

UNIVERSITY OF REGINA RESEARCH MAGAZINE SPRING / SUMMER 2018

# Discourse

Queering the Queen City | 06

Aging well on the Prairies | 17

Pinstripes on the Prairies | 24

**Coming home:  
Raven Sinclair and  
the Sixties Scoop**





# Examining the Sixties Scoop and beyond

**BY NICKITA LONGMAN** The Sixties Scoop has a long and complicated history that begins before 1960 and continues into the present day. Raven Sinclair, along with her research team, is halfway through a five-year Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) project that explores the genealogical study of Indigenous and Métis adoption in Canada, beginning as early as the 1940s.

Sinclair's project is called the Pe-kīwēwin Project, Cree for "coming home," and it delves into the policies that enabled a national Indigenous child removal system that extends well before the Sixties Scoop and continues today. The project uses archival research and interviews, with much of the work dedicated to the experiences of adoptees.

## THE HISTORY

The "Sixties Scoop" is a term first defined by researcher Patrick Johnston in a 1983 report commissioned by the Canadian Council on Social Development. Johnston's report, *Native Children and the Child Welfare System*, examined the early phases of the Scoop that began in 1951, when federal amendments to the Indian Act moved jurisdiction over Indigenous child welfare from reserves to the provinces.

On the heels of residential schooling, which had an unwritten mandate to "kill the Indian in the child," the child welfare system began inserting itself into Indigenous kinship under a similar narrative. Indigenous families were assumed to be unfit to raise their own children, and so were seized by the state and placed, in most cases, into middle-class, white families.

Johnston wrote, "Like most countries, Canada accepts the notion that the state has an obligation to care for children who, for whatever reason, cannot properly be cared for by their own parents." This became the foundation for defining child welfare, as well as the system that was implemented to uphold it.

Building on Johnston's research, Sinclair also addresses the paternalistic perspective the federal and provincial governments hold towards Indigenous families.

"The racism that is embedded in an assimilation perspective will play out in any federal or provincial programming," says

Sinclair, an associate professor in the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Regina, Saskatoon Campus.

Sinclair, an expert on the Sixties Scoop, explains that the apprehension of children really took off during the 1960s, "though it became a machine that is still operating at full capacity today." Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada estimates that 11,132 children were apprehended from their families between 1960 and 1990. Recent media reports suggest that number is closer to 20,000.

## A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AS AN ADOPTEE

It is no mystery why Sinclair was drawn to this research: she was apprehended and adopted in 1965 at the age of five. "In my own experience, my adoptive parents got a little one page sheet that summarized my birth family and our characteristics," she explains. "One of the characteristics suggested, erroneously, that there was musical potential." As a result, Sinclair's adoptive mother enrolled her in various music classes in an attempt to hone those skills.

Another detail on Sinclair's adoptive information suggested that she was of French-Métis ancestry. This led her to believe she was Métis up until her 20s when she discovered she is status Cree and Scottish.

Adopted in Saskatoon, Sinclair's adoptive family moved to West Germany, where she started primary school. They eventually returned to Canada, landing in Ontario. That move proved to be a turning point in Sinclair's journey to figuring out her past.

"It wasn't until I started working for Nishnawbe Aski Nation in Ontario in the early '80s that I discovered I was not Métis," says Sinclair. Established in 1973, Nishnawbe Aski Nation is a political organization that represents 49 First Nations communities and about 45,000 people in northern Ontario.

Bill C-31 was passed into law during Sinclair's employment with Nishnawbe Aski Nation. The law was an attempt to update the gender inequalities embedded in the Indian Act. This amendment, made in 1985, was passed to restore Indian status to those who had previously lost it to enfranchisement, as well as to allow bands to control who would be registered on their reserves.

"One of the researchers at Nishnawbe Aski Nation asked me if I had applied for my status yet," Sinclair explains. "I told her I wouldn't be able to because I was Métis. She told me to look in the mirror. 'You're not Métis,' she said."

And she was right.

At the age of 25, Sinclair was able to locate her birth family with the help of her half-sister and gained status from George Gordon First Nation in Treaty 4 Territory.

Allyson Stevenson, Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Peoples and Global Social Justice at the University of Regina, is a fellow Sixties Scoop researcher and part of the Pe-kīwēwin Project. With a background that includes the impact of the Canadian child welfare system on Indigenous people in Saskatchewan, she says she is now proud to be a Métis adoptee, but notes, "it has taken a long time to get to this place."

"I was given up at birth by my mother and raised by a family in Regina," says Stevenson. "My mother was non-Indigenous

and my father was Métis." And although her father has been missing since 1980, Stevenson recounts stories from his family that reveal he had a strong desire to raise her but was not able to at the time. Stevenson never got the chance to meet her father.

**KEY PLAYERS**

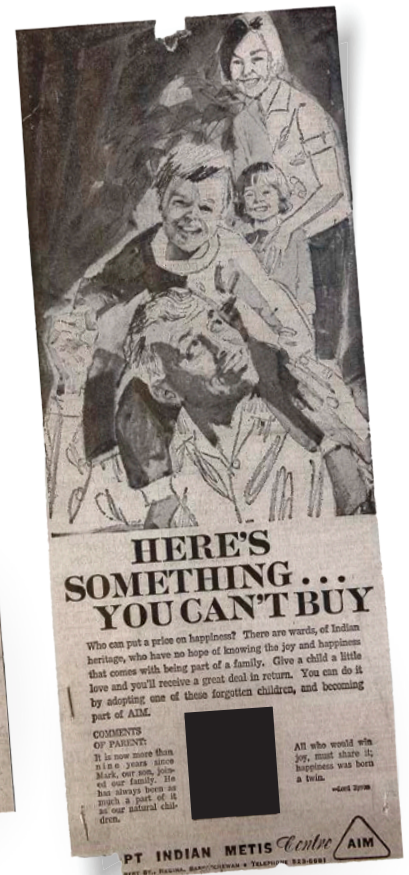
At the centre of the Sixties Scoop were the social workers. Part of Sinclair's second phase of research will focus on their experiences and the policies they have operated under from the early stages of the child welfare system to the present day.

Sinclair and her team will also explore the experiences of adoptive parents to reveal what they were told about why Indigenous children were available for adoption. This will help centre the stories of adoptees.

While Sinclair acknowledges there were plenty of adoptive parents who did the best they could, she also understands there were very troubling reasons behind Indigenous and Métis children being adopted out.

"I do think a lot of people adopted for the wrong reasons," she says. "It may have been that they believed the prevailing 'child-saving' narrative." Sinclair explains that without the tools of cultural context or relevance, the child is ultimately the one that suffers.

Samplings of just a few of the earliest AIM ads from the late 1960s. Faces at the bottom have been blacked out as per Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan regulations.





Allyson Stevenson with several copies of AIM advertisements from 1967.

“Now that most adoptees are grown, many have received their documents from Social Services. Those documents, along with adoptees, will help us to explore the narrative adoptive parents were told and how accurate that was.”

### THE AIM PROGRAM

Like so many others, Sinclair’s adoption was made possible through Saskatchewan’s Adopt Indian and Métis Program (AIM). Established in 1967, it was funded by the province with assistance from the federal government. Although AIM did not apprehend children, it worked as an advertising party focused on finding “forever homes” for “Indian” and Métis children in permanent care of the province.

“So many children were coming into care that the halls were filled to the rafters,” Sinclair explains.

Other provinces and territories had their own versions of AIM with similar attempts to find permanent homes for “unadoptable” children.

“One of the things these programs did was participate in the advertisement of children,” says Sinclair. “We look at that now with distaste, but at the time, I am sure they thought it was very honourable.”

Stevenson acknowledges that the child welfare system has remained at odds with women’s liberation and decolonization efforts globally. Over email, she explains that AIM advertisements erased Indigenous mothers. “Children appeared to come out of nowhere, without any attachments,”

“Métis people in Canada have a long history of child removal, and, in Saskatchewan, were the first Indigenous peoples to recognize the genocidal threat of child removal to their future.”

she writes. “One of the reasons why the Saskatchewan Native Women organized in 1971 was because of the AIM program and the way it treated women.” She says there are many ways that mothers were disrespected, including, for example, not being told what was happening to their children.

### CULTURAL GENOCIDE IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

Sinclair notes that most of the people graduating from social work programs at the time were upper-middle-class Euro-Canadians—most of whom had never been to a reserve or even met an Indigenous person. “They would have seriously lacked those necessary understandings of cultural differences,” she says.

Stevenson points out that the child welfare system worked on the need for willing families “to assume their role in the solution to the ‘racial problem.’” In an article she wrote



Michael Bell

**Raven Sinclair looking through documentation from the Children's Aid Society of Manitoba from the 1970s .**

for activehistory.ca, she recounts the pushback from Saskatoon's Métis Society: "Métis people in Canada have a long history of child removal, and, in Saskatchewan, were the first Indigenous peoples to recognize the genocidal threat of child removal to their future."

The term "cultural genocide" has been making its way back into the discussion about Canada's colonial past. Used as early as 1985 by Justice Edwin Kimelman to describe the child welfare system in *The Kimelman Report*, he stated, "Cultural genocide has been taking place in a systematic, routine manner."

Stevenson agrees. "The government has consistently refused to dedicate funding to preventative family supports for Indigenous peoples. Rather, removal and adoption and fostering has been the way child welfare has operated since it came together in 1946."

### THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES

Sinclair notes that, presently, there is a distinct and somewhat harsh move from permanent homes to foster care. "A foster-care economy has evolved where foster families receive an income," she explains. However, Indigenous children in care receive 20 to 40 per cent less federal funding than non-Indigenous children in care.

"We cannot provide the same services or foster care rates and support for Indigenous children in care," says Sinclair. "It's become a no-win situation." Further, when cases of apprehension are taken to court, Indigenous families often lose. "The courts will always see Indigenous families as less than. We have to examine how racism plays out in both policies and legislation," Sinclair notes.

Stevenson agrees.

"The Sixties Scoop and contemporary child welfare legislation continue to erode kinship as a way of eliminating Indigenous nationhood."

"The courts will always see Indigenous families as less than. We have to examine how racism plays out in both policies and legislation," Sinclair notes.

### WHAT'S NEXT FOR THE THE PE-KĪWĒWIN PROJECT?

One of the many goals of the project is to create an interactive Geographical Information System (GIS) map for adoptees and survivors. This was inspired by a conversation Sinclair had with Colleen Cardinal, director of a national group of adoptees called the National Indigenous Survivors of Child Welfare Network (NISCWN). As a community collaborator with the Pe-kīwēwin Project, Cardinal attended two Indigenous GIS training sessions offered by the Firelight Group, known for their commitment to research and policy-building services for Indigenous communities.

The map will use a GIS platform to locate the Indigenous adoptee diaspora worldwide and will eventually be featured on the NISCWN site, where adoptees will be able to create their own profile and document their communities, as well as their adoption displacements. They will also be able to explore the documentation of fellow adoptees.

The vision for the online platform is to be able to track the movement of survivors of the child welfare system on a global scale. By using the map, "adoptees and visitors to the site will be able to move their cursor all over the world and learn the stories of survivors," says Sinclair.

Through her personal journey, Sinclair says she can relate to the displacement that can result from adoption. But the hope is that this technology will help to make it easier for others to learn about their birth families, histories and cultures, as well as to connect with those who have had similar experiences – a possibility Sinclair never could have imagined all those years ago. [D](#)

---

*Raven Sinclair's project is supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). Join Sinclair at **Congress 2018** at the University of Regina to hear more about her research into the Sixties Scoop.*