

# A framework for Indigenous adoptee reconnection: Reclaiming language and identity

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*Abstract: Canadian society is ascribing increasing importance to the large numbers of Indigenous children who have – and continue to live – in the child welfare system. An unexplored aspect of this phenomenon is how such children rebuild their Indigenous identities once they become adults and are no longer in care. Recent estimates suggest up to 20,000 First Nations, Metis, and Inuit children were removed from their families during what was known as the Sixties Scoop (Sixties Scoop Survivors, 2015). The Sixties Scoop is part of Canada's colonial story in which the prevalent assimilative force has been disconnecting Indigenous children from their families and understandings of the world. To date, there is little research on how transracially adopted Indigenous adults reconnect with their Indigeneity. Identity reclamation is a personal and intimate process. I begin by summarizing the scholarly literature on the Sixties Scoop, and describe a proposed theoretical framework of Indigenous adoptee identity reclamation emerging from my reflexive process in writing a critical personal narrative. I emphasize the importance of shifting from 'othering' hegemonic discourses to a spirit-based discourse of healing and wholeness. Finally, I engage in a broader dialogue on decolonizing education from Indigenous perspectives.*

*Keywords: Decolonization, Identity, Indigenous Education, Indigenous Resurgence, Language, Reclamation, Sixties Scoop*

## Introduction: I'm allowed to be Native<sup>1</sup>

When I was eight, just before my Mormon baptism, I looked in the mirror in the church bathroom searching for myself. A mirror in front of me and a mirror behind me created the illusion of infinity and a multiplicity of selves. I knew I was adopted. I knew I was Native. I knew I wasn't supposed to talk about or question where I came from. I didn't know my adoption was part of a larger movement of transracial adoption known as the Sixties Scoop. From the late 1950s through the early 1980s, the Sixties Scoop was a wide-scale national apprehension of approximately 20,000 First Nations, Metis, and Inuit children who were adopted out of their communities (Johnston, 1983) and placed in primarily non-Aboriginal homes in Canada, the U.S. and overseas (Johnston, 1983; Kimelman, 1985). In her study of current Aboriginal child welfare on reserves, Sterritt (2011) suggested that the child welfare system had become the new agent of assimilation and colonization after residential schools were phased out. This large-scale adoption project represents one of the many approaches to the colonization of Native populations in Canada. Bonita Lawrence contested that these policies were designed to manufacture the "elimination of Indigenous peoples as a legal and social fact" (as cited in Hargreaves, 2012, p. 97). From this perspective, the transracial adoption of Indigenous children is a cultural genocide, forcibly transferring children from one group to another.

At eight years old, I knew being baptized would bring me closer to my adopted family. That story of the mirror in the church bathroom carried me through my teenage years when I reconnected with my family on northern Treaty 8 territory, also referred to as the Wood Buffalo Park region of the Northwest Territories and Northern Alberta. I was shocked by my family's poverty and saddened by my inability to fit in. After a few years of painful reconnections I distanced myself from both of my families and moved out of country as a means of escape. I lived outside of Canada for eight years.

Formatively, during my twenties, I lived in Nicaragua for five years. During this time, I worked on education projects with Nicaraguan educators and practiced critical pedagogy (Freire, 1993). I sought ways to empower learners, and through this process I came to critique the First World teachings that were embedded in my ways of knowing, and wondered how I could empower Nicaraguan students and educators when I saw myself as 'other'. The only way I could explain my experience of transracial adoption was from a hegemonic lens that included a Settler story of "the Indian problem." In other words, I saw my Native identity as a problem that I was rescued from when I was adopted into a non-Native home.

I returned home to the Northwest Territories in my thirties and spent ten years reclaiming my identity, reconnecting with family and the land, and reframing my understandings of Indigeneity. I have forgiven. I

<sup>1</sup> I generally use terminology from a specific era (chronologically): Indian, Native, Aboriginal, Indigenous. If I am referencing someone else's work, I use the terminology and capitalization they use (e.g. indigenous or Indigenous). I tend to steer away from the term 'Aboriginal' in my own work, which is definitely an imposed 'othering' term (as was 'Indian') and I am inclined to use Native for this time period in my life, unless I am referencing the Canadian state. Indigenous is now widely used globally and references the inhabitants of a territory from time immemorial with creation stories of that place.

have learned boundaries in relationships. And I don't carry "white guilt" or "Native shame" anymore. My children know their grandmas and their kokum—it brings healing to hear my children address their *nêhiyaw* (Cree) grandmother in the language.

Their grandpa—my adopted father—has visited us many times in the Northwest Territories and reframes his own experience forty-five years ago, when he was a young white teacher in the NWT fostering a Native girl. Now that I am allowed to be Native, the multiplicity of selves does not daunt me. I can look at my reflection and am not surprised to see image upon image. My life is a multiplicity of experiences and realities. My first language was *nêhiyawêwin* because this is the language that my mother and grandparents spoke in our home, and yet it is also English as I left our home when I was a baby.

I am from a small northern community at the North Eastern edge of Treaty 8 territory. We have a rich history that comes from being land-based people with a spiritual connection to all living beings. Up north, my grandparents were called trappers. My mother and her siblings were born on the land, and being of the land was their way of life. I was also raised by a Settler family in the suburbs of one of Canada's largest cities where all my food came from the grocery store. There was no understanding of my Indigenous family's worldview where I was raised. When I moved back north as an adult, some teachings came easily as they live in our genetic memory while other teachings made me feel like a toddler again. It is not easy. I have used alcohol to overcome shyness, numb my feelings, and escape from acknowledging pain, yet over the years this deep-rooted pain has been relieved by reframing what it means to be Indigenous, including returning to my home territory, meeting relatives all over the north, and spending time on the land. When I consider myself as connected to the cosmos—this large web of relations—and I am in the bush sitting by the fire, or being guided in spiritual practices, I am at peace. This does not change what happened to me as a child, but it does transform the way in which I live in this world.

I am not alone. Scholars and community-based activists have spoken back to processes of colonialism and it is now recognized that the Sixties Scoop is part of Canada's colonial story (Helcason, 2009; Sinclair, 2007). Several researchers, such as Bombay, Matheson and Anisman (2009) Fournier and Crey (1997), and Sinclair (2007), identified commonalities between children adopted out during the Sixties Scoop and Residential School Survivors including culture and language loss, internalized racism, and isolation within their own communities and in Settler society.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission has opened the door to an examination of the child welfare system, and while there has been "a moratoria on transracial adoption" (Sinclair, 2007, p. 68), there are currently over 30,000 Indigenous children in care. Fee (2012) stated that "more Aboriginal children are in care now than were in residential schools at their height" (p. 10). Some researchers, such as Cindy Blackstock (2008), have suggested that the child welfare system is punitive and will ensure another lost generation of Indigenous children who do not have their Indigenous identity.

In the policy paper, *Indian Control of Indian Education* (1972), the National Indian Brotherhood and Assembly of First Nations presented their statement on Education that included the rationale for local First Nations control of First Nations children's education. The authors explained "we modern Indians want our children to learn that happiness and satisfaction (comes) from: pride in one's self, understanding one's fellowmen, and, living in harmony with nature. These are lessons which are necessary for survival" (p. 1). The Assembly of First Nations pointed to the necessity for Indigenous children to receive Indigenous teachings in order to have a healthy identity. I started hearing these teachings from my family when I was in my twenties and it took another ten years for me to have the courage to return home to live in the community. Until then, I was living with a political Aboriginal identity, the First Nations, Metis, and Inuit status assigned by the Canadian state, the same state whose actions resulted in removing me from my home, disconnecting me from cultural or spiritual identity.

### **Three Phases of the Sixties Scoop Literature**

Most of the literature on the Sixties Scoop falls within three critical phases in the literature: the first phase (mid 1950s-1970s) encompassed concepts of child well-being; the second phase (mid 1970s-1990s), described the development of Indigenous self-governing agencies; and the third phase (2000-present) presents issues of adoptee identity. The first phase of the Sixties Scoop literature indicated that white families needed to be encouraged to adopt Indigenous children, there was hesitation based on racial difference, and babies were preferred (Fanshel, 1972; Ward, 1984). In 1967, Saskatchewan established its Adopt Indian Metis (AIM) program to advertise the availability of 150 Indian and Metis preschool children for adoption. The AIM newspaper articles advertised a "child of the week," which suggested that white families needed to

be convinced that Indian and Metis children were safe to adopt and should be assimilated. In doing so, families would be saving these children from their Indian and Metis homes (Fournier & Crey, 1997).

Indigenous people under the Indian Act were enfranchised in 1960—almost a century after Confederation—and First Nations leaders had more leverage in regard to Canadian state policy development. Over the next two decades, First Nations leaders lobbied for the right to administer child welfare (Sinclair, 2007) and education on reserves. Hudson and McKenzie (1981) presented the relationship between the child welfare system and Native people as one of cultural colonialism. As such, the dominant group has used policies and practices that devalued the culture of a subjected people, believing only the dominant group was the carrier of a valid culture. However, the colonizing of Indigenous children in the child welfare system was further complicated when Indigenous social workers were replacing white social workers with the same role of child protection (Helcason, 2009) and the focus on reserve was institutionalization rather than supporting families on reserve or in communities (Steritt, 2011).

As one of only two social workers of Aboriginal descent within an agency of hundreds, I was often prevailed upon by the perinatal team to assist them in counselling young mothers into relinquishing their children. Regrettably my naivety and need for secure employment caused me to comply more than I was comfortable with. This is a situation about which I am haunted to this day (Helcason, 2009, p. 51).

While Indigenous self-governing models for child welfare were being implemented, the structures and approaches to working with children and families remained deeply rooted within colonial policy. In response, Sinclair (2007) proposed that a paradigm shift was required in Aboriginal transracial adoption ideology and put forward recommendations for the social work profession. Further, she believes many adoptees are facing identity issues because of being socialized and acculturated into a middle-class ‘white’ society (p. 69). Both Sinclair (2007) and Nuttgens (2013) noted that the experience of reconnecting with members of one’s birth family is a neglected aspect within transracial adoption research.

### **Autoethnography as a Tool for Self-Awareness**

Returning to university as a doctoral student, I quickly became engaged in the dialogue on Indigenous approaches to decolonizing education, including land-based programs, connection to spirit, Elders and knowledge-holders as facilitators, and Indigenous language immersion. Thanks to Indigenous activists and scholars who have come before us (e.g., Archibald, 2008; Battiste, 2013; Castellano, 2006; Dickason, 1997; Ermine, 1995; Kirkness, 2013; Orion, 1991), as well as critical theorists and educational practitioners, educators have the responsibility to engage in research projects that address Indigenous issues. Through these projects, we have the opportunity to reframe the colonial history of Canada, support Indigenous nations and communities’ well being, and improve the dominant society’s understandings of spirit-based discourses.

Autoethnography is an approach to research where researchers study themselves as the phenomenon of interest (Creswell, 1998). In feminist and critical research spaces, autoethnography asks social scientists to take on dual academic/personal identities and tell autobiographical stories about an aspect of their lived experience (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). The autoethnographer is vulnerable in telling her story and this writing requires self-reflexivity. By tapping into the affective domain of her experiences and writing as both the researcher and the researched, the autoethnographer can be effective in presenting lived experiences (Prendergast, 2009). Autoethnography creates dialogic spaces, where critical, Indigenous and anti-oppressive resistance discourses may emerge.

Paul Whitinui (2013) has presented Indigenous autoethnography as a resistance discourse. He pointed out that in addition to self-reflexivity, a researcher using this method of inquiry needs to be cognizant of relationship to community. Absolon (2011) concluded that Indigenous researchers are seeking to contribute to the collective good of the community, nation or ‘Indian situation’ in Canada. Wilson and Yellowbird (2005) presented decolonization as praxis in which we “question the legitimacy of colonization” (p. 3). Congruent to, and as a result of, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, our communities are discussing the child welfare act within the context of colonial policies of assimilation and the children that have been removed from community. Whitinui (2013) asked, “Will sharing your story about yourself bring people together?” (p. 23). He also invited the researcher to consider “their own level of connectedness to space, place, time, and culture as a way of (re)claiming, (re)storing, (re)writing, and (re)patriating our own lived

realities as indigenous peoples” (p. 23). Thus, personal narrative is a powerful act of decolonization. By speaking from this space of self, we can improve relationships, reduce prejudices, encourage personal accountability, and promote social and cultural change.

My self-reflexive praxis has included a willingness to learn, to accept my lack of Indigenous knowledge, to be compassionate with myself and others, and to engage in an ongoing process of asking myself *why* in order to gain congruency between my actions and beliefs. Extended family—including my mother’s cousin who is now a close aunty to me, and two of my brothers in particular—have taught me much about *nēhiyaw* ways and loved me unconditionally throughout my process of decolonization. From what I have been taught living in community, aunty is both a kinship and respectful term for an older woman that we have a relationship with. In this relationship I am a learner, the young one.

I have also been fortunate to have a young Elder support my growth both in the workplace and in my family life. These people help me become spiritually stronger and encourage me while noticing when I am struggling and where I need to do more work on myself. After my first year of doctoral studies, my children and I did a road trip home including a twelve-day boat trip down the Dehcho. During this trip, I took photos and wrote notes for myself. The following summer—after my mother passed away—we took another road trip home and I wrote about and photographed our family’s bush camp where my mother was born. Back at university, I was able to sift through the images and words, reflect on these conversations and on my life journey. In many ways, I am not the same woman that stepped off the airplane in Yellowknife twelve years ago and in many ways I am still that baby girl who was living in the receiving home in my home community over forty years ago.

## **A Theoretical Framework of Indigenous Adoptee Identity Reclamation**

Situating myself and articulating my process of decolonization is a necessary step in reclamation work and a critical component of Indigenous research. I needed to look back at my process of maturation, specifically how I framed my lived experience as an Indigenous adoptee, and how this has shifted over the years as I continue to reclaim my Indigenous identity. In doing so, I have drafted a theoretical framework of Indigenous adoptee identity reclamation that is grounded in Indigenous Education (Archibald, 2008; Battiste, 2013; Kirkness & Bernhardt, 1991; Kirkness, 2013; Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008) and Indigenous Resurgence scholarship (Absolon, 2011; Alfred, 2009; Alfred & Corntassel, 2005; Chilisa, 2012; Claxton, 2008; Simpson, 2008), and based on my lived experiences in order to articulate my process of reclaiming identity, reconnecting to community and reframing who I am as an Indigenous adult. I conceptualized this framework in my first year of doctoral studies through ongoing discussions about decolonization. I found myself using the term ‘lens’ to describe the different views people have on life experiences and their understandings of colonization. I read Wilson and Yellowbird’s (2005) *For Indigenous Eyes Only*, and asked myself how my ‘eyes’—the lens through which I look—have changed during my own process of decolonization. In an early collage of the framework, I used photographs of my eyes. To create a curriculum resource in an accessible format, I have simplified the model, using four circles. The framework’s first two lenses: *Develop-eyes* and *Colon-eyes* are in a hegemonic space that is represented by the blue colour. The third and fourth lenses: *Indigen-eyes* and *Spiritual-eyes* are in a spirit-based space that is represented by the purple colour. The four circles are interconnected to represent my lived experiences and the intersectionality of my proposed theoretical framework of Indigenous adoptee identity reclamation.

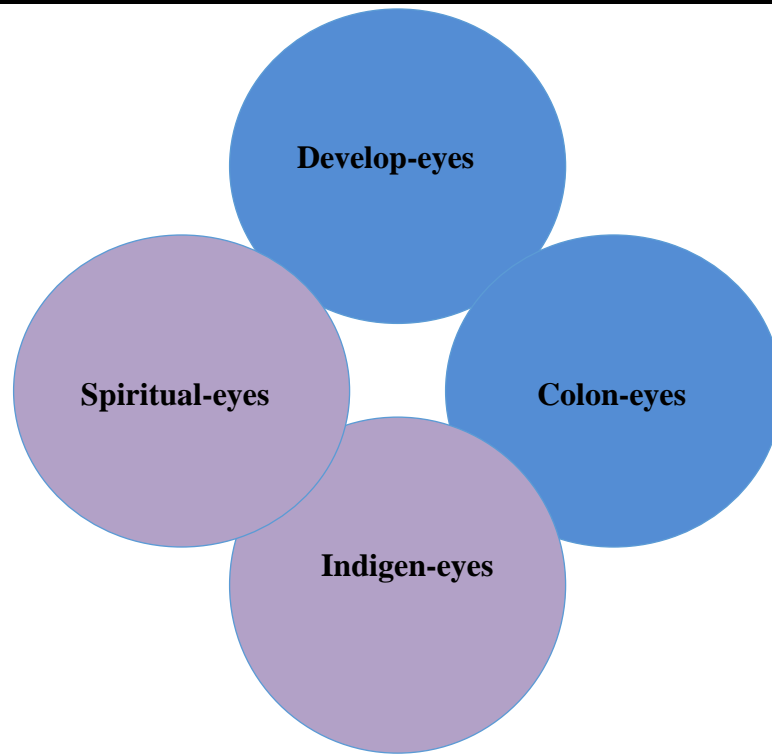


Figure 1: A Theoretical Framework of Indigenous Adoptee Identity Reclamation

### **Develop-eyes**

Berg and Lune (2012) asserted that qualitative research is often community action-oriented. My master's research (Wright, 2003) was action-oriented and grounded in feminist and critical theory. However, I worked with a framework within a hegemonic space. I was an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher, teaching an undergraduate 400 level Research Methods course for EFL pre-service teachers in Nicaragua. I assisted Indigenous student teachers to be successful in the discourses that surrounded them, rather than the discourses of their families or their communities. I encouraged students to find their voice, make meaning from the materials we studied, and create their own action-research projects, yet this was still within a framework of English education for global participation.

I worked with a Miskito educator at the Bluefields Indian and Caribbean University (BICU) over a period of several months. With a team of educators, we created the first local English Language textbook to be used for undergraduate learners. We did not consider Miskito, Sumu or Rama ways of learning and knowing. We used local stories to create texts that would fit within the academic structure of English language proficiency testing so that local people could become part of the Western academic tradition. While I may have been an ally to Indigenous Nicaraguan teachers, I now wonder how English language proficiency supports self-determination and empowerment of Indigenous nations? Can we participate in critical transformation if we are othered and view ourselves as 'other'? What happens when, in retrospect, we find ourselves choosing hegemonic projects for emancipatory actions?

As I developed my 'eyes', I started to be curious about my Indianness and understood that the Settler story of contact was both a convenient and oversimplified explanation for complex relationships. The longer I lived in Nicaragua, the more I saw political similarities between Indigenous-Nicaraguan state relations and (Northern) Indigenous-Canadian state relations. I observed that while there were regional governance structures in place and a local university, communities operated within Nicaraguan legal structures, such as the use of Nicaraguan passports and Nicaraguan currency—despite the 1987 agreement that established these lands as the Autonomous Regions of Nicaragua. This—as well as the 1999 establishment of Nunavut as a territory—compelled me to move back home to the Northwest Territories.

## Colon-eyes

My critical consciousness was awakened by my experiences in Nicaragua and I was able to look back at the colonial discourses of my childhood from another lens. I relate my childhood experience to the views of a fellow Indigenous adoptee, Richard Wagemese (2009), who recalled:

INDIANS NEVER GOT MENTIONED IN ANY OF THE SCHOOLBOOKS EXCEPT FOR being the guides for the brave explorers discovering the country. I could never figure out how you could say you were out discovering something when you needed a guide to help you find it... We were either heathen devils running around killing people or simple savages who desperately needed the help of the missionaries in order to get straightened out and live like real people. (pp. 12-13)

This rings true with my experience of being raised in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, informally known as the Mormon church. *The Book of Mormon* presents history from a Settler perspective. There is one lost tribe in *The Book of Mormon*, the Lamanites, who are the Indigenous peoples of the world. I was raised to believe that being a Lamanite was inferior to the other eleven tribes. Both of my adopted parents were from the tribe of Ephraim. From a young age, I was told that I was a Lamanite and I dreaded turning eighteen because I did not want confirmation of this status in my patriarchal blessing<sup>2</sup>. My thoughts turned to suicide and I abused alcohol and drugs to cope with my conflicting identities and low self-esteem.

From the lens of *Colon-eyes* I was “other” and my culture was being presented as inferior to the culture into which I was adopted. Until the late 1980s, the hegemonic colonial discourses described Native peoples as culturally deprived or incapable of properly parenting their children. In my own case, I was told my mother was a Native alcoholic who didn’t want me. End of story. Indeed, such hegemonic discourses attempt to totalize a particular discourse over all other narratives (Iqbal, 2008). I see autoethnography as a way to speak back to such hegemonic discourses. To challenge the narratives and stories of colonialism, we need to start with our own stories, to articulate our worldviews and identities as Indigenous peoples. Stories and narratives that provide insight into silent spaces (including curriculum) contribute to our communities and our own transformation.

## Indigen-eyes

When I moved home twelve years ago, I had a colonial story to explain the injustices in my life and I held on to this story when I was in conflict with others. One day I used this story to explain “yet another injustice” that befell me. Afterwards, two knowledge holders who were visiting shared with me that when we push and fight to be right we are only pushing and fighting ourselves. I understood from their teaching that I need to feel in my heart that I am whole, and then act from this space. I call this a spirit-based space, an opening to ways of knowing and being in which healing and wholeness are present. My adult introduction to this space included the notion of being stewards of the land, living in community, and reacquainting myself with ancestors’ presence in all living beings. Thus, I experienced a reawakening of my corporeal memory prior to my adoption.

In his Indigenous research paradigm for application in social work, Hart (2010) proposed that we consider the perspective of local community values and aspirations and recognize family and social network approaches that emphasize the relational self. For me to gain Indigenous eyes, I needed to go home and live in the community. Now, when I consider relational accountability, I recognize that I cannot always differentiate myself from others as I see the interconnectedness and the effect that my actions have on other human and non-human relations. I also recognize that there are deeply entrenched perspectives between the Denesuline, nêhiyaw, Metis, and Settlers in the territory that I am from. As an adult, I continue to learn the tribal histories and the post-colonial complexities of this land.

With *Indigen-eyes*, I am able to see the entanglement of Indigenous nations with the Canadian state. These entanglements include treaty relationships that have been misused while building a new Settler nation state and the policies that have unfolded which impact Indigenous families autonomy and

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<sup>2</sup> At the age of eighteen, Mormons receive their patriarchal blessing, a blessing provided by the patriarchs of the church “which provides inspired direction from the Lord” and includes a declaration of a person’s lineage in the house of Israel (“The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints” 2016).

decision-making. Indigenous people are not the stereotypes and cultural descriptors used in hegemonic discourses to either foster the neo-liberal agenda of individualism (*Colon-eyes*), nor the social justice programs to 'help' the oppressed (*Develop-eyes*). While social justice is important to inform policy and program development, I have observed that many efforts in hegemonic spaces regenerate othered peoples.

Indigenous Resurgence scholarship emerges from the theoretical development of an Indigenous paradigm that is rooted in the knowledge and experiences of Indigenous communities. The concept of Indigenous Resurgence begins with individual and community level "reconstruction" and "reorganization" of identities and institutions (Alfred, 2005, p. 34). In Canada, this reconstruction has profound and specific implications for Indigenous-Settler relations. Alfred (2005) cautions us that attempting to create structural changes to our relationships before our hearts and minds are cleansed of the stains of colonialism is counter-productive. We require mental and spiritual decolonization in order to "theorize or to implement a model of a 'new' *Onkwehonwe*-Settler relationship" that is just and achieves "long-term peaceful co-existence between our peoples" (p. 180). Therefore, I propose that Indigenous identity reformation is an act of decolonization that can be languaged as a shift from hegemonic discourses to a spirit-based discourse of healing and wholeness. While there is no one way forward, Alfred and Corntassel (2005) proposed "directions of movement" that support a shift from colonized spaces to Indigenous spaces (p. 612). Alfred and Corntassel concluded that we must acknowledge the importance of land and the power of Indigenous languages, freedom over fear, a decolonizing diet, and incremental change. *Indigen-eyes* acts as a lens of awakening in order to better understand my political and cultural identity.

### Spiritual-eyes

Over the past twelve years, by reconnecting to my community, my relations, and the land, I came to understand what Verna J. Kirkness and Ray Bernhardt (1991) described as the 4 Rs (*Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity, Responsibility*). In Indigenous worldviews, knowledge is collective and much of what we learn is through reflective practices. When research is approached from an Indigenous worldview (axiology), ways of knowing (epistemology), and ways of being (ontology) are inseparable (Wilson, 2008). This knowledge extends beyond social formations to the realm of metaphysics to include our spiritual understandings of cosmology and the connections that we have to all living beings. Many laws and creation stories are expressed in the relationships that animals and people have with the universe. This knowledge cannot necessarily be explained by reason and is often realized in sacred ceremonies or through prayer. This is a powerful understanding that has profoundly shaped my epistemological and ethical orientation. Margaret Kovach (2009) defined ethics as *miyo-wicehtowin*, or "good relations, the heartbeat of ethical responsibilities within Indigenous research practice" (p. 19). *miyo-wicehtowin* encompasses ethics as methodology, reciprocity and an ethical starting place. Indigenous scholars are borrowing traditional ways of knowing and framing these in the context of modern academic research. I consider the dynamics of community, the power of story and narrative, and both the necessity to ground myself in an Indigenous worldview and also recognize the limitations of pre-existing social and political constructs.

In other words, *Spiritual-eyes* moves beyond the Settler socio-political frameworks that we have inherited, to Indigenous ways of knowing: places such as dream and vision, where time shifts from temporal space and critical theory lands in another dimension. Being reintroduced to the land with the guidance of knowledge holders, and in ceremony, has reshaped my adult identity and I have found myself moving away from a hegemonic space of disconnection. In this spirit-based space, I can see the web of connections that is my life, including the ground where my ancestors walked and how they come to me now. It takes conscious effort for me to stay in this spirit-based space: to be clear minded, to be pure hearted and to be walking with forgiveness, compassion, and love. I recognize that I can slip back into colonial stories and see myself as victim when I lose connection to the land, the cosmos, and I caution myself that being in an Indigenist research space of theory in the university, without spiritual practice, can bring me back to a hegemonic space of colonial frustration. I better understand political and cultural identity with *spiritual-eyes* and view political and cultural projects without spiritual understandings as incomplete.

Contextual intersectionalities—based on the respectful relationship between researchers and participants (Berryman et al., 2013)—can be collected through narratives in the shared space between *Indigen-eyes* and *Spiritual-eyes*. While the practice (spiritual ceremony) happens outside of the university, it informs the theory (Indigenist research) at the university. Hart (2010) emphasized that Indigenous peoples' cultures recognize and affirm the spiritual through practical applications of inner-space discoveries

as well as the role of Elders. I will keep returning to the land and the counsel of knowledge holders to continue inner-space discoveries.

### **Reclaiming identity: A spirit-based discourse**

This theoretical framework of Indigenous identity reclamation is based on my life experiences and is a lifelong process. I apply the framework to articulate the practice of reclaiming Indigenous identity, reconnecting to community and reframing my identity as an Indigenous adult. I now identify wealth with community knowledge and the abundance of our land. I view status and prestige in the ways one reciprocates and shares knowledge. I treasure the stories of my family, the territories I am from, and the land that sustains us. Throughout this process of decolonization, my values have changed. I no longer see myself through colonial narratives: such as the neglected daughter of a drunken Indian on welfare. That is not my narrative. Now I know I was born *nēhiyaw* in Northern Treaty 8 territory. I am a *nēhiyaw* woman. Living within a spirit-based discourse brings me healing and wholeness.

As an adoptee who was removed from my community, my focus is repatriation or “stepping closer to the fire” (Alfred, 2005). It is an ongoing process for me to live with *spiritual-eyes* and learn from knowledge holders. I recognize that story and narrative are central to Indigenous knowledge systems and sharing my narrative is a necessary step in this project. Sharing my story and gathering the stories of others on a similar journey of Indigenous identity reclamation allows me to honour collective knowledge while involving myself in the highly individualized and hierarchical doctoral dissertation process. Wagamese (2009) has described the trauma of the Sixties Scoop as “The Primal Wound” (p. 12). He also reflected on reconnecting with community, noting:

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. 13)

The experiences of Indigenous adult transracial adoptees who have reclaimed, reconnected, and reframed their identities will present language and frameworks to inform Indigenous Resurgence scholarship and transformational educational paradigms. It is time to hear the stories of Indigenous adoptees who have reclaimed their identities. It has been said ‘home is where the heart is’ and now when I look in the mirror I am home because I know who I am. *kinanaskomitin*.

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