was eight years old. Now who was going to give me that clarity I needed? I began seeking answers from books, birth family and adoptive family and I began to see that the answers were very complex. My search for clarity led me into murky waters that I could only clear with knowledge, experience and even more patience.

To further complicate matters I also had a birth Father that was Swiss. My draw to him was not nearly as strong as it was to my birth Mother though. This still perplexes me and makes me question the wonders of DNA memory and maternal bonds. My draw and focus was on my Aboriginal identity, maybe it was because I had darker skin & hair, and maybe it was because I had experienced life as a minority. Although I was raised in a different world full of privilege, education and safety. Racism did not spare me.

My name is Lenora Starr. I have no traditional úcwalmicw name to share with you. That fact alone, can make me feel very disconnected from my culture and still uncertain of my identity. The reason I have no traditional name is that I was raised away from my home community. I was never brought through the ceremony of name giving, neither have my children. As many adoptees can relate, a traditional name instills a sense of belonging and connectedness to our home fires. When I refer to home fires, I think of these fires as representing our entitlement to the security, familiarity, health, warmth and comfort of our

birth communities. Without this connection, it can often feel like we are still disconnected and isolated from ourselves, our families and our teachings.

My adoption occurred when I was very young, and I was fortunate enough to have my brother adopted with me into the same family. Our upbringing was a good one. We were cross-culturally adopted into and raised in an Irish/Hungarian home and were also brought up in the Catholic faith. My adoptive Mom is a strong Irish Catholic woman, likely where I got much of my stubborn and critical thinking tendencies from. My late adoptive Dad was a quieter, simpler and somewhat more passive person. He was raised in rural Saskatchewan on a typical settler's homestead. My adoptive parents raised us in a home with no immediate struggles revolving around addictions or abuse. We were safe, loved and well provided for. We were raised to be proud of ourselves and our Native background. Our adoptive family provided us with a home where we felt accepted and loved. Despite all this love and support, something was missing and it would not be until later in life, when I developed relationships with my birth family and community, when I would finally feel a sense of belonging and identity that I had been longing for my entire life.

I began asking questions about my birth family when I was in my late teens. I was seeing so many Native people around me and wondered how I actually fit into this seemingly distant and almost scary world. I remember how nervous I was to ask my adoptive aunt about my birth Mom. They had been good friends so I figured she was a reliable source of information for me. I remember the moment and all the emotions that came with it. She was sitting on the couch and I was laying on the floor writing or drawing...the coffee table was between us. I don't recall how I started the conversation about my birth family, but I did.

Then I asked her “What about my Mom, is she still around?” I held my breath waiting for her reply. It was sadly very matter-of-fact and seemingly lacked any degree of sympathy.

“Oh no, she died years ago.”

I felt shock and disbelief. Then there was only silence and processing. As she went back to reading her book, I realized that this was all I was going to be given in response. I mumbled out a feeble “Oh yeah” then we went back to whatever we were doing and back to more silence. Was that it? Was that all I was going to get? The grief that overwhelmed me in that moment was almost unbearable. I calmly got up, avoiding eye contact, and went down the hall to the bathroom. I sat on the floor and cried quietly to myself. I was never going to see her again. This heartache marked the beginning of my journey home and many tough decisions and realizations along the way.

I soon realized that the only way I was going to get to know my birth Mom was through stories. I had to re-connect with the people that knew her best and that meant reaching out to find more of her, and also my, family. Just at the thought of meeting my birth family I felt excitement, fear, worry and anger. This excitement was to see where I truly came from and to see people that I resembled. Fear that they would again reject me or deny me what I was seeking. Worry that I might be hurt or saddened by their realities as I knew mine was so very different. Finally, anger, as I needed answers as to why me and my brother were given away. Why did they leave us and why didn't they come back for us?

Through this process of meeting my birth family members, I was finally seeing people that looked like me, laughed like me, and had the same sense of humour as me. I was finally having the connection and experience I had always wanted for myself. I was getting to know

who I was and where I was coming from, both critical pieces to my self-esteem, and therefore my identity. This process of reconnection and belonging is validated in Carrière (2010) where she states “The search for and reconnection with original family members provided a number of adoptees with a sense of belonging that they described as missing from their childhood” (p. 24). The loss of connection to birth family is a common thread in many of the stories Carrière was witness to. I was also called to witness some of these stories as I made my way through my research journey.

But what a tangled web we weave in reconnecting. In my story, as well as other adoptees stories, we also have an adoptive family that went through their own emotions as we began to reconnect with our birth families. In my own reunification, and considering how it may have been challenging and confusing for my birth and adoptive families, I decided to have a grand giveaway dinner and bring both my adoptive and birth families together. It was held in Lillooet, where my birth Mom is from. The idea was to give my families a chance to see each other for who they are today and to offer thanks and support for their roles in my life, past and present. As I began to plan this dinner, I had an adoptive sibling that refused to have anything to do with my birth family and was offended thinking that I believed that my adoptive family was somehow ‘not good enough’. Our relationship has been stagnant and almost non-existent for many years. Another adoptive sibling wouldn’t even respond to my request to meet my birth family. To this day I do not know exactly why, and am left with only my imagination. We have lost contact. My third adoptive sibling was thrilled that I was taking this step in life and wanted to meet my birth family but was unable to attend. This sibling asked her oldest daughter to go to the giveaway dinner to support me, what a blessing that she

attended. Thankfully my adoptive Aunts and Mother also attended along with some of my very close friends.

My birth family also had their own journey of emotions and thoughts to sort through as I made my way home. Many of my cousins hadn't seen me since I was a new baby and I later found out that they were not told what happened to my brother and I. Our Mother was distraught so she didn't speak of it at all and neither did her family. Our family had to grieve our loss and come to terms with the confusion around it. Coming home to people who were open, loving, speculative, jealous and confused presented a whole new set of challenges for me and them. To this day the hardest part is having birth family members that know you are related to them, but they don't know how, so there continues to be some distance and separation between us. It broke my heart to have to settle for being called cousin when I really was an aunty to my nieces and nephews, because they simply didn't understand. Or to be called cousin, where I would have been called sister if we had all been raised together. The past distance between us created some present day awkwardness. The loss of these life long relationships continues to distress me repeatedly. To me, they feel like a wound that can never be fully healed.

This journey of re-discovery of my birth family and my identity has had many ups and downs and will continue to as I live out the rest of my life and as I do my best to mold the lives of my children. The gaps left on my identity are reflected on their identity as well. The story of adoption and reunification is a long one and it impacts many people across many generations.

The process of cross-cultural adoption is not an issue of the past. There are many adult adoptees who currently struggle with their adoption issues and there are a great number of

First Nations adoptees who have yet to find their way home. Today, there are still many First Nations children being adopted into non-First Nations homes. Given that we have a basic awareness of the struggles cross-culturally adopted children face, it makes it even more pertinent to understand the far reaching impacts on adoptees, their birth families and their adoptive families.

As an adult survivor of cross-cultural adoption during the Sixties Scoop, Richard Wagamese has evolved to become a journalist and poet. Wagamese (2009) states:

When I found my people again it got better. Every ceremony, every ritual, every phrase I learned in my language eased that wound and eventually it became easier, more graceful, to walk as an Indian person. I began to reclaim the history, culture, language, philosophy, and way of being that the Sixties Scoop had deprived me of (p. 12).

This statement and the stories within this thesis are evidence that even though the adoptions had taken place decades ago, the impacts of those decisions are still being felt by adoptees as they are seeking to find themselves and their people. Further to this is the research that I discovered while on this journey, all of which offered me some validation and reassurance through their written and spoken recognition of my own struggles.

Fournier & Crey (1997) are most inspirational to me in the work that I do and in the writing of this thesis. Regarding the ongoing struggles of those cross-culturally adopted children they state:

All across Canada, homeless shelters, courtrooms, youth detentions centers and prisons are full of aboriginal people who grew up in non-native substitute care. A 1990 survey of aboriginal prisoners in Prince Albert penitentiary found that over 95 per cent came from either a group home or a foster home. Jerry Adams, a Nisga'a social worker for Vancouver Urban Native Youth Association, estimates that half to three-quarters of all habituated native street kids that he works with "are graduates of the B.C foster care system or runaways from adoptions that didn't work out. They're looking for the sense of identity and belonging with other aboriginal street

kids down here that they never got in their non-native home. Maybe 80 per cent of the girls and more than half of the boys have been sexually abused in care, but even the ones from good homes are on the run.” Concludes Adam, a former government social worker: “Foster kids tend to have children very young, and those children, too, wind up in foster care”. After four continuous decades of child abductions, there are enough lost and missing First Nations children, their fate a mystery to their own communities, to populate a small Canadian city (p. 90).

This thesis, or compilation of stories that are similar, yet so different from mine, provides me with the opportunity to explore other people’s experiences in their own cross-cultural adoption, identity search and reunification stories. In this next stage of my journey, I am honored with the opportunity to hear the stories of four other First Nations adoptees with their own experiences in cross-cultural adoption and reunification with their families of origin, communities and cultures –also surmised as their ‘home fires’. I will explore many of the similarities and differences we had in our reunification journeys. No two stories of adoption are alike. But there are common themes and cues that need to be made note of for future returning adoptees and their families. The sharing of these stories will allow me to explore my thesis question which asks us to further understand the common experiences of returning adoptees to their home communities, and how can they be supported so as to facilitate a safe and healthy process for both the adoptees and the communities?

Chapter two of this thesis will provide a snapshot of historical traditional family systems both through literature and through how I have come to understand them by means of teachers and Elders. Since the time of contact our traditional family systems have been challenged and slighted by colonial settlers. This chapter will examine the practice of cultural genocide by the government towards First Nations people, which was intended to further force the assimilation of First Nations people into European values and beliefs, specifically through their children. This chapter includes a breakdown of the social policy tools of

colonization that were implemented by the government through various forms of legislation. For example, the *Indian Act* of 1867, the federal governments imposed residential school system, the Sixties Scoop policies, and current provincial child welfare legislation. This historical background is important when considering how cross-cultural adoption came to exist on Indigenous populations.

In *The Life of Reason (Volume 1)* the late Spanish philosopher George Santayana stated: “Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it” (1905). This quote clearly reflects why this chapter is relevant to this thesis. Firstly, in order to truly understand the current circumstances of Canada’s Indigenous populations, history must first be examined to fully understand how past Canadian policies, practices, laws and belief systems impacted on the Indigenous populations since the time of contact. Secondly, the hope is that this history of cultural genocide and assimilation will not continue to repeat itself.

Chapter three provides an overview of literature pertaining to cross-cultural adoption and reunification of First Nations children to their home fires. This chapter begins with a look at available literature that addresses some of the main themes that rise in the words of our storytellers and numerous other adoptees as well. Woven into the chapter are perspectives and stories from several people with varied backgrounds and cultures. There is often reference to the Sixties Scoop, as many of the children apprehended at this time were put up for adoption as well as being raised in foster care. This chapter provides a brief insight into some of the issues that will surface from the teachings of our storytellers in chapters five through nine.

Chapter four discusses the use of storytelling as a valuable methodology. I will explain briefly the history of storytelling in First Nations populations. I will demonstrate not only its historical use but how it is used now and in future generations. Storytelling played a

vital role in First Nations communities from the beginning of time. They were used to pass down values, beliefs, history and shared communal ways of life from one generation to the next. Storytelling allowed the storytellers to share their experiences in their own voice and with a specific purpose. In this thesis the storytelling methodology has provided storytellers with an opportunity to have their story become a written part of their history. The process of storytelling, combined with an ability to listen in a good way, is a respectful way to honour the storyteller and their experiences so we can learn from their understandings. In my language we call this ‘Amháka7’...to do things in a good way. The storyteller is sharing in a good way, with good intentions, and the listener is also accepting the information in a good way.

Chapters five, six, seven and eight are the shared stories/experiences of fellow adoptees who have reunified with their birth communities and their home fires on some level. All of the storytellers are First Nations and have been cross culturally adopted into Caucasian homes. This is a significant qualification as I am of First Nations ancestry and was also adopted into a Caucasian home. I will seek to demonstrate points of similarity and difference between our stories. My hope is that the information gathered in this thesis will one day benefit other First Nations adoptees, their home fires, and even their adoptive families. The storyteller’s names and identifying information have been changed to protect any third party people that may not be able to or wish to give their consent to be identified in the stories. Exception to this falls with my own story, as I am identified and this may make it easier to identify third parties in my story. All of this is taken into consideration as I share my story, I am cognizant of the fact that my birth and adoptive family members may be reading this...but my story is my own and is a reflection of my current reality and the understanding I have of

my personal history. This is my story, and stories of the storytellers in this thesis are their own as well. Every part of our stories written here have been shared following the practice of amháka7 and is not intended to upset or hurt others, but to help us all through this very difficult situation we have been placed in. For our stories are our truth. In order to create real and honest change, we must convey the truth in our stories. Our hope is not to upset people, but to make a positive impact for future returning adoptees, the adoptive and birth families and/or the communities. If we can enhance one person's perspective, this journey will have been a success.

The stories gathered through the interview processes are presented as follows:

Chapter five – Spàpza7's (Father's) Story

Chapter six – Kèckec's (Older Sister's) Story

Chapter seven - Sèsq'wez's (Little Sister's) Story

Chapter eight – Qatsk's (Older Brother's) Story

The names given to the storytellers are in my St'àt'imc language and are assigned based on how they relate to me by age. It is also a way of connecting us as family. This is very suiting in that traditionally, as family members, each of us has a role and teachings to offer.

Chapter nine will look at the role identity plays in cross-cultural adoption and reunification. As noted in all of the stories shared by participants, confusion about identity is one of the main losses they experienced. One of the main driving forces to reunite with birth families is to claim a sense of identity, to know ones' history, genetics and connection to a

culture and family that were lost to the adoptees. The issue of identity is connected to a person's sense of self-worth, purpose and belonging. All of these areas are struggles faced on a daily basis by adoptees prior to reunification, throughout the reunification process, and throughout their entire lifetimes. Examining the role of identity for adoptees is vital in understanding the impacts of cross cultural adoption and the importance of a supported and healthy reunification process. The journey of discovery of one's First Nations ancestry and culture is often a journey of healing and re-connection for adoptees.

Sinclair (2007) speaks to the value of reunification of adoptees with their birth communities by stating "Perhaps by reconnecting with their birth culture, the individual provided for themselves vital cultural mirrors necessary for self-validation; a cultural reframing from which to review and re-perceive their experiences (p. 76).

Chapter ten will present recommendations from storytellers to adoptive families, birth families, home communities and other adoptees. As an adoptee myself, it is my wish to not only point out many of the similarities in adoptees stories, but to hear recommendations from adoptees about what to do to make things better for all involved in the reunification experience. Learning from the past is important, but planning for the future, so as to not repeat the errors of the past, is critical. Hearing from the storytellers about what they wish would have happened and what they think would be helpful for future returning adoptees gives the storytellers a sense of purpose as well. Every storyteller I interviewed stated that it was their hope that sharing their story would help someone else out with their own adoption and reunification struggles.

Chapter eleven is called My Journey and is a reflection of what my experience was like in researching and writing for this thesis. I am a strong believer in lifelong learning and

healing and this belief was reinforced as I went through this tremendous experience of sharing my story and through listening to and honouring these remarkable storytellers as they shared small segments of their lives so as to teach and support others in finding their way back to their own home fires.

Chapter Two

A Discourse on the Assimilative Social Policies of the Government Towards First Nations People.

The following provides a historical perspective of the First Nations way of being prior to contact with foreign settler peoples. Much of this information is based on my own teachings and the understanding may vary from one First Nations community to another. Through mainstream resources, I have also cited works that support many of the notions I was taught about First Nations communities prior to contact. This chapter also provides a brief outline of some of the tools the government implemented to assist in the colonizing of First Nations communities leading to eventual displacement and adoption of First Nations children into non-First Nations homes:

A) Prior to Contact.

In order to understand how and why cross-cultural adoption into Non-First Nations homes began, we should look briefly at the history of child welfare in Canada and how it impacted First Nations families. This is a journey that I, as the writer, and you, as the reader, will take together as we travel through the time prior to contact, then to the time of the creation of the federal policy known as the *Indian Act*, then we will move into the era of residential schools followed by the government imposed child welfare legislation that led to the notion of adopting First Nations children out of their communities and into non-First Nation homes. In closing we will briefly look at today's delegated aboriginal agencies and the role they are playing with our families and communities. A delegated Aboriginal agency is an aboriginal controlled agency that is mandated by the provincial government and therefore

must adhere to provincial authority by working under the provincial child welfare policy, the Child, Family & Community Services Act. This is a brief overview, there are many steps in the history of child welfare in Canada that are not closely examined in this thesis so as to maintain a focus on cross cultural adoptions versus the foster care system, even though the two overlap greatly.

Prior to the introduction of the nuclear family system by European colonizers, First Nations communities operated in a cooperative and communal manner. Each person in a community had a role in the raising of children. This concept is supported by McShane & Hastings (2004) where they state “In most cultures parents are the primary caregivers. However, in First Peoples families the extended family plays a role in raising children. Kinship, emphasizing the inter-connectedness of many family members and even non-familial community members, is one of the fundamental traditional values of First Peoples” (p39). According to my own traditional teachings, roles were assigned based on what the individuals had to offer the younger generation. For example, Elders would assist with caring for younger children as parents left to go hunting or gathering. As well, Aunts and Uncles would look after older youth so as to teach them the skills necessary to be a helpful and contributing community members (i.e.: hunting, harvesting, tanning hides, etc.). It was the community’s need and desire to ensure the next generation had the skills necessary to survive and maintain a balance with the world around them. These essential skills have been passed down from one generation to another since the time of creation, as described in our traditional legends. For example, as a St’at’imc woman, my ancestors have fished the Fraser River for thousands of years. We have caught fish, cleaned it and cut it in the same place for generations. Even in my return home, I was expected to get to the river and learn how to fish.

I was expected to learn the stories about how Coyote brought the salmon to the river and about the creation of the waterfalls where we fish. I remember being there the first time with my family and them showing me the process from start to finish. As my sister broke the fishes neck to bleed it, there was a perfect groove in the rock to hold the fish so it wouldn't slide back in the river. I told her it was convenient that that groove was there, and she explained to me that the groove was there because my ancestors had stood in that exact spot for thousands of years, doing the exact same work. It was exasperating and connected me to the river and our way of life indelibly.

It was not long after that I needed to understand the political systems, familial roles/responsibilities and communal structures were all well developed and existed in my First Nations community. One of the biggest differences in my First Nations community versus the environment I was raised in was the sense of communal and environmental responsibility. Families were extended, so much so that the family system is entirely different in a First Nations framework. We are responsible to look after the land and the community, not just our immediate children or spouses.

I have learned that my home community is based on a traditional social system that is based on communal living. This meant that families were not individualistic in their thinking and doing. Historically for example, when it was time to hunt game, all the men went out and collectively gathered for the whole community and it was stored so the community had access to the meat. The meat was prepared for the community as a whole. Food preparation was done on a large scale to ensure every member had their fill. No one family would take portions of food for their immediate family only nor eat separate and apart from the rest of the

community. This communal food preparation and feasting were times for storytelling, bonding, teaching and living cooperatively together.

This communal way of being is contradictory to the nuclear family system that has been forcibly imposed upon our First Nation communities since the time of contact. This nuclear way of being creates segregation from the community as a whole which lends itself to individualism, materialism, competitiveness and is hierarchical in nature.

In a communal society, First Nations individuals were certainly allowed to decide their own path in life, but the priority fell to recognizing one's role in the community and how their role impacts the community and the greater world around themselves.

As Bennett & Blackstock (2002) state:

Since contact, the nuclear family model has been rigidly imposed by outside cultures even though it did not fit with Aboriginal cultural traditions (Armitage 1995; Fournier & Crey, 1997). These events forever changed the traditional circle of extended family in Aboriginal communities. Throughout history, every Nation has developed and maintained an institution called the family (First Nations Task Force on CFS, 19993; RCAP, 1996) (p. 276).

Given my own life experiences I feel that our way of being was forcibly interrupted. We lost sight of our communal way of being as a result of many of the imposed laws that will be discussed in this paper shortly. I do not believe it has forever changed the essence of who we are as First Nations people nor how our society best operates. Our need to look after each other and work together has never disappeared. Our eyes were diverted for many years, but in my generation, we have seen a shift in our line of vision and we are refocussing on our communal ways again.

Given the vast differences in ways of being, and the colonizer mentality of the European settlers, there was no respect paid to the already existing life systems of the Indigenous populations. This lack of recognition and acceptance of the way of life of the Indigenous populations led to Indigenous populations being seen as inferior to the European settlers and to the Imperialist way of life. This clash of value systems and perceived right to force a way of life onto the Indigenous populations led to vast struggles between these two groups. An example is the differences in family structure/communal roles in raising the next generations. The forced imposition of the nuclear family system and an individualistic way of life did not fit for Indigenous populations and their resistance led to them being seen as heathens, resistant and incapable to raising the next generation in a more Eurocentric manner. In traditional family systems, the whole community was responsible for raising a child. Many community members played a vital role in their upbringing. It was never seen as one person's responsibility. With young boys, the uncles and older male cousins had a role to play to teach the boys how to be men so they understood their role in the community. They had an understanding of their strength and gifts and how they could benefit the community. Young girls also had Aunties and older female cousins to help them in this way as well. Elders were often child minders, keeping an eye on the young ones while the older ones were training or hunting or harvesting. These are just a few general examples.

Muir and Bohr (2014) recognize that “bonds between an Aboriginal child and adults (including many caregivers) in these extended families were multi-layered and not dyadic (between two people only)” (p. 71). A child would have time to learn from several relatives, not just one or two people. This ensured a high skill level and created connections and trust among community members. The children had a space, their identity and connectedness were

naturally developed within their community. Even children that were orphaned or had been captured from other tribes were cared for in this way. This would be a traditional form of custom adoption within First Nations family systems:

Parents were the first line of responsibility. If for any reason children were left without parents, an extended family member, or an interested citizen of the community would assume responsibility for those children. Those children then became members of that family but the original birth family was not forgotten nor ignored. This is in direct opposition to the practices of mainstream society, which today continues to uphold the norm of secrecy. Within the First Nations context, there was no secrecy in such family arrangements. Moreover, there was no word for “adoption” in First Nations languages. With the coming of Europeans, this way of life changed forever the social fabric of First Nations communities (Bennett & Blackstock 2002, First Nations Task Force on CFS, 19993; RCAP, 1996) (p. 276).

On a personal level and within my own extended family system, to further describe the First Nations approach to family systems and custom adoptions, when I returned to my birth family’s home fires, my birth mother had died years before. My birth siblings that I was trying to reconnect with were struggling with addictions. My Aunty Irene had told me that since I had come back home and I had no Mother to return to, that I would just be taken into her family. I was one of hers now and that was the end of it. Since this custom adoption occurred, my Aunty Irene has passed on, so her sister recently reminded us that we were now hers. We were reminded that she would be mother, aunty and advisor for us now. All of us are grown adults with children and grandchildren of our own, but the value placed on mothering is evident in this passing on of responsibilities. This is an example of how our way of being, or how the social fabric of my family, has not changed. Often times it has been the Elders that have reminded us of how we used to be and how we should be.

Carrière (2010) states that custom adoption is generally defined as “the cultural practices of Aboriginal peoples to raise a child, by a person who is not the child’s parent, according to the custom of the First Nation and/or Aboriginal community of the child” (p. 112). Carrière goes on to offer suggestions and insights from the earlier Yellowhead Tribal Services Agency families to assist other First Nations communities in reviving their own traditional practices in the area of custom adoptions. Issues to consider included ensuring the child and adopting family had supports to manage racism as it occurred it impacted the child’s life, ensuring culture remains an integral part of program policies and post adoption services, ensuring elders and spiritual leaders are involved with adoptees, supporting adoptees as they return to their home communities and finally, follow up with the adopting family to see how they are managing and to seek their recommendations for future adoptive situations (p. 113-114). This is a fairly formal process and is fitting for an Agency that is involved in the adoptions process. I have found within my family system most of this work was done by the adoptive family with the support of the birth family. Most of the onus falls to the adopting family to reach out and not isolate the child from their birth family/culture.

B) The Indian Act.

During colonization the government needed control and safeguards between the settlers and the First Nations people. The government opted to create a plan that would provide short term care and protection to the First Nations people until such time as they were all absorbed into mainstream society. This plan is reflected in the *Indian Act* of 1876. The development of this legislation was done through government lenses only. As stated in Bennett & Blackstock (2002), there was no consultation with the Aboriginal populations as to what might be in their best interests, this *Act* “gave parliament control over Indian identity,

political structures, land holding patterns, and resource and economic development on reserves...the Act imposed non-Aboriginal forms of traditional governance and land holding and cultural practices” (p. 15).

Since contact, there have been several laws and policies that have been aimed at fragmenting our traditional First Nations communities and our way of being. To start, we have the *Indian Act* of 1876, and its oppressive components, such as Indian status, separate bands, Bill C-31, gender discrimination and enfranchisement. The reserve system was also created to limit First Nations peoples’ movement, use of the land and its resources and to free up land for arriving colonial settlers. Next, the residential school system refers to a caustic school system set up by the Canadian government and administered through the churches to educate First Nations children by forcibly removing them from their families and home communities to assist with the assimilation process. Soon after came an era known as the Sixties Scoop.

Sinclair (2007) clarifies that the term ‘Sixties Scoop’ was first coined by Patrick Johnston in his report in 1983 called *Aboriginal Children and the Child Welfare System* while he worked for the Federal Department of Social Policy Development. He found this term appropriate firstly because, he observed in the statistics that adoption as the mechanism to address problematic child welfare issues had resulted in notable increases in Aboriginal child apprehensions in the decade of the 1960’s. Secondly, in many instances, Aboriginal children were literally apprehended or “scooped” from their homes and communities without the knowledge or consent of families and bands (Johnston, 1983 Timpson, 1995; RCAP, 1996, Saskatchewan Indian, 1977) (p. 66).

The 'Sixties Scoop' refers to a period of vast removals of First Nations children from their families and home communities. Even though this phenomenon occurred in the 1960's and 1970's there is still widespread cross-cultural adoptions of First Nations children into non-First Nations homes still occurring today. In the midst of this era was the proposal of the White Paper which was a policy the government proposed to make all First Nations equal in status to other Canadian citizens, it was eventually abandoned due to widespread resistance from First Nations peoples as it would take away our distinction as First Nations people.

As well, in 1985 Justice Edwin Kimelman released his highly pivotal and critical review of Aboriginal child apprehensions called *No Quiet Place: A Review Committee on Indian and Métis Adoptions and Placements*. In his report, known as the Kimelman Report, after holding hearings and hearing oral reports he and his committee made 109 recommendations for policy change. Kimelman concluded that "cultural genocide has taken place in a systemic, routine manner". Through this report, it was then evident that child apprehensions had become the successor to the residential school system as a new form of genocide (Indigenous Foundations UBC, 2016, Sixties Scoop and Aboriginal Child Welfare, para. 10)

Pre-emptively to all of this was the Royal Proclamation of 1763 which is the first colonial policy to mention First Nations and it continues to influence government policy development and First Nations sovereignty rights discussions today. It is important to look closely at these policies to see how they had lent hand to the fragmenting of our First Nations families and the challenging of our traditional family system practices.

The *Indian Act* fragmented our communities, imposing foreign systems and regulations that were set to destroy our way of life and divide us as a people. This *Act*

continues to interfere with the lives and future of First Nations communities on every level imaginable, from who is to be eligible for status to who is to be in political positions and how they are to operate. The purpose behind this legislation was assimilation and destruction of the Indian ways of being. Bennett & Blackstock (2002) surmise that this tactic has failed through the resistance of Aboriginal people and the prejudice and unwillingness in settler society to allow Aboriginal people fully and equally into the fold of the dominant social order (p. 16).

The *Indian Act* was created to discriminate against and divide First Nations communities. In recent years, amendments have been made allowing some previously excluded from the grasp of the *Indian Act*, to be included as status Indians under the *Indian Act's* terms. Again, having an outside entity dictating who is entitled to be Indian and who is not, has only created resentment and confusion for those that are directly impacted by this controversial piece of legislation. For example, the *Indian Act* discriminated against First Nations women in that their status was lost, by means of this law, if they married a non First-Nations man. This was known as forced enfranchisement. It was soon recognized that these provisions in the *Indian Act* were not in line with the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* in regards to gender equality. In 1985 amendments were made to the *Act* with the following intentions: “to address gender discrimination of the *Indian Act*, to restore Indian status to those who had been forcibly enfranchised due to previous discriminatory provisions, and to allow bands to control their own band membership as a step towards self-government” (Indigenous Foundations. UBC. 2016). Further amendments needed to be made as Bill C-31 only addressed the women forced into enfranchisement, not the loss of status to their eligible children. Soon, Bill C-3 was created to ensure that eligible grandchildren of women who lost

status as a result of marrying non-Indian men would become entitled to registration for their status.

The authority this legislation has had in dictating who is entitled to be status had also led to the further dismantling of our families. The changes have mainly impacted upon women and them either losing or gaining Indian status. Women are the backbone of our communal family systems. When their role is displaced by force, it disrupts the entire family and community systems. The impacts of this on the children are far reaching, often affecting their understanding of their own identity, connectedness and belonging to their First Nation communities. Assimilation and colonization were the goal of these legislative changes and they have been very impactful on our women and children especially.

It should be noted that the *Indian Act* is the only piece of legislation in history that was created specifically to govern and oppress a specific race of people. Thunderbird states:

It is ironic because the Canadian *Indian Act* formed much of the basis for the oppressive apartheid policies in South Africa...It's kind of an understood custom and practice that Canada's *Indian Act* came to be known as the acceptable role model for apartheid policies...the *Indian Act* served as the blueprint on how to oppress a people within a democratic system. (Radio Canada International. *Canada and Africa share a Dark Past*. 2013).

The interest from Africa to use the *Indian Act* as a model for their own apartheid policies is further evidence that the intent of this legislation was to assimilate and oppress for the purpose of continued colonization. Many of the policies mentioned previously were intended to fragment First Nations family systems and force assimilation and enfranchisement into the general Canadian population. By attacking the family systems, the government was

weakening the familial and cultural ties in hopes of annihilating First Nations rights and title to the land.

C) Residential Schools.

The frustration of the government in dealing with the First Nations population grew as more and more settler people wanted the land for their own use and development. The government was in the process of changing and implementing laws that would assist with their goal of further assimilation and integration of the First Nations people which would forcibly remove them from their homelands. One of the tactics used to support the assimilation process was the residential school system. The residential schools were an entity that operated across Canada and was funded by the federal government and operated by the churches. According to the Legacy of Hope foundation the legacy of residential schools ran from 1831-1996. Ironically, the last residential school to close was in Punnichy Saskatchewan. It was knocked down to mark the ending of the residential school era (Legacy of Hope Foundation. *About Residential Schools*. 2016) Punnichy is where my adoptive father was from. His parents moved from Hungary and settled in Punnichy with some of the first immigrant settlers of Canada. As a family, we spent many weekends there through my high school years. At that time in my life, I had no idea what a Residential School was or what its purpose was. The school was still in operation when we frequented the farm, and recently I have been reminded that my Uncles wife used to teach at the residential school in Punnichy. I also have another Aunt that taught at the residential school in Kamloops, and also continued to teach when it became a day school. Until recent years, I had no idea of the perplexing irony of their career choices in relation to my own birth family/community's struggles.

The Report on the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People [RCAP] broadly summarizes the purpose of the residential schools as follows:

The tragic legacy of residential education began in the late nineteenth century with a three-part vision of education in the service of assimilation. It included, first, a justification for removing children from their communities and disrupting Aboriginal families; second, a precise pedagogy for re-socializing children in the schools; and third, schemes for integrating graduates into the non-Aboriginal world (p. 313).

Every First Nations family in North America has stories attached to it about the impacts of the residential school system on their family systems and communities. Mine is no exception. Upon meeting my birth family, I heard the stories of the forced and traumatic round up of school aged children from the reserves. I saw the scars and crippled hands that were the result of stealing apples to avoid starvation and for speaking the only language my uncles and aunties had ever known.

By being forced, by law, to attend these schools, children lost out on the right to learn and practice their cultural teachings within their own communities. Parents, especially Elders also lost out on parenting the children and the opportunity to pass down traditional knowledge. Both sides lost the right to carry on their language and customs. While in the schools there was little contact allowed between children and their families, often leaving the children feeling disconnected from their families. Children were shipped far from their home communities to create a sense of disconnect and force them to settle in to their new school life.

Fournier and Crey (1997) reaffirmed that Aboriginal parents were not complacent once their children were attending the schools. Often times the parents' letters to their children were censored and their visits were discouraged. The contact was being severed. Given government policies and poverty inducing restrictions on the Aboriginal way of life, parents could not afford to make the trip to visit their children at the schools...young girls would bear bruises on their bodies weeks after having been strapped.... Physical and sanitary conditions in schools all across the country were unsuitable to the point of being a health concern. Children frequently would fall ill due to over crowding, poor food, and airless dormitories. It's a sad reality that many grieving parents finally saw their children only when they were sent home to die (p. 56). Often times, the children would die at the schools from the abuse or neglect as well as being sent home to die if they were sick. Legacy of Hope Foundation (2016) reaffirmed that "broad occurrences of disease, hunger, and overcrowding were noted by government officials as early as 1897. In 1907, Indian Affairs' Chief Medical Officer, Dr. P.H. Bryce, reported a death toll among the schools' children ranging from 15-24% – and rising to 42% in Aboriginal homes, where sick children were sometimes sent to die".

Although the loss of life would seem like the direst consequence of these schools, the children that survived had grown up in an environment with no parental figures, with little nurturing and love. They were raised to be ashamed of themselves, their cultures and many were horribly traumatized with repeated sexual, physical, emotional and spiritual abuses. Upon release from the schools, after graduation or on occasional holidays, the children would find themselves disconnected from their families and communities due to shame and being raised with an opposing value system. With many of the former students resorting to alcohol

to cope with their traumas, a lifestyle of chaos and violence would continue for them for many generations to come. Time and experiences would pass, and some of the students would find themselves becoming parents. Most would find themselves resorting to the teachings they learned at the residential schools instead of the teachings from their elders. Many of these parents could not parent or did so in a way that was far too authoritarian or too lax and disorganized (Bennett & Blackstock 2002, p. 20). This forced shift in child rearing styles from traditional to a dysfunctional nuclear process proved extremely difficult for former students. Inevitably, it led to a large number of their families becoming forcibly involved with the provincial child welfare system. Parents were constantly being challenged in their daily lives by their past trauma's from colonization and residential schools. Unfortunately, these past traumas were often times numbed by the use of drugs and/or alcohol and would lead to strong addictions to these substances to assist in the numbing of those past pains and hurts. This often led to children being neglected due to their parents' addictions and lack of parenting skills. Due to the assimilative mind set that still existed, it was believed by the child welfare system that it would be best for these children to be cared for by non-First Nation's families in the mainstream child welfare system. This led to a massive influx of First Nations children in care being placed cross-culturally into non-First Nations homes in a system now coined as 'stranger care'.

As years passed, and more and more First Nations children ended up in stranger care, former residential school students would eventually come forward to speak of the abuses that occurred at the schools. Mental, physical, sexual and emotional abuses were becoming all too common of a theme from former and current students. The healing of these wounds would take many generations.

The inter-generational impacts of residential school and the child welfare systems in Canada are also mirrored in the experiences of the 'Stolen Generations' of Australia's

Aboriginal peoples:

'Stolen Generations' are the generations of Aboriginal children taken away from their families by governments, churches and welfare bodies to be brought up in institutions or fostered out to white families.

Removing children from their families was official government policy in Australia until 1969. However, the practice had begun in the earliest days of European settlement, when children were used as guides, servants and farm labour. The first 'native institution' at Parramatta in 1814 was set up to 'civilise' Aboriginal children" (Racism No Way, para. 1).

Intergenerational impacts of these policies in Australia on their Indigenous populations are similar to what our Indigenous populations face currently in North America. Despite some claims that children were removed 'for their own good' or that policies were essentially nonthreatening in their intention, the separation of Aboriginal children from their families has had long term negative consequences. Some of the effects have been listed as:

- They are more likely to come to the attention of the police as they grow into adolescence
- They are more likely to suffer low self-esteem, depression and mental illness
- They are more vulnerable to physical, emotional and sexual abuse
- They had been almost always taught to reject their Aboriginality and Aboriginal culture
- They are unable to retain links with their land
- They cannot take a role in the cultural and spiritual life of their former communities
- They are unlikely to be able to establish their right to native title. (Racism No Way, para. 11).

Considering the inter-generational impacts these policies have had on both of these Indigenous populations, it was evident here in North America as well that the children and

grandchildren would still be struggling to gain a sense of identity and belonging to their communities, as were their Aboriginal counterparts in Australia.

For our First Nations children, the disconnect from their families would lead them to be in and out of stranger care, continuing the cycle of disconnect and abuses. Many of these children were put into stranger care situations and many were adopted out. Closed adoptions were seen to be most suitable in order to effectively sever the child's ties to their First Nations family and culture. First Nations families were in a state of crisis as generations of children were being taken to the schools or placed into stranger care.

Eventually, in the late 1950's the federal government would be forced to admit that the residential schools were not successful in fulfilling their vision of solving the Indian problem. Complaints were streaming forward from the parents and it was shedding a poor light on the churches and the federal government. Something needed to change, and in the shadows, awaited the child welfare system that was ever ready to further assist in the assimilation of First Nations children into mainstream settler society.

D) Child Welfare Legislation.

Given the significant changes to the *Indian Act* after the failure of the residential schools' tactics, the Federal government passed the responsibility of child welfare to the provinces through the Section 88 amendment of the *Indian Act*. Bennett & Blackstock (2002) share that many would later speculate that this *Act* was in contradiction of the federal governments' fiduciary responsibility to Aboriginal people under the Constitution Act and that it would leave Aboriginal families and communities to exist in a continuing state of poverty (Little Bear, 1988; Union of BC Indian Chiefs, 2001). With the closure of most of the

Residential schools came the next wave of assimilative policy and practice by the government. The child welfare era began.

Bennett (2002) states;

The extension of provincial child welfare jurisdiction on reserve was viewed as yet another attempt at cultural genocide, which continues to contribute to the destruction of Aboriginal cultures (Giesbrecht, 1992; Hudson and McKenzie, 1985) (p. 6).

The torch to assimilate and ‘kill the Indian in the child’ was passed from the federal government and the residential schools to the provincial government and their ability to create and implement legislation that would undoubtedly pull First Nations children out of their homes and into mainstream society.

The constructs of this child welfare legislation were again, solely based on a Eurocentric model and nuclear family system. The First Nations communities were set up to fail by a government that wanted desperately to get rid of the ‘Indian problem’ that was hindering the progress of the settler communities. New provincial child welfare legislation was introduced excluding the foundational principles of traditional First Nations child rearing practices. The legislation did not recognize communal strengths nor balance and reciprocity among extended family and community members which are vital aspects of First Nation practices since the beginning of time.

Much of my own professional experience has been in the First Nations Child Welfare system. I wanted to believe that I could make a difference and be there to implement and recommend changes to the system so it would be a better fit for our First Nation communities.

In this section I will also be sharing my own stories about the impacts, both professionally and personally, by the various levels of child welfare legislation.

In the 1960's and 1970's the number of First Nations children in the provinces care grew dramatically. Decisions to remove First Nations children from their homes were based on a Eurocentric value system, dismissing the First Nations way of living and being as well as disregarding the obvious impacts of the residential school experience on First Nations communities. Issues for former students, and future generations, that stemmed from the residential school experience included such struggles as inability to bond with their children, lack of parenting skills, lack of ties to family for support, trauma induced addictions, low self esteem, displacement and racism, to name a few. As stated in Bennett & Blackstock (2002), often times children were removed due to the fact that their parents had attended residential schools and because of their residential experience some were ill equipped to effectively care for their children.... many children were taken away from parents whose only crime was poverty and being Aboriginal (p. 22).

The numbers of children coming under provincial care and being adopted into non-First Nations homes could not be ignored, nor could the poor practice of social workers that were responsible for going into communities, and conducting mass removals. Blackstock & Trocme (2001) state:

Social workers deprived of the information, skills and resources to address the poverty, disempowerment, multi-generational grief and loss of parenting knowledge defaulted to a practice of mass removals known as the 60s scoop (Aboriginal Justice Inquiry 2001, p. 12).

I have heard first hand, the stories from Spallumcheen Indian Band members about how the mass removal of children from Spallumcheen between 1951-1961 devastated their

community. Chief Wayne Christian explains that “from 1951-1961 in the Spallumcheen Band community, they took 70 of our children. The Provincial government has destroyed one whole generation” (UBCIC Annual General Assembly Minutes, 1980, p. 6). In one instance a bus was chartered to aid in the removal of 38 children from the small reserve of Spallumcheen (Sinclair, 2007, p. 66). To the residents of Spallumcheen, it was made clear by social workers that children removed would be better off away from their families and culture, to assist in their assimilation into white society. Some were adopted into Christian based homes in Canada, but the majority of these children were never seen again as they ended up totally dislocated from their homes as most were adopted into the United States privately. In regards to private adoptions of this time Fournier & Crey (1997) state:

The private adoption agencies, often religious, that scooped up Canadian Indian children for white Americans usually did little screening beyond ascertaining the applicant’s ability to pay; typically, five to ten thousand dollars changed hands during an aboriginal child’s adoption. Although the situation has been remedied, until 1982 there were no legal barriers to out-of-province or international adoptions or to social workers accepting financial ‘incentives’ for finding adoptable children. There are no reports of money ever reaching the relinquished family” (p. 89).

Private adoption meant the birth family would not know the child’s name or location after adoption and the adoptive families would know little about the child’s birth family or cultural identity, the families had no say in the adoption proceedings.

In addressing the shocking levels of children that began coming into provincial child welfare care and being adopted into non-First Nations homes at the end of the residential school era, the Union of BC Indian Chiefs (2002) stated:

In 1955 there was 3,433 children in care in the BC child welfare branch. Of that number, it was estimated that 29 children, or less than 1% of the total, were of Indian ancestry. By 1964, however, 1,446 children in care in BC were of Indian extraction. That number represented 34.2 % of all children in

care. Within 10 years, in other words, the representation of Native children in BC's child welfare system had jumped from almost nil to a third. It was a pattern being repeated in other parts of Canada as well (In *Calling Forth Our Future*, p. 11).

Having such high numbers of children removed from their birth homes and communities had such grave impacts on the communities left behind. Due to the forced removal of children, alcoholism and depression flooded the reserves, making them weak and vulnerable rather than helping them and their children assimilate into settler society, as was intended. It was a well-known fact that once children were removed from communities, they rarely were returned. Fournier & Crey (1997) state:

Residential schools incarcerated children for 10 months of the year, but at least the children stayed in an Aboriginal peer group; they always knew their First Nation of origin and who their parents were, and they knew that eventually they would be going home. In the foster and adoptive care system, aboriginal children typically vanished with scarcely a trace, the vast majority of them placed until they were adults in non-aboriginal homes where their cultural identity, their legal Indian status, their knowledge of their own First Nation and even their birth names were erased, often forever (p. 81).

It was not the goal of the child welfare agencies to strengthen the family to ensure a safe return for a child, instead it was to assimilate by separating the children from their traditional family systems and ways of being. Bennett & Blackstock (2002) support this view by quoting Kimelman (1985) "the goal of child welfare should be to strengthen family ties, not sever them" (p. 23). It is known that other Aboriginal families were not even given the chance to look after any Aboriginal children believed to be at risk by the provincial child welfare system, social workers believed that it would be easier to assimilate the children if they grew up away from their brothers and sisters and the influences of home. Fournier & Crey state "Placing children with another family on a remote reserve was not seen as a viable option when a child could be delivered by plane or bus to white foster parents in the big city"

(p. 86). This fact presents strong evidence that these children were being taken out of their communities primarily for assimilative purposes versus safety purposes.

In *The Lost Generation: First Nations Communities & White Middle-Class Adoption*, Henry & Lévesque share that Kimelman stated that “he had reviewed 93 cases of adoption of Aboriginal children and found that no attempt had been made to find Aboriginal homes for these Aboriginal children. From the mid 1960’s to the early 1980’s Manitoba alone lost approximately 3, 000 Aboriginal children to white adoptions” (p. 6).

The impacts on the children removed from their communities were hugely significant. Sinclair (2007) summarizes some of the issues facing First Nations children that have been adopted cross-culturally; Loss of Identity and continued struggle to form a concrete identity, racism, status levels being different at home versus in society, lack of cultural mirrors, and internal traumas (pp. 70-74) To this list I could also add loneliness, depression, loss of cultural and spiritual affiliation, loss of language, loss of land, trust issues, anguish in searching for identity/family, difficulties parenting. The hardships on cross-cultural adoptees are numerous and lifelong. Hardships are very similar between adoptees but also given individual circumstances, the hardships can vary greatly from one adoptee to another.

From my own personal experiences of being removed from my community and adopted out into a Non-First Nations home, I can assertively say that I have lived through many of the items on this list. Today, I still struggle with some of those impacts, and my children do as well. I was adopted into a home with no immediate violence or abuse. But I still had to find my way through several of the issues listed in order to maintain my sanity and to survive. Often times, I was alone on these journeys. My adoptive family was not able to understand the struggles I was facing. I was trying so hard to fit in, the harder I tried the

clearer it became that I was not meant to fit in. The differences frightened me and made me worry that I would be rejected by my adoptive family.

Sinclair (2007) supports this experience by stating “an adopted child who experiences racism and discrimination may not share that with their family because it is not part of their ethos. Kim (1978) explains that for a child who wants to fit in, bringing in information that highlights their difference might be emotionally challenging “(p. 72). And this was my experience as well. I recall struggling with racism and my adoptive Mother standing up for me and showing me how to handle it. But it seemed to come from a place of recognizing equality. Never from a place of recognizing sovereignty or Indigenous rights. There was talk of ‘people shouldn’t see color; the color of a persons’ skin shouldn’t matter’. But it did and it still does. I know my adoptive Mother fought for me the best way she knew how to, and I am grateful for those teachings. But now, I have learned on my own that if you don’t see my brown skin then you don’t see the struggle that I face and my ancestors faced – nor where and when that struggle initiated. You don’t see the injustices that have occurred against me and my brown skin. If you don’t see it, you don’t have to acknowledge it and you certainly then don’t have to worry about how to make things right.

This is just one example of how being raised in an environment where First Nations adoptees surrounded by Eurocentric thinking can cause identity issues, low self esteem and feelings of disconnect. I have worked hard to form an identity as a First Nations woman. I have had to seek people out to help me define what it meant to be First Nations and to understand my history and present day circumstances in this Indigenous world so I can recapture what was denied me from birth and to stand up for who I am and what I value.

We will delve further into the impacts of separating First Nations children from their communities in Chapters 5, 6, 7 & 8 when I share the stories of those who have been separated from their home fires and lived the experience of cross-cultural adoption. Again, home fires representing their entitlement to their security, familiarity, health, warmth and comfort of their birth communities

Reflecting back on further child welfare experiences: As a social worker that had been working within my own band, I had struggles with Ministry for Children and Family social workers for years. Workers often refused to notify the band of any involvement they were having with our children and certainly saw no need to ask for permission to travel onto reserve lands to conduct investigations or home visits with our families. Often times children were removed from their communities without a thought of their familial needs nor cultural needs. In current legislation, there are provisions to acknowledge the reality of First Nations children being removed from their communities without their bands knowledge and consent. In the following quote from the Child, Family & Community Services Act (current to February 17, 2016) it is still dictated that:

Timing and notice of presentation hearing about application for supervision order Section 33.1 of the Child, Family & Community Services Act (CFCSA);

- (4) In addition, the director must, if practicable, inform the following of the date, time and place of the presentation hearing:
- (a) each parent, if not already served under subsection (2);
 - (b) the Public Guardian and Trustee, if the parent entitled to custody of the child is under 19 years of age;

(c) the applicable aboriginal organization prescribed in the regulations for the purposes of this section, if the child is an aboriginal child, other than a Nisga'a child or a treaty first nation child;

(d) the Nisga'a Lisims Government, if the child is a Nisga'a child, and

(e) the treaty first nation, if the child is a treaty first nation child.

(5) The director need not inform a person under subsection (4) if that would, in the director's opinion, cause physical or emotional harm to any person or endanger the child's safety (CFCSA Division 4, Section 33.1).

I have a hard time with this clause not being unconditional. Under what circumstances would it not be practicable to notify a child's band that the child is removed from its birth parents and in the Directors care? I have seen this clause, and the pre-amendments before it be used as an excuse for the Directors staff to work without consulting the child's First Nation band and plan independently which typically ended up in the children in care not maintaining their cultural/familial connections. Currently there seems to be more recognition of the need for a First Nations child to remain connected to their culture and birth family for the sake of maintaining and enhancing a child's sense of self and connectedness to their First Nation community.

In reviewing the updated CFCSA I see there are still no solid terms insisting the Director notify the First Nations band of when they are investigating on reserve. As a social worker for my own band, I developed relationships with the Directors staff and our Chief & Council. It was important that we had an agreement that they would notify myself before

even coming out to the reserve to investigate. Most social workers for the Director were compliant with this and found it helpful, as a community based social worker would have a pulse on the community and be able to assist the process. The band social worker role was vital in assisting social workers with an investigation but also in helping the family understand the process they had become involved in and ensuring they had the resources to get through it effectively. I have seen many social workers for the Director that still maintain an authoritarian mentality. Sadly, I have seen some that see First Nations people as simple and their views as irrelevant in their planning. Given the history of First Nations people and the child welfare system, this type of mentality is not readily welcomed in our communities. This mentality causes a greater rift between First Nation's and the child welfare system, so long as it exists, there will never be a complete mend between child welfare system and First Nations people.

As an educated Indigenous woman, who had experience living in both worlds, I was still unable to develop a strong and supportive working relationship with the child welfare authorities at this time. While I struggled with this dual role encounter, children in stranger care and adoptees raised in non-First Nations homes were also experiencing feelings of being caught between two worlds and not fitting in on either side. Due to these failures of the child welfare system, many youths that were in stranger care or adopted cross-culturally ended up becoming involved in the criminal justice system due to their substance abuse issues. Issues of identity and belonging that plagued nearly every child being raised in non-First Nations homes was not being acknowledged nor addressed adequately, if it had been, there would never have had to have been a search to understand who they are and where they came from. If First Nations children growing up in stranger care or cross-cultural adoption situations had

attention paid to their issues of identity and belonging, they would likely never experience an identity crisis, nor the need to run away from their current ill-fitting world and return to their birth communities/families. They would not struggle with self worth, nor the confusion of understanding why they are different than the peers they were raised with.

Seemingly, over time, there was some recognition of First Nations children being in stranger care needing to know their cultural identity and for them to be supported in exploring their culture and heritage. Closed adoptions came into question, were they truly necessary and ultimately helpful for these children especially as they searched desperately to find birth families and communities that they had been separated from? Private adoptions were also happening on a large scale. This led to more First Nations children being adopted out and the limited information available to those adopted privately made it even harder for their First Nations communities to keep track of their whereabouts and wellbeing. Fournier & Crey (1997) add:

None of the private, public or religious adoption agencies that placed aboriginal children out of province or out of the country monitored the children and few even kept records that would allow adoptees to retrace their roots or find their tribes (p. 91).

Recognition of these wrongs turned to out cries from the First Nation communities demanding their children be returned. Birth families and adoptive families were recognizing the high suicide and imprisonment rates of youth in care and former youth in care. Changes were necessary again as public outcry began to echo across the country.

These outcries caused policy makers to review the child welfare policies and practices to seek areas for amendment. Changes made to the provincial child welfare laws would suggest involving First Nation communities when a child was brought into care and in

planning for that child while in care. From my own experiences, these tactics do appear more ‘culturally sensitive’ as the amendment suggested that ‘the director must, if practicable’ be contacted by the Ministry for Children & Families when a child is removed from the reserve or for planning for a First Nations child in their care. Unfortunately, when contacting the child’s band happens only ‘if practicable’, it leaves room for judgment and if a Ministry social worker is remiss in contacting the child’s band, it leaves the band little legal recourse to insist this action happen. Contacting the child’s First Nation band is essential in understanding the child’s family system, to seek possible short and long term placements, to keep the band involved in the planning for that child and ensure the band knows the whereabouts of the child as well as possible supports that the family left behind may be needing.

Amendments made at this time to the provincial child welfare policy known as the *Child, Family & Community Services Act* would also encourage cultural planning for First Nations children being adopted into non-First Nations homes. It would be suggested to create plans with the involvement of the child’s First Nations representative. I have been the social worker sitting at these planning meetings and been astounded to hear that there is no legal recourse if any party in a cultural plan fails to adhere to such plans. At this time, the Ministry did not want to dictate how an adopting family should live or where they should reside. Closed adoptions were not far in the shadows and there was still a concern about respecting the adopting families’ boundaries over the adopted child’s best interests.

Carrière (1996) conducted research for the Ministry for Children & Families regarding cultural planning for Aboriginal children placed with non-Aboriginal families. Phase 1 of her research focused on the adoptive families and the Aboriginal community’s

experiences, phase 2 focused on ministry staff and their experiences. Phase 3 provided information from adopted youth and their stories. This plan was to provide details in how the child's culture will be encouraged and maintained throughout the child's life, specifically if they were placed into a non-Aboriginal home. Policy reviews such as this are essential in understanding what is effective and ineffective in our current policies. Given Carrière's experience in adoptions and having a Metis background lends to a relevant review and strong recommendations for change when necessary. These reviews aid in identifying and filling gaps in service that our communities have been struggling with for so many generations.

Links between the children that were raised in foster care or adopted cross-culturally and those that turned to alcohol and/or drug abuse in their teens was becoming evident. The teenage years is a time challenging to a youths' self esteem and identity. Sinclair (2007) states that "Identity is an extremely tumultuous journey for all adoptees.... developing a cultural identity related to one's biology when raised in a different cultural context is exceedingly difficult" (p71). On top of this challenge is the fact that the ethos is that Canada is not a racist country and that racism never happened here. An adoptee who experiences racism but does not have the familial support and understanding to help them through it will have extra challenges in identity formation and connectedness with adoptive or fostering families.

As well, adoptees will naturally question where they came from and seek answers to assist in fulfilling their own identity. Every storyteller that shared their story with me talked about the identity crisis they experienced when they hit their teens years. Everything they knew about themselves and their world was being challenged and they didn't have concrete answers. So their search began.

E) Delegated Aboriginal Child Welfare Models.

As a result of the Sixties Scoop and legislation geared towards segregation and assimilation, a disproportionately high number of First Nations children in care and adopted out cross-culturally brought about many criticisms of the provincial child welfare system. The failure of the government to recognize our inherent right to look after our future generations meant we would still have to endure under the provincial authority for our child welfare matters. According to Bennet & Blackstock (2002) “Despite our inherent rights to care for our children, First Nations authority has not yet been fully recognized in practice by the federal or provincial/territorial governments in Canada. Thus child welfare services delivered to Aboriginal peoples continue to be predominantly mandated through federal and provincial statutes (p. 31).

Since the late 1970’s we have witnessed the delegating of child welfare authority to delegated Aboriginal agencies. These agencies are seen by many communities as an provisional step towards reclaiming full authority and jurisdiction over the care of their children and families. A delegated Aboriginal agency is an aboriginal controlled agency that is mandated by the provincial government and therefore must adhere to provincial authority by working under the provincial child welfare policy: The Child, Family & Community Services Act.

Funding and service delivery are contentious issues between these delegated agencies and the funding governments. Funding formulas and terms for service were tainted with a colonial agenda that would struggle to adequately serve our families and communities. Initially, Aboriginal child welfare agencies were permitted to serve only Aboriginal families on reserve. This left a huge gap in service to the remaining Aboriginal population that resided off reserve due to employment or housing requirements. Service to on reserve residents

consisted mainly of protective and intervention services, very little funding was able to be put towards preventative services. As well, the funding that was received by Aboriginal child welfare agencies for on reserve services was not comparable to funding received for off reserve families. Blackstock (2004) quotes MacDonald & Ladd, et al:

The Directive, whilst facilitating the development of over 100 First Nations child and family service agencies serving on reserve communities, has been broadly criticized for its inequitable funding levels as compared to provincial child welfare providers and its emphasis on supporting child removal and placement versus allocating resources to support families and communities to safely care for their children at home (2000, p. 7).

Aboriginal child welfare agencies were required to implement a national funding formula known as Directive 20-1, this formula would dictate the amount of funds sent to delegated agencies for operations and maintenance costs. The intent behind the funding is mainly focused on protective, intervention type services to families. Little support was made to accommodate any type of prevention services that could strengthen and enhance the communities. This is summarised by the Aboriginal Children in Care Working Group (2015) as follows:

There is a body of evidence that suggests child welfare systems must evolve towards providing families with holistic, targeted, community-based programs and support systems that are culturally appropriate. The most effective prevention programs that are known to improve child welfare outcomes encompass a constellation of services that encourage family preservation. These services can include mental health treatments, early childhood education, family counseling, and violence deterrence. In promoting the development of strong families, prevention services limit interactions with child protection authorities and quicken the return of apprehended children to the family home, thus reducing the numbers of children in care. It is for these reasons that prevention supports, including early intervention to families at risk, are seen as more effective than emergency intervention (p. 23).

Some jurisdictions in Canada are shifting policies and structures to support the expansion of culturally relevant early intervention and prevention supports in hopes of improving quality of support to First Nations families and to work towards lessening the number of First Nations children coming into care. Again, the Aboriginal Children in Care working group recognize this movement by stating:

In Ontario, the Ministry of Children and Youth Services is working with Aboriginal partners to co-develop an Aboriginal Children and Youth Strategy to transform the way services are designed and delivered, through nurturing more open and trusting relationships, and building in shifts in control over the governance, design and delivery of services. Similarly, in British Columbia, Delegated Aboriginal Agencies (DAAs) operate under a unique governance structure that is rooted in partnerships with First Nations and Métis peoples and guided by specific operational and practice standards. DAA responsibilities include the delivery of guardianship and child protection services and current work with Aboriginal partners in child and family service delivery is underway to further enhance prevention and early intervention initiatives (p. 26).

Shifts are being made slowly across the country to recognize the value and importance of culture and community to First Nations peoples on their path to healing. Often times the protective services can seem like a knee jerk reaction to a crisis versus an attempt to resolve why the crisis is happening in the first place. This has been a struggle for delegated Aboriginal agencies for many years.

Further to the rejection of funding for early intervention and prevention services, I recall the daily battle between our Executive Director and the funding agents to gain recognition of the unequal funding situation and to access equal funding for our Aboriginal children being serviced by the delegated agency. The difficulty was that the funding levels were not reflective nor linked to the provincial child welfare rates. So, when other provinces experienced a review of their funding rates, and change the legislation to allow for funding

formulas to be amended, there is no review or consideration able to be given to delegated agencies. MacDonald & Ladd (2000) state:

A national review conducted in June of 2000 found that on average First Nations child and family service agencies receive 22% less funding per child than their provincial equivalents despite the documented higher child welfare needs on reserve (p. 14).

Funding levels for these Aboriginal child welfare agencies were not fair in monetary nor provisional terms for service. Less funding provided to aide the communities that were struggling the most and that had the highest percentage of children in care was unacceptable and was a battle fought by many over the course of several years.

Cindy Blackstock (2010) captured the essence of this battle by stating:

Repeated reports indicate that First Nations children on reserve receive less child welfare funding than other children in Canada despite the fact that First Nations children have higher child welfare needs. After the Government of Canada failed to implement two joint solutions to address the inequality, First Nations organizations in Canada filed a human rights complaint alleging that the Government of Canada is discriminating against First Nations children on the basis of race and national ethnic origin. This historic case is now before the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal and marks the first time that Canada has been held to account before a legal body for its current treatment of First Nations children and their families (p. 1).

Most recently, on January 26th, 2016 a Canadian Human Rights Tribunal has ruled that the federal government has been discriminating against First Nations children on reserves by providing less funds for child welfare services than is provided elsewhere in Canada.

Cindy Blackstock had filed the complaint against Ottawa in February 2007. Blackstock argued “the support the federal government provides for child welfare on reserves is much lower than the support provincial governments give to children off reserves – even though on-

reserve needs are greater. Less funding for family support means more children end up in the child welfare system” (CBC News online, 2016).

This was a momentous day for so many people and children. This recent change took many years and was really only an acknowledgment by the government that they had short changed our children since the beginning. I know all of us will be watching to see the implications of this ruling unfold. There is hope that the extra funding will eventually assist the delegated agencies be able to better provide prevention services, and/or for communities to be given the support needed to exercise their inherent rights to look after their children in a more culturally safe manner.

In my own personal experiences with delegated Aboriginal agencies, I recall when I was working on a board to form one of these agencies. This board represented seven of the Aboriginal communities in the area. This was an incredible learning time for me, as I was witness to the expectations we needed to adhere to and also witness to the struggles for equal funding for our children and families so it was comparable to our non-Aboriginal counterparts. I soon came to understand that we were developing an agency that would contract with the province to deliver the same child welfare programs we were already victims of. It seemed to me that we were going to be brown faces doing the same work as the colonial faces had for generations before. The intent being that we could be a comfort to those First Nation families we were serving by implementing more culturally sensitive approaches. Would it be easier for them to work with another First Nations person versus a Caucasian person? This didn't sit well with me. I figured that it would put the First Nations social workers in the tough spot of trying to fulfill their legal responsibilities of their powerful delegated roles and still maintain ties in their own First Nations communities. The staff

involved with this delegated agency would need to be able to balance their legal responsibilities with how they were practicing. It would be a struggle to find ways of ensuring a child's safety and still maintain a balance with their own cultural teachings and recognition of historical traumas. I anticipated that rifts would be created for many social workers between their social worker identity and the loyalty and connection to their home communities. Having had the personal experience in life already, I knew that the stress of balancing both obligations for many would be seemingly insurmountable. The hope was that since it was a delegated agency that we could practice differently, that we could allow more space for cultural elements in how we planned for our families. There would be a real recognition and personal understanding of the historical traumas that occurred for our communities from the previous child welfare authorities.

Soon after the delegated agency was created, I was hired to supervise the staff. The Executive Director, the late Bill Simon and myself kept a close eye on the number of children in care. We had to be very creative in how we supported the families that were struggling to keep their children safe. Not only did we need to make tough decisions about when to bring a child into care so as to access funds to support the family, but we also had to recognize the hardship of our children in care as they were receiving less than that of their white counterparts in care.

It was always a struggle to access adequate funding and to find the right staff that would be a supportive fit for our First Nation communities. We all wanted to bring more traditional practices into the work we were doing, but were also limited with funds and flexibility to do so. I recall having several discussions with staff about how they could change their way of practice to be more culturally serving. We had to find a way to practice

differently than the Ministry for Children & Family Development but still function under their policies and procedures.

One example was regarding trust building with our communities. As an Agency we had a few strikes against us from the beginning. We were working with our own people, and we all intimately knew the historical traumas caused by the child welfare system in previous and current generations. As well, many of us were of First Nations ancestry, so we were often seen as traitors or untrustworthy by our own people. Most of our people were not trusting when it came to delving into their personal family business. Many families had had experiences of their children being taken away and never seeing them again, or hearing that their children were badly abused while in the stranger care of the child welfare system. How could we do it differently with less resources and unique trust building concerns?

The answer was simple in theory. We do what was necessary to build trust with the families we were working with. But implementing this was a challenge. A specific example I have revolves around the children's Christmas concerts. We had a few Caucasian social workers on board and they mostly tried to keep trust building and culture in mind. Although some did tend to come in power hungry and their delegation was a weapon they carried proudly. I recall chatting with one of these workers about how she was having a hard time with the family and they wouldn't trust her at all. The Christmas season was drawing close, and I asked if she had plans to go to this child's Christmas concert. She was shocked. "I can't do that. They would be so upset to see me there. Plus, I only work until 4:30 and the concert is at 6:00". I explained to her that the reason it would be good to go was because it would start to show her support of the family, as a family. And that she didn't need to be there only in the crisis. She would be showing care, support and humanness. It's a small step in working

to build trust. She felt she didn't have time to go and refused. It wasn't long after that we had a team meeting and I brought up the importance of trust building and made it a directive for staff to get out to these Christmas concert, school plays, naming ceremonies, funerals, etc. It was then recognized as essential that they make the time. This was a part of their job and was going to help build trust and repair relationships.

Not long after, another social worker reported at our team meeting that she went to a child's ballet recital and saw the Mom and foster Mom watching it together. She was invited to sit with them. When that little girl saw all 3 of these people there to support her it was a good thing. It helped build relationships all around. The social worker took pictures of everyone, put one in the file and gave the rest to the foster family and the Mom. They were very pleased. It opened a door of humanness, respect and a manner of practicing social work in a realistic setting.

Finding ways to practice and operate that felt comfortable was always a challenge. I knew logically that as First Nations people we could parent our own children. We had done it for thousands of years prior to contact and the residential school system. The legislation that governed our delegated agency was a provincial policy. A paternalistic policy. As First Nations people, the majority of us are matriarchal. A significant cultural difference. As well, the legislation was built around a nuclear family system model. We are a communal people. Responsibility to raise children fell to many people, not just two. What happened to our right to raise our children in a way we saw fit, with culture, language, community, and connectedness? What happened to our inherent responsibility to our children versus the governments imposed responsibility?

The Union of BC Indian Chiefs (2002) note that;

Even with the changes in the delivery of child welfare services, statistics showed that the overall percentage of Indigenous children in care has remained constant at approximately 35%-40% of the total number of children in care within the province. The delegated model does not represent Indigenous Peoples' inherent jurisdiction and Nationhood and continues to be unsuccessful at reducing the total numbers of Indigenous children apprehended under provincial laws. Though arguably driven by the best of intentions, delegated models (delivered through First Nations agencies) represent a continuation of historic policies of assimilation and continue to deny the inherent jurisdiction and authority of Indigenous Nations over our children (p. 12-13).

Coming to understand the content of this quote by the Union of BC Indian Chiefs guided me as my knowledge of the system grew and my understanding of how our people lived and survived. I came to view the delegated agencies as a front. Simply another means for the government to maintain control over our families through our children. When it became known that we had more children in care now than at the height of the residential school era, my heart broke. Nothing had changed, in fact it had gotten worse. The government now has us creating this trauma in our own communities. As well, most First Nation's delegated agencies have a hard time keeping First Nation's workers on board. Most of these children were going into care through delegated agencies which typically house a majority non-First Nations staff, leaving their cultural identity and connectedness vulnerable. I know this to be true from my own personal experience and awareness of several delegated agencies within BC. In *Closing the Circle: A Case for Reinvesting in Aboriginal Child, Youth & Family Services in British Columbia* the BC Government and Service Employees' Union states:

Frontline workers ranked recruitment and retention as one of the top three challenges faced in performing their core duties. An informed and culturally attuned system of care depends on the effective training, recruitment and retention of qualified and knowledgeable Aboriginal workers. Aboriginal agencies, even fully delegated agencies, remain disproportionately staffed by

non-Aboriginal workers. In our surveys, more than four-fifths (84%) of MCFD Aboriginal Service workers identified as “Non-Aboriginal.” Nearly half (46%) of DAA child, youth and family survey respondents identified as “Non-Aboriginal” (p. 18).

The Union of BC Indian Chiefs (2002) supports the thought of conflicting ideologies within delegated agencies by stating that “In all cases, although there were Indigenous individuals involved in these agencies, they operated under provincial authority and not according to the inherent jurisdiction and authority of Indigenous Nations” (p. 12). This sheds light on the legislative reality that any work being done under the provinces laws does not fully take into account our inherent rights as Indigenous peoples simply by way of adhering to an outside governing body’s laws and failure to recognize our own sovereign rights and responsibilities.

I began to wonder what it would look like if our inherent rights and jurisdiction took precedence and we looked after our children in our own traditional way again. If all the underlying causes of child welfare concerns were addressed. The abuses, the disconnect, the lack of parenting skills, the need to get back to a more communal way of supporting each other, if we would again recognize our way of being and work our way back to it with our children and for our children. This could be reflective in more preventative programs, cultural programs, and policies that insist upon a child in care maintaining contact with their birth families. Foster parents would be required to be involved with the birth families for support and more naturally occurring access to the children in care. Programs and services would serve the purpose of capacity building. Instilling relevant skills to our adults and young people to assist in living healthy and productive lives. The day-to-day practices of social

workers in child welfare would change remarkably for our wellbeing versus remaining static for their own convenience or comfort levels.

After six years supervising at this Agency a decision was made by the Board to hire a Caucasian male who had decades of experience with the Ministry for Children & Families, but no First Nations cultural teachings. He and I did not see eye to eye on many issues and soon after he was hired, he decided to fire me from the Agency that I had played a key role in creating. Broken hearted at the thoughts of the possible implications for my community, I had no choice but to move on. It was becoming very clear to me that as long as we have the province enforcing laws that are applicable to their nuclear family system and are not recognizing the inherent jurisdiction of our Nations that the delegated models would never be truly successful in supporting our communal families on the road to health and healing. Having my own experience of being removed from my community and growing up in a non-Indigenous environment, I wanted better for our future generations. The essential pieces of good leadership and adequate funding have been absent throughout the lifetime of the majority of delegated agencies. The teachings of Amháka⁷ (to do things in a good way) seemed to be absent in the running of some of our delegated agencies. There seemed to be differing values and belief systems clashing from the onset of our delegated agencies. Minimizing the clash and finding some positivity in the work we were entrusted to do was a delicate balancing act.

Recognizing that our First Nations people had always relied on good leadership versus strong bosses was key in finding the right approach to working at and supervising at our delegated agency. Traditionally, our leaders were known to be as wealthy as the people afforded them to be. If leaders truly served the needs of the people over the needs of

themselves, they would want for nothing. They would be taken care of by the people. If leaders were self centered and ill-equipped to handle the responsibilities, they would suffer as they would not be cherished and cared for by their people.

In the delegated agency, it was apparent to me that I was doing my job well if the community received me well. For example, there was one family that I had been involved with through three separate removals of their children by the Ministry social workers. To this day, the parents will still hug me and acknowledge me when we cross paths. This tells me they still respect me and appreciated how I did my work with their family. As a leader at the delegated agency, I did my best to instill the same principles in the staff I was supporting. When I was let go, it was not based on the quality of work I was doing, nor how I was supporting our staff in their practice, but for non-descript issues that were menial and unfounded.

Being released from the delegated agency was very disheartening for me. I found myself letting go of the hopes and dreams I had for the agency as I heard more and more stories of culture and traditions being pushed to the side. As well, I was having my own thoughts around the overall effectiveness of these agencies for our people and the recognition of our inherent rights and jurisdiction. I needed to explore other ways of implementing policies to keep children and families safe in our Aboriginal communities that had a foundation based on policies that were created by the community, for the community. It was time to see what exercising inherent rights and jurisdiction could look like.

F) Spallumcheen's' Child Welfare Bylaws.

My next adventure took me to Splats'in Indian Band in Enderby, BC. Formerly known as Spallumcheen Indian Band. I knew Splats'in had created an agency known as Splats'in Stsmamlt Services to deliver their own child welfare system through the development of a by-law system. There was no influence from the provincial laws. I wanted to learn more about how this operation came to be and I wanted to see first-hand how it served its members.

First a bit of background as to how Splats'in Stsmamlt Services came to be...and what exactly is it? As outlined in UBCIC's 1980 Indian World Newsletter, in 1980, Spallumcheen Indian Band, under the direction of Chief Wayne Christian, worked closely with the Union of BC Indian Chiefs, the Indian Homemakers Association and other First Nations Bands to begin their process of reclaiming their inherent rights of jurisdiction to govern their own child welfare matters. A group of people formed to support this initiative and eventually a caravan of people was born, known as the Indian Child Caravan of 1980. This caravan march began on October 9, 1980. It was actually the combination of several caravans; one from the Chase, BC area and another from the Prince George area, more from Bella Coola...and many supporters joined along the way. All these groups, numbering perhaps 350 strong, headed to Lil'wat or Mount Currie reserve in the St'at'imc territory. Here they were hosted by the St'at'imc Nation and rested before heading to Vancouver on October 12th. All caravans converged at Oppenheimer Park to plan for the main gathering on Thanksgiving Day. On that momentous day, the large caravan was escorted by police to the home of the Human Resources Minister Grace McCarthy to make their demands to govern

their own child welfare matters, to ensure she understood the objectives of the Indian Child Caravan. The Minister was not home (p. 7).

On October 16th, 1980 Chief Wayne Christian and the UBCIC representatives met McCarthy and the caravan had its opportunity to ensure McCarthy understood the concerns of the Spallumcheen Band. UBCIC News (1980) reported that;

The demands of the Spallumcheen Band were presented to her and she finally recognized the concerns of the Spallumcheen Band. An agreement was worked out whereby the Band can reclaim the children now in non-Indian foster homes as long as the children wanted to return to the reserve.... McCarthy stated that this agreement now opens the door for other bands who want to reclaim their children from foster homes. Wayne Christian, in looking at the agreement stated, ‘This agreement will allow us, as Indian people, to have more control over our own lives. Our hard work has paid off’ (p. 15).

In the end, Spallumcheen was approved to create its own child welfare policies and implement them through their bylaw process under Section 81 of the *Indian Act*. This bylaw is known as “A Bylaw for the care of Our Indian Children” and is a bilingual document, written in both English and Secwepemctsin languages. Even today, this bylaw recognizes and enforces the authority of Splots’in Band over all of its children, both on and off reserve.

I have seen first-hand the success at Splots’in Stsmamlt Services. I have had enough experience in First Nations child welfare to develop a significant frame of reference to state that the by-law process implemented for Spallumcheen’s child welfare jurisdiction has been a success. Their laws are created by the people and for the people. Given the vast dilemmas they face from having a whole generation removed from their community, the day to day successes are celebrated and recognized by the leadership and the community members alike. Unfortunately, they are the only band in Canada to be granted such authority over their child

welfare. Other First Nations bands have tried independently to access the same rights as Spallumcheen, but their requests fell on deaf ears and they were told that such a circumstance would never happen again, this was assured by further amendments to the *Indian Act* through Bill 45 and the passing of the Family and Child Service Act in legislature soon after authority over their own child welfare matters was handed to Spallumcheen.

As reflected in the Union of BC Indian Chiefs News Bulletin some of the main concerns regarding the passing of Bill 45 was that this Family and Child Service Act would “fail to recognize Indian Government. It required that notice of hearings must be given to the Band Manager or Band Social Development Officer rather than to the Chief of the band to which the child belonged, thereby the government would be failing to acknowledge [Spallumcheen’s] own system of government – Indian Government. The Bill would give all authority for our children to the provincial government ignoring Indian Governments” (1980, p. 1).

Several years later, through the creation of the Stsmamlt Project, several Secwepemc bands rallied together to demand the recognition of their inherent rights to look after their children and families. The idea behind this project was to enhance the cultural, social and health outcomes of their people through the exercising of inherent rights, advance their traditions, customs and beliefs, always celebrating and sharing who they are as a people, and also to implement Nation-based, family focused, and community driven approaches. The ideas were inclusive of a Secwepemc Nation Child and Family Wellness Act which would govern the child welfare jurisdictional rights. This project was funded by the Ministry for Children and Family development and was only funded until 2014. I have yet to hear any further on what will be done with the work done on this project now that funding has ended. I

have searched for an evaluative mechanism to see what progress or benefits this project had and there are no closing summaries that I can see. It seems that the intention was to have structural ideas drawn up as to what a form of governance might look like if the government ever recognized Secwepemc jurisdictional rights over their children. It seems not to have gone further than that to date.

But it is through efforts such as this that First Nations communities struggle to gain control of the lives of their families and children. It is yet another step up in having our jurisdictional rights recognized. All of this action, on behalf of Spallumcheen band and Stsmamlt Project have a common goal: To keep our First Nations children safe and within their First Nations communities, to continue our process of decolonization where it matters most...at home and with our children.

G) How Legislation Influenced the Cross-cultural Adoption of First Nations Children.

It is important for us to have this historical understanding of First Nations child welfare so we can have a better understanding of the framework from which cross-cultural adoptions have occurred. The *Indian Act*, even though it is a racist and discriminatory document, will be upheld by First Nations people until the government wants to acknowledge its obligations to us as Canada's first inhabitants and rightful caretakers of the land, the aim of this legislation was to deconstruct our traditional family systems through force assimilation. It was created to provoke the extinguishment of First Nations inherent rights to the land. The residential school era was another attempt towards the assimilation and genocide of First Nations people, by forcibly separating children from their families to make the assimilation of the next generation easier for the government. Child welfare legislation was amended to

allow for the mass removal of First Nations children from their homes to continue with the assimilative process by dividing families and weakening familial and cultural ties for children in government care. Eventually, this responsibility was passed to delegated Aboriginal child welfare agencies, where the intention was to implement more culturally sound practice for First Nations families and the lawful protection First Nations children. However, more First Nations children have been removed from their homes during this era of delegated Aboriginal agencies than the peak of the residential school era. Ball (2008) confirms this by stating “There are approximately 27,000 Aboriginal children younger than 17 in government care — three times the number enrolled in residential schools at the height of their operations, and more than at any time in Canada’s history. In some provinces, Aboriginal children outnumber non-Aboriginal children in care by a ratio of 8 to 1” (p. 10).

The impacts of these pieces of government legislation has been devastating as they all lead to the removal of children from our communities and ultimately exposure to cultural genocide. In doing this, our families were forcibly deconstructed by dividing our communities, displacing our traditional family roles, interrupting cultural teachings and ways of being, as well as by inflicting countless abuses and traumas on First Nations people that would unfold over several generations of hurt before healing would begin for each and every individual impacted. On an individual level we were deconstructed as well. The impacts of such a traumatic history can be seen on a communal level, but also, when one looks closely at the individual level, the deconstruction appears by way of low self esteem, disconnect from family and community, identity struggles, and repeated abuse cycles. For those cross-culturally adopted, the loss of our true identity was a significant result of all of these assimilative pieces of legislation. Having been a child separated from my birth family, I had

emotions such as fear, anger and shame...shame of my brown skin. Like myself, others separated from their families and communities were left alone to struggle with conflicting and confusing emotions. Not knowing who we were and where we were from were some of the biggest identity issues we had to face. Carrière (2010) found:

...that all of her participants ‘explained that their drive to seek out their birth family stemmed from questions about a longing to know who they are, where they come from and where they belong in the world’ (2005:137) (p. 41).

Further, many of the social workers that were involved in the removal of so many First Nations children around the 60’s Scoop era were non Native and lacked education and experience in understanding conditions and political struggles on Canada’s reserve systems. As a result of the legislative requirements and standards of the day, Bennett & Blackstock (2002) stated that “because of the poor socio-economic factors facing First Nations communities, many First Nations children were consequently apprehended, placed in foster homes and never returned home. Poverty was the only reason many children were apprehended from otherwise caring Aboriginal homes. Those who did find their way back home after prolonged absences found themselves alienated from their families and cultural environments (Hudson and McKenzie, 1981; 1985)” (p. 25). The impacts of child welfare legislation effects many children for their remaining lifetimes....and the lifetimes of their children and grandchildren.

As you have seen in some of the details of my own story of adoption and as you will see in the stories of the participants that I have interviewed, being raised in the white mainstream culture and not fully understanding our own cultures led to all sorts of complications, especially as adolescents. Not knowing anything about our cultural background and trying so hard to fit into mainstream society that would never fully accept us

anyways. To summarise Bennett & Blackstock (2002), this put us in a place where we had a privileged upbringing in a white system that had shown us attitudes of superiority. These feelings may have created conflicts for us when we tried to connect with our birth families (p. 25). In my own journey I have referred to this as a 'way of being'...how I live my life based on the values I was presented with. Even though I grew up in a home that did not teach superiority, I was still surrounded by those messages through social media. I was (seemingly) a part of the dominant mainstream society, and expectations were set for me that matched the environment I grew up in. So upon my return to my home community I was grateful for being taught the humbleness I had been by my adoptive parents. I was open minded and did a lot of processing alone. I didn't want to share too much of my thoughts as I worried I may sound like I was looking down on or judging my First Nations people. But I also found that this notion of superiority would not escape me, no matter how humble I was. Some of my birth family and community automatically assumed I was entering the community with a superior mindset and that I likely saw myself as above others, due to their own low self-esteem and victim mentality. I was seeing and learning that I was not the only one impacted by an assimilative process, my birth family was as well. They were hurting from generations exposed to numerous genocidal practices on behalf of the government. I would soon see that my struggles with acceptance and belonging, to either world, were greatly impacted by the conflicting values I was exposed to and that others assumed I readily accepted. The whole process of adoption led me to be marginalized further, but this time it was by some of my birth family.

Often times, this marginalization can lead many adolescents to seek acceptance and recognitions from other subcultures and/or groups. Often times, when feeling marginalized,

we turn to others in the same predicament for validation and support. Sadly, these subcultures often led to the usage of alcohol and/or drugs to manage the stress and angst created by this conflict. Ironically, this choice and resulting behaviour end up reinforcing the negative self-image that brought the adolescent to the place of misuse to begin with, and from this, the cyclical nature of addictions can begin.

Furthermore, many of the children that were adopted out or placed in the child welfare system, end up involved in the criminal justice system. Proulx & Perreault (2002) state “...children who were removed from their parents are less likely to form strong attachments with others, resulting in a lesser level of social control and an increased likelihood they will break the law...” (Bennett & Blackstock, 2002, p. 26).

As recently witnessed through the Truth & Reconciliation Commission we can see that the impacts of these forced social policies on First Nations populations. Every one of these atrocities had an impact on First Nations people and cultures. Each event occurred with it's own agenda and devastated our families and communities. The impacts hit our families hard, and today First Nations families still suffer at the expense of assimilation. The results are far reaching and cross many generations. It will take several generations to heal from the trauma that these colonial policies and practices have had on Indigenous people.

One of the jobs of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada was to collect and document statements from former students of the Indian residential school system and anyone who feels they have been impacted by the schools and their legacy, this included those who went into care or were adopted out given the impacts of residential schools upon their parents.

Five of the 94 recommendations that stemmed from the TRC were directed specifically at the child welfare systems and asks the federal, provincial, territorial and First Nations governments to make specific changes to their policies and processes. The recommendations were first on the list and are as follows;

Child Welfare.

1. We call upon the federal, provincial, territorial and Aboriginal governments to commit to reducing the number of Aboriginal children in care by:
 - i. Monitoring and assessing neglect investigations.
 - ii. Providing adequate resources to enable Aboriginal communities and child-welfare organizations to keep Aboriginal families together where it is safe to do so, and to keep children in culturally appropriate environments, regardless of where they reside.
 - iii. Ensuring that social workers and others who conduct child-welfare investigations are properly educated and trained about the history and impacts of residential schools.
 - iv. Ensuring that social workers and others who conduct child-welfare investigations are properly educated and trained about the potential for Aboriginal communities and families to provide for Aboriginal communities and families to provide more appropriate solutions to family healing.
 - v. Requiring that all child-welfare decision makers consider the impact of the residential school experience on children and their caregivers.
2. We call upon the federal government, in collaboration with the provinces and territories, to prepare and publish annual reports on the number of Aboriginal children (First Nations, Inuit and Metis) who are in care, compared with non-Aboriginal children, as well as the reasons for apprehension, the total spending on preventive and care services by child-welfare agencies and the effectiveness of various interventions.
3. We call upon all levels of government to fully implement Jordan's Principle.

4. We call upon the federal government to enact Aboriginal child-welfare legislation that establishes national standards for Aboriginal child apprehension and custody cases and includes principles that:

- i. Affirm the right of Aboriginal governments to establish and maintain their own child-welfare agencies.
- ii. Require all child-welfare agencies and courts to take the residential school legacy into account in their decision making.
- iii. Establish, as an important priority, a requirement that placements of Aboriginal children into temporary and permanent care be culturally appropriate.

5. We call upon the federal, provincial, territorial, and Aboriginal governments to develop culturally appropriate parenting programs for Aboriginal families.

I feel it is crucial to acknowledge this moment in history and these essential recommendations made as a result of the statements of those impacted by the residential school process and thereafter the child welfare and cross cultural adoption process. These recommendations suggest changes to the social policies and practices we have been discussing in this thesis. It is a hopeful moment in history that policies could improve for our future generations so they do not have to live through further cultural genocide and dislocation from their communities, whether it be in the form of foster care or adoptions.

Fournier & Crey (1997) shed light on a recent study by Christopher Bagley of the University of Calgary in which he states that Aboriginal adoptions are more likely to fail than even trans-cultural adoptions of children from countries outside of Canada. As well, he claimed that the adoptive family's attempt at supplying aboriginal culture – museums, films and beading classes – were too superficial to bolster their adopted children's low self esteem. Aboriginal adoptees had to suffer systemic racism in isolation, without enjoying any of the powerful spiritual or cultural benefits of being Indian (p. 90)

From my own experiences, I know that the exposure to culture that I had was minimal. It was many years ago, and my adoptive Mother did her best to instill cultural pride in my brother and I, but when we were unsure of what our culture was in its entirety and when we were trying to decipher the systemic racism, it was not enough. I knew it wasn't enough because when I turned 19, I still had questions and no idea about who I was or where I was from and what beauty my culture would bring to me. I was still eager to connect with my family and community for clarity about who I really was.

Bennett and Blackstock (2012) further state that “Many of the children and youth who graduated from residential schools and those abducted by the child welfare system find themselves in a paradox, which becomes more acute during adolescence and young adult stages of life. This situation is faced when they do not fully know their own heritage and culture (language, laws, customs, beliefs, religions, and so on) yet on the other hand they are neither accepted by and/or find it difficult to relate to the dominant Western culture” (p. 25). As a person who was dislocated from her community I can relate to all of these personal struggles and know they impact greatly on a person's identity and self-esteem until action is taken to make things right by giving back what was taken away. Recognition of inherent rights as First Nations people helps anyone dislocated find a place to belong, it explains to them their right to access and practice their culture and to know their own lineage.

Chapter Three

Overview of Cross-Cultural Adoption of First Nations Children and

Reunification Literature.

In searching for information on the topic for this study, I came across several recent works by well-known authors. Much of the work I have found had been written in that last 10 years and it was written by various authors of differing ethnic backgrounds.

In *A Literature Review and Annotated Bibliography Focusing on Aspects of Aboriginal Child Welfare in Canada* Bennett and Blackstock (2012) speak to the forced removal of First Nation children from their families and communities since colonization. They speak to the immediate losses these families and children experienced as well as to the long term generational effects we are still witnessing today. Bennett (2012) points out how the “loss of their identity became acute. The damage caused indescribable pain. This suffering manifests itself throughout many First Nations communities and has a direct impact on alcohol and drug abuse, suicides, high incarceration rates, tragic deaths and the general disarray of First Nations communities” (p. 24).

The concept of reconnection is a theme common throughout all of my resources. There are common themes that run through the material cited here and the stories that were shared with me by our storytellers about their own experiences with reunification. Of course, each experience is unique and some reunification processes were faster or smoother than others. But regardless of how the process happened, there were always issues of shock and uncertainty in how to manage the issues of addictions, abuse and trauma when they reunited with their birth families. The process becomes multi-layered very quickly. I recall in my own

journey going back feeling angry, hurt, confused and anxious and then on top of that having to juggle my thoughts and emotions about the lifestyles I was witnessing for the first time within my birth family. Of course, we can't forget everyone else's emotions that were involved in the process, the resentment or support from my adoptive family or the jealousy or overwhelming openness from my birth family. There was so much to juggle. Adoptees wanting reunification need to have someone to speak to about what to anticipate.

In *Aski Awasis/Children of the Earth*, Jeannine Carrière (2010) comments also on the issue of reconnecting/repatriation from the eyes of the returning adoptees by stating “for those who had not been provided any contact with Aboriginal people there is a general theme of shock and disappointment when returning to their First Nation communities for the first time...they acknowledged that being raised with white privilege did not prepare them for the extreme poverty, oppression and marginalization that are the daily reality for Aboriginal people in Canada” (p. 45).

Sinclair (2007) states in *Identity Lost and found: Lessons from the Sixties Scoop* that often times “Aboriginal adoptees’ ethnic and cultural identity is wrapped up in cultural stigmatization, their identities are most likely associated with poverty, alcoholism, and other negative stereotypes” (p. 72). Sinclair is touching on the important struggle between identity formation and stereotypes that children adopted cross culturally must encounter and decipher.

Becker-Green (2009) explores the life stories of seven First Nations adults who were adopted trans-racially prior to 1978. Her use of a storytelling methodology puts her in a position of being the learner and the storyteller in a position of being a teacher, thus offering validation and credibility to participants and how they have evolved. Becker-Green seeks common themes in the stories and identifies 12 factors that strongly impacted on the

participants' identity formation. The 12 factors are adoptive family, community, educational experiences, religion/spirituality, travel, exposure to cultural experiences, employment, friendships, peer groups, military, societal messages, and reconnection to tribal heritage. Recommendations are also put forth to other Native American transracial adoptees, their birth families and tribal communities.

Nuttgens (2013) examines the psychological and psychosocial implications for four adult Aboriginal adoptees, that were adopted transracially as children. Nuttgens' stresses that the scarce research on this subject matter of transracial adoptions fails to address the psychological factors for these children. Common themes that emerged from his research include disconnection, passing, diversion, connection, surpassing, reconnection and identity coherence. Racism is identified as a central constituent in identity development of all participants and lends to Nuttgens' exploration of what protection is adequate and available for the Aboriginal child raised in a non-Aboriginal family who experiences such racism and discrimination by the society they live in.

Richard (2007) presents a stand against the adoption of Aboriginal children by non-Aboriginal families. His stance is based not only on politics but on the realities of many cross-culturally adopted Aboriginal people who have shared their stories with him. Richard also draws from his own practical experiences from working within the child welfare field since 1973 and teaching cross-cultural social work practice at the University of Toronto. Richard explores the principle of 'best interest for the child' and recognizes that this notion places the child's interests as separate and apart from their family, community and culture and is influenced by an individualist ideology of European culture.

Bennett and Blackstock (2012) also comment on the lack of connection these children faced when they returned to their communities. Many family members had moved or died, leaving children truly alone. Some of the children were never given the option to return home; instead they were adopted out into white mainstream families, leaving the children to manage culture shock, racism and loss of identity on their own.

LeFrance and Collins (2003) explain the impacts of residential school on future generations parenting skills or lack thereof in *Residential Schools and Parenting: Voices of Parents*. Their perspective is based on many professional years of working in and around First Nations families that were impacted. This reading comes across as very analytical but not a very culturally based perspective of First Nations identity and struggles. In the very first paragraph they state that the voices of the participants have been interwoven with theory. There is no reflection on our traditional teachings, our innate connection to the land, our Creation stories nor the stories of our elders.

There are no examples in their work of their personal reflections validating the words of those they interviewed. It seems merely a presentation of facts gathered through their interviews of residential school survivors.

This is the type of research that I have struggled with but have come to see that it has its place on the research timeline because it has pushed us, as Indigenous researchers, to become researchers ourselves so that we aren't continually analyzed under a different lens or framework than would do our personal struggles justice. As well it encourages us to apply a more suitable cultural lens when conducting research in and for our communities.

Shawn Wilson (2008) explains complexity theory which recognizes:

...the great strengths that Indigenous scholars have in their ability to see and work from both the Indigenous and dominant worldviews. This becomes of great importance when working with the dominant system academics, who are usually not bicultural. As part of their white privilege there is no requirement for them to be able to see other ways of being and doing, or even to recognize that they exist. Oftentimes ideas coming from a different worldview are outside of their entire mindset and way of thinking. The ability to bridge this gap become important in order to ease the tension that it creates (p. 44).

Sharing our similar backgrounds also allows a more in-depth understanding of what was lost during the residential school process. It allows us to take people from a superficial factual level to a deeper, more spiritual and reality based understanding. It is when this level of understanding cannot be achieved, that survivors end up being interviewed over and over, feeling invalidated by interviewers who do not incorporate nor believe and/or understand our cultural ways of being and stories into their research.

As well, *Residential Schools and Parenting: Voices of Parents* is dated 2003. At this time in research history, Indigenous scholars were beginning to "...assert their power. No longer would they allow others to speak in their place. They began to articulate their own Indigenist perspective and demand to be heard doing so (Wilson, 2003, p. 51). The presentation of this paper, from a Euro-centric lens, would be an example of research being done by outsiders who see only from their privileged position instead of having a relationship of commonality with the storytellers. *Residential Schools and Parenting: Voices of Parents* is one of many that marks a turning point in the research that was occurring in our Indigenous communities. A shift would occur where we would start to be our own researchers with our own worldview and perspective and would not need to seek validation from the dominant society for our ways of being.

In *Identity Lost and Found: Lessons from the Sixties Scoop* Sinclair (2007) comments “Adoptees who choose to acculturate to their birth culture, find needed belonging and cultural validation. The act of repatriation often assists adoptees in reframing their experiences within the context of Canadian colonial history (p. 78). Even from my own experiences I can reinforce the value of this reconnection. Growing up in a white world as an Indian child, I was confused, felt no belonging and was discriminated against in ways others in my adoptive family were not. By coming to understand my birth family’s history and how it was impacted by colonization, I was able to reframe how I viewed my adoption.

Sinclair (2007) reaffirms that “Obviously more research is needed. Resiliency amongst adoptees is an area that beckons inquiry. The influence of repatriation to birth culture is another that needs exploration” (p. 75). I believe that the only way to get this information about repatriation is to speak to those adoptees that have returned or plan to return to their birth culture. Learning about what they experienced and what they may anticipate in the process is vital learning for all involved in the adoptions field, whether they be social worker, adoptive parents and extended family or for other adoptees themselves. I am very curious as well about the communities, how do they welcome adoptees back and make them feel a part of the community? How do they make them feel like they belong and are needed? How do they assist the adoptees in deconstructing a lifetime of hurt, confusion and sadness?

In *Residential Schools: The Intergenerational Impacts on Aboriginal Peoples* Partridge (2010) explains that “Reconnecting is the part of healing which shows individuals moving past their isolation and becoming actively involved with their families and communities. Reconnecting with family that has been ‘broken’ by residential school, opens the possibility

of rebuilding that family and reclaiming one's place within that family. The individual is able to regain what they had lost; their meaning, their family, their pride, their identity" (p. 57).

The purpose of Partridge's (2010) article is to "explore the relationship of residential schools and their intergenerational impacts on Aboriginal peoples mental, emotional, physical and spiritual wellbeing" (p. 35). Partridge touches on many facets of the intergenerational impacts of the residential schools on her as an Anishinaabe-kwe (Anishinaabe woman). But what are not presented are the details in how the reconnection to the community can happen after an event such as the residential school experience or the forced removal from one's home and family through being in stranger care or being adopted out cross-culturally. These details could be helpful in informing us about what it is that returning adoptees need in order to feel connected, needed and valued. I would have appreciated hearing more from Partridge about what a process of reunification could look like. What actions on behalf of the community and those returning would assist in making reunification a successful process?

I believe that having been in this situation myself (as an adoptee returning home) I have some valuable insight into what one needs to make a really strong, healthy and fulfilling connection to one's community. Bringing people together with similar experiences makes them stronger and more confident to reach their goals. Allowing a voice to those adopted out will make for a successful reunification plan for both the individual and the community, both now and for future generations. The intent of this paper is to suggest steps that would help adoptees work towards the best possible reunification for their situation. The hope is to share the joys and challenges of adoptions and reunifications. Even my own reunification process did not include all of the steps mentioned above, but from our combined, shared experiences we can smooth the path for future returning adoptees.

I understand the hurdles in trying to re-integrate yourself into your home community and family. Not being so closely connected to the community makes it hard to develop sudden close-knit relationships and access cultural learning opportunities. How does an adoptee re-integrate and what support is needed from the community to make this event successful?

From my research, what I have noticed is that most authors discuss what was lost by children being dislocated from their family and community. They speak of loss of identity and tied to identity itself is self-esteem, self-perception, and a sense of belonging and love, most of which is formed by the symbolic interaction they experience everyday of their lives. Many of the symbols they have likely interacted with in life produce a negative image of First Nations people. They may have experiences of racism first hand and not had adequate support in dealing with it. Not many authors spoke of the actual concrete ways that adoptees could be formally brought back into communities and families that they have been separated from for so long.

In her Master's thesis *Kwin Tsaniine das Delh (Returning Home to the Fire): An Indigenous Reclamation* Wickham (2008) speaks about the displacement that First Nations people experienced and about "how grassroots community efforts may serve to bring home stolen generations, thereby re-asserting Indigenous control over cultural survival" (pii). Wickham does some focus group work within the Gitdumden community in the Wet'suwet'en Nation and some individual interviews with people that have experienced dislocation from their Indigenous communities. She asks very specific questions on both sides about what will help the reunification process and what may prove to be barriers. This is very supportive of the type of research that I have proposed in this paper. It looks beyond the

recognized need for reconnection to the fundamentals of how this can happen in a healthy and supportive manner for all parties involved. The value of reconnection is clearly surmised in

Consciousness Rising: A Collection of Women's Stories where Carrière (2010) states:

My own life as an adoptee was not always easy: I believe this was mostly the result of the mystery of living in the family of another people, borrowing other people's names and culture while being alienated from my birth family and community. But this all changed for me one day when one of my sisters from my birth family showed up at my parents' door asking 'Are you Jeannine?' When I replied that I was she announced that she was my sister, my whole world changed. I lost everything and I gained everything. It was as if something inside of me shifted and I felt connected. I belonged again. No, let me rephrase that: I felt like I belonged for the first time in my life (p. 128).

The process of reunification can be extremely varied for returning adoptees. Issues of unhealthy/unsafe birth family contact can be a huge setback for the ones returning. Upon reconnection, a second rejection from the birth family can occur and be devastating for adoptees. Many birth families don't understand the life experiences and ways of being that the adoptee was taught by their non-First Nations adoptive families. Feeling of confusion, envy or anger may cause some birth family members to push returning adoptees away as a means of protecting their own identity and connectedness to the birth family.

Carrière (2010) goes further to explain that "(her) participants acknowledged that being raised in white privilege did not prepare them for the extreme poverty, oppression and marginalization that are the daily reality for Aboriginal people in Canada. Reunions with birth family members were clouded both by their own shock and by resentment from birth family members who do not enjoy the same privileges" (p. 45). Providing adoptees with information to study about First Nations people's history, colonization, systemic racism, stereotypes, etc.

prior to contacting birth families would be one helpful step in supporting a safe and healthy reunification

It was not until my own reunification that I considered how my removal from my family and community impacted others left behind. I was focussed on my own losses. It wasn't until one of my sister's told me;

You were there one day and then gone. I used to run to see your Mom every day after school when she was around. I wanted to help with the baby, which was you. She also had your brother with her. I helped look after him and would take him swimming or for walks. Then one day, I ran through the door only to see that you were gone. So was your brother. I begged and pleaded with your Mom to tell me where you guys were. But she said nothing, she never spoke of you guys again, no matter how many times I asked. No one did. I was left to grieve this on my own. I didn't understand. I was heartbroken.

The impacts of cross cultural adoption are far reaching. Not only did I have my own traumas to work through, but so did my birth family. These are the pieces that are so vital for returning adoptees to know, as well as their adoptive families. In order to provide support necessary to make reunification positive, everyone's stories must be considered and respected. Further in this research, I will honour and respect the stories of four adoptees that made the move towards reunification with their home fires.

The traditional manner of teaching for First Nations is through storytelling. It is a methodology that dates back thousands of years and I will next show an example of storytelling as it has been used historically as a method of teaching and survival.

Chapter 4

Respecting the Story Telling of Our Ancestors.

Wild Man Story (Swiniya):

Long ago, before the time of great travels, there was a young being named Swiniya. Swiniya and his family lived high in the St'at'imc mountains along what is now known as the Mighty Fraser River. Swiniya and his family knew a life of self-sustenance. The only way they knew was to live off the land and respect the gifts given to them every day by N'Kulten (Creator). They knew of no other way of being. By today's standards, Swiniya and his family were rugged looking, in an unkempt state, smelling strongly of fish, sweat and earth.

Before too long, the time of great change was upon Swiniya, his family and his people. Human beings had started travelling long distances and exploring land unfamiliar to them. Swiniya and his family watched from a distance as more and more human beings came closer to their home. They looked funny: hairless and pale, not hairy and brown with earth. He and his family found several camps along the water that many human beings would settle at with their families. They were not leaving.

This was a time of great change. Many human beings, including some of Swiniya's close family members went to see these camps. Some never returned, others came back with exciting tales of their journeys and would use these stories to lure others to them so they would also stay at these camps and learn this new way of being.

Swiniya would not go. He was afraid, and angry that his family had left him. He was now alone in the mountains and his family was living in the camps. Eventually his family all agreed it would be best for Swiniya to join them at the camps. Many of his people worked their way back to Swiniya. It took many days to paddle to the base of Swiniya's mountain. It then took days to climb through the rugged terrain to get to Swiniya. His family begged him to come to the camps, telling him it was better for him to join them than stay in the mountains alone. The thought of this

made Swiniya very anxious and nervous. He would have to leave the only way of life he knew. He resisted.

His family felt it was better for him to come and were determined to get him out of the mountains. In the end, they decided to tie Swiniya up with a rope and pull him off the mountain. He fought and fought, scared and bewildered. He was feeling betrayed by his family.

When Swiniya and his family made it to the main camp along the water, his soul was terrified and angry. His family decided to leave the rope on him to control him and to keep him safe. They were worried he would hurt some of the other people in camp, as he was lunging at them out of anger and resistance to this new way of life. They also didn't want Swiniya to hurt himself by running away and getting lost or having other people try to hurt him out of fear and revenge.

People in camp were afraid of Swiniya. He was still rugged, naked and smelly. They had become 'civilized'; shaving, wearing clothing, cleaning their bodies and brushing their hair.

Swiniya needed lots of encouragement to recognize the good in himself again and also to see the good in the people around him, even though they were different.

There is also a song and dance that goes along with this story. The song states "T'ak kacw hi ya...Amalhkacw Swiniya...." These words basically translate into "You have arrived and you are good Swiniya"

This story is the Wild Man story from my St'at'imc people. This story has many components to it. There are very apparent teachings in it such as the importance of respecting our traditions and also learning when and how to give into modern ways. It also reminds us to see the positive in any situation we find ourselves in, and to never lose sight of the goodness within ourselves. There are also subtler teachings in it around family roles, caring for one another and community support.

Since the beginning of time, my people told stories to reflect upon the creation of the world, the animals, the plants and finally the human beings. Since we were an oral people, these stories were told from one generation to the next. We had no written language prior to and during contact with European settlers. It is from these traditional stories that my core traditional St'at'imc belief systems have been formed. The power of these stories and our connection to them is evident in the fact that I was raised away from my traditional stories and teachings and yet in finding them, they have had a stronger and profoundly natural impact on me and how I define myself in this world.

The purpose of many of our oldest mythical legends is to remind us of who we are and where we came from. They remind us also of our continual connectedness to all things around us. They also remind us of our history and lessons learned from past experiences so we can make wise decisions in the future. As stated in Wilson (1998):

Stories in the oral tradition have served some important functions for native people: The historical and mythological stories provide moral guidelines by which one should live. They teach young and remind the old what behavior is appropriate and inappropriate in our cultures; they provide a sense of identity and belonging, situating community members within their lineage and establishing their relationship to the rest of the natural world (p. 24).

The Wild Man story and other traditional stories are more than an amusement or simple words to me. It is an integral part of my being. It is reflective of teachings lived out by those before me that allow me to be who I am and where I am in life today. The purpose in sharing this story is to provide an example of storytelling and its role in Indigenous communities. It supports the intent of this thesis and the stories that have been shared so generously by the storytellers I have interviewed.

By witnessing the songs and dance that accompany this story, I am learning and also reminded of the ways of my Ancestors. I see their dances re-enacted today and their song echoes through my mind so I can also pass these teachings onto my children and grandchildren.

When we share this story, we remind ourselves and our people that we can look after our children, we are reminded that we do know how. We rekindle a spark that for many had almost disappeared. It reminds us that we have parented for many generations and that we know how to do this in a way that is right for us and our way of being. This reminder will tie in nicely with the stories of adoption that will be shared throughout this thesis.

To honor the teachings of my ancestors, in this thesis I use storytelling as a methodology. By using this methodology, I was compelled to do this research in the most honorable way possible. In my traditional language of St'at'imcets we say *Amhàka7*...to do things in a good way. This is how I was taught to be, so it was a comfortable basis for my research journey.

In implementing a storytelling methodology, I came to understand further the value of our storytellers and the gifts they share with our people. I had read many times that storytelling was a decolonizing process. That by sharing our stories, we show that we are still here. After all of the attempts to kill us or assimilate us, we are still here and our culture is still here. I have been advised that I would hear from others that storytelling was biased or maybe not *really* a research methodology and need to be validated by something more concrete and accepted in the academic world. In Brown and Strega (2005) Thomas states that “Storytelling is often deemed illegitimate because it is subjective and therefore biased...Why is it our only means of recording histories – by oral tradition – must be validated by a more

‘legitimate’ research methodology?’” (p. 243). It wasn’t that many years ago, when I asked to use storytelling in a methodology class and was advised by my professor that storytelling was not a valid research method. It wasn’t recognized. This was one of many moments in my academic career when I realized I still had to do a balancing act. The act of meeting the University’s academic standards as well as maintaining my own values and beliefs in the process includes fighting the fight for our Indigenous ways of being to be recognized and respected.

Growing up away from my culture, I had to go through my own process of accepting the importance and legitimacy of storytelling. I was unsure at first, how could information passed on for thousands of years still be accurate? I had to look within myself to understand oral history and recognize the cultural elements that proved it to be accurate and real.

I had fears of sharing people’s stories. This fear came from past exploitations of my people, their words and their ways of being. Thankfully for cultural and academic guidance, I managed to find a way to share the stories that respected the storyteller’s intent and also met my academic requirements. Kovach (2009) supported this notion by sharing that “Story, then, is a means to give voice to the marginalized and assist in creating outcomes from research that are in line with the needs of the community. Reliable representation engenders relevancy and is a necessary aspect of giving back to the community” (p. 100). The intention of my research has always been to give back, to the storytellers, the communities, the families. The hope is that it has been done in a good way and clearly represents the storytellers’ perspectives for our own learning.

Having made the choice to use storytelling methodology I then needed to find a way to recruit storytellers that had been adopted cross culturally and reunified with their

communities. I needed to find a way to do this that respected my traditional teachings and the pressures of the academic world I was employing. I chose to use word of mouth and a few specific First Nations bands to help me in recruitment. I was worried as I did not have a large mass of people calling to be participants. I had to take time to reassure myself of my good intentions and trust in Creator's plan to make things happen as they need to. Sure enough, within a few weeks, I had storytellers cross my path personally that I had not met before that were wanting to participate. It all began to fall in to place. The diversity of the four storytellers I had chosen was better than I ever could have imagined. Two women, two men, varied experiences with adoption and reunification. For each of the storytellers, they were happy to talk about their experiences with someone who could relate. The whole process brought them joy and satisfaction. There was no hurt, sadness or surfacing of unresolved grief. The intent of each storyteller remained focussed on helping and healing for themselves and others involved in cross cultural adoptions. They wanted their stories to have a purpose and to be useful in a good way.

After the transcribing of their stories, I had to find a way to present their information in a clear and mostly succinct manner so other people could read and follow the intent of their stories. I wanted to shift things but not change their words. I did not want to risk compromising the lessons in their stories with my own intentions. I did not want to disempower the storytellers by changing their words to meet an academic nor Euro-centric lens. This balancing act was a struggle right from the start of my intentions and my own writing.

My Ethics Protocol needed to be written so as to reflect my respect for both of these entities, the Euro-centric world of academia and my own innate Indigenous way of being. It

was challenging. My fear and worry was that I would lean too heavily on the side of academia. I spent a large portion of my life in the non-First Nations world of academia. Would the strength I have attained through my Indigenous ways of being shine through or would I fall back to familiar, 'safe in the dominant culture' ideologies, even though they weren't truly a part of who I was while going through the writing process of the Ethics Protocol and this thesis? I often called upon my cultural advisor and other cultural leaders to ensure I was not compromising my traditional values to meet academic expectations. This support was essential in helping me through the witnessing and writing of my storyteller's teachings.

I have chosen to listen to and share the stories of four people who experienced cross-cultural adoption and reunification with birth families/communities. Prior to the interviews, I advised story tellers that they would control their own telling process, and that they had something the rest of us needed – insight and information about their adoption experience. By doing this I was recovering the voices of the oppressed by breaking their silence or offering a stage on which to present their story. I also recognize what Thomas (2000) described as:

Storytellers hold the power in this research methodology – they are in control of the story and the 'researcher' becomes the listener or facilitator. Cruickshank (1998) refers to this process as the 'open ended possibilities' of oral history because the researcher does not enter the relationship with any preconceived directions that the research will take" (p. 245).

Their experiences can teach us about the process of reunification after forced separation from culture, birth family and community. These stories are essential for us as a people to be able to heal from our past and learn from it, so we, as a people, don't find ourselves susceptible to the same oppressive experiences again. As stated by Kovach (2010) "Story as methodology is decolonizing research. Stories of resistance inspire generations about the

strength of the culture” (p. 103). One of the main purposes to doing this research is to allow people to share their experiences so that others can learn from it. There is much for all people involved to learn prior to any reunification back to their home fires. These powerful stories will assist with positive change for the benefit of future adoptees that are also planning to make this journey home.

Another part of my teachings has been the act of being called to be a ‘witness’, which has been mentioned a few times in this thesis already. By agreeing to share their stories with me, the storytellers were asking me to be a ‘witness’ to their story. It would then be my responsibility to remember the stories, share the stories and ensure they were shared with good intentions. I have a responsibility to take these stories into the future and give them voice. Being a witness occurs at many First Nations ceremonies. It is an integral part of our oral history and comes with great amounts of responsibility and integrity to uphold this responsibility. I have been very honoured to have this task assigned to me by these storytellers.

The in-depth interviews took place in a setting that the storyteller and I were comfortable in. The time allotted for the stories was approximately two hours per session with two sessions available. No interview time went past two hours. Storytellers were welcome to contact me after our allotted interview time if they felt they needed to add more information to their story. This flexibility and openness supported the storytellers in their journey of teaching and healing. Kovach reminds us of Anne Ryen’s understanding of a more open approach to interviewing whereby “the more structured the interview the less flexibility and power the research participant has in sharing his or her own story” (p. 99). I appreciate Kovach’s summary of this in saying “Through this less-structured method, the story breathes

and the narrator regulates” (p. 99). It brings to mind how our stories can take on a life of their own. What it means to one, may not be the same as what it means to another, it is flexible and adaptable depending upon what the listener is open to hearing. Our stories are non-linear and filled with lessons and messages. We are always encouraged to hear what we can hear in the moment and understand that there are other messages in the story that we may hear more clearly next time we hear it.

For myself, it was important to be able to share the stories of those interviewed, as they were told, so as to avoid any misrepresentation of their truths. All too often, as First Nations people we have been studied for research purposes only to have the researcher relay only on their understanding of the information we presented to them, versus the truth that accompanies our words through stories we tell with our own words.

As I began my research, it became clear that the scope of my research needed to broaden. Initially, I was wanting to interview specifically adoptees from my own Indigenous group of the St’at’imc people. Interestingly enough, I did not receive much feedback from any St’at’imc members that were adoptees. I was left to wonder if their numbers were low due to their experiences of being in care versus having been adopted. Or maybe they did not get word of my research through the assigned supports...or maybe they were not ready. I can only speculate. In any event, I broadened the scope to Indigenous adoptees versus St’at’imc adoptees. In the end, I interviewed two women and two men, which proved to be a nice balance in understanding their experiences from a male and female perspective.

One of my storytellers, Spápza7, had a slightly different label to his experience of being separated from his family and being raised in a non-First Nations’ environment. His experience is one that would typically be labelled as being raised in ‘foster care’ versus being

‘adopted’. There was no formal adoption of Spápza7 into his foster home, even though he stayed with them from the time he was a small child until early adulthood. His story parallels adoption stories on many levels due to the fact that he was separated from his birth family/community for so many years. His situation had this similarity to an adoption situation but there were also differences. A common hurt among many children who are fostered for a lifetime by the same family is one of rejection or not feeling ‘good enough’ to be adopted. For adoptees, we can say we were taken in as their own. No one was paying them to look after us. From my own professional experiences, I can share that many fostered children have regrets about people being paid to look after them. After talking with Spápza7 to see if he was a suitable participant, we agreed that his story would still be helpful in understanding the impacts of being taken from his family and the challenges he faced during reunification with his birth family. The differing labels of foster care and adoption were secondary to the experiences and perspective he had to share. For many of us both of these labels blanket our experiences of being victimized by assimilative policies that forced the separation of us from our families.

As I received the stories, I would transcribe them within a day or two of hearing them. I wanted to be able to recall their emotions, their tone and their body language as I typed their stories. Storytellers were content with me using the stories on tape to transcribe into my thesis, with the understanding that they would be given a copy of the thesis upon its successful defense. I wasn’t sure how to see this disconnect from their stories, but after it was all said and done, I can see it was a part of letting go and trusting that their stories were being used in a good way. This was a huge responsibility to me, and one that I accepted humbly.

Informed consent and confidentiality were both discussed and revisited throughout the interview process. Along with the initial paperwork that we signed there were moments where consent happened during the storytelling process, it may have been a nod, a statement ('that's right' or 'of course'), or reaffirming of boundaries and safety measures of the process.

Thomas (2000) referenced Lipson as having listed the following as guidelines for informed consent;

1. Consent is informed and voluntary (sufficient information to make an informed decision)
2. The subject can withdraw without penalty at any time
3. Benefits of the research outweigh the risks (benefits to society or the individual, preferably both)
4. The investigator is qualified to perform the research
5. All unnecessary risks should be eliminated

My consent form was developed with all of the above guidelines kept in consideration

(see APPENDIX A).

All participants agreed to the changing of their names and some locations to protect third party characters. They understood that they could still share their experiences and recommendations without causing any further upset to those third party characters in their stories. Their goal was to make things better for others about to go through the experience of reunification, not to lay blame or upset anyone over past experiences surrounding their childhood adoption nor reunification.

A) Storytelling Process for this Research.

These stories were shared with me in an open dialogue framed by specific questions regarding the storytellers' personal experiences with their cross cultural adoption and reunification experiences. The interviews varied in length, depending upon how much they wanted to share and the amount of time they needed to share their stories in a safe and respectable way. The interviews were done individually and in a space we both felt safe and comfortable. A space where tears, laughter and honesty could flow uninterrupted. The interviews were digitally voice recorded only, I initially had a thought to take a lot of notes, but found I needed to give my attention to the storyteller to learn of their experiences. I found myself treating these stories as I would our traditional stories. I listened, in awe, as though an elder was telling these stories and it was up to me to decipher the lessons. And like any other traditional story, these stories were multi-layered. There was not one message, but several. It was up to me to hear them and now to share them.

Surprisingly, not one storyteller contacted me after the initial interview with follow up ideas or thoughts, and not one of them wanted to see the transcription of their interview. There was an earned level of trust that allowed them to let their story go in a good way with no worries or fears of it being negatively manipulated. It was my goal from the beginning to do this research in a good way. As previously mentioned, in my language is this way of being is called 'Amháka7'. Unknowingly to me, this has been also coined Relational Research.

Kovach (2009) quotes Indigenous scholar Marie Battiste as suggesting that:

...the most critical aspect of Indigenous research is the ethical responsibility to ensure that Indigenous knowledges and people are not exploited. Research is about collective responsibility: 'We can only go so far before we see a face – our Elder cleaning fish, our sister living on the edge in East Vancouver...- and hear a voice whispering, 'Are you helping us?' (p. 36).

I believe that the storytellers were grateful that I was not only helping them but they also were grateful that I was helping other returning adoptees as well. One of the highest honours during my research process was to be witness to my storytellers and their teachings. It was a humbling gift for me to be trusted with their stories for the purpose of helping others.

The stories were initially transcribed verbatim, so as to not miss any detail of the storytellers true lived experiences. This allowed me the ability to revisit what I had thought I heard in the interview process and clarify certain elements to help me understand the storytellers message clearly. The next step was to incorporate it into my thesis in a way that was reader-friendly. It didn't matter if the reader was an academic, a social worker or the storyteller themselves, I needed to ensure that a reader would clearly understand the stories and not be confused by the Moments where a train of thought was interrupted or epiphanies occurred for the storyteller. All of the information given to me is included in the stories, the only manipulations were small word deletions and shuffling details to fit a clear storyline.

Every storyteller did ask to see the final thesis paper. One participant said he just needed to see it to know it was really out there, that his story was now out there to help other adoptees through their own process of reunification and to offer them some validation. This is reflective of our teachings that storytelling has always been purposeful and intentional.

This process was very rewarding for both me and the storyteller. In my own mind, the storyteller brought with them the gift of validation and further rationale to be writing this thesis. In the storytellers' words, the process gave them hope to help other adoptees and all people who would be impacted by their reunification. three of the storytellers said they wanted to share the information so that other adoptees wouldn't have to have as hard of a

time as they did in finding out about their birth families, communities and cultures. After listening to their stories, I know there was real trauma involved for them in being cross culturally adopted and then more in their attempts to reunify. Their goal was to soften the burden for others on a similar journey, by interviewing them and giving them space to share their story, I gave them a venue for following through on their desire to help other adoptees and to continue on with their own healing journey.

Using storytelling methodology was fitting in this case because this method allowed the storyteller to have their own voice and share their story from their own position versus the researchers' position. Implementing this methodology allowed storytellers to own the process of sharing. They were able to make decisions about what to share and how to share it. The process respected their choices which is extremely important for adoptees as many of their life choices were made for them without their opinions being considered. In my mind, when the storytellers were sharing their stories, it was with the understanding that they have been impacted by the voices of our ancestors and they also have knowledge that one day they will be the ancestors and their voices will have impact for others as well.

Thomas (2005) shares that "Given that most First Nations people traditionally come from an oral society, a storytelling methodology honours that tradition and the Ancestors...enabling us to keep the teachings of our Ancestors, culture, and tradition alive throughout the entire process" (p. 242)

This process of storytelling was very impactful in my research process, I would use this methodology whenever I am able to, as it is a comfortable fit for me to relay a persons' perspective accurately and honestly. Storytelling was a way of life for my Ancestors, so I'm not sure that there are many situations that I would choose not to use it. This is a way of being

that is innately programmed inside of us. I was a storyteller long before I even knew why or what it meant. As a child I was scoffed at by my peers because my answers were often long winded and colorful versus the linear and clear cut answer they were hoping for. I believe hearing directly from the people you are researching is the most accurate and respectful way to gather information.

The length of time it took me to write this surprised me. I thought it would have been much quicker, but as I heard stories and reflected upon my own story, I experienced emotions over and over that I figured I had dealt with long ago. I am grateful for my own traditional knowledge of self-care and the understanding I have of my own sacredness. The healing from displacement from your family and community is lifelong. The writing of this thesis was an integral part of my own healing and growth, allowing me to continue to move forward...for myself and my people...in an honest and good way.

Is there more work to be done? Of course there is. In my own life I see the impacts of my separation/identity crisis. Self-esteem issues and disconnection impact on my children and their sense of belonging. As all of the impacts of residential school have been deemed to be multi-generational, so are the impacts of separation and dislocation from our communities through cross-cultural adoptions. My children are both disengaged and tentative about their ties to their First Nations communities and families. Will they ever be fully connected? Or does the connection continue to get weaker as each generation passes? There needs to be more recognition of this and there also need to be consideration of this as adoptions of First Nations children into non-First Nations homes continues today.

Chapter Five

SPÀPZA7'S Story.

I come from a very large family. I had nine siblings in total. Three of my oldest siblings went to residential school and all of my younger brothers and sisters, myself included were apprehended. I grew up in a small town in Northern British Columbia, I was raised there by my foster family ² since I was a child.

During my school years I was growing up in the non-native community and educated in the public school system. This exposed me to, and allowed for, absorption of so called Euro-centric Canadian values and attitudes. I eventually realized these views were very racist in nature and conflicted with who I was learning to see myself as in this non-native world.

This racism and confusion eventually led me to a serious identity crisis in my teenage years. I was feeling prejudice and racism in society and school because I was not white. I turned to alcohol around the age of 15, it was a very troubling time.

When I was a young married man with two wonderful sons, my birth father showed up on my doorstep while I was at work. My marriage wasn't going very well so when my ex-wife called me to let me know who showed up I abruptly asked her "Why are you bothering me on the job?" And she said "You better come home right away, your Dad is here". Naturally I thought it was my foster Dad she was referring to and I said "Well so what, why are you bothering me?" and she said "No, no, no, you don't understand, it's your real Dad!"

² Spàpza7 was raised in the same foster home since he was a small child. We are noting that being adopted and fostered in this way are very similar in terms of the long term separation from birth family/community and the struggles of being raised in a non-First Nations home. The impacts and challenges of reunification in each situation are akin to each other.

So I pretty much went into shock, I went home and we visited for an entire day and I couldn't wait to go over to my foster parents' house to tell them the news. After our visit, I rushed over to their home and said "You'll never guess who came to visit!" Of course they had no idea and I said "My Dad". My foster Dad was really excited, he thought that was pretty cool but my foster Mom was not at all pleased and as time went on we had a profound parting of ways. I think her final statement to me, after having been raised in care by this single family my entire life was "After everything we did for you, you went back to the Indians" I was in my early 20's at this point, so it wasn't a very nice closure to that part of my life.

So began my journey into discovering my birth family and Native community. After the first visit with my father, he invited me to come home to the reserve. I told him that he might be surprised but my ex-wife, our sons and I had actually travelled through the town near the reserve and camped out at a local campground and had not even made the effort to go visit him...because during the course of my upbringing I was told pretty much on a daily basis how terrible First Nations people were - how violent, dangerous, unsavory, lazy and alcoholic they were.... pretty much the stereo type messaging. Furthermore, I was told, in no uncertain terms, not to socialize with First Nations people. So I told my Dad that's why I never came to visit him.

When I did go back to my home community for my first visit, initially my family was absolutely ecstatic that I came home, everybody was incredibly happy. You have to remember a lot of us children were taken to residential schools or put into foster care permanently, and I was the last to come home. Actually, I was pretty much the last one of our generation to return home of all of the children that were apprehended from our community

and it was a pretty big event when I came home. I visited for the first time for three days and people came to visit nonstop for three days. And what was incredibly interesting was that everyone dressed up in their Sunday best – so to speak – and there were a lot of tears, particularly from our elders, and the women would speak to my Dad in our traditional language and make gestures to the effect that the last time they saw me I was a little baby. So it was a very emotional homecoming.

So, as a young man I had reconnected with my birth family and there were many ups and downs to the reunification. It was actually very traumatic. During my darkest times through this transition, I was suicidal. I was feeling suicidal because I felt I couldn't go back to my previous existence in the white world and there were times I didn't feel completely welcome in my new world either. It was very challenging times for me.

It was an incredible experience, coming back home, re-entry into the community, initially it was very, there was a lot of celebration, it was absolutely an incredible experience to leave one world and enter an entirely new world. But as time went on, I became more part of our community given the fact that I had graduated and our local band office was relatively a new institution in the community the band office was taking on new program staff and I submitted a resume and was hired as the education counsellor trainee. And relatively shortly after that I was elected into the band council. It was evident that there was a new dynamic beginning to enter into this picture, and that was pretty much jealousy and resentment on the part of the community at large and from certain elements within my own family. They didn't think it was particularly fair that I had pretty much dropped out of the sky and was immediately hired at the new emerging and growing band administration, was elected to the local governance and so I began to realize that there was more to this than the initial home

coming and all of the celebration and quite frankly it was kind of traumatic. It very much sharpened the fact that I was betwixed and between, that I had grown up in the non-native community and had learned views that clashed with the world I had entered into in terms of the true history of Indigenous peoples in this country, of social values and so on and so forth.

It was quite amazing, in that day and age, which my father found me and contacted me. Interestingly, there was no organized effort to facilitate reunification probably from the standpoint of my family or the community at large. A policy of the Ministry, at the time I was apprehended, and that would have been 1958 or thereabouts, was not to allow, in fact to prohibit any communication between the apprehended child and the birth family. So, I grew up in the non-native world with my family that had taken me into care, not knowing who I was or what type of Indian I was, so to speak and that was pretty much the way it was during those times.

What needs to be understood, is that when there is an effort to reunify adopted children into their birth families and their home community, I think that the agencies involved need to understand that this could prove to be very traumatic and it can prove to be high risk in terms of the health and wellbeing of the adoptee.

I've been home now for well over 40 years, much longer than I lived in the non-native world, and I do greatly appreciate the double perspective I have with respect to both societies. I think it equips me better to understand the somewhat warped priorities and attitudes and worldview of governments and society at large. All in all, I think I have had a very blessed life, I am absolutely so grateful and proud of the fact that I have been clean and sober now for the last 28 years. My wife and I have been married for over 25 years and have been together

for over 35 years and we have five adult children between us and our baby is 39, I believe, and our five children have blessed us with 12 grandchildren, with the 13th on the way.

Bottom line, at the end of the day, everybody goes home and we must do our utmost to keep our families together and do whatever we can to ensure that there are strong connections between adopted children, or children taken into care, and their birth family, community, culture and traditions.

Chapter Six

KÈCKEC'S Story.

I was adopted as a month old baby, I was really, really sick and in and out of the hospital and I remember my adoptive Mom saying there was a point they were unsure if I would make it. She said I had fevers and then she said we got a queen size bed and they just put me between them because I would just cry all night and I was sick – you know, that separation. Up until age 6 we shared a bed and in and out of hospital, just really sick. When I heard my Mom's side of that I was like 'holy moly how a baby can just grieve so much'.

I had to be in foster care for a month while adoptive papers went through. My adoptive parents wanted a girl, because they had two older boys that are biological to my adoptive parents. My adopted aunt has five boys. So my adopted Mom didn't want to take the same risk. She wanted to make sure it was a girl, so they adopted me as a baby.

My adoptive parents always encouraged me to find out where I was from because I went through, probably about age 12, what I learned in school, they called the identity crisis. I went through that and I always kind of felt like I was different but I didn't understand why so I was really confused....so I found alcohol. I wasn't a social drinker, and it lead to a lot of problems. So my adoptive parents thought, maybe she needs to find out where she is from. So they were always really encouraging and that was one reason, they saw that I was having a lot of problems. Around age 16 my behaviours got really bad, I ended up drinking a lot – drinking really takes you to terrible places and it took me there.

After years of self-destructive behavior, I started thinking, I wanted to go back to school. Because when you're drinking you don't go to school. So that's what triggered going

back to find out where I'm from. I wanted to go to school and I wanted to get some funding because I moved out of my adoptive parents home when I was, oh my god – 14 or 15 years old, I had quite school when I was so young. Then I met a guy, could buy me alcohol, he was old enough to get in and he smoked pot so I thought 'wow, I'm gonna live with him'. But I always knew that there was a better life. I was also in therapy for separation...being so detached... because of adoption. Some of those behaviors from hard times still existed and would surface from time to time, even still.

Eventually, I actually wrote a letter to Ottawa (Indian Affairs). Back then it wasn't so open like it is now. There wasn't social media, or a lot of support services, but I did get a hold of Ottawa and they let me know what Nation I was from. Somewhere I have a letter from Indian Affairs saying my Mom was from a totally different Nation than where she was actually from. It was inaccurate because they wanted to throw me off. Adoption back then were mostly closed.

The whole time my adoptive Mom and Dad were really encouraging, but I had a hard time, because I had a loyalty to them, because I thought, oh my god, these people raised me and they tell me they love me and they do everything for me, and how can I go and look for another Mom and Dad? It kind of felt like I was wanting to replace them. I had loyalty issues so I had to work through that, which took about five years before I came to terms with 'It's ok to find out who you are and where you are from'.

It was a learning experience that we all went through because my adoptive parents really wanted to support me more but back in the 70's and 80's there wasn't any kind of services to bridge the families and my adoptive parents didn't know what to do.

When I thought of reunifying with my birth family I was terrified to find out if I was a child of rape. That was a big one for me. I was terrified to get rejected and yeah, circumstances – I made stuff up in head, none true of course. I had no idea what it would be like, in hind sight, if I had known how huge it was...because I went from a small family, maybe 10 cousins...now related to two of the largest families on the coast. My birth family tree is 25 pages long! Some days I have to stop thinking about it because it gets so overwhelming.

Reuniting with my birth family was nothing but positive. I was so worried, all these thoughts that go through your head. I connected with a lady at the band office and she was the Education Coordinator at the time and I got to know her really well then one day I went to a ceremony at the smoke house. The mask dancers came out, as soon they hit that drum it was like an out of body experience, it was like the trippiest thing I have ever experienced. We were sitting there in the long house, and I had my daughter Rebecca, she was just able to hold her head up, about four-six months old. It was like an instant coming back into my home and into my culture.

The next day I called that Education Coordinator said “I’m ready” Oh my god...I wanted to find my parents. I wanted to know who they were and I wanted to find them. There was a newsletter that was going out and I put an ad in it because I just wanted to know and I just had this awesome experience at the long house. She said “Ok, I see you are serious” so she helped. She phoned me that afternoon – she had found her, she had found my Mom! The worker told me that she talked to her to make sure she was ready to meet me and she was, so she gave me her phone number. So it was on my shoulders to make a move. Holy crap! I thought it would take months! I was stunned sitting in the kitchen. I made that call and it was

the weirdest call I ever made in my life, it's like what do you say? Humour helped, 'I hear you're my Mom', what else could I say?!

My Mom was really happy, so was I. We talked on the phone - it was fall, and I met her on New Year's. She told me to come see her because she was having a gathering and everyone will be here. So I said ok, and I didn't know the native community. So I go there and my uncle and I are the only sober ones at the party, everyone else was full of love but intoxicated. At this point, I was 20, I had quit drinking and had my babies so I was 100% in my sobriety. I always knew there was a better life, I just didn't know what it was, and I just knew I had to quit drinking.

My eldest Uncle and I just connected right away as he was in sobriety as well. It was an instant bond, right there. But after that, it's been nothing but positive, I've never had anyone make any negative comments, or behavior or insinuation. Everyone is just so happy that I came home. A lot of the 'long lost' introductions...I'm just so happy. A few relatives who just took me under their wing and they took me around and introduced me and they will remind me of names again and again because it's so hard to remember sometimes. They explained things and would make sure I was comfortable.

My sister, on my Dad's side was a bit jealous. My Dad is a world renowned artist; he's got art all over the world. He has carved Totem Poles all over the world. It was very overwhelming learning about it. His daughter didn't know about me for a long time.... he was always worried about us meeting because she had always been the only girl, she was the princess. It just happened that we didn't meet for seven – eight years. We knew about each other but didn't meet. We were kind of protected from that conflict. By the time we met, we understand that we understood her Dad's alcoholism and all the things that go along with that, then to go

through her own disappointments – Daddy issues – so that when we met we were able to put it all aside...and be like ‘my sister’. It all just happened.

The community played a role in welcoming me home as well.... but it mainly consisted of individuals, my cousin, my aunt, my four uncles on my Mom’s side who were all in sobriety and just took me in, and were all so happy and just went out of their way to make me feel welcome. For example, at a New Year’s gathering in the community long house my Uncle would welcome me in front of everyone, so you know, it’s like a public welcoming and my other uncle, whenever we were in a crowd he would say “This is my niece” to make sure everyone knew. He was so proud of me. Later, at a similar event, to really re-establish cultural connectedness, I was given my Indian name.

What’s really strange is how close my birth family and I had come to each other throughout our lifetimes. We talked about where we lived and at times, we even saw each other - not knowing that it was our family we were looking at. It’s very strange to think we were that close and yet longing for each other.

The cultural connection is so huge because being adopted... it’s like... to describe it to people, it’s like you’re floating up here and people say they love you and your like family and they introduce you but I always felt like I was in a glass bubble that no one could reach. They could say ‘I love you’ through the glass but I just couldn’t feel it and I was floating way up here, and when my Dad had one of his ceremonies, we were given names, me and my daughters. And when it happened, it was like he reached up, pulled me down and I was grounded. That’s literally what it felt like. It’s like my spirit came grounded... he knew what I needed. He said you have a name, so your ancestors will know you when it’s your time to go, they will recognize you. I didn’t feel like I was floating around anymore. I was kind of

lost until then – even though I was connected to my family again. I didn't feel grounded until I was given my name by my family. A thousand pow wows can't do what one potlatch does. Nothing like going home.

I was and still am like a sponge when it comes to culture, it's so strong in my heart. Every moment, I crave it. The saddest thing for me is not knowing how to speak my language. Some people in my birth community will even shame me for not knowing it. The sadness from not knowing language is so deep. The final connection – its missing – must be why it makes me feel so sad.

For me, in reuniting, I just took it as it came. Learning about the addictions, the abuse, the abuse from residential school, some days that's hard to digest, and in our birth communities we go to too many tragic funerals. So sad. Some days I feel sad knowing I have lost a brother, my sister is back in jail, then hear what she did to get back in there. Then we only have so many fluent speakers... some days I feel hopeless, but it doesn't last long.

Oh, and also the differences in my adoptive family and Native family's views on funerals. In my adoptive family, we would only go to a funeral if it was immediate family or a close friend. But in the Native community, you go to any funeral in your community for the connection, to support community, and be a part of the community by participating in the process. Having these diverse experiences allows me to bounce back and forth from one world to the other. It does have its benefits.

I don't think I would have changed anything in how I reconnected with my family. It happened the way it was meant to happen. The only thing she would have preferred to have happened in a different way was meeting of one of my relatives by accident. Someone

thought we had met, and accidentally gave away who I was prior to me meeting them. But it all worked out in the end.

For others planning to reconnect, I would suggest to them to be prepared for the reality. They have to discover their own family's reality. We can't define it. Don't romanticize it. Their own pieces of the puzzle. Your frame of reference is different as an adoptee who grew up away from community and culture. Plus, it's always nice to talk to another adoptee and to share stories.

In sharing my story, I demonstrate that I know that it is important to bring awareness about reunification, especially for people who are isolated...or not ready. There are always good reasons they aren't ready. Sharing stories gives a sense of safety and permission that we can move forward. It helps us see that there are other people who are like us. It's such a feeling of being unique. Even though I had no blood sisters, it was a weird feeling of isolation. It was odd being only adopted child from a parent, there were no biological siblings with me in my adoptive family, to go on this journey with. I felt very much in the spotlight when reuniting.

After reuniting with my birth family, I chose to remain connected to my adoptive family. I couldn't imagine leaving them, they raised me, it would be so sad. Even today, my home base is close to my adoptive family.

Chapter Seven

SÈSQ'WEZ'S Story.

I know my father was abusive to me. I don't necessarily know to what extent but I know my aunts were very concerned about what was going on. I can't pin point it to a cause, that there was alcoholism, or drug addiction or ... when my parents had me, they were married, they kept me for almost four years. They relinquished me and 40 years later they are still married and they are still living together. They never had any more children. Why? Later, I was told by the social worker involved in my adoption that my parents couldn't bond with me, they couldn't seem to have the parent/child relationship they thought maybe we should have. But, I don't get how that doesn't happen. I've had children, most of my life I have had almost a feeling that my bio Mom did this to protect me, and I don't know specifically why. I still don't have an answer. I try not to get specific, it's their privacy and it's theirs. If the answers come, great, if not that's ok.

You look at family photos and...I fit in pretty well with my adoptive family because I am fair skinned. My adoptive parents never really told me I was Aboriginal. I always knew, but knowing and understanding what it meant though are two different things...I was probably about nine or ten years old, when I was really looking at other people. I was in catechism and French immersion, in a different life than what I was born into. I remember looking around at all these blonde little things and, I don't know, they were so different...and in my little broken ten year old heart, they were pretty. I was the gymnast, the sturdy one, I didn't know why. When I was in high school, I started seeing and thinking 'Holy Mother of God, I don't know where to go, I don't know who I am, I don't know which side I belong on'

and I felt like I had to pick a spot. And high school is really bad for that anyways. I think everyone feels like that at some point – I felt like I had to pick, like self-identify, but what was that? It didn't make sense because I was both. Part of me is French – I can eat the shit out of a batch of poutine like there's no tomorrow. I would be much happier if I was doing it by myself in front of a river though. How do you explain that?

I remember as a teenager I was so rebellious, as a child I was the sweet one. I was gentle, I did no wrong. For me it was more forward in my mind that I would be given away again if I wasn't good. I needed to be good. But then, at 13 years, I went 'F' you all, I don't care anymore, I'm so sick of caring. I'm not going to be good, just going to do this and that. Well that didn't fit either, because it wasn't me either. A few years later, I settled and was like "meh – I don't know who I am"and I just carried on.

(Sèsq 'wez' presents an old and worn scrapbook that was made for her by the social worker involved in her adoption. Included in it are letters to Sèsq 'wez' from her short term foster Mom, her adoptive Mom and from the social worker outlining why Sèsq 'wez' ended up in care and then adopted out. It paints a fair and gentle picture for Sèsq 'wez' to reference throughout her lifetime.)

My daughter and I were discussing this, my daughter is 17 and she was looking at this scrapbook and she knows of my history. But it's not part of daily life, it's not something we talk a lot about. But we took the book out and she read the whole thing and she just couldn't believe how ...how, you know. I told her, there were points in my life that were not great, and that I was doing self-destructive things and having that inside battle about who you are, who you think you are, you don't know who the hell you are.

As an adoptee you can have guilt for everything, blame self for other's racism. 'I didn't mean to offend him' Not being sure, so it must be my fault. It's always your fault, especially with a catholic background.

I think in using this scrapbook, as an example, you can't measure the amount of impact this will make in your life, but here I am all these years later and this social worker – and my whole life, it's been up and down – when your given away by your family and you are rejected on such an internal level, you feel unworthy, you feel really unlovable. I read her words, she wrote this to me...she put the pictures in for me...she had to have cared what happened to me. And not just where she was placing me or where she was going, but this was meant to take me through to adulthood, hopefully so I could get to a place like where I'm at now. See things in a different light. But you know, you can't see over the counter when you're a little kid. You only see what's in front of you, and she put this in front of me. And it's what I can see and I just have so much gratitude, what she has done for me. I haven't looked at this book in 10 years. I have it memorized, I know the pictures and it's there if I need it. But all of a sudden, you're looking at this book too, and maybe we will show some other people what this one person did. Can we put a number on how many could be effected by a photo album from 1979? Who knows?

If you can change someone's day, that's amazing – changing someone's life isn't that what we should all strive to do? I'm not afraid for my story. I'm not afraid of the bumps and bruises it left, because without that, I wouldn't have the healing I've been able to get. You know, it is what it is. It's hard to get to that place though, if we can help people get to that place, through so much pain...the pain of loss...you're losing either your entire family or you're losing your child. It doesn't matter where they go; everybody is losing. The losses help

me see the magnitude of this scrapbook. I just want to know why I have a scrap book from this social worker?

When I made attempts to reunify, my adoptive family wasn't unhappy but I know my Mom started feeling inadequate or almost less than. When I spoke to my aunts and immediate family members I shared every detail of the conversation with my bio aunt, she was very interested, she was crying at some points, but after that it was like she was shorter with me and a little bit, I think she was having a hard time accepting...if I was in her place would it feel like I was being rejected? Was I not good enough? I was your mother? Why do you – so for her I tried to be gentle. And if she asked questions, to answer...whatever she wanted, but not to initiate. It feels like an odd dynamic to the relationship, a new dynamic way.

All of a sudden I'm talking about my Aunts, my uncles, and oh my gosh this person looks like me. I felt like it was a slap in their face. I need to be grateful.

I've never had a conversation with my adoptive brother about my reunification, ever. He's never seen a picture of my bio family, he has no idea. I don't know if my adoptive Mom told him. He never asked. He's a guy, and we aren't super close.

Reunification ripples out and impacts so many, on all sides. I try and be gentle in my feeling and in my action. I feel stuck in the middle...hard to be gentle because it's important to us, but at the same time, their feeling is important to them. Rejection is a tough one, valid or not, the feeling is there. It's hard when they are feeling like that, you know, you haven't done anything.

To help make contact, I had the Canadian Adoptions Registry help me. The woman that runs it is a point person, on her own, of her own. She facilitated, checked records before

she does this. She doesn't get paid. She does this because she has four kids that are half aboriginal and their father was adopted. It became a passion for her because she saw what it did to him. I have her on Facebook, I talk to her once a year and remind her how much her work means to people. She's a beautiful person. For her to pick up the phone and call, how do you find the words "I found your Mother..." It's out of the blue.

I have not spoken to my bio parents. It was a cousin that found me on the adoptees registry. And decided if somebody was looking then I would be there, but I didn't want to push, even though I knew who they were and I had cyber stalked. So my cousin found me, the administrator of the web site I used called me personally and then had gotten permission to share information. So, I talked to my cousin Sara first for like two hours, but she wasn't born (when I left) she was like ten years younger than me. But she knew, more importantly her mother, my Aunt, was devastated, she is the one that would pick me up on weekends and would really try and step in, it was her daughter that found me. So we hung up and she called her mother and her mother called me. She and I spent five hours on the phone, she was crying for much of it, she wanted to know I was ok, she had so much guilt because she couldn't do anything. I have been thinking about this for years, what do you say? You know? The only thing, I just wanted to reassure them that I was ok and had a good life.

My cousin went further and she shared my phone number, so many relatives called me. For the next three days, one would hang up and the next would be on the line. They are 3,000 miles away, I don't know them, they are bawling. And I'm adding them on Facebook and sending pictures. They tell me they remember me and knew me when I was small. I would say I have no idea who you are, but I'm glad you're happy! This happened roughly five years ago. I am still unsure if my birth parents know I had contact with family that found

me – my birth parents have never contacted me. But I left it with my Aunt to decide on that matter.

If I eventually speak to my parents, I just want them to know that I thank them and I love them because I know it must not have been easy. The courage it took, I understand why they put me in a closed adoption and didn't give me a family, there probably would have been a lot of drama, I wonder what that would have done to the rest of the family, how fractured it would have become. What would my life have turned out like – being pulled by them or do they cut the ties and give me a shot at a clean life. There is no right or wrong.

My Aunt answered a lot of questions about my parents. My Aunt and my birth parents didn't have any contact for 15 years. My Aunt and parents completely segregated themselves after I was adopted out. Just recently my Aunt and Mother had begun speaking casually when I first contacted my Aunt. I said to my Aunt that I was going to leave it with her. If you want to tell your sister that you spoke to me, please do. If you want to give her my number, please do. If you don't want to open that can of worms, then leave it alone. If they want to find me, they can find me easily just like your daughter did. So don't have that burden on you. I'm ok. If you do talk to her, the only thing I have to say is thank you, and that's it, and that's ok. I would love to know more and hear more but it's got to be - I don't know; it was their decision to give me up it's got to be their decision to open the door they closed. It's not my place to barge into whatever they have created. Pushing is the wrong thing to do.

To this day I've never met my parents. A lot of my childhood memories matched up with what my Aunt said. For me it was very settling, just confirmed things I remembered because I was so little. It was unbelievable for me to have a connection to hear "I knew you when you were born and I knew you when you turned one", it's interesting, it tells me that I

was a person and I was there. People loved me, often as adoptees, we feel unlovable for a really, really long time. In reunifying, it's often as strangers, but not in bio family's mind because they know you and love you.

I had no profound worries about meeting my birth family, all I knew was not to have expectations and just to listen. And hear what was important to them to say because I don't, it's kind of a one sided thing. There is some direct questions I could ask, but it's going to be me they want to know about, I'm the one they lost. That's going to be the time to let them know I'm ok, I had a good life, decent stable loving parents and opportunity to leave the chaos. My only goal for myself to let them know I'm grateful. If anything comes its ok, if something comes, it's a bonus. My life doesn't hinge on that, I'm still me, and it doesn't matter. I chose my direction, whoever comes with me is a bonus. Me doesn't hinge on someone else.

When I think of meeting my birth family I know there is a big difference between why did you? and how could you? How to respectfully yet honestly ask "I'm in pain and it's your fault, how could you have?" This is something to be mindful of in meeting birth families.

Did you feel guilt because you didn't have to go through so much suffering like your birth family? Some, for me...I envy your ability to be a part of a community. Because I don't have one at all. I have my little village of girls (coworkers) that are like a family, but I don't, and never had anybody. I have never been a part of that, and I do feel that that is missing from my life, but, I can't go to my band office and walk in because my birth Mom works there. I have to stay disconnected from that and that's fine. I have a life, but I miss and I don't know what I'm missing, but... Does the feeling of disconnect ever go away?

I have lived here, alone, my whole life. Culturally I've been alone, and that is ok. But I have caught myself seeking out other cultural minorities to connect with. I've realized over the past number of years, that culture is what I am missing and maybe that's why I chose the friends I do. Because I'm missing something, I'm not even sure what it is. I don't fit in a lot with white folks, my point of view is different, I worry they will be Catholic!

For adoptees choosing to reconnect with birth family, I would advise you to be gentle with yourself first and foremost, because people are so hard on themselves. You're not perfect, we were not meant to be perfect and that's ok. When you start pecking at yourself at the inside about things you said or should have said or did or should not have did, it just cracks that little foundation of you in there. It's the same thing when your approaching your family, you don't know these people, but they are your family, just be gentle. In all directions, adoptive, bio, self, and your children.

***It should be noted that while I was writing this thesis Sèsq'wez's birth Mother passed away and 2 months after her death, her birth Father passed away as well. Sèsq'wez' never met either of her birth parents, but was starting to contemplate a process to contact them.*

Chapter Eight

QATSK'S Story.

So, first I was told that my birth Mom left me in the hospital when I was born.... that I stayed there for two weeks or something before the social workers came and took me out to go live with these other people. Then, I was told that I did come home from the hospital and that the whole family had to take care of me because Mom took off and left me with them. They had to go next door to get food and diapers and they took care of me for a while. I have never really had clarity on my story.... I was a kid; I just didn't know what to believe. I still don't know the beginning of my own story.

I grew up with my adoptive family not allowing me to explore my heritage, or let me explore the native cultures or native spirituality, they just didn't. They always put natives down, they never tried to – I always heard the negative from them – natives are a bunch of alcohols' they just have a bunch of kids they don't want because they need the welfare cheque to drink and I heard all that while I was growing up. They were Christian, very religious. It would have made a big difference in my life to have had their support and encouragement.

So, I grew up very frustrated, confused, angry at a lot of people because they didn't allow me to explore that aspect of my life. It led to a lot of unrest, relationships that didn't work out, a lot of charges, a lot of...because I grew up angry, bitterly frustrated and confused, and all that stuff...and attachment disorders. I would get into relationships and be like 'your mine! You're not going anywhere, you can't do this, you can't do that, this is where you are and that's it. I was very controlling, just messed as far as relationships go.

I have to say, I grew up in a good home, never seen abuse, never seen fights, they would talk at the kitchen table or whatever but it was never full blown arguments, stuff like that. I never grew up with that, for me to become like that or become an alcoholic was very - I just look back and wonder why? Like, is it genetic, is it because my Mom was an alcoholic, is it because I was in her tummy when she drank alcohol, was it – just all these questions I used to have around the issue.

I also believe that I have attachment disorder because I never bonded with anyone, I know that. I do know that. I did a little bit of research around that while in therapy and they say in the first six or three months, a baby will bond with their mother, and they need that in order to develop bonds later on in life, properly.

There was a lot of problems with that adoptive home I've never been able to talk about and I've taken lots of counselling over it and about it. Religion was crammed down my throat twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week, I think that's why I'm not very religious today. I try to be spiritual but not fanatically religious. From my father I had like.... spanking with a belt. Now a days they call it physical abuse, I also had emotional abuse from him. He was like, if I did something wrong and my Mom said 'Just you wait until your Dad gets home', I would be nowhere near that house when my Dad got home. I'd be over at the neighbors, I'd be at the park, and I'd be anywhere but home. Because I knew what I would get. I guess that was his way of trying to instill respect in me, something, I don't know, but...there was also a lot of verbal stuff. He would tell me ...like, I would do something and he would cut me down for doing it wrong. Like, when I'd do something to the best of my ability, I didn't know whether it was because he didn't like natives or what it was, but I just can't to this day put my finger on it. Sometimes I think that he didn't want me, but my Mom

pushed the issue until she got her way. Things like that I think about, you know, and, yeah, he always treated me badly, basically.

When I chose to find my birth family, my adoptive family didn't like it but because they were Christians so they didn't come right out and say it, I just sensed it. I heard all the bad of my family like, 'Oh your Mom's an alcoholic', 'Natives are no good for nothing' and stuff like that. Just little things that I would hear here and there. Just little things I would pick up on, then when I found out I was a Native, I was like...um ok...he thinks Natives are bad, I must be bad, right?

They didn't come right out and say they were bad but they would hint around about it. I would hear stories that my Mom was a run around and she lived in the same town as they did so they kind of knew her situation. I was in my early 20's when I started talking about reuniting. And I wanted to do it because I thought it would help with my personal demons, I guess...it would help with my identity crisis, it would help me know who I was and where I came from and give me more strength, I guess.

One of the reasons I was doing research into my background was I thought it would help with my sense of who I am, some pride in it. And I also did it to try to get status. Department of Indian Affairs went three generations back from my Mom and they found no trace of my family ever being status. So they wrote to me and denied the status but could give Metis on Dad's side because he is Metis and has a card. But I had to get permission from him. He had to write a letter of consent. He did that. I talked to other people about DIA and they said they always do that. You just gotta keep at it and finally they will give you your status. Another thing I was told was my Mom wasn't very well educated, she couldn't read or write, so someone told me I should go to Red Deer and take her by the hand and go to DIA and get

her to apply for status. Then they would go back three generations from her and see if there was status. I never did do that. Basically I accepted that I'm Metis, whatever, so I don't have a status card.

But to begin my journey, I had to contact someone from Adoptions Registry to find my Mom and approach her to see if she was ok for me to contact her. Because sometimes the bio parents didn't want contact. It was a lot of hoops to jump through. She said she was willing, and gave her phone number and address. They got back to me and said they had her ok and told me how many brothers I had, I had eleven brothers and two sisters. So I contacted that worker to get her contact info and it all fell into place. I was getting phone calls for a month from brothers and sisters. I got a phone call from a lady down in the States for one of my brothers. It was like I got phone call after phone call from all these people that I didn't even know that were saying you're my brother and we're glad you're ok and we always thought about you and wondered. It was strange.

When I think about it now, my ex-wife and her family, were big contributors in me getting to know my biological family because when I got together with her I told her I was adopted and she asked me if I ever wanted to meet my Mom, and if I ever wondered whatever. Then basically she started the ball rolling, her sister was instrumental in finding things out...because her sister was going to that Neichi School and for some reason she had a friend that was a social worker and she had a line into the social working aspect of it. And her friend found the social worker that did the process for me to be adopted, so they really had an influence in helping me research, everything, to find my biological family. To this day my ex-wife has all that information. She didn't give it to me because I was a practicing alcoholic and

she didn't want me to lose all that information that we compiled together, basically, so she has kept all that information.

I had some worries about meeting my birth family, I was just worried about my own behaviors. About what I was going to do or say. Because once I found out I was adopted, I grew up hearing 'your Mom was an alcoholic, your Mom gave you up, and your Mom didn't want you'. I heard all of these negative things about my Mom from my adoptive family. So I internalized that and became very angry, very...like, ok, if I ever meet her I'm going to do this, or I'm going to call her down. I was just very angry. I would ask her why the heck did you even have me if you didn't want me in the first place. Plus, I didn't know about residential school or addictions issues before meeting my biological family, which was all a bit of a shock.

When the time came to meet my Mom, she was really happy, first time I met her I travelled to Red Deer. I was working and had a good job. So I had money, vehicles, whatever, I had to be financial stability to meet her, to take time off work. It was a weird conversation with her. First I had to talk to Adoptions Registry then they wrote me a letter and gave me the info about my family.

After the first few phone calls, all my family was reaching out so I made a plan to go to Red Deer to meet my Mom, took time off work and travelled to Red Deer. The closer I got the more feelings and emotions I had to deal with, every mile I was nervous, anxious, excited, wondering what she was like, wondering if she was still drinking, you know. But then I got to the house and my ex-wife said 'this is something you gotta do on your own, I'm not going to do it with you' and I was like 'argh! Ok'. So I was nervously sitting outside her house. I finally gathered up enough courage to walk up to the door and knock on the door and ring the

doorbell. She walked up to the door and walked out and gave me a great big hug and smiled and said 'Welcome home and I'm glad to meet you, I'm glad to see you and I always wondered about you, would you like something to eat, would you like some tea, coffee? Oh! Don't leave your family sitting in the car, go get them.' So I went and brought them in. We sat around talking and one of my half-brothers was there. I have some half-brothers and some full brothers. He was 'where have you been, what have you been doing, so we talked for about two hours. Then all of a sudden, my Mom was in the kitchen and she asked, 'Hey would you like to meet you Dad?' and I was like 'My Dad?'" because the birth certificate that I got said 'father unknown'. I said yeah I guess so and she said she'd call him and he's be there in half an hour. He's just across Edmonton. And he was there in no time. He walked in and threw his arms around me and brought another half-brother of mine from his side from another marriage or whatever.

To this day I can't really grasp that that's my Dad. To me it's just someone that claims to be my Dad. There is no emotional bond behind that. It's just a person who claims to be my Dad. Because on the birth certificate it said 'father unknown'. I understand, because I have been an alcoholic, I understand that people do strange things when they're drinking and stuff so, you never know though. But he claimed me as his son. He wrote to DIA and gave them permission to give me Metis status. So I have a Metis card, so he did that, so, part of me wants to say ok, that proves that he wants the responsibility or he's taking responsibility or in the back of my mind it says he's just a guy that claims to be my Dad.

My Mom told me a little bit about her and Dad's situation, that they had always been friends over the years and that he comes to Red Deer quite a lot and helps her out and brings her fish. She did explain it a little bit.

I looked more like my Mom. My Dad...I looked for similarities, but I couldn't see any, maybe in the eyes a little bit. Because I have this issue with my eye, I guess from being born alcoholic, FAS or whatever, I had that defect, and he kinda looks like that. My half-brother looks kind of like me but not a lot. I have my Mom's hands, her long fingers, her nose and yeah he came and met me then from there he asked if I would like to meet my family on his side so I said, yep that'd be great. So me and my ex-wife went with him and drove around for most of the day in Red Deer. I don't even remember half the people we met. 'Oh I'm your cousin, I'm your this, and I'm your that', it was just crazy we drove all around Edmonton. It's like I was related to half of Red Deer.

I had a lot of questions when I met my Mom because she was always giving me things and I wondered if she was doing it because she felt guilty, or what. She gave me this really nice bear rug. And I always questioned, why did she do that? What was her reason? Even though she said I'm giving you this because I love you and I want you to have it, whatever, and my Dad, after I went up to his place after I went back to BC, gave me a car. And it's like, ok? A car and a dog? And I always did question that, like why did they do that? Do they feel guilty?

I compare the two families like I'm caught in the middle like – I've always been alone. I've always felt alone or lonely or whatever you call it. It did help to meet my biological family and my Dad and everything. After I met my Dad and I met those relatives, we went back to my Mom's and he said he had to go do something so he went to go get fish or something, he lives near Edmonton. They eat a lot of whitefish. So he said he was going to go get a fish and come back and cook it for us. He came back and cooked it and we had supper with everybody then he invited me back to his place, so I needed to call and get

another week off work. So then I went up and stayed at his place for another four days or a week or so, visiting a bunch more relatives in that community.

Some of my family are doing well, but some of my brothers are real alcoholics. Two of my brothers went out to another family. They weren't adopted but they were fostered and they both grew up in the industry and another is a mechanic and has his own garage, so they are doing well. But most of my brothers are fallen on the wayside with alcohol.

One of my brothers I met when I met my Mom said, 'Oh you're gonna come hang out with me today and see what I do' and I agreed, so I went with him and my ex-wife stayed with my Mom. Turns out he was a back alley kinda person. We just walked around the alleys picking this and that, and getting cans. He said this is my route and no one picks it but me and if they do I get after them. This is my territory. He said I pick enough cans every day to get enough for my supply at night. I get my drinks and do the same thing day after day after day. He took me to a soup kitchen place in Edmonton. That's how I got to know him.

Now.... My Mom doesn't drink anymore but she self-medicates with prescription drugs. And my Dad was an alcoholic, but he doesn't drink anymore, he doesn't do drugs. Nothing, he does a lot of hunting, fishing, trapping, stuff like that. He's more into that kind of lifestyle. As far as alcohol is concerned, he doesn't like it at all.

In terms of my adoptive family now, after reconnecting with my birth family, I don't really have contact with my adoptive family. My sister, I will text her once in a while. I was living with my Dad this past fall and winter, had his own place, trying to take care of him because he's 71. Our relationship hasn't been a relationship, no depth to our relationship, he

always worked, my adoptive Mom was house Mom. My Dad was the worker and my Mom was a dutiful wife, have supper on table when he came home.

I last saw my adoptive Mom two years ago. She passed away about two years ago. One day I got a call from my brother telling me to come because Mom's not doing well, she's in hospital. I didn't really get to know too much about my adoptive brothers and sisters because they were all older. I grew up with my nieces and nephews because my parents were older when they adopted me. I guess that's how it worked. But I had a relationship with my adoptive brother since we did a couple of jobs together, and so he was the one that called me when Mom was not well. So I got my stuff together and went to see Mom, got off the bus, went straight to the hospital and she was coherent, but she wasn't, one minute she'd know me another she'd say who are you, what are you doing here...saying off the wall things. And then from there, I spent a week there with them then nothing was happening so I decided to come home on the bus, and basically the next day my brother called me to say Mom passed away last night at so and so time you better get here and whatever, so I jumped back on the bus and went back and stayed up there. I had a better relationship with her than with my Dad, because like I said my Dad was always gone working, and my Mom was always there for me. It was sad when she passed because I was always able to pick up the phone and call her anytime when I wanted to. If I was having problems and talk to her and she would always listen and give me advice and stuff like that. But it was sad after she left because I didn't have that support, or...I couldn't just pick up the phone and say 'hi Dad, I'm having a problem and blah blah blah', because our relationship wasn't like that.

Since my adoptive Mom's death, contact with my birth family hasn't really happened. I went and I met my birth Mom, I met most of my family and got it on paper somewhere, ok

this is my brother's name and birthdate and whatever. But I didn't really maintain any relationships with them. I used to try and keep in touch with my birth Mom, but she still, moves around so much, that I couldn't keep up with her phone numbers, addresses or anything. So no, I didn't keep in contact with any of them, not for 15 years now. I used to try to call my Mom on her birthday, I used to phone her at Christmas, I used to try and carry on a relationship with her, but it never did last.

I felt a little bit of loss - losing them again, because I always tried to get my birth Mom to come down here and live with me. Told her I'd take care of her and she wouldn't have to worry about anything. She never would. So then, we basically just lost touch. I haven't been in touch with them very much.

Back to my feelings of feeling lost.... or not belonging anywhere or alone...it's because I don't have my bio family. I don't have much to do with them. Plus, I have my adoptive family and I don't have much to do with them and I'm basically on my own kinda thing.

Advice that I would give to adoptees thinking of returning to their birth families, don't be hard on yourself. Just take it slow and one day at a time and don't be too hard on yourself. Don't put a lot of expectations into other people. Don't expect a lot, I guess. I built certain expectations up about my birth Mom and how things would be, and I seem to be that kind of person that builds things up in my own head, and when they don't turn out, I get down on myself and it's just, yeah. Take it easy, don't put too much expectation into people you are trying to reconnect with. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't, I mean I've read stories and books where a lot of people go back and meet their families where they are

welcomed in and taken in and stuff like that and it all works out. My situation, that wasn't the case.

Just be ready to hear lots of different stories. That's what happened to me, I heard this story, and I heard that story, from this person and that person. Twenty different stories about the same situation and they are all different. Ok, first my Mom left me in the hospital then she lost me when she took me home, then like I had no idea what to believe. I was unable to access my files because they were locked, sealed because I was adopted. I tried to go back to the hospital I was born in and said I needed my birth certificate and they said, no you can't have that. So I don't know how to access that information. I have two names, biological and adoptive. I can never access that record, unless, I go back and change my name and put it in the paper, to change it legally. I thought about it, I thought if I changed my name it would give me a sense of pride and I won't drink no more, stuff like that, so ... I tried to access the records in my birth town, the hospital where I was born, went to records, but they were sealed because they said that person doesn't exist anymore, well he does...I'm right here. So, I don't know how you would get around that situation.

My brothers all have different stories. One brother said yes I did come home from the hospital and they all had to take care of me, Mom took off and left me and they had to go next door to fend for food and diapers and whatever and they took care of me, and I heard my Mom left me right at the hospital and I stayed there for like 2 weeks or something before the social workers came and took me out to go to these other people. I was a foster kid... I was really confused.

Advice can also be given to adoptive and biological families as well, to help the adoptee in reconnecting. Education on cultural differences or struggles can also be given to

the adoptee before meeting their birth families. I do believe if a native child is placed in a non-native home the caregivers need to be trained on how to introduce that child to their birth culture, their heritage, and their people. Not just say ‘ok, you’re ours, we love you, blah’. There needs to be some training with adoptive/foster parents with regards to that because I know that I missed out on my culture. My family was right against me having anything to do with natives. I think that type of advice and education would help us all a little bit.

One of my first experiences with culture was hearing the drums. I remember when I first heard them – it was mystical. I can’t explain it, how they touched me to my deepest core. They still do. That was like a calling itself.

I think that by sharing my story, it will help me a little bit too, because in sharing my story, I believe some other person might get out of it what they need...to better understand their situation, or their predicament....and say ‘Oh, that’s why’! There’s really not enough information out there for adoptees. They need more support, in adoptive homes and when they reconnect with biological families.

I often remember.... this one elder told me that being adopted was a gift and I can thrive in the non-native society or the native society. It’s like a cross cultural thing and I never even looked at that until he suggested it, and then I started thinking that maybe he’s right. I know that “*It starts with me*” I can’t look at the big picture until I kind of clean up my own yard first. And now I see it, native communities are coming out of alcoholism, realizing that’s another way that non-native society has had control over them.

Chapter Nine

Recommendations from Adoptees Who Returned to the Home Fires.

A) Regarding Identity.

The main theme that runs through all of the stories that were shared with me, as well as my own, evolves around identity. The mere fact of being raised in a society that was mentally, physically, spiritually and emotionally conflicting with our own innate senses caused trauma and confusion for all of us at a very young age. For many that were raised away from their home fires, the concept of ‘fitting in’ can seem like a foreign one. In our adoptive homes, we did not fit in because of our looks or our innate way of being. In our birth families, we feel we don’t fit in because we have missed out on a lifetime of bonding and learning with our families, communities and cultures. So who then do we fit in with and identify with?

Sinclair (2007) further recognizes the impacts of adoptees lacking cultural mirrors in their adoptive social environments by stating:

Within their adoptive context, their roles and expectations are understood, and most likely there is no aura of ‘otherness’ surrounding their existence. However, once they walk out the door, their social status alters drastically, as so the expectations of them by others. The adoptee may eagerly and readily embrace and adapt to the culture of their adoptive family, but socially, they may be excluded from enacting that culture and those roles out in the social arena (p. 72).

Spàpza7.

...this exposed me to, and allowed for, absorption of so called Euro-centric Canadian values and attitudes. I eventually realized these views were very racist in nature and conflicted with who I was learning to see myself as in this non-native world. This racism and confusion eventually led me to a serious identity crisis in my teenage years. I was feeling prejudice and racism in society and school because I was not white.

Kéckec.

My adoptive parents always encouraged me to find out where I was from because I went through, probably about age 12, what I learned in school, they called the identity crisis. I went through that and I always kind of felt like I was different but I didn't understand why so I was really confused....so I found alcohol. I wasn't a social drinker, and it lead to a lot of problems. So my adoptive parents thought, maybe she needs to find out where she is from. So they were always really encouraging and that was one reason, they saw that I was having a lot of problems. Around age 16 my behaviours got really bad, I ended up drinking a lot – drinking really takes you to terrible places and it took me there.

Sèsq'wez.

I remember as a teenager I was so rebellious, as a child I was the sweet one. I was gentle, I did no wrong. For me it was more forward in my mind that I would be given away again if I wasn't good. I needed to be good. But then, at 13 years, I said "*F' you all, I don't care anymore, I'm so sick of caring. I'm not going to be good, just going to do this and that*". Well that didn't fit either, because it wasn't me either. A few years later, I settled and was like "*meh – I don't know who I am*" ... and I just carried on.

Qatsk.

...then when I found out I was a Native, I was like...um ok...He (adoptive father) thinks Natives are bad, I must be bad, right? They (adoptive family) didn't come right out and say they were bad but they would hint around about it. I would hear stories that my Mom was a run around and she lived in the same town as they did so they kind of knew her situation. I was in my early 20's when I started talking about reuniting. And I wanted to do it because I thought it would help with my personal demons, I guess ... It would help with my identity crisis, it would help me know who I was and where I came from and give me more strength, I guess.

I recall from my own childhood the utter confusions around this exact issue of 'otherness'. The idea of 'otherness' is central to understanding how majority and minority identities are constructed. Further, our identities are formed by recognizing the similarities and differences between ourselves and others around us. If we are not a part of the majority group, we must then belong to the minority group? This concept is the fine line for adoptees who are raised within the dominant culture and are raised with a false sense of status that not

all others in the dominant group accept, leading to rejection and confusion. Even in our adoptive families, sometimes there is perceived acceptance but when it comes down to it, an adoptee can still be considered an outsider or 'not real family'. In larger society, an adoptee can be seen simply as a minority if there is no knowledge of their adoption and upbringing. Therefore, they are treated as a minority even though they have been raised with certain privileges and views of mainstream society. In turn, upon meeting their birth families, there are immediate clashes of values, family systems, beliefs, etc. which lead to further feelings of alienation and discomfort. Often times many of the clashes are real and other times they are merely perceived. Some of my birth family members thought I had a perceived sense of status when I returned home. It took a while for them to get to know me to understand that I did not feel privileged or above them in any way. The perceived status issue was revealing their own insecurities and I needed to understand why they had those insecurities in order to have the desire to work on those relationships and eliminate the preconceived notion.

For many years, I was sheltered from my otherness. I was accepted into a Caucasian family and no one dwelled on color. No one in my community of family and friends judged me by my skin color. But I saw color, I dwelled on my different color. I remember one incident in elementary school when I was in grade four, we had recently moved to a new town and therefore a new school. For some reason, there was a group of girls who glommed onto me. They took me into their fold with no hesitation and no questions. It was odd. They seemed nice enough so I rolled with it. These girls were from the local First Nations community. I didn't see their color. I didn't make the connection at first. Until the lunch hour when we were sitting outside and one of the boys came up to us and called us squaws. I had no idea what a squaw was. I looked blankly at my new friends who were already on their feet

and getting set to chase this boy away. So, I got on my feet and did the same, all the while wondering what a squaw was, but figured it must have been something bad and continued to chase the young boy and called him names in return, as my new friends were doing.

As an adult, now I look at my difference and seek sameness for validation and belonging. I have heard over and over that being brought up in a white world and now understanding my First Nations world, I should feel comfortable in either world and there are so many doors open to me for work, etc. I am told I can balance both worlds, I speak both tongues, I have white man's education and a First Nations worldview. I ask myself if it can be done. As an adoptee, there is often no feeling of total connection nor belonging. For us, racism still exists on the white side and this is complicated by both our home community's and our own uncertainty about who we are. It can be a lonely and confusing place to exist.

Cognitively, what we went through to understand our place in this world and the identity and attachment issues that we faced every day, were so enormous and ultimately imbalanced that it tires me to think of how we made it through. And in this is some unfortunate irony, because many did not make it through. Carrière (2010) supports the understanding of identity loss for adoptees, she states:

Identity was viewed by all eighteen adoptees who were interviewed as the main loss that they experienced through adoption...All adoptees explained that their drive to seek out their birth family stemmed from questions about, and a longing to know, who they were, where they came from and where they belonged in this world (p. 23).

Personally, one of the largest hurdles I face daily as a result of my adoption is my own personal identity. I have done a lot of research and slowly molded my life around understanding what it means to be St'at'imec. But I still look for clarity and to fit in, to

belong. It has been twenty-three years since I first ventured on the path of reunification. As an adoptee that has reunited with my true self and my birth family, I keep track of how long I was away and how long I have been re-unified. My friends and I joke, but we know the purpose in me saying “I feel relief and pride in knowing I have been Indian longer than I have been white”. I was raised solely in a white world, with white values for nineteen years and I was never fully accepted by white society. I felt uncomfortable in my own skin. Then I made the choice to learn about my First Nations background and it’s been a long journey of twenty-three years, with many ups and downs. At forty-three years of age, I am still getting an understanding of who I am and how I fit into my skin and into my community. This is a difficult task given the disconnect I feel from my birth community and the fear I have to fully immerse myself in it.

Recommendations:

1) In early childhood, ensure that adoptees are not exposed to inherent or blatant racism in their adoptive families. The racism and stereotypes impact negatively upon an adoptees self esteem and identity. Allow adoptees to explore their birth families so they can understand what it truly means to be First Nations rather than letting them grow up mainly hearing the negative stereotypes from society and/or family. Let them discover the beauty of their culture so they see the beauty in themselves.

2) See skin color, talk about skin color, talk about differences and respect them. By promoting a ‘melting pot’ mentality whereby Canada should be a blending of many cultures with equal rights and entitlement, you would be overlooking the uniqueness of First Nations people and the struggles they have endured to maintain their identity. This perspective fails to understand First Nations circumstances today and will hence be ill-

prepared to support and teach a First Nations adoptee about their inherent rights and responsibilities and authentic identity.

3) Adoptees will feel unaccepted by many of their white counterparts as well as by their First Nations connections. Many may feel that they do not belong in the white world nor the First Nations world. Understand it can feel lonely and can often lead to depression. The feeling of the slightest denial will be magnified for adoptees who are already hypersensitive to rejection and abandonment.

B) Racism.

Spápza7.

During my school years I was growing up in the non-native community and educated in the public school system. This exposed me to, and allowed for, absorption of so called Euro-centric Canadian values and attitudes. I eventually realized these views were very racist in nature and conflicted with who I was learning to see myself as in this non-native world.

This racism and confusion eventually led me to a serious identity crisis in my teenage years. I was feeling prejudice and racism in society and school because I was not white. I turned to alcohol around the age of 15, it was a very troubling time.

... because during the course of my upbringing I was told pretty much on a daily basis how terrible First Nations people were - how violent, dangerous, unsavory, lazy and alcoholic they were.... pretty much the stereo type messaging. Furthermore, I was told, in no uncertain terms, not to socialize with FN people.

Qatsk.

I grew up with my adoptive family not allowing me to explore my heritage, or let me explore the native cultures or native spirituality, but they didn't. They always put natives down, they never tried to – I always heard the negative from them – natives are a bunch of alcohols' they just have a bunch of kids they don't want because they need the welfare cheque to drink and I heard all that while I was growing up.

From the very beginning of a First Nation child's life, the child and their family faces systemic racism by way of the 'tools' used by child welfare authorities to determine if a child is safe and what the standards should be to meet the 'best interests of a child'. It is made quite clear in assimilative child welfare legislation that the best interests of the child are to be determined by the Director (aka Ministry for Children & Family or delegated social workers). There is a distinct effort to dismantle any reference to First Nations family systems by considering only the child's best interests, not realizing that the child's best interests are intertwined with their birth family and community. This consideration is very Euro-centric given that it is based on a nuclear family system structure versus the communal family systems of First Nations communities. It is an imposed value system that sees the nuclear system as the recognized and respected way to keep a child safe. It is discrimination that is made based on the value system of one race over another.

Carrier (2010) shares that:

The challenge in determining the best interest of the child occurs when interests are defined and determined via the Anglo European lens. Many difficulties arise as a result. The most obvious challenge is the mainstream strategy of separating the child's best interest from their family and community. The argument made...is that the two are interdependent in such a way that the relationship cannot be severed. In the event these best interests are separated, disservice is done to the child and community.... argu[ing] that the best interest of the child cannot be properly or fairly assessed unless it is culturally defined (p. 5).

This brings about the next step in systemic racism that First Nations families face when being examined by the Eurocentric lens of the Director seeking 'best interest of the child'. Who decides what culture is to a First Nations child? Delegated Social workers have been given authority to create Culture Plans for First Nations children in care. Some social

workers may seek input from the child's family and community. Other social workers may take it upon themselves to define what would meet the cultural needs of this child. All too often, and sadly recently, I have seen social workers promote Pan-Indian events for their First Nations children/youth in care to attend. Often times, so they can check a box stating that they were supporting the child/youth cultural activities. Pan-Indian means events or things that are thought to be cultural to all First Nations people. The go to items/events tend to be pow wows and dream catchers. Send a child in care to a pow wow and that should meet the expectations of a culturally relevant event for a child /youth in care. This mentality itself is racist and derogatory to the child/youths cultural identity if it is not truly a tradition practiced by their specific cultural group. The definition of culture and tradition needs to come from a traditional grassroots lens, not from the Directors Euro-centric lens. The child's whole First Nations community, Elders especially, need to play a role in supporting and defining what a child's cultural understanding and best interests should be. This is especially true when considering long term permanency planning for First Nations children in care and/or First Nations children being adopted cross-culturally. Social workers and others involved in child welfare matters need to be held accountable for this lack of ethical awareness and change their focus and process in planning for our First Nations children.

Carrière (2010) states that "The courts are not equipped or culturally versed to effectively determine the most beneficial and culturally appropriate permanency option for Indigenous children" (p. 6). Thus further supporting the notion of the court, or the Director's, Euro-centric lens which would not adequately focus on the cultural needs of First Nations children in care or those being adopted cross-culturally. This lack of focus would lead to cultural negligence and dis-service to the child, the family and the community.

For example, a young woman I have worked with is from the Central Interior of British Columbia and is a youth in care and that has been in care since she was a baby. Only recently has she begun to identify with the Syilx culture and is now an accepted and celebrated member of the Syilx community. Her social worker was often misguided in encouraging the young woman to attend pow wows, or not support her involvement in more significant cultural activities that were traditional to her people. Pow wows are not traditional to the Central Interior of BC; they originate from the Plains cultures. Her social worker, like many others, lack the understanding of the diversity of our First Nations cultures and was unable to identify localized cultural activities for her to engage in. Sadly, due to this lack of understanding, some opportunities were lost for this young woman to engage in many of the local traditional activities that she was wanting to engage in.

Eventually the young woman found a means to get to these events, in the end, we just ended up doing all of the transporting. There was little to no support from her social worker and foster parents. In fact, when she shared her excitement with them about the events, they would minimize the relevance, or not know what to say and therefore offer little encouragement to continue in this affirmation and development of her identity as a First Nations woman. This intentional lack of interest and understanding has had detrimental impacts on this young woman. The imposition of Pan-Indianism and lack of support for her relevant cultural activities is a form of systemic and subtle racism. Subtle or covert racism can be understood as actions or words from a person of one race towards a person of a different race. Actions and words would be negative and based solely on differing races and prejudices. For example, when the foster parent refused to drive the young woman to cultural events, it was subtle racism covered up by the excuse of a busy schedule. Mind you, had the

young woman enrolled in soccer the foster parent would have likely met the demand to assist with transportation without hesitation.

Unfortunately, this covert and systemic racist behavior led to disrespect from the foster parent to the young woman and her cultural pride. Derogatory and racist remarks were made about the traditional winter ceremonies by the foster parent. When it was brought to the social workers' attention, she attempted to pressure the young woman to address the foster parent on her own, even though the young woman had already stated she wasn't comfortable to do so. When the young woman refused to call the foster parent on her derogatory and racist remarks, the social worker did nothing to address it further and essentially let it slide. Hearing about this moment infuriated me. I was taught that silence is consent, if you do not have a voice or speak out, you are supporting the dominant view. Sadly, for this young woman, she received the message from her social worker that the social worker supports and will perpetuate racism rather than support her in taking a stand against it.

From my own personal experiences as an adoptee I know that when racism hits, it hits hard. It is setbacks like this that further impound the struggle adoptees face with identity, pride, acceptance and belonging. As a teenager, I recall trying to feel some pride in being First Nations, but the world around me was telling me otherwise. No one was validating my 'otherness' and people around me seemed color blind so as to be wishfully ignorant and some how feel as though they were protecting me from the realities I was facing by not stating the obvious, which in essence, would have validated my experiences and confusion.

In reality, many foster parents and adoptive parents struggle with their own biases and inherent racism. Some begin fostering to be a saviour. Many may have good intentions, but are ignorant in how they approach the notion of fostering and end up subjecting the foster

child to racist language that puts their white foster parents in a superior role of saviour. Therefore, putting the child and their family in a role of victim and inferior. Self awareness and clear intentions need to be demonstrated by anyone planning to adopt or foster cross-culturally.

Recommendations:

4) Racism can include hearing racist remarks and not speaking out against them, reinforcing the negative stereotypes about First Nations people, separating an adoptee from their First Nation's connections by stating that they are '...better than them, were given a better chance than them' and suggesting they not interact with other First Nations because they are dangerous, dirty, drunks and lazy. The list of stereotypes is long.

5) Even on a legislative level, recognize the systemic racism that stems from white privilege. Learn about white privilege, talk to adoptees about this when it is age appropriate.

6) Ensure adoptees have access to culturally relevant activities and people. Being culturally-negligent to an adoptee will further damage self esteem, identity and confidence. Make culture a priority as it is linked to the over all health and wellbeing of any child. For First Nations children, culture can bring balance to their physical, mental, emotional and spiritual selves leading to strong self identity.

7) Recognize that as a non-First Nation's caregiver that you are not fully equipped to assist a First Nations adoptee manage racism. Seek support from birth family or a local First Nations community/programs to assist adoptees learn how to manage racism and to rise above it. Allow them regular, natural access to other First Nations people to keep the feelings

associated with being the 'other' at bay and to instill pride that can prove to be a great barrier against racism.

C) Support from Adoptive Families.

Spàpza7.

My foster Dad was really excited, he thought that was pretty cool but my foster Mom was not at all pleased and as time went on we had a profound parting of ways. I think her final statement to me, after having been raised in care by this single family my entire life was "*After everything we did for you, you went back to the Indians*" I was in my early 20's at this point, so it wasn't a very nice closure to that part of my life.

Kéckec.

The whole time my adoptive Mom and Dad were really encouraging, but I had a hard time, because I had a loyalty to them, because I thought, oh my god, these people raised me and they tell me they love me and they do everything for me, and how can I go and look for another Mom and Dad? It kind of felt like I was wanting to replace them. I had loyalty issues so I had to work through that, which took about 5 years before I came to terms with '*It's ok to find out who you are and where you are from*'. It was a learning experience that we all went through because my adoptive parents really wanted to support me more but back in the 70's and 80's there wasn't any kind of services to bridge the families and my adoptive parents didn't know what to do.

Sèsq'wez.

When I made attempts to reunify, my adoptive family wasn't unhappy but I know my Mom started feeling inadequate or almost less than. When I spoke to my aunts and immediate family members I shared every detail of the conversation with my bio aunt, she was very interested, she was crying at some points, but after that it was like she was shorter with me and a little bit, I think she was having a hard time accepting...if I was in her place would it feel like I was being rejected? Was I not good enough? I was your mother? Why do you...? So, for her I tried to be gentle. And if she asked questions, to answer...whatever she wanted, but not to initiate. It feels like an odd dynamic to the relationship. A new dynamic.... I've never had a conversation with my adoptive brother about my reunification, ever. He's never seen a picture of my bio family, he has no idea. I don't know if my adoptive Mom told him. He never asked. He's a guy, and we

aren't super close... Reunification ripples out and impacts so many, on all sides.

Often times, adoptees will struggle with loyalty issues to their adoptive families. This can often hinder the reunification process for years and poses a huge ethical dilemma for the adoptee, making the reunification process longer and sometimes more difficult. I also struggled through loyalty issues, but knew I had a right to know who I was. I had support from my adoptive mother, though I know she was worried about me getting hurt, and years later I heard my adoptive father was worried they would lose me forever. Ties with my adoptive sibling were strained and some, to this day, have not been repaired. Even my birth brother whom was adopted with me had loyalty issues, from what I could see and hear, he was unsure how to handle my reunification with our birth family. Today he still struggles with how to balance this, respecting my desire to continue to reconnect and still manage to keep his own pace in his own reunification process.

This issue of strained loyalties also brings about how we as adoptees can handle those strains. Some, such as Qatsk, speak of attachment issues whereby he has a hard time understanding and maintaining healthy relationships. I have also learned how to break emotional ties with people I am close to, in hind sight, maybe in a too severe and rigid way, but it was out of necessity. For example, in my own story when I asked my birth and adoptive families to come together for the giveaway, it put strain on some of my relationships with some of my adoptive siblings. Knowing that my sense of identity and belonging hinged on this event and the consequences of it, I knew I had to move on and not wait for those adoptive family members to see the value in supporting me and my children. I waited long enough and I needed answers. For me, sadly, it was not a difficult decision to put those

strained relations on hold so I could get what I was needing to establish some balance and clarity in my life. It was unfortunate but in comparisons to what I was seeking for myself and my children, those relationships unquestionably had to take a back seat.

Adoptive families also need to recognize that while their adopted First Nations child is growing up, they are forever finding a way to fit in to the world around them. This is natural, to want to find your place in the world. But as a First Nations child being raised in a white world, it was hard for me to find where I belonged. As I would look around I saw white faces and was exposed to a religion that never felt like it fit. Through my adopted family's direction, I only came across other First Nations people on occasion, and even some of those connections seemed orchestrated with good intentions but were very unnatural and confusing. High school, the time of identity formation, is the hardest. I didn't know why I was being discriminated against by some teachers and my white friends were not. Comments made from racist classmates impacted on my being. How was I to fit in? How could I feel a sense of belonging when I really didn't know where I truly belonged. Belonging was a concept that seemed unattainable, I seemed to be immersed in a world of acceptance and tolerance instead of being able to find my true belonging.

These feeling of disconnect and 'not belonging' arose from being raised away from a world that I had things in common with. There was little around me that my mind and spirit could feel a true sense of connectedness and belonging to. Being separated from family that look like me and act like me was a hurdle in finding commonality. Being separated from culture and getting validation for my innate way of being emotionally shut me down for a good part of my life. Now, after being connected to my birth community and family for the last 25 years I finally feel some level of belonging and understanding about who I am. But it

is still a work in progress, I still need bits and pieces from my adoptive family. My connection continues to grow with my birth family but there are still hesitations and insecurities. This is a life long healing journey that I am on.

Recommendations:

8) When an adoptee returns to their birth community and family, be there. Open your heart and mind to accepting the birth family in as your own. Don't look at them as the 'other'. Many of those birth family members may be struggling. Educate yourself to understand why. Develop respect, empathy and compassion to help you keep your arms open and welcoming to them. To an adoptee, seeing this support from an adoptive family is very reassuring for them to move forward to seek the answers and belonging they have longed for their entire life. Reassure them that you will always be there, so they don't have to feel torn because of loyalties.

9) As an adoptee, be gentle with yourself and your adoptive families. Be patient as they may not understand the struggle you have fought for so long. They may feel inadequate, or hurt by your curiosity. Be present, be reassuring and be respectful.

D) Support from Birth Families.

Kékec.

It was like they could say *'I love you'* through the glass but I just couldn't feel it and I was floating way up here, and when my Dad had one of his ceremonies, we were given names, me and my daughters. And when it happened, it was like he reached up, pulled me down and I was grounded. That's literally what it felt like. It's like my spirit came grounded... he knew what I needed. He said *'You have a name, so your ancestors will*

know you when it's your time to go, they will recognize you'. I didn't feel like I was floating around anymore. I was kind of lost until then – even though I was connected to my family again. I didn't feel grounded until I was given my name by my family.

Kéckec.

When I thought of reunifying with my birth family I was terrified to find out if I was a child of rape. That was a big one for me. I was terrified to get rejected and yeah, circumstances – I made stuff up in head, none true of course. I had no idea what it would be like, in hind sight, if I had known how huge it was...because I went from a small family, maybe ten cousins...now related to two of the largest families on the coast. My birth family tree is twenty-five pages long! Some days I have to stop thinking about it because it gets so over whelming.

As shared by Kéckec, she completely felt accepted once she was given a name by her birth family. I also understand the interest and need to receive a traditional name from your birth family or community. I have never received a name for myself nor my children. I have expressed an interest to those who would be involved in giving names, but to no avail. In my own mind, this is a very important facet in reuniting and gaining the sense of belonging that I have gone without for my entire lifetime. Due to the lack of connectedness and belonging, many adoptees suffer from low self-esteem and mine can creep in on occasion as well, this is one area of my life where it shows its disagreeable self. The “want” for a traditional name stems from a “want” to fit in. The “want” to have something I was entitled to my whole life that I was never given the opportunity to receive.

The assigning of traditional names is what roots us to our specific communities, elders and ancestors. The names given may be names from familial ancestors, they may describe our

role in the community, they are typically in the traditional language to offer even further connection. By being given a name, we are tied then to our community and feel a strong sense of belonging and responsibility to the name and to our people.

The issue of receiving a traditional name has often been heard to be a hallmark of returning home but this was only brought up by two of my storytellers. I am aware that Spàpza has received his traditional name since returning home and Kéckec received her name shortly after reunifying with her birth family. Sèsq'wez hasn't received a traditional name, and very little contact was made with her family as her adoption was closed. Qatsk has not received a traditional name either.

Given that the action of attaining a name is out of my control, I now seek to make things right for future generations. I have taken it upon myself to work with a birth family elder and sister to assign names for any of the new grandbabies being born to me and/or my brothers. Last year, we had our first grandbaby born through my brothers' youngest daughter. I worked with our family heads to come up with a suitable name to give to the baby. This ensures she will always know her name, acknowledge it and speak of it. She will never not know where she is from and what we see her role in the family as being. As a side note, even this step was met with resistance from my birth brother (who I was raised with), he did not understand nor accept the process for giving names from our birth family. The confusion and defensiveness was a result of not knowing nor understanding. Another hurdle in reunification. The list is long, trust me.

One of the biggest eye openers for me in reuniting with my birth family was that all the years that I was gone, they were grieving to. I hadn't given much thought to how my adoption and separation from my family had impacted on anyone other than me and my birth

mother. One day, my birth sister shared her last memories that she had of me before my adoption:

I used to come home from school every day and the first place I would go was to see my Aunty, you, and your brother. I would change your diapers and help cook meals so Aunty could rest. I went there every day after school, and then one day, you were gone, you and your brother. Aunty was so upset and wouldn't talk to me about it, no matter how much I cried to her. No one would talk about it. So, I was left with no idea where you went and if you were ok, I was heartbroken, we all were.

I was shocked. She had grief and loss issues around mine and my brothers' absence. I hadn't thought about my birth family's experiences around my adoption. But it was obvious that there was tremendous hurt and sadness for all of them due to our removal from the family. Speaking further to this heartbreak, Fournier & Crey (1997) state:

As an elder sadly asked the BC Government at a 1992 hearing: 'Where are our artisans, our weavers, fishermen, medicine people, dancers, shamans, sculptors and hunters? For thirty years, generations of our children, the very future of our communities, have been taken away from us. Will they come home as leaders knowing the power and traditions of their people? Or will they come home broken and in pain, not knowing who they are, looking for the family that died of a broken heart' (p. 93).

As a closing comment after my interview with Spàpza7, he advised me that I have gained a wealth of knowledge and experience that could be very helpful for my people, and that I learned all of those things for what? There was a reason I went away and learned what I did, don't let it be for nothing. On top of all the learning I had already done in life, I still had to learn about my traditional way of being. I needed to see where my skills were with hunting, fishing, basket making, gathering etc.

As an adoptee who reunited, these points surmise the truth behind many adoption experiences. Even though I had a safe and sound upbringing, and have leadership skills, do I have the cultural understanding and capacity to step back into my community in a leadership role? The opinions on this vary, from one person to the next and for myself, from one moment to the next. Did I come home broken, in pain, unaware of who I was and looking for family – yes, absolutely! Do I know the power and traditions of my people? – I'm learning. In some ways, I feel coming home and learning what was once denied me makes me more eager to learn and more inclined to learn grassroots teachings versus modern ones.

There are so many ups and downs to reunification, and so many questions to consider on the journey. Given how overwhelming it can be, I found that having one main person to rely on for the reunification process was helpful. A person that I felt safe and comfortable with. It could have been a family member or community member. But having a place to stay when a trip home is in order, a safe person who could give me the scoop on other family members or community members so I felt safe in connecting with people 1-1 or for group activities. This person has also been a source of information about my family tree so I can understand, historically, who I am a descendent of and who my relatives are.

Reunification can be a very scary process, often times people returning home are met with mistrust, jealousy or anger. I always maintained that in returning home I had never felt so raw and exposed before in my life. So if anything negative came my way by way of comments, looks or energy, I was set back and fell into that tarn of low self esteem and would have to pull myself out and brush myself off in order to continue on. It was not always easy. I believe my process of reunification was quite smooth compared to other stories we have heard here and thousands of other stories that remain unspoken. Having that support person

from my birth family there during the difficult times can help separate your own struggles from the struggles of your home or adoptive communities.

Finally, as was advised to adoptive parents, keep your heart and mind open to accepting the adoptive family in as your own. Yes, they have different values and beliefs. But there is a common thread. And that thread, or adoptee, deserves support in seeking answers and belonging. One of my birth sisters consciously calls my adopted Mom ‘Momma’. Every time she does, this warms my heart. I need to know they can be respectful of each other so maybe I don’t have to juggle and balance so much anymore.

Recommendations:

10) First of all, know that a returning adoptee is likely terrified and feeling very raw emotionally and very exposed. It can be an overwhelming experience. Meeting so many relatives is confusing and exciting at the same time. Understand that even though you may know the adoptee and may remember them as a baby, they do not know you. It will take time, patience and lots of love for relationships to grow.

11) Adoptees may not be aware of the impact that their adoption had on the birth family. They may not be aware of your unresolved grief stemming from their adoption. Share stories with them to build up their sense of identity, but don’t be afraid to say “I’m not sure”, or “I don’t recall” rather than give them false information that may conflict with another person’s story. Try to be accurate.

12) Have one or two people as the main contacts for the birth family. This makes it so much easier for the returning adoptee to feel safe. It makes planning so much easier and that

one person can walk them through the family tree, answer any questions the adoptee may have, and support them on their journey home.

13) Be open to their adoptive family. Recognize that it is helpful to the adoptee to see acceptance versus conflict between their birth and adoptive families. If there is conflict and tension, it will lead to divided loyalties and added stress for the adoptee.

14) Finally, do what ever is necessary to help an adoptee feel like they belong. Reaffirm with words that this is their home, they belong there, these are their relatives, this is their way of life. If traditional names are used in your community, have a gathering with family and community to recognize the returning adoptee. Give them a name. This will ground them in belonging and connect them to their community.

E) Support from Birth Community.

What I derived from the stories I heard from participants is that an openness on behalf of the community is vital in making returning adoptees feel welcomed, missed and that they are finally where they belong. Hold ceremonies for returning adoptees, dinners and ensure they are informed of community events so they can engage at every opportunity.

Most importantly, storytellers encouraged birth communities to have an open mind. Adoptees have been raised in a world with varied values and beliefs. They have been lost and discriminated against and were likely not adequately supported in learning how to manage the racism and stereotypes. Adoptees may have no idea about why people suffer so much in their home community. They may not know about residential schools, colonization, the *Indian Act*, the Sixties Scoop or any other atrocities that their community had to endure in their absence. Be patient in developing relationships, it takes time and trust and connectedness may be

difficult for returning adoptees. Accept their way of being. It's all they know. Hold their hand for a while until they feel comfortable to navigate family and community on their own.

Appreciate their adoptive families and whatever good they have given to the adoptee. Speak of these good things and be open to meeting the other side of the family. And teach them, at every opportunity, about their culture and traditions. Every piece of information or connections made is another piece of their puzzle in the process of getting to know themselves.

As well, be clear with your stories for the returning adoptee. Don't make up stories or moments so they feel a connection. Be honest and as accurate as you can be.

Qatsk.

Just be ready to hear lots of different stories. That's what happened to me, I heard this story, and I heard that story, from this person and that person. 20 different stories about the same situation and they are all different.

I know I have heard different stories about when I was a baby. Sometimes, they make no sense because they conflict with another person's story. One says I was in Heffley Creek, the others say I was in Chase. Was I just visiting in Chase? Or is someone confused? It's very frustrating trying so carefully to put the pieces of my life together when I am given misinformation. I have had to learn to let go of the need for details and focus on the big picture only. Now, I see humour in the conflicting stories and the effort put into trying to make sense from non-sense. Whatever happened when I was a baby, I am still here and am still who I am for the moment.

Returning to the community was a huge step in my own healing journey. It was at a time in my life when I was still registered with the Adams Lake Indian Band (my birth

mother married an Adams Lake Indian Band member and back in the day her membership would automatically transfer to his band). I was returning to ask permission to fish at our family fish camp on the Fraser River. Given that I was not a band member, I had to go to a special meeting to ask permission...even though this was my mother's home and she was buried not more than 100m from the boardroom. I was initially denied permission. I spoke up and against the decision, stating that my mother was likely rolling over in her grave at the thought of her daughter returning home to fish, to exercise her inherent rights, and being turned away by her own people. I explained how important every faucet of re-uniting was to me as an adoptee returning home and this felt like a slap in the face. I questioned why I even came to meet with them. It was heart wrenching. I was a bundle of nerves and emotions (plus I was five months pregnant coping in a heat wave in the middle of June!). They each shared their thoughts after I spoke and by their consensus, I was granted a traditional fishing license so I could fish every year and not have to ask permission any more. Had I not gotten the support of my community in that moment, I would have felt rejected again. It would have had a tremendous impact on my self esteem and identity. It may have been a hard enough blow for me to have had no further interest in getting to know my community and our traditional ways. It would have sparked anger and resentment where none had existed before.

Eventually I transferred my membership and my children's to my mother's home community. Making things right, in my mind. Now my children will never have to go through the process of asking to fish, they have simply grown up exercising this right and responsibility every year.

This situation sheds light on the essential role of community in reunification. Support from family had initiated my request for a basic fishing permit, it was with their prompting

and support that I began to see fishing as an important cultural component that I need to be engaged in. Further to that, at the community meeting, I had community members speak up on my behalf. This was such a relief and made me realize that I really was connected to this community. The ultimate blessing was being down on the fishing rocks and seeing these community members there to welcome me and my children to the rocks for the first time and then learning from my family and community about fishing and all of the protocols and ceremonies that are attached to it.

Through the easy learning moments and the difficult ones, having community there to encourage and support me has been invaluable. Often times when my birth family were unavailable to me, I have had other community members there to guide me and welcome me home when I do find myself back in St'at'imc territory.

Recommendations:

15) Ensure to formally welcome adoptees home, giving them a sense of belonging but also letting them experience an intimate familial community process, which is something they may not have witnessed before.

16) Be patient as adoptees find their bearings with so many new people and a such new way of being. Every moment presents a learning opportunity for the adoptee and the community. Remain open to the messages. Adoptees may be coming home with insecurities and it will take time to develop relationships based on trust and connectedness.

17) Teach returning adoptees about your community's history. Generally, and specifically. Tell them which family members went to residential school, or foster care. Show them how a communal family operates.

18) Respect the adoptive family and do not put an adoptee in a position to choose sides between their way of being and yours. I think most adoptees want to embrace their Indigenous way of being, as it feels right, but this will take time.

F) Education of Adoptive Parents/Foster Parents.

Qatsk.

Advice can also be given to adoptive and biological families as well, to help the adoptee in reconnecting. Education on cultural differences or struggles can also be given to the adoptee before meeting their birth families. I do believe if a native child is placed in a non-native home the caregivers need to be trained on how to introduce that child to their birth culture, their heritage, and their people. Not just say ‘*ok, you’re ours, we love you, blah blah blah*’. There needs to be some training with adoptive/foster parents with regards to that because I know that I missed out on my culture. My family was right against me having anything to do with natives. I think that type of advice and education would help us all a little bit.

Spàpza7.

...because during the course of my upbringing I was told pretty much on a daily basis how terrible First Nations people were - how violent, dangerous, unsavory, lazy and alcoholic they were.... pretty much the stereotype messaging. Furthermore, I was told, in no uncertain terms, not to socialize with First Nations people.

Above, Qatsk speaks to the importance of adoptive families supporting an adoptees cultural being and Spàpza7 speaks about the reinforcing of negative stereotypes by adoptive parents when they do not have all of the information necessary to help the adoptee understand his birth family’s circumstances. The education of adoptive families on First Nations issues is essential in developing a level of understanding and respect for the birth families and communities. This increased level of awareness will help the adoptee to develop the same understanding and respect for this other part of their being.

The practice of adopting First Nations children cross culturally is not a practice of a distant history. This still happens today in countless communities, though the push is to keep families close and connected to their birth families. I know as an adoptee raised in a non-native home, there were things I wish my adoptive parents knew or understood so as to allow me more of an opportunity to have maintained my identity and built a keener understanding of First Nation's issues prior to reunification. But I also know that there were things that my adoptive parents wish they had known or done to help me with my identity as well. Some of the barriers may have been fear based for my adoptive parents. They were worried to lose me or to have me harmed emotionally. All concerns any parent would have for their child, but ultimately, unfounded and those fears came with a momentous loss.

I wish someone had told my adoptive parents that I needed to be close to my culture and community and that I would have benefitted from meeting more family and knowing more about my family's history. I wish someone would have told them that culture is something that is lived, not an occasional trip to a pow wow or Indian Village. My heart still aches at the thought of not being taken to my birth mothers' funeral. A hallmark event in my life. I know they did the best they could with the understanding they had at that time. But there is so much room for improvement in this generation that it actually leaves no more room for excuses. No more wishing. It's time to mandate these wishes into expectations.

It's was very difficult trying to piece together the pieces of my life when I didn't have enough access or information for true clarity. A hugely significant piece of misinformation was when I was told by an adoptive relative that my birth Mother never went to residential school. This was inaccurate information and I'm not sure if I was told this as a means to try to protect me from generalizing myself into an 'unsavoury' category of being or if it was truly

an error in understanding. If people are truly looking out for the wellbeing of a child being adopted out, absolute openness is that child's right. How we got to a place of filtering the information a person has access to about their own lives is so unfathomable and profound. Having openness in adoptions would allow for accurate transfer of information about the adoptees history, genetics and familial ties. There would be less mystery about connection and identity and more understanding for all involved. Mystery only leaves room for speculation and assumptions that can all too readily become a person's false truth or insecurity.

And even recently, adoptive members of my family still believe that me and my birth brother that were adopted into their home, have not had any contact with the negative impacts of the residential schools. They believe this is not a burden that should be impacting us. Little do they know that we were impacted not only by the residential school era but by the child welfare era as well, and so to have our children and grandchildren. This stems from lack of education and awareness. Maybe a piece of the unawareness stems from guilt, feeling bad for the impacts of the choice they made and not wanting to see all of the detriments that resulted. I have seen a desire to only see the positives about our adoption. To 'protect' us or 'shelter' us from the realities of our own factual situations.

For example, the very fact that our birth mother was unable to care for us is a direct impact of the residential school era. The fact that our community was unable to care for us is also an impact of the residential school and child welfare era. Our continued struggles with identity and belonging, our lack of cultural knowledge, our ignorance of our birth family's medical history, our children's feelings of confusion around their own identity, the fact that

are loyalties have to remain divided are just some of the examples of how we were impacted by the residential school and child welfare era.

Even in this day and age, we are still working towards a means of attaining openness in adoptions. I have seen us progress from no cultural plans in adoptions, to having cultural plans (with no weight nor means of enforcement) and now to having legal Openness Adoption Agreements. We are headed in a better direction but very slowly. As a social worker, I recall working on a cultural plan with a family and in the midst of the meeting, it dawned on me, that there was no way to enforce any plans being made. This adopting family could dismiss the plans made and move with the child to another country the next month if they wanted to. I brought this concern up. I was told by the Ministry social worker that ‘There is no way we can tell the adopting family how to live their life, we can’t restrict their lives with these documents’. All I could think was what about the child’s life? What about how restricted his life will be now with this adoption going through and less and less access being granted to the parents and community. What would happen to his sense of identity and belonging? And sure enough, a year later that child was moved to another province with their adopting family. With no plan for culture or family connection. The agreement was simply broken because the adopting Dad was transferred for work.

Carrière and Scarth (2007) shed light on this situation with the words of an adopting father of a First Nations boy:

If we are to succeed in this dialogue, it will be with the understanding that parents are not the proprietary owners of children. Whether they come to us by birth, by legal sanction, by blended families, or unanticipated circumstances, we are only entrusted with their care for a short time. We are accountable to them for this privilege (p. 207).

I often wonder about the boy that moved with his adoptive family. If his adopting parents had a better understanding of First Nations issues and struggles would they have had a clearer idea of his community and the need to keep him connected for his sake and the sake of his birth family? Would a mandated educational program assist families in making the choice to adopt a First Nations child? Or to choose not to given the high level of commitment and openness? I would strongly support the adopting parents be required to take a mandatory educational course prior to be considered for adopting a First Nations child. The course should be specifically designed to reflect the experiences of his First Nation and also provide a historical oversight of the general colonization process and a modern perspective on the decolonizing process as well. It should also outline the need for a First Nations child to remain connected to their community, and what are they willing to do to ensure this? I have seen First Nation communities open their arms to customarily adopt the adopting family into the community. So they are then a part of that child's First Nation community and feel connected and the child remains connected with no risk of cultural negligence. Are they open to this idea? Are they willing to change who their close circle of friends are? Are they willing to change who they consider family? If not – why? These issues need to be explored and shared prior to any child leaving their community on an adoption or fostering level, anything less than would be negligent to the child's overall wellbeing.

Carrière and Scarth (2007) further support the notion of openness in adoptions by stating "...what would be the impact on adoption policy and practice for First Nations children if culture and identity were viewed as protective factors for resilience? Indigenous scholars have proposed that individual identity is inseparable from the collective identity of

Aboriginal people (Anderson, 2000; Bennett, 2001; Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Bockern, 1990; Kral, 2003)” (p. 210).

A young friend of mine, who is a youth in care recently spoke to the Okanagan Nation Alliance’s Children First Forum and advised them that cultural events do not equate to living a traditional lifestyle. She further shared that a First Nations child needs culture in order to attain balance in their physical, mental, emotional and spiritual life. The need for this balance should be given more attention than the recreational activities foster parents rush their foster kids to every week (January 27, 2016). This young woman has been in care most of her life, she was never adopted. But she knows the confusion of being separated from her culture and her home fires. She knows the process of re-unification and re-learning about her Indigenous way of being. With lots of love and encouragement, she has recently come to appreciate the openness she feels in connecting to her culture by means of her own volition.

di Tomasso and de Finney (2015) speak to openness in adoptions as follows;

The move toward open adoptions has initiated a broader dialogue about how the everyday realities of racism and colonialism come to bear in individual adoptions. This dialogue, in turn, is part of a move toward greater cultural continuity in adoptions and in permanency planning for Indigenous children and youth in care. Cultural planning, like openness, is intended to mitigate adopted or foster children’s separation from their community, culture, and territorial affiliations. When it is conceptualized from an Indigenous perspective, cultural planning is rooted in relational and kin-based identity formation, which are understood as requiring relationships with Elders and other knowledge holders, whose “stories are our identity statements” (p. 13).

In an open adoption the adoptive and birth families have some responsibilities to the adoptee to enlighten the adoptee about their birth family’s history and ensure they do not experience complete disconnection from their birth family and community. Having information that helps the adoptee understand how and why they ended up adopted creates an

opportunity for empathy and understanding versus judgment and stereotypes. Maintaining contact with birth family and community works to keep a child's self identity and sense of belonging intact.

Sinclair (2007) recognizes the need to prepare and/or shift the adoptive family's way of being to alleviate the adoptee from experiencing the sense of 'otherness' when it comes to their cultural diversity: "At the very least, new directions must be taken in preparing adoptive families to meet the needs of their Aboriginal children. Indeed, in order for a child to learn about the culture" (p 77).

The term biculture is used in Sinclair's study by adoptive families to describe themselves when they have chosen to adopt transracially:

"...the implications of an adoptive family taking on a bicultural identity as opposed to the child standing alone in their 'transraciality' might be significant. Such a paradigm shift might influence how an adoptive family conducts itself with respect to their adopted Aboriginal child including for example, where they live, their choice of schools, and their general family 'culture'. At a policy level such an ideological shift might influence adoptive parent/family screening strategies as well as general transracial adoption procedures, specifically in terms of adoptive family preparation" (p. 77).

Recommendations:

19) Education and understanding is essential for caregivers. An increased level of awareness about First Nations history and inter-generational impacts of forced colonization will not only help the caregiver but will also help the adoptee develop a healthy and factual understanding of their reasons for being adopted, hopefully leading to more empathy versus judgment for the birth family and community.

20) Don't be afraid of an adoptee getting to know or remain connected to their birth family. Most of the fears are unfounded and will only cause great loss and

anxiety to the reuniting adoptee. Openness with their birth family is an adoptee's right, it will help them feel connected to their identity and also develop a strong sense of self worth.

21) Make culture a natural and lived experience, not just an event that you feel obligated to attend on occasion. Engage in, learn from and enjoy the cultural teachings with your child, so they can see you being open and respectful to their world. At some point, if the adoptees birth community suggests an adoption ceremony, to adopt your family into theirs, be open to it, feel honoured as this would be the best of both worlds for an adoptee.

G) Raising a Child Cross-Culturally.

The task of adopting and raising cross culturally is not a simple one. There are challenges for everyone, not only the parents. Having the support of other adoptive families throughout the childhood years of the adoptee and through into the reunification process may be an asset for adoptive families who feel they are losing or endangering their child.

Sinclair (2007) recognizes the paradox faced by adoptive parents, she quotes Kim (1978), "Adoptive parents are faced with a dilemma; they have the contradictory task of incorporating a child fully into a family and simultaneously promoting a sense of distinct ethnic identity. The very "success" of transracial adoption, is indicative of its failure as this success has been achieved at the expense of an ethnic identity (p.485)" (p. 74).

My own professional experience and personal experiences tell me that adoptive families need to make significant adjustments to their way of life if they are adopting a First Nations child. Richard (2007) states that

“...adoptees who appear unmistakably different from their adopted parents are most likely to encounter societal discrimination. Apart from the obvious differences in appearance, Aboriginal adoptees into non-Aboriginal families are further challenged by their Aboriginal status. They often have little information to help them interpret their present situation and instead rely on messages garnered from their parents, and the broader environment in which they live. Subtle and not so subtle messages will often ‘inform’ Aboriginal adolescents that they are lucky to be out of their birth culture and that the Aboriginal community is not capable in providing good care for children. They rarely see the diversity of Aboriginal life and absorb the stereotyping, often negative, that abounds in North America mainstream society” (p. 195).

Be prepared to broaden the circle of people you engage with considerably. You will need to make room for your adopted child’s birth family members and community members. If you are going to allow them the exposure to culture that they really deserve, you will need to engage with the family and community involved in those ceremonies, celebrations, etc. Adopting cross-culturally should be about putting that child’s cultural needs before your own comfort levels. Go through the cultural journey with them, so you can encourage them and know what it is exactly that you are encouraging. Let them feel your openness and respect for something that is truly an integral part of who they are. If you cannot commit to this level of openness in the adoption, then you cannot commit to the child’s best interests. Adoption is deemed by many to be a selfless act. Putting a child’s immediate needs as priority and opening your home and life to a child. The same is true for a First Nations child and all the magnificence of their culture that comes with them.

In *On the Matter of Cross-cultural Adoptions* (2007) Dr. Leo Steiner, former Director of the Aboriginal Community Crisis Team at the Toronto East General Hospital stated:

A child who is conflicted about their identity is severely handicapped. He may have developed a host of functional skills, but he is also subject to a gnawing, chronic self-questioning. The child becomes a victim of a

self fulfilling prophecy, self sabotaging his own attempts at success for he strongly believes he is doomed to failure. With low self-esteem and a confused sense of self, the child is ill equipped to form healthy, mature relationships with others (p. 195).

In this day and age, with our levels of awareness, this seems to be a huge risk and an unnecessary one. Cultural negligence is inexcusable. If you cannot provide the enmeshed cultural way of life that a First Nations adoptee needs, then do not step up to the plate. Knowing my own story and struggle with adoption, and hearing other people stories, I waiver back and forth on whether cross cultural adoptions should even occur or not. However grateful I am for the solid foundation I was given in my upbringing with my adoptive family, I cannot deny the struggles that I still face today as a result of being one who was cross-culturally adopted. On the far end of the spectrum, which I frequent readily in my heart, Richard (2007) strongly opposes cross cultural adoption of Indigenous children based on his experience in the social service field and hearing the stories of children adopted into non-Indigenous homes (p. 189). While this may not be a reality for today's current situation of our families as they still struggle through the intergenerational traumas of the residential school era, there are some helpful insights from Carrière and Sinclair (2009) noting that cultural planning for First Nations children that are up for adoption can be addressed by a framework that is guided by the following principles:

1. Resources should be directed to family preservation
2. Eliminate Indigenous transracial adoption or place children with extended family
3. Educate potential adoptive parents
4. Educate child welfare workers about adoptive parent selection
5. Recognize that adoption is a privilege
6. Collaborate with Indigenous agencies on behalf of Indigenous children
7. Adopt siblings together
8. Promote ongoing ties between adoptive families and Indigenous cultural resources

- 9. Promote openness in order to help maintain birth and cultural knowledge
- 10. Support the child to acculturate and maintain cultural ties
- 11. Provide elder support in raising their grandchildren (pp. 266-268).

Consideration of these guiding principles could lead to the elimination of First Nation's children being adopted cross-culturally. But as I stated above, the current reality is that there are still a high number of First Nations children in care and being placed up for adoption. As Carrière and Sinclair state "Until Aboriginal agencies are willing and funded to develop adoption programs we propose that a cultural planning process must consider the option that Aboriginal and non Aboriginal adoptive parents will adopt Aboriginal children" (p. 16).

Recommendations:

22) Recognize your white privilege and understand that your child will never know that privilege personally. When the adoptee is old enough, explain this to them so they aren't left to sort through it all on their own.

23) Be prepared to shift your world to allow the birth family and/or community in. This openness will benefit everyone if it is done in a respectful and meaningful way. You must be able to commit to this in order to holistically honor the child you are adopting.

H) Insights for Returning Adoptees.

Sèsq'wez.

For adoptees choosing to reconnect with birth family, I would advise you to be gentle. With yourself first and foremost, because people are so hard on themselves. You're not perfect, we were not meant to be perfect and that's ok. When you start pecking at yourself at the inside about things you said or should have said or did or should not have did, it just cracks that little foundation of you in there. It's the same thing when your approaching your family, you don't

know these people, but they are your family, just be gentle. In all directions, adoptive, bio, self, and your children.

Qatsk.

I often remember... this one elder told me that being adopted was a gift and I can thrive in the non-native society or the native society. It's like a cross cultural thing and I never even looked at that until he told me that and then I started thinking that maybe he's right. I know that "It starts with me" I can't look at big pix until I kind of clean up my own yard first. And now I see it, native communities are coming out of alcoholism, realizing that's another way that non-native society has had control over them.

Spàpza7.

I've been home now for well over 40 years, much longer than I lived in the non-native world, and I do greatly appreciate the double perspective I have with respect to both societies. I think it equips me better to understand the somewhat warped priorities and attitudes and world view of governments and society at large.

Kéckec.

For others planning to reconnect, I would suggest to them to be prepared for the reality. They have to discover their own family's reality. We can't define it. Don't romanticize it. Their own pieces of the puzzle. Your frame of reference is different as adoptee who grew up away from community and culture. Plus it's always nice to talk to another adoptee and to share stories.

In sharing my story, I demonstrate that I know that it is important to bring awareness about reunification, especially for people who are isolated...or not ready. There are always good reasons they aren't ready. Sharing stories gives a sense of safety and permission that we can move forward. It helps us see that there are other people who are like us. It's such a feeling of being unique.

From my own experience, I want you to remember that you are an Indigenous no matter what your life experiences have been. Being Indigenous doesn't just mean that you have grown up immersed in your own culture and language. Being Indigenous also means you have suffered at the hands of a colonial government and been separated from your family and community for this governments own benefits. This may mean you are a survivor of the *Indian Act*, residential schools, the previous and current child welfare systems. Any of these ways of existing and being are ways that only an Indigenous person could experience in our

day and age. There are many branches that stem from our Indigenous roots. One is no more relevant than the other. You are Indigenous because you were adopted out cross-culturally. Do what you need to do to begin to feel whole. Find your family, your culture, your language, whatever it takes to feel the sense of connectedness and belonging you deserve.

One of the most beautiful elements of this research was how much each participant enjoyed the opportunity to talk about their cross-cultural adoption experiences. Even though there was a sense of relief and validation, there was some trauma and heartache in revisiting their stories. Being able to share parts of my story with them and to speak freely after the interviews was helpful in offering shared experiences and hurdles, and to be able to laugh about them but also recognize the need for change for future adoptees and returning adoptees. Every one of the participants stated that they never really had another adoptee to talk to about all of the highs and lows of adoption. In the past, when they shared their adoption stories with others, there was little validation or respect for their experiences.

Recommendations:

24) Be gentle with yourself and those involved in your journey. There will be struggles and triumphs, you just have to let it all unfold naturally, but take care of yourself and pace yourself.

25) Appreciate the double perspective you have been given. It will allow you to see and understand the struggles of our people and how these struggles have been triggered by the non-First Nations world. At some point, that double perspective can be used to help your own First Nations community to move towards increased health and healing.

26) Continue to share your stories so others can learn from them. Speak to other adoptees so you can get the support and validation you may need as you make this remarkable journey.

1) Inter-Generational Impacts of Cross-Cultural Adoption.

I have always worried about the impacts of my journey of identity on my children and grandchildren. As I worked my way through this thesis and witnessed my youngest son hit his identity-challenging teen years, I became even more aware of the impacts of my journey on my children. I can't help but wonder, definitively, how my life path has impacted on my children. From my eyes, my search for identity and belonging is also their search for identity and belonging. I have done the best I can in my lifetime for myself and my children. When I began my journey as a small child I thought I was white and that I thought I belonged in the white world. Now, my boys' paths have varied as well. My oldest son spent the first six years of his life with majority influence of family coming from my adoptive Irish-Hungarian family. When he was seven years of age, I married my youngest sons father from the Tsimshian territory, we made a shift to exercise our inherent rights to fish and hunt. We spent more time with my First Nations family and learned to take more pride in who we were. I began to realize just how much I didn't know about myself and my history. With the help of my husband, I saw how I had isolated myself from my First Nations community and First Nations people in general. There was more I needed to do...and as I started to do these things, it was like I was finally understanding who I was. But it was a shift for my oldest as well. Now he was encompassing another group of family and another way of life. This has had a huge impact on his development of his own unique identity. Today, he has divided loyalties

between his birth and adoptive families. I have struggled with those same loyalty issues, most adoptees do. My oldest son possesses a slight disregard for his First Nations culture and identifies mainly with his Jamaican ancestry, which I understand as he is seen by society as Jamaican with his beautiful dark skin and coarse hair.

For my youngest, he has always grown up with First Nations culture around him and had my birth family around him from the start to know he has this First Nations family and way of being. But still, there is a disregard for the culture that he carries. I'm uncertain if it is due to his loyalties to our adoptive family that he has picked up on from his older brother or from me. Maybe he senses my insecurities around my birth family? Or he may have picked up on some of the insecurities and judgment from our adoptive family towards our birth family which lead to him pushing his culture away.

I do have a few strands of hope that I hang onto. One is that both of my boys love to go fishing in our home territory every summer. Provided the salmon pass through to spawn, they will have a draw to go home every year. As well, I have seen my oldest son, on two occasions show his absolute trust and belief in some of our traditional cleansing medicines and ceremonies. When these moments happened, I cried. I cried because I knew I had done something right and that he was listening and believing.

So it leaves me to wonder, will my children and grandchildren know where they are from? Will they one day have pride and be open to understanding the Ucwalmicw (*People of the land* in St'at'imcets) way of being? Have I done all that I can do to ensure they know their First Nations family and culture? What about when I am gone from this earth, will my boys still fish and bring their children to fish? This topic is worthy of further research and maybe as my children continue on their path, I may one day take a

closer look at their situation and the situation of others who have also survived the survivors of cross cultural adoption.

Recommendations:

27) Be aware that the intergenerational traumas of adoption will be felt for several generations. It is an interruption on a family system that will impact on the adoptee, and their children and likely their grandchildren. Be patient with your children, for your struggle is their struggle as well.

28) Don't be fooled into thinking that this adoptee has been 'saved' from the struggles of their birth family. There are genetics at play and the need for identity will almost always bring them back to their birth families. Self awareness, education and openness are the best tools that can be implemented to help minimize the intergenerational traumas that can stem from cross-cultural adoptions.

Chapter Ten

My Journey.

Throughout the process of hearing the participants' stories, I was constantly reminded of the need to keep my story and experiences separate from theirs. There were so many points of similarity; on occasion I found myself briefly interjecting with sounds or nods of understanding, or offering a brief bit of my story to offer validation to encourage them to continue. On occasion, this seemed needed by the participants. Allowing them to share their story through the predefined questions helped them to share openly and without losing their focus. I saved the bulk of my own story, if they were interested, for the end of our time together. Hearing their stories and how they managed through somewhat similar circumstances as mine reminded me of the diversity of our situations. No two stories are alike and each story is valid.

One participant in particular, Spàpza7, offered me enlightenment in my own story. Moving me to the point of tears as soon as I left him. Mutual understanding and support between adoptees is very powerful. No matter how much healing, counselling or support we seek – there will always be a rawness and tenderness that will connect us through our common, yet so varied, experiences. Spápza7 enlightened me about the story I shared at the beginning of my thesis, he told me that he believed, no, he knew that I was not alone in that teepee that day. He knew my birth mother was there with me. That is why I received such a gentle yet clear message. What a blessing to have had this moment with Spápza7.

The gifts and stories that were exchanged between myself and the participants were fulfilling, healing and validating. Every one of the participants had the common goal of

having their story heard so we can learn from their experiences and make future ones better for other returning adoptees and their families. In storytelling, for First Nations people, there is a selflessness, a humbleness and hopefulness. We share our stories to teach. This is our responsibility. It is not about whether we have something to be proud of or ashamed of, its about a lesson that was learned and the passing down of information to help the next generations. This is the intended power of storytelling to our people.

The writing of this thesis took more out of me than I had imagined. Yes, it took time, dedication and energy...but it also took a small piece of me, as well as a small piece of each of the storytellers, I'm sure. Like them, I had the intention to share my story in hopes that it makes a difference for someone else.

There were days that I struggled to write or read any more about adoption. I found certain words sparked huge epiphanies for me, or would trigger me to remembering old feelings of hurt, confusion and sadness. There were times that I needed to put it all away and process, or to simply clear my mind and think of other things. This work has been all-consuming on so many levels. I have been challenged emotionally, spiritually, mentally and physically. But like the storytellers who shared so bravely with me, I know there is a greater purpose to understanding our situations and that pushed me through.

I hope that this thesis touches adoptive families, to be supportive and open to the journey of the adoptee in reunifying with their birth families. I want them to know that they should not pass judgment on us nor our birth families...but as adoptees, we need to feel a sense of belonging and that our genetics would not allow us to rest until we felt that connection again. They need to understand that "there was trauma that [we] can associate with feelings of disconnection from the rest of the world, based in hidden knowledge and

silent grief” (Carrière & Scarth, 2007, p. 208). As adoptees returning to the homes fires, we are simply looking to address that trauma and become increasingly self aware. Be open to broadening your frame of reference. First Nations family systems and ways of being are simply different than yours. Do not judge or criticize, simply educate yourselves about the differences and accept them as a part of the returning adoptees broadening way of being. Show an interest in their journey, support them through the hard times, learn with them, don’t act like you know more than they do... those innate and deeply profound spiritual senses will always be stronger.

I hope that it touches birth families and communities, to encourage them to be open to adoptees and all the different ways of being that we have learned while away from you. Celebrate when your children come home, honor them, for they have been away and absent from themselves for a lifetime. You make them feel whole, accepted and most importantly, you let them know they belong. Give them a name, a sense of belonging and value. Keep in mind their insecurities and low self esteem. Hold their hand for a good long while. They need it, otherwise they may turn and run. Be kind to their adoptive family, accept them as your own as well. This acceptance means the world and makes balancing in both worlds so much easier. Know that its not only culture, but lived experiences of colonization that make us Indigenous. We have had different paths, suffered in different ways, but are still of the same bloodline and history.

There is a very real need for returning adoptees to be supported in their journey home. Some thoughts may suggest there is a roll for local child & family service offices to play in reunifying adoptees with their home communities. Or is there a need for a private government funded venue that would work in tandem with child & family service agencies to help in

locating lost families and communities? This thought of government support of reunification provides an opportunity for the governments to again, make steps to correct wrongs of the past and work towards healing in our First Nation communities.

I hope that it touches families considering adopting cross-culturally. Be aware, be conscientious, be committed enough to change the way you live and how you live. Most importantly, be open and unafraid. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Seriously ask yourself if you can give what is needed for this child and if you cannot, then don't do it. Understand that an adoptees culture, identity and connectedness to birth family is a right and if respected will keep them safe mentally, spiritually, emotionally and physically.

Most importantly, I hope it touches other adoptees. Whether you have thoughts of returning to meet your birth family or if you have taken the steps to do so. Your story may be filled with many ups and downs, even throughout the reunification process, but every bump and plateau is a part of your own life's puzzle...keep finding the pieces and putting them together. Your story is unfolding and your story is invaluable. Your trials and tribulations as an adoptee was not for nothing. Share your story to help others understand and grow, making the path for future returning adoptees that much smoother. Make the understanding for all others involved that much clearer. Speak up to help others weigh the odds of the positives and negatives of adoption.

In closing, Ka-càta nscwàkwekwa (My heart is lifted, I am honoured) to those that shared their stories with me. Words and small gifts alone cannot express the gratitude I have for you choosing to trust me in respecting you and to hold your stories sacred. I am truly humbled. I will do my best today and in the future to make use of your teachings that you offered so openly and so graciously.

Now, to end with a traditional story that can be reflective of an adoptees struggle to find their sense of belonging and purpose. The messages you hear will be reflective of what you may have understood and felt throughout the reading of this thesis:

St'at'imc Legend: How Toom got her Power

No one would give Toom any advice on how to get her power to become an Indian doctor. She decided to find and eat the heart of a special animal. Whenever she saw an animal, she killed it and ate the heart. Toom was trying hard to find her power, but the dream would not come to her telling her what she needed to do to become an Indian doctor.

She continued trying to get her power, so she decided to go into the mountains to practice, as the old Indian doctors did. She wanted to have a strong heart, so that she wouldn't be afraid of anything.

At one point, Toom had been captured. Toom didn't tell anyone exactly where she was captured by the other tribe. Part of her life was spent in foreign lands. During her travels, she continued to eat the heart of every animal that she killed. Toom wanted to have a strong heart, but she couldn't kill the strong animals, such as grizzly bears, wolves, cougars and wolverines. She killed the smaller animals and ate their hearts. When she returned to camp, she anticipated dreaming of her power.

Toom travelled widely throughout the foreign lands. She was still trying to get her power. On her travels, she saw a large frog. She killed the frog and ate the heart. After she ate it, she fell asleep and dreamed. In her dreams, a spirit told her. "You have achieved what you wanted, now that you have eaten the frog's heart, you will begin to get your power. You have been looking for a long time." Toom thanked the spirit of the frog. "I have been punished ever since I was captured, to travel with these people as their slave. If you will help me, I wish for a strong heart like yours". The frog's spirit told her "Now that you have the heart, you have the power, don't be afraid of anything, ever again". Toom

again thanked the frog for giving her the special power she had longed for. Now she would never be afraid.

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Appendix



University
of Victoria

School of Social Work
PO Box 1700 STN CSC
Victoria British Columbia V8W 2Y2 Canada
Tel (250) 721-8036, Fax (250) 721-6223
Email: socw@uvic.ca Web: www.socialwork.uvic.ca

Participant Consent Form

Project Title: Thesis research for Masters of Social Work Student Lenora Starr.

Funded by: Student

Researcher(s): Lenora Starr, Masters of Social Work Graduate Student, School of Social Work, University of Victoria.

Supervisor: Robina Thomas, School of Social Work, 1-250-721-8036, robinat@uvic.ca

Purpose(s) and Objective(s) of the Research:

This research focuses on adoptees to share their information via story telling. This will be done along with with the author's own adoption story. From the stories gathered, suggestions will be made through the completed thesis work to allow further planning to occur for future returning adoptees.

This Research is Important because:

Very little research exists that speaks specifically to the reunification process of an Aboriginal adoptee and the family/community they are reconnecting with. This information could benefit future returning adoptees in their journey towards reconnecting with birth family and community.

Participation:

- You have been chosen to participate in this process because you have shown an interest in sharing your adoption/reunification story.
- Participation in this project is entirely voluntary.
- Whether you choose to participate or not will have no effect on your position [e.g. employment, class standing] or how you will be treated.

Procedures:

- Interviews can be held in two sessions if needed. Some specific questions will be asked to begin the sharing. Interviews will be audio recorded to assist with transcription at a later date.
- **Duration:** 1-2 hours for each interview.
- **Location:** at a location comfortable and safe for both the storyteller and the Researcher, will vary.

Compensation:

- As the Researcher, I will offer a small gift to you for the sharing of your story and time, this is customary in Indigenous populations and would be seen as disrespectful if not adhered to.
- It is unethical to provide undue compensation or inducements to research participants. If you would not participate if the compensation was not offered, then you should decline.
- There are no extra funds provided for child care needs of the participants.

Benefits:

This research is being done by myself, an Indigenous woman who was adopted out into a non-Indigenous home therefore the perspective of the researcher is unique yet relates to your experiences on many levels,. Diversity in our stories will only further enhance the value of our unique experiences.

The more Indigenous research being done by Indigenous researchers can only help to improve the scope of understanding and empathy to those of us sharing our stories and improve the reunification process for adoptees and those they are reuniting with.

Risks:

- There may be emotional and spiritual risk to you by participating in this research, as the sharing of such personal information, often trauma based, can cause stress and/or anxiety.
- Risk(s) will be addressed by ensuring you have access to your own personal emotional supports or such supports provided by the researcher.

Researcher's Relationship with Participants:

- To help prevent a shared communal relationship from influencing your decision to participate, the following steps to prevent unnecessary felt obligation have been taken:

1) You are aware that participation is voluntary and should occur only if they are comfortable to do so.

2) Recruitment for this research project is supported by St'at'imc Chiefs Council, but participation in this study will not have any direct impact on your relationship with St'at'imc Chiefs council as this research project is not being done for the St'at'imc Chiefs Council.

Withdrawal of Participation:

- You may withdraw at any time without explanation or consequence.
- Should you withdraw, your data will not be used and any documentation or recordings of your story will be returned to you or destroyed.

Continued or On-going Consent:

- I will continually check in with you throughout the interview process to see if you are still comfortable to continue.

Anonymity and Confidentiality:

- To protect your confidentiality and anonymity, as well as the confidentiality and anonymity of other non-participants that may be identifiable in your story, pseudonyms will be used and/or changing identifying information throughout all of my notes, recordings, etc. All information gathered through interviews, phone calls etc will be destroyed after my thesis is successfully defended.
- During the research process, interview information will be stored on an external hard drive or in written notes and will be securely locked when not in use.
- Confidentiality may have exception if any incidental information comes forward that creates a safety concern for participant, researcher or another party. This information will be reported to the proper authorities to ensure safety of all involved.

Research Results will [may] be Used/Disseminated in the Following Ways:

- Research results will be used in Researchers written thesis and will be made available to you & to the St'at'imc Chiefs Council for the communities use and growth.

Questions or Concerns:

- Contact the researcher using the information at the top of page 1;

- Contact the Human Research Ethics Office, University of Victoria, (250) 472-4545
ethics@uvic.ca

Signed Consent

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers, and that you consent to participate in this research project.

<i>Name of Participant</i>	<i>Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>
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A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.

Future Use of Data

I consent to the use of my data in future research: _____ (*Participant to provide initials*)

I **do not** consent to the use of my data in future research: _____ (*Participant to provide initials*)

I consent to be contacted in the event my data is requested for future research:

 (*Participant to provide initials*)