

Maternalism and Dispossession: The Sixties Scoop and the Colonial Assault on Indigenous Motherhood

by Marcus Vermilya-Mayer, HTST 511

The conflict between Western maternalism and Indigenous motherhood lies at the heart of Canada's colonial efforts to reshape family structures. Rooted in Eurocentric ideals and the first-wave feminist movements of the interwar years, maternalism framed motherhood as a private, nuclear role centered on individual caregiving, domesticity, and conformity to white, middle-class norms.¹ In contrast, Indigenous motherhood emphasized communal caregiving, kinship networks, and cultural teachings that connected children to their ancestors, language, and land.² This fundamental difference positioned Indigenous maternal practices as "deficient" in the eyes of colonial authorities, who imposed their own standards of "proper" motherhood to disrupt Indigenous life. By undermining Indigenous women's cultural authority, colonial systems used mothers as a focal point in their broader agenda of assimilation and control.

Residential schools had previously served this colonial pursuit, functioning to forcibly sever Indigenous children from their families and assume the maternal role in their lives. By positioning the state as a surrogate caregiver, residential schools sought to replace Indigenous kinship systems with eurocentric ideals of family and care.³ This framework continued through the child welfare system, where punitive interventions displaced Indigenous families, disproportionately targeting mothers and justifying ongoing surveillance and child apprehensions. The Sixties Scoop was a continuation of this colonial project, illustrating how child welfare policies rooted in maternalist ideologies dismantled Indigenous

¹ Erika Dyck, *Facing Eugenics: Reproduction, Sterilization, and the Politics of Choice* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 31-32.

² Miranda Sophia Leibel, *Reproductive Narratives: Settler-Colonialism and Neoliberalism in Alberta's Child Welfare System*, (M.A. thesis, University of Alberta, 2017), 22.

³ Allyson Stevenson, "Vibrations across a Continent: The 1978 Indian Child Welfare Act and the Politicization of First Nations Leaders in Saskatchewan," *American Indian Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (2013): 223.

families under the guise of care and the “child’s best interest.”⁴ Following amendments to the *Indian Act* in 1951, these systems transferred control to provincial authorities, expanding the removal of Indigenous children from their homes.

Indigenous children placed in white, middle-class homes faced profound cultural alienation and identity loss, severed from their languages, traditions, and familial ties.⁵ For Indigenous mothers, the child welfare system’s interventions were deeply dehumanizing, stripping them of their autonomy and vilifying them through racialized stereotypes that framed them as “unfit” caregivers.⁶ Programs such as Saskatchewan’s *Adopt Indian and Métis* (AIM) initiative and Alberta’s eugenics-influenced policies reflected the colonial belief that assimilation was not only justified but benevolent and necessary. By presenting removal as an act of urgent care, the state obscured its complicity in perpetuating systemic issues, such as poverty, inadequate housing, and the chronic underfunding of Indigenous communities, while placing blame solely on individual mothers.

Yet, despite the violence and trauma inflicted by these policies, Indigenous women and communities resisted this dispossession with remarkable resilience. Reclaiming motherhood became an act of cultural and political resistance that asserted their sovereignty and affirmed their kinship ties to preserve cultural survival.⁷ Through grassroots organizing, women-led advocacy, and cultural revitalization efforts, Indigenous mothers challenged colonial narratives that sought to erase their identities and practices. Organizations such as the Native Women’s Association of Canada and local advocacy groups fought to restore autonomy to Indigenous families and to hold colonial institutions

⁴ Raven Sinclair, “Identity Lost and Found: Lessons from the Sixties Scoop,” *First Peoples Child & Family Review* 3, no. 1 (2007): 78; Stevenson, “Vibrations across a Continent,” 222.

⁵ Margaux Kristjansson, “Refusing Child-Stealing States: Settler Capitalism and the Ends of Canada’s Indigenous Child Removal System,” *Theory & Event* 27, no. 3 (2024): 394-395; Sinclair, “Identity Lost and Found,” 69.

⁶ Stevenson, “Vibrations across a Continent,” 222.

⁷ Jo-Anne Fiske, “Child of the State, Mother of the Nation: Aboriginal Women and the Ideology of Motherhood,” *Culture* (Canadian Anthropology Society) 13, no. 1 (1993): 25.

accountable.⁸ Resistance also took the form of storytelling, legal challenges, and the reclaiming of cultural teachings that emphasized Indigenous understandings of motherhood as integral to communal survival and identity.⁹ This collective resistance highlights the strength of Indigenous communities in the face of systemic erasure and underscores the ongoing struggle to assert sovereignty over family and care. By refusing to accept the colonial framing of their motherhood as “deficient,” Indigenous women reclaimed their roles as cultural protectors and nurturers, demonstrating that motherhood itself is a vital foundation of resilience and resistance.¹⁰

Surveillance and Apprehension: “In the Child’s Best Interest”

The maternalist approach to child welfare policies in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba were deeply rooted in eurocentric ideals of caregiving and targeting perceived inadequacies in Indigenous motherhood. Following the 1951 amendment to the *Indian Act*, which transferred jurisdiction over Indigenous child welfare from federal to provincial authorities, these policies expanded definitions of neglect while erasing the cultural context of Indigenous family systems.¹¹ Rather than addressing systemic factors such as poverty, inadequate housing, and underfunded social services, provincial authorities framed these conditions as parental failures.¹² This framing provided justification for increased intervention and the widespread removal of Indigenous children, marking a significant escalation in the state’s efforts to surveil and disrupt Indigenous families.

Infant and mother welfare clinics became central to this colonial framework, serving as sites of surveillance and regulation under the guise of public health initiatives. Indigenous mothers were pressured

⁸ Diedre A. Desmarais, “The Native Women’s Association of Canada’s Struggle to Secure Gender Equality Rights within the Canadian Constitution,” (M.A. thesis, The University of Regina, 1998), 8-12.

⁹ Fiske, “Child of the State, Mother of the Nation,” 25.

¹⁰ Fiske, “Child of the State, Mother of the Nation,” 28.

¹¹ Indian Act, 1951, c. 29, s. 1.

¹² Sinclair, “Identity Lost and Found,” 72-73.

to conform to Eurocentric parenting standards, such as formula feeding, rigid schedules, and individualized child-rearing practices. Traditional practices like breastfeeding, communal caregiving, and culturally rooted diets were dismissed as inferior, neglectful, or unsanitary.¹³ Dependency on formula in particular created new barriers for Indigenous mothers, requiring regular visits to clinics to access supplies—visits that deepened their entanglement with state systems.¹⁴ These programs not only invalidated Indigenous cultural practices but systematically eroded the autonomy of mothers and their communities. Public health initiatives extended this surveillance beyond the confines of clinics and into the mainstream. Mass media campaigns, pamphlets, and public workshops promoted sanitation, Western nutrition, and the nuclear family model as the hallmarks of “good” motherhood. While these programs were presented as efforts to improve child welfare and public health, they functioned as mechanisms of colonial maternalism, positioning Indigenous mothers under constant scrutiny, invalidating their cultural authority, and reinforcing the state’s control over Indigenous family life. And while these initiatives shared common goals across Canada, their implementation varied by province. Public health initiatives extended this surveillance beyond the confines of clinics and into the mainstream. Mass media campaigns, pamphlets, and public workshops promoted sanitation, Western nutrition, and the nuclear family model as the hallmarks of “good” motherhood.¹⁵ While these programs were presented as efforts to improve child welfare and public health, they functioned as mechanisms of colonial maternalism, positioning Indigenous mothers under constant scrutiny, invalidating their cultural authority, and reinforcing the state’s control over Indigenous family life. And while these initiatives shared common goals across Canada, their implementation varied by province.

¹³ Leibel, *Reproductive Narratives*, 67-68.

¹⁴ Jeannette Corbiere Lavell and Dawn Memee Lavell-Harvard, *Until Our Hearts Are on the Ground: Aboriginal Mothering, Oppression, Resistance and Rebirth* (Toronto: Demeter Press, 2006), 28.

¹⁵ Lavell and Lavell-Harvard, *Until Our Hearts Are on the Ground*, 41.

Initially implemented in the early 20th century to regulate immigrant populations, Alberta's eugenics program increasingly turned its focus to Indigenous and Métis communities in the postwar period. Indigenous women became disproportionately subjected to forced or coerced sterilizations, justified as measures to prevent "degeneracy" and improve public health.¹⁶ These policies were rooted in racialized assumptions that equated whiteness with social and moral fitness, while Indigenous women were deemed "unfit" for motherhood due to stereotypes of mental and physical inferiority.¹⁷

The Sixties Scoop intensified this colonial framework by pathologizing Indigenous motherhood and linking child apprehension to ideas of "betterment" and assimilation. This process worked in tandem with eugenic principles, reinforcing the view that Indigenous women and their families required intervention and control. Social workers and government officials, operating with broad authority, engaged in pervasive surveillance of Indigenous mothers, subjecting them to invasive assessments and dismissing their cultural caregiving practices.¹⁸ Structural issues, such as poverty, housing insecurity, and underfunded social services, were ignored or reframed as evidence of maternal failure, further justifying the removal of children and the sterilization of women.¹⁹ Both eugenics and child welfare systems were tools used to undermine Indigenous sovereignty and dismantle familial and kinship structures that stood in opposition to Eurocentric ideals of family and motherhood. By situating Alberta's eugenics practices alongside the child welfare policies of the Sixties Scoop, it becomes clear that these systems were not isolated measures but part of a larger historical project of assimilation and cultural erasure. Alberta's case

¹⁶ Jana Grekul, "Sterilization in Alberta, 1928 to 1972: Gender Matters," *The Canadian Review of Sociology* 45, no. 3 (2008): 248.

¹⁷ Suzanne C. Robertson, Carey Sinclair, and Andrew R. Hatala, "Indigenous Mothers' Experiences of Power and Control in Child Welfare: Families Being Heard," *Journal of Social Work* 22, no. 2 (2022): 314.

¹⁸ Leibel, *Reproductive Narratives*, 5; Kristjansson, "Refusing Child-Stealing States," 396.

¹⁹ Karen Stote, "Birthright Denied: The Sterilization of Indigenous Women," *Herizons* 2017, 17-18.

presents to us the deeply entrenched colonial ideologies that shaped Canadian policy, where Indigenous bodies and families were treated as problems to be solved in service of national progress.

In Saskatchewan, the Adopt Indian and Métis (AIM) program exemplified the colonial priorities embedded within Canada's child welfare system. Launched In 1967, the program was created to address the rising number of Indigenous children in state care, mirroring the U.S. Indian Adoption Project. Framed through "color-blind liberalism," AIM ignored the cultural and historical contexts of Indigenous communities, claiming Indigenous children were "no different" from others except for "the colour of their skin." This rhetoric appealed to white, middle-class families and promoted adoption as a solution to child welfare issues while erasing Indigenous identities and kinship ties.²⁰ Indigenous children were advertised for adoption in newspapers, particularly in *Regina's Leader-Post*, and even on television.²¹ These ads Westernized children's names and placed them alongside unrelated content, as though they were ordinary classifieds, stripping the children of their identities and reducing them to commodities.²² A *Leader-Post* article from September 15, 1973, written by Joan Deshayé, provides insight into the adoption process described by social workers for both the Department of Social Services and AIM. Prospective parents going through the former system underwent a four-month evaluation period, during which social workers assessed factors such as income and marriage stability. Applicants were required to provide at least six references, one of whom had to be a close relative, and following placement, a six-month probationary period involving home visits ensured further evaluation. A social worker noted: "We don't look for

²⁰ Margaret D. Jacobs, *A Generation Removed: The Fostering and Adoption of Indigenous Children in the Postwar World* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), 152.

²¹ Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, *Adoption Agency Seeks Homes for Indigenous and Métis Children in 1968*, CBC Archives, aired May 30, 1968, reported by Craig Oliver, video, 1:42, accessed December 15, 2024, <https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/video/1.3732958>.

²² Some examples of *Leader-Post* publications that these ads can be found in include "Colvin" (August 21, 1973), and "Miles" (June 4, 1974).

immaculate, well-furnished homes... We just look for a home where there is enough affection between the couple that some can spill over on the child. ”²³

This methodical approach was not extended to AIM-specific program practices. While the article claims that AIM adoption procedures mirrored those of the Department of Social Services, significant discrepancies even within the article itself reveals a rushed and less thorough process; AIM facilitated single-parent adoptions far more frequently, despite purported priorities to place children with couples.²⁴ These inconsistencies highlight systemic biases: the urgency to remove Indigenous children often outweighed considerations for their long-term well-being. Rather than prioritizing stability and care, AIM operated as a tool of cultural erasure, reinforcing colonial assumptions that Indigenous families were expendable and incapable of providing for their children. By 1973, the AIM program had further expanded its focus to include children described as having “hindrances,” such as physical or mental disabilities. A February 10, 1973, *Leader-Post* article reports on a survey involving 355 participants, which was part of a broader media campaign to promote AIM’s expanded mission. While framed as an act of charity (rescuing children deemed harder to adopt) this shift reveals a paternalistic logic consistent with the broader goals of assimilation during the Sixties Scoop. The program presented itself as benevolent, but its practices continued to erase Indigenous identities under the guise of care and progress. By 1973, the AIM program had further expanded its focus to include children described as having “hindrances,” such as physical or mental disabilities. A February 10, 1973, *Leader-Post* article reports on a survey involving 355 participants, which was part of a broader media campaign to promote AIM’s expanded mission.²⁵ While framed as an act of charity (rescuing children deemed harder to adopt) this shift reveals a paternalistic logic consistent with the broader goals of assimilation during the Sixties Scoop. The

²³ Joan Deshaye, "Child Adoption Isn't as Easy as It Once Was," *The Leader-Post* (Regina), September 15, 1973.

²⁴ Deshaye, "Child Adoption Isn't as Easy as It Once Was."

²⁵ "AIM's Adoption Survey Results Please Director," *The Leader-Post* (Regina), February 10, 1973.

program presented itself as benevolent, but its practices continued to erase Indigenous identities under the guise of care and progress.

The experiences of Indigenous mothers with these programs and social workers reflect the persistence of colonial control. Mothers described exchanges as culturally insensitive and punitive, where any emotional display risked being used against them.²⁶ Women described living in constant fear as social workers used their children as “pawns” to enforce compliance. They were threatened with child removal if they failed to meet demands like sobriety, ending relationships, or attending mental health and addictions programs. This persistent threat of apprehension maintained a climate of control, intensifying mothers’ stress and isolation. To avoid being labeled unfit, women suppressed their grief and anger; every interaction with these systems assumed guilt of these women, forcing them to prove themselves each time.²⁷

While these child welfare policies were framed as being “in the best interest of the child,” they inflicted profound harm on Indigenous mothers and families, exposing the deep contradictions within this justification.²⁸ The removals disrupted far more than individual households; they severed the intergenerational bonds that connected children to their families, communities, and cultural identities. For Indigenous mothers, the loss was both deeply personal and collective, as it represented not just the removal of their children but the erasure of their roles as cultural protectors and caregivers.²⁹ Indigenous mothers were rarely given the opportunity to challenge these removals, as child welfare agents wielded unchecked authority. The removal of children inflicted profound and overwhelming grief, guilt, and powerlessness: for many, the loss of their children mirrored the grief of death but was exacerbated by the uncertainty of

²⁶ Jacobs, *A Generation Removed*, 79.

²⁷ Robertson, Sinclair, and Hatala, “Indigenous Mothers’ Experiences,” 312-315.

²⁸ Dale Spencer and Raven Sinclair, “Looping Effects, Settler Colonialism, and the Indigenous Child Removal System,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 48, no. 1 (2025): 198.

²⁹ Fiske, “Child of the State, Mother of the Nation,” 17.

not knowing where their children were taken or whether they would ever return.³⁰ Justified by colonial narratives of Indigenous mothers as “unfit,” these actions ignored the systemic poverty and underfunded services caused by colonial dispossession, instead placing blame on the mothers themselves.³¹ Many Indigenous families already lived in underfunded and neglected communities, where inadequate infrastructure and limited access to education, healthcare, and employment created cycles of economic instability. Instead of addressing these structural inequities, child welfare agents framed poverty as parental neglect, using it to justify child apprehensions.³² Mothers were left to bear the emotional burden of their children’s removal while continuing to struggle with financial insecurity and the lack of institutional support.

In response to this compounded grief and financial instability, many mothers turned to substance abuse as a way to numb their pain or cope with overwhelming feelings of guilt and shame. Alcohol and drug use became mechanisms to endure their trauma, even as these behaviors were further weaponized by colonial systems to reinforce stereotypes of Indigenous inadequacy.³³ This cycle of poverty, grief, and substance abuse created additional barriers for mothers seeking to maintain custody of their children or reunite with those who had been taken.³⁴ Deep and lasting harm was also inflicted on the children who were forcibly removed from their families and placed in predominantly white, middle-class households. Stripped of their names, languages, and teachings, these children were raised in environments where their Indigeneity was either ignored or erased entirely.³⁵ Without access to their families, land-based traditions,

³⁰ Fiske, “Child of the State, Mother of the Nation,” 23; Jacobs, *A Generation Removed*, 22-23.

³¹ Kristjansson, “Refusing Child-Stealing States,” 387.

³² Allyson Stevenson, “The Adoption of Frances T: Blood, Belonging, and Aboriginal Transracial Adoption in Twentieth-Century Canada,” *Canadian Journal of History* 50, no. 3 (2015): 475.

³³ Leibel, *Reproductive Narratives*, 54.

³⁴ Leibel, *Reproductive Narratives*, 126.

³⁵ Spencer and Sinclair, “Looping Effects,” 198-9.

and kinship systems, these children were denied the foundational knowledge that connected them to their histories and communities.³⁶

Indigenous children removed from their families experienced a profound sense of abandonment, made even more devastating by their inability to understand or make sense of why they had been taken. Raised in environments where their cultural roots were denied, many children internalized feelings of shame, inferiority, and displacement.³⁷ As they grew older, this disconnection often led to profound struggles with belonging, depression, anxiety, and crises of identity. The overt and covert racism they encountered in white households and communities further entrenched this alienation, leaving them socially and emotionally isolated.³⁸ Survivors describe growing up in what scholars have called “cultural liminality”—caught between two worlds: the Eurocentric world in which they were raised and the Indigenous world to which they belonged but were prevented from accessing. For those adopted internationally, the geographical and cultural distance from Canada made reconnecting with family and community later in life exceptionally difficult or impossible.³⁹ Yet, all of these children grew up with little understanding of their place in Indigenous histories and often struggled to reconcile their identities with the predominantly white and foreign cultures in which they were raised.⁴⁰ This extreme isolation deepened their sense of cultural dislocation, exacerbating the loss of language, traditions, and relationships that are central to Indigenous identity formation.

The trauma inflicted by the scoops reverberated through multiple generations of family, disrupting Indigenous kinship systems and creating cycles of harm. As adults, many survivors struggled to return to their communities, where their loss of culture left them feeling like outsiders. For some, the disconnect

³⁶ Kristjansson, “Refusing Child-Stealing States,” 395.

³⁷ Jacobs, *A Generation Removed*, 164; Sinclair, “Identity Lost and Found,” 74.

³⁸ Sinclair, “Identity Lost and Found,” 75.

³⁹ Jacobs, *A Generation Removed*, 148.

⁴⁰ Sinclair, “Identity Lost and Found,” 69.

was irreparable, preventing them from fully participating in the cultural and familial practices that define Indigenous community life.⁴¹ Others struggled to overcome their own trauma when raising their children, as they lacked the parenting models and communal support systems that had once been central to Indigenous families.⁴² This generational harm not only impacted individual survivors but also disrupted the cultural continuity that is fundamental to Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination.

The 1985 Kimelman Report, “No Quiet Place”, offered one of the first formal acknowledgments of the profound harm caused by the Sixties Scoop to Indigenous mothers and children. Judge Edwin Kimelman’s investigation exposed how child welfare policies, under the guise of serving “the best interest of the child,” systematically vilified Indigenous mothers, dismantled families, and disregarded cultural caregiving practices.⁴³ Mothers were excluded from decision-making processes and denied any meaningful opportunity to contest the removal of their children. The report further highlighted the rushed and careless nature of these placements: expedience took precedence over the well-being of the children and their families.⁴⁴

One of the primary reasons for the report’s importance is the legal recognition of the damage inflicted by the child welfare systems. By describing the apprehensions as “cultural genocide,” Kimelman provided a stark acknowledgment of the state’s role in perpetuating systemic harm and forced assimilation. The report validated the lived experiences of Indigenous mothers and children, while critiquing policies that weaponized poverty, inadequate housing, and underfunded services as justification for child apprehension. Calling for urgent systemic change, it exposed the colonial underpinnings of child welfare

⁴¹ Spencer and Sinclair, “Looping Effects,” 190.

⁴² Jacobs, *A Generation Removed*, 168.

⁴³ E. C. Kimelman, *No Quiet Place: Final Report to the Honourable Muriel Smith, Minister of Community Services* (Winnipeg: Manitoba Community Services, 1985), 27; Spencer and Sinclair, “Looping Effects,” 198.

⁴⁴ Kimelman, *No Quiet Place*, 3, 78.

systems and emphasized the need for policies rooted in respect for Indigenous families' rights, autonomy, and cultural integrity.⁴⁵

The maternalist approach to child welfare policies in the Prairie provinces reveals how colonial systems weaponized Eurocentric ideals of caregiving to justify the disruption of Indigenous families. By framing poverty, inadequate housing, and systemic neglect as failures of Indigenous motherhood, the state ignored its own role in creating these inequities.⁴⁶ Programs like infant and mother welfare clinics, eugenics-driven sterilization practices, and initiatives such as the Adopt Indian and Métis (AIM) program exemplify the state's deliberate efforts to surveil, regulate, and dismantle Indigenous kinship systems.⁴⁷ These policies not only vilified Indigenous mothers but also inflicted profound harm on their children, severing them from their languages, traditions, and cultural identities.

Ultimately, the interconnected systems of surveillance, child apprehension, and cultural erasure reflect a larger colonial project aimed at assimilating Indigenous peoples under the guise of care and progress. The rushed nature of adoptions, racialized assumptions of maternal "fitness," and the systemic erasure of Indigenous cultural frameworks highlight the deep contradictions within these policies.⁴⁸ Far from improving child welfare, these interventions perpetuated intergenerational trauma, dislocation, and cycles of harm that reverberated across Indigenous families and communities. By situating these practices within the broader history of colonial control, it becomes evident that the maternalist policies enacted in the Prairie provinces were tools of cultural genocide that disrupted Indigenous sovereignty, resilience, and self-determination.

⁴⁵ Kimelman, *No Quiet Place*, 3, 27, 47.

⁴⁶ Kimelman, *No Quiet Place*, 3, 62; Leibel, *Reproductive Narratives*, 126.

⁴⁷ Leibel, *Reproductive Narratives*, 67-8; Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, *Adoption Agency Seeks Homes*.

⁴⁸ Grekul, "Sterilization in Alberta," 251-252; Dyck, *Facing Eugenics*, 61.

Resistance and Resilience

The role of motherhood in Indigenous resistance is central to how women navigated colonial systems that sought to disenfranchise them, strategically using motherhood as both a symbol of cultural continuity and a means of asserting political autonomy. In their struggle for self-determination, Aboriginal women have reclaimed motherhood as a powerful, sacred symbol that embodies not just biological reproduction, but the transmission of cultural identity, values, and knowledge.⁴⁹ This maternal symbolism stands in contrast to the colonial appropriation of motherhood, where the state redefined motherhood according to Eurocentric ideals of domesticity and caregiving. By redefining traditional motherhood within their own cultural framework, Indigenous women have resisted attempts to strip them of their reproductive autonomy and cultural authority, instead using the maternal role to challenge the state and assert Indigenous sovereignty.⁵⁰

Families also employed various strategies to protect their children, often taking covert actions to prevent social workers from removing them, such as hiding them or relocating them temporarily. Conversely, white foster parents would hide their Indigenous foster children when men from their communities passed through the area for fishing or business to avoid the risk of them being recognized by members of their community and incurring any confrontation. In other instances Indigenous strategies weren't covert but outwardly defensive as they refused to hand over their children to social workers, leading to police intervention.⁵¹ Resistance also grew through organizations like the Métis Foster Home Committee and the Saskatchewan Native Women's Movement (SWNM), which campaigned against the Adopt Indian Métis (AIM) program.⁵² Leaders like Howard Adams and Phyllis Trochie advocated for

⁴⁹ Fiske, "Child of the State, Mother of the Nation," 25.

⁵⁰ Fiske, "Child of the State, Mother of the Nation," 24; Leibel, *Reproductive Narratives*, 147.

⁵¹ Kristjansson, "Refusing Child-Stealing States," 399.

⁵² Kristjansson, "Refusing Child-Stealing States," 400.

Native-led placements, while the SWNM rallied support from groups like the American Indian Movement (A-I-M). Their efforts culminated in a 1985 ruling that imposed a moratorium on trans-provincial adoptions and acknowledged the “cultural genocide” within child welfare practices, marking a significant victory for Indigenous resistance.⁵³

The leaders of the Native Women’s Association of Canada (NWAC) worked to reshape the concept of sexual equality by grounding it in Indigenous traditions, aiming to differentiate their stance from white feminist movements that would or could not encompass their demands effectively. They moved traditional motherhood away from being a solely biological role and reframed it as a cultural honor vital to the survival of Indigenous nations. Motherhood, they argued, played a crucial role in sustaining Indigenous nationhood by passing down language, culture, and values.⁵⁴ By asserting that the future of Indigenous peoples depended on the strength and preservation of motherhood, NWAC leaders positioned themselves at the heart of the struggle for self-determination. Their fight was not for individual rights but for collective responsibility; through this framework, the Ontario Native Women’s Association (ONWA) redefined the organization's political engagement, connecting their roles as mothers and grandmothers to their leadership, teaching, and healing responsibilities.⁵⁵ This new political vision emphasized the spiritual duty to honor and protect the Earth, with NWAC’s voice increasingly recognized as a spiritual force in their advocacy.

The Indian Homemakers’ Clubs, introduced in the mid-20th century, were programs designed to assimilate Indigenous women into Eurocentric ideals of womanhood and motherhood. Modeled after non-Indigenous women’s institutes and overseen by the Department of Indian Affairs, the clubs emphasized domestic skills such as sewing, cooking, and child care, reflecting the colonial belief that Indigenous

⁵³ Kristjansson, “Refusing Child-Stealing States,” 399.

⁵⁴ Fiske, “Child of the State, Mother of the Nation,” 30.

⁵⁵ Fiske, “Child of the State, Mother of the Nation,” 25.

women were deficient as mothers and homemakers.⁵⁶ These programs sought to replace traditional Indigenous gender roles with middle-class Eurocentric domesticity. However, Indigenous women resisted these assimilationist goals by transforming the Homemakers' Clubs into spaces for cultural preservation, leadership, and community care.

Through political travel and regional conventions, Indigenous women built cross-provincial networks to share challenges, activities, and strategies, uniting their socio-political efforts under the larger umbrella of the national Indian Homemakers' Club (IHC). The 1954 Homemakers' Convention at Duck Lake, Saskatchewan, for example, brought together delegates from British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, fostering dialogue and collaboration across provincial boundaries.⁵⁷ By the 1960s, provincial conventions had become the norm, yet many women continued to attend conferences outside their home regions, strengthening connections and advancing shared causes. This growing network amplified Indigenous women's collective agency, allowing them to challenge colonial structures while supporting their communities.

Frances Decker's fight to maintain the Mount Currie Club's space in 1965 exemplifies this resistance, as she highlighted the club's essential welfare work, such as home repairs and medical support. Similarly, women on the Paul Band in Alberta used the clubs to teach sewing, passing knowledge between generations and fostering cultural continuity.⁵⁸ By reclaiming these programs as vessels for community-based familial roles and interprovincial organizing, Indigenous women subverted colonial ideals of motherhood, asserting their agency and preserving their cultural values.

⁵⁶ Sarah A. Nickel and Amanda Fehr, *In Good Relation: History, Gender, and Kinship in Indigenous Feminisms* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2020), 82.

⁵⁷ Nickel and Fehr, *In Good Relation*, 103.

⁵⁸ Nickel and Fehr, *In Good Relation*, 95-96.

Recognizing the resilience of Indigenous communities—expressed through resistance movements, grassroots advocacy, and cultural revitalization—is essential to fully addressing the impacts of the Sixties Scoop. In recent years, Indigenous-led efforts have been instrumental in advancing healing, justice, and accountability for survivors. Organizations such as the Sixties Scoop Indigenous Society of Alberta (SSISA) and the National Indigenous Survivors of Child Welfare Network have created vital spaces for survivors to share their stories, reclaim cultural identities, and advocate for systemic change that prioritizes Indigenous family unity.⁵⁹

These efforts have led to significant milestones, including landmark legal victories like the 2017 settlement agreement, which provided formal acknowledgment of the harms inflicted and pathways for compensation.⁶⁰ These initiatives not only amplify the voices of those directly impacted but also highlight the intergenerational nature of trauma and the systemic roots of these injustices within colonial policies. Indigenous communities continue to challenge and dismantle the structures that sought to erase them. Their advocacy serves as a powerful reminder that healing and justice are inseparable from cultural resurgence and the restoration of Indigenous self-determination.

The history of Canada’s child welfare policies reveals a deliberate and sustained colonial effort to dismantle Indigenous families and erode Indigenous cultural identity. Rooted in Eurocentric maternalist ideals, these policies justified the removal of Indigenous children under the guise of benevolence and care, while simultaneously vilifying Indigenous mothers as “unfit” caregivers. By ignoring the systemic poverty, inadequate housing, and underfunded social services created by colonial dispossession, the state reframed these structural inequities as evidence of Indigenous failure, further legitimizing its intrusive

⁵⁹ Sixties Scoop Indigenous Society of Alberta, *Sixties Scoop Indigenous Society of Alberta*, accessed December 15, 2024, <https://www.ssisa.ca/>; Sixties Scoop Network, *Sixties Scoop Network*, accessed December 15, 2024, <https://sixtiesscoopnetwork.org/>.

⁶⁰ First Nations Child Compensation, *First Nations Child Compensation*, accessed December 15, 2024, <https://www.fnchildcompensation.ca/>.

interventions.⁶¹ The severed family bonds, cultural dislocation, and generational trauma are woven into the historical record as testaments to the far-reaching impacts of colonial policies.

Despite these systemic assaults, Indigenous mothers and communities demonstrated extraordinary resilience. Motherhood, which colonial powers sought to redefine and control, became a site of resistance and cultural preservation. Through grassroots activism, political mobilization, and cultural revitalization, Indigenous women reclaimed their roles as the carriers of tradition, language, and identity.⁶² Initiatives like the Native Women's Association of Canada and the Sixties Scoop Indigenous Society of Alberta illustrate how survivors and advocates worked to hold colonial systems accountable, restore family unity, and rebuild cultural connections that had been disrupted.⁶³ Legal recognitions such as the *Kimelman Report* provide critical evidence of the harm inflicted, while also acknowledging the state's role in perpetuating cultural genocide.⁶⁴

This history demands that we critically examine Canada's colonial foundations and their enduring consequences. By centering the experiences of Indigenous mothers and children, we not only uncover the systemic injustices that shaped Canada's child welfare policies but also illuminate the strength and resilience that enabled Indigenous communities to endure and resist. The legacy of these policies underscores the need to recognize the historical and ongoing impacts of colonialism while committing to a future shaped by Indigenous autonomy, cultural restoration, and justice. Ultimately, the history of the Sixties Scoop and related policies is not simply a story of loss but also of survival. It reveals the power of Indigenous families and communities to resist erasure and to reclaim their roles as stewards of cultural continuity and identity. In confronting this past, historians must engage with both the systemic nature of

⁶¹ Leibel, *Reproductive Narratives*, 93.

⁶² Fiske, "Child of the State, Mother of the Nation," 19.

⁶³ Kristjansson, "Refusing Child-Stealing States," 382.

⁶⁴ Kimelman, *No Quiet Place*.

colonial violence and the enduring resilience of Indigenous peoples, ensuring that these histories are understood not as isolated events but as part of a broader narrative of struggle, resistance, and survival.

Bibliography

"AIM's Adoption Survey Results Please Director." *The Leader-Post* (Regina), February 10, 1973.

Armstrong, Pat. "The Womb Is to the Nation as the Heart Is to the Body: Ethnopolitical

Discourses of the Canadian Indigenous Women's Movement." In *Feminism, Political Economy & the State*. Canada: Canadian Scholars' Press and Women's Press, 1999.

Brown v. Canada (Attorney General). 2017 ONSC 251. Ontario Superior Court of Justice. February 14, 2017. Accessed December 15, 2024.

<https://www.canlii.org/en/on/onsc/doc/2017/2017onsc251/2017onsc251.html>.

Canada, Library and Archives. "Collection Search -Blackfoot Agency - Correspondence Regarding Child Welfare. (Photograph of Baby Show 1926)," November 25, 2016.

Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. *Adoption Agency Seeks Homes for Indigenous and Métis Children in 1968*. CBC Archives. Aired May 30, 1968. Reported by Craig Oliver. Video, 1:42. Accessed December 15, 2024. <https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/video/1.3732958>.

Carter, Sarah. "Categories And Terrains Of Exclusion: Constructing The 'Indian Woman' In The Early Settlement Era In Western Canada." *Great Plains Quarterly* 13, no. 3 (1993): 147–161.

Cavanaugh, Catherine A., and Randi R. Warne. *Standing on New Ground: Women in Alberta*. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2000.

Deshaye, Joan. "Child Adoption Isn't as Easy as It Once Was." *The Leader-Post* (Regina), September 15, 1973.

Desmarais, Diedre A. "The Native Women's Association of Canada's Struggle to Secure Gender Equality Rights within the Canadian Constitution." M.A., The University of Regina (Canada), 1998.

- Dyck, Erika. *Facing Eugenics: Reproduction, Sterilization, and the Politics of Choice*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013.
- Fiske, Jo-Anne. "Child of the State, Mother of the Nation: Aboriginal Women and the Ideology of Motherhood." *Culture (Canadian Anthropology Society)* 13, no. 1 (1993): 17–35.
- Grekul, Jana. "Sterilization in Alberta, 1928 to 1972: Gender Matters." *The Canadian Review of Sociology* 45, no. 3 (2008): 247–266.
- Indian Act. 1951, c. 29, s. 1.
- Jacobs, Margaret D. *A Generation Removed the Fostering and Adoption of Indigenous Children in the Postwar World*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014.
- Janovicek, Nancy. "'Assisting Our Own': Urban Migration, Self-Governance, and Native Women's Organizing in Thunder Bay, Ontario, 1972-1989." *American Indian Quarterly* 27, no. 3/4 (2003): 548–565.
- Johnston, Patrick. *Native Children and the Child Welfare System: Canadian Council on Social Development Series*. Toronto: Canadian Council on Social Development in association with J. Lorimer, 1983.
- Kamboureli, Smaro, and Roy Miki. *Trans. Can. Lit: Resituating the Study of Canadian Literature*. Waterloo, ON, CANADA: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007.
- Kimelman, E. C. *No Quiet Place: Final Report to the Honourable Muriel Smith, Minister of Community Services*. Winnipeg, Manitoba Community Services, 1985.

Kodeeswaran, Janani, Maggie Campaigne, and Anita C Benoit. "I'll Struggle, and I'll fall...I'll Have My Days, but It's Okay: Indigenous Women Surviving the Sixties Scoop." *International Indigenous Policy Journal* 13, no. 1 (2022): 1–31.

Kristjansson, Margaux. "Refusing Child-Stealing States: Settler Capitalism and the Ends of Canada's Indigenous Child Removal System." *Theory & Event* 27, no. 3 (2024): 381–410.

Lavell, Jeannette Corbiere, and Dawn Memee Lavell-Harvard. *Until Our Hearts Are on the Ground: Aboriginal Mothering, Oppression, Resistance and Rebirth*. Toronto: Demeter Press, 2006. *The Leader Post* (1930-), Aug 21, 1973.

The Leader Post (1930-), Jun 4, 1974.

The Leader Post (1930-), Mar 2, 1974.

The Leader Post (1930-), Mar 27, 1979.

Leibel, Miranda Sophia. *Reproductive Narratives: Settler-Colonialism and Neoliberalism in Alberta's Child Welfare System*. M.A. thesis, University of Alberta, 2017.

Monture, Patricia A., and Elena Miller. "A Vicious Circle: Child Welfare And The First Nations." *Canadian Journal of Family Law* 9, no. 1 (1990): 199.

Nickel, Sarah A., and Amanda Fehr. *In Good Relation: History, Gender, and Kinship in Indigenous Feminisms*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2020.

Robertson, Suzanne C, Carey Sinclair, and Andrew R Hatala. "Indigenous Mothers' Experiences of Power and Control in Child Welfare: Families Being Heard." *Journal of Social Work* 22, no. 2 (2022): 303–322.

Sinclair, Raven. "Identity Lost and Found: Lessons from the Sixties Scoop." *First Peoples Child & Family Review* 3, no. 1 (2007): 65–82.

"Sixties Scoop." Accessed December 10, 2024. https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/sixties_scoop/.

Sixties Scoop Indigenous Society of Alberta. *Sixties Scoop Indigenous Society of Alberta*. Accessed December 15, 2024. <https://www.ssis.ca/>.

Sixties Scoop Network. *Sixties Scoop Network*. Accessed December 15, 2024, <https://sixtiesscoopnetwork.org/>.

Spencer, Dale, and Raven Sinclair. "Looping Effects, Settler Colonialism, and the Indigenous Child Removal System." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 48, no. 1 (2025): 185–205.

Stevenson, Allyson. "The Adoption of Frances T: Blood, Belonging, and Aboriginal Transracial Adoption in Twentieth-Century Canada." *Canadian Journal of History* 50, no. 3 (2015): 469–491.

Stevenson, Allyson. *Intimate Integration: A History of the Sixties Scoop and the Colonization of Indigenous Kinship*. Vol. 51, 51. *Studies in Gender and History*. Toronto [Ontario]: University of Toronto Press, 2021.

Stevenson, Allyson. "Vibrations across a Continent: The 1978 Indian Child Welfare Act and the Politicization of First Nations Leaders in Saskatchewan." *American Indian Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (2013): 218–36.

Stote, Karen. *Birthright Denied: The Sterilization of Indigenous Women*. *Herizons (Winnipeg)*. Vol. 31. Winnipeg: Herizons Magazine, Inc., 2017.

Stote, Karen. "The Sterilization of Indigenous Women." *Herizons*, Fall 2017, 16–19.