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## ABSTRACT

In 1978, federal legislation was passed to protect tribally enrolled or potentially enrollable American Indian children and prevent the breakup of Indian families. Prior to the passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act, it was estimated that one-quarter to one-third of all Indian children were being removed from their families. In this paper, an Indian woman, Anne Thunder Hawk, recounts her experiences growing up with her adoptive White family and a Black caretaker in Alabama and how she came to terms with her feelings of alienation, loss, and abandonment. She attended a public school, where she was the only Native person and where she was physically punished for challenging the history that was taught. There were also few Black students and no Black teachers in the school system, but being raised by an African American caretaker helped to sensitize Thunder Hawk to racial injustices at an early age. Experience with racial bias also extended to church, where Thunder Hawk was the only person of color and was accepted only because of her adoption. When Thunder Hawk was a teenager, a local Cherokee man took her to cultural events, supported her efforts in school, and encouraged her to look at her identity. Her search for identity has taken her to several reservation communities and is ongoing. She has scripted a documentary video on interracial adoption and is working on a book. (SV)

# HIDDEN IDENTITY

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## Hidden Identity

Adoption among Native American tribes or nations was a common practice even before European contact. The extended family and the community were directly involved in the rearing and nurturing of children. Childless couples were also given children to care for as their own. Children were considered sacred beings.

In 1978, federal legislation was passed to protect enrolled or potentially enrollable Indian children. This public law 95-608 is known as the "Indian Child Welfare Act" or ICWA. The 1978 Indian Child Welfare Act states that the primary reason for this legislation was to prevent the breakup of families. Prior to this time, it had been determined that 25-35% of all Indian children were being removed from their families. I was adopted 17 years before this legislation was passed. What I feel was actually occurring was a planned continuation of cultural genocide under the disguise of assimilation.

The Select Committee on Indian Affairs reported their findings to Congress, which the findings concluded by Congress

was a national crisis. Almost all non-Indian public and private agencies showed no respect and sensitivity to Indian culture and society. The previous methods of collecting information concerning the removal and placement of Indian children were insufficient and in numerous cases completely covered up and covert. Also concluded was the fact that the removal of Indian children from their cultural environment had long term impact for the tribes and nations themselves, which had an impact on how tribes and nations viewed sovereignty.

The reexamination of sovereignty and the ability of a tribe to perpetuate itself was a very basic conclusion. This conclusion was additionally cited from case law involving the adoption of a Native American minor child, Randall Nathan Swanson, Navajo.

As explained in the adoption case of Randall Nathan Swanson, it was argued on his behalf that child rearing and the maintenance of tribal identity are essential tribal relations. By paralyzing the ability of a tribe to perpetuate itself, the intrusion of the state in family relationships within the Navajo nation and interference with the child's ethnic identity with the tribe of his birth are ultimately the most severe methods of undermining

retained sovereignty and autonomy.<sup>1</sup> In theory, take the children away and destroy the tribe.

It has only been through the incentives by Native Americans, the tribes and nations themselves, to educate the non-Indian to a level of visual consciousness and accountability as to the pain and hardships the United States government and its people inflicted on Indian people. Claiming ignorance is no longer a valid excuse for the decisions and actions of the federal government and its people in regard to the treatment of Indian people, also theft of Indian land and the exploitation and destruction of the world's environment. I feel the United States government is very aware of their actions and other countries have used the United States' stratagems for removing children as a form of genocide for indigenous people.

These methods of warfare are a gradual process throughout one's life. The United States government has practiced these methods on my family for seven generations. It has been a slow process of cultural extermination that has removed me completely from my family, tribes, and culture. For me being adopted, my

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<sup>1</sup> Select Committee on Indian Affairs, *The Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978*, 95<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1977 S. Report 95-597, 51.

biggest loss is loss of family. I've kept in contact with my birth mother since 1997, but I don't understand why she has never made any attempts to see her grandchildren or me. As a mother this is inconceivable to me and I have never been able to explain to my son why we are not important to her.

My birth mother has explained to me that when she was young there was not any alcohol treatment centers, and to kill emotional pain, she drank. No one ever told her alcohol was addictive. Presently, she is under two years of court ordered treatment.

Learning about my family and culture, I have had to learn about alcohol, fetal alcohol syndrome, and fetal alcohol effects, children of adult alcoholics, and other culturally specific issues related to alcohol abuse. This was not something I wanted to learn but a necessary tool to understand the history since European contact. What I feel that I have to be grateful for is that I was never exposed to reservation alcoholism; although my adopted mother may have had co-dependency issues they were not alcohol related, and I did grow up knowing what love is. I have been able to look back and now see the differences in adults that were nurtured and loved and those not nurtured and loved. By being adopted by

another race, I understand that I was given or afforded the opportunity to receive individualized and not institutionalized care. Although my sense of belonging became distorted growing up, my formative years were grounded with love. I have found that persons who experienced boarding schools have similar thoughts. What I have discovered from this is that somehow we all knew that within our spirit that we were in the wrong place. We should be at home with our parents and families and in our communities.

The issue of institutionalized care was also understood as a determining factor within the 1978 Indian Child Welfare Act to provide conveniently located day schools. The feelings I had of displacement were hard for me to conclude, but now I know why I have those feelings.

The feelings of displacement due to family and cultural deprivation increased throughout my educational years. I still cannot find the words to verbalize my feelings to help a non-Native person understand. What I term as the “dirty Indian syndrome” can only be described in adjective terms as feeling lost, alone, abandoned, misplaced, left out, dirty, forgotten, hated. Also being mocked, belittled, and physically abused.

Learning to believe these things as I was told and experienced was part of the American society conditioning. Fortunately, around age 11 my first contact with a Native person, that person realized what was happening to me and helped me.

As I now look back at this, I feel that the Great Spirit must have sent this person to help me because it seems that some great plan was being orchestrated on my behalf. As Indian people, we were one of the first races of people in history to be forced by another to be educated and religiously altered to the dominant society's expectations. This religious persecution of Native Americans was in effect from 1820 until 1972, which has been during my lifetime. What an oxymoron that the same people that inflicted this persecution were those and their descendants who were experiencing similar religious persecution that led them to flee from their homeland and claim ours through manifest destiny.

As with my family, boarding schools and prison camps were forced upon them as a phase of assimilation and genocide. For me, assimilation through bi-racial, multi-racial adoption was what I have endured.

Since age 11, I legally now can pray and worship to my higher power in any manner I choose, which now is primarily



Lakota. This is something I stress to my son, who is now learning the Lakota language.

What I have learned using Lakota traditional healing practices is that the language is essential in performing the religious ceremonies as well as participating within them.

Also, what I've learned about my own adoption experience was the fact that although for all those years I was separated from my cultures, there came a point in time in my life to where these dreams and thoughts kept overflowing. And I had to find answers for this. Once I started searching for the answers, I realized what I was hearing was the Lakota language. And ever since then, I have made an effort to immerse myself in the culture.

As to why I haven't had the same experiences with my Yaqui identity and my Pueblo identity, I have not been able to explain this. Which leads me to believe that there is something genetic about my experiences.

I had a few experiences as a young child about different places and once I was older and did visit my reservation, Pueblo of Laguna, I had the deja vu experiences then. And in my 20s, I moved out to Albuquerque to look for answers when I wasn't even aware that I was searching for my own identity. I went through the

experience of being rejected and alienated by my extended family; however, my grandfather, John Alonzo, was glad to see me and we were able to spend a few times together, because he died two months after I arrived.

Although I didn't know my grandfather well, I highly respected him because my son was his first great-grandson. When he was in his 70s, he took a three-day bus trip from New Mexico to Alabama to see his grandson and to give him his Indian name.

My grandfather was famous for his horses: Revenue, War Bonnet, and Shoofly. Also, my grandfather grew up at the Carlisle Boarding School in Pennsylvania.

My mother was also educated in a parochial school in Albuquerque. I am the first generation of my family since boarding schools were established that attended a public school system. However, it's probably due to the fact that I was adopted and not exposed to this boarding school upbringing. But my public school experience was not a healthy learning environment either. During my educational years, I was the only Native person in the school system. I was physically punished in front of classmates for challenging history curriculum and teachers, and reminded continually from the school logo, an Indian effigy.

This experience of cultural deprivation and prejudice and racism was so subliminally ingrained in me that I can remember the teachers names involved that punished me. I can remember each student's name who harassed me, hit me. This is when I started loosing interest in school.

What is very interesting reflecting on these insensitivities is the fact that there was never, ever an African American ever make a racial comment or innuendo or anything toward me. The curriculum is an important part of education, which in most states are determined by the state education system. When I was attending school the curriculum was biased, distorted, and wrong. The school curriculum prompted ignorance. Many of the African-American students had similar experiences with conflicting information being taught.

But in the county school system during my educational years, there were no African American teachers. I went to the only school in the county that accepted blacks. I would estimate that there were less than 100 black students in that county school system.

The fact that an African American woman raised me I think opened my eyes to see not only how I was treated and

disrespected, but also I was able to see and feel how the black students were treated and disrespected. It wasn't until my later years in high school that blacks became recognized for their abilities, which the ones who played basketball received preferential treatment.

It would be interesting for me to revisit that school and see if things have changed. I feel that I connected with the African American community. I bonded with my caretaker and not my adopted mother. I remember my caretaker, I remember picking cotton with her. I remember pumping water with her. I remember her old coal stove that was her source of heat. And three or four or five layers of peeling wallpaper. She always carried me around on her hip, especially when she was cooking. And I give credit to her for teaching me how to make the best chicken and dumplings, collard greens, and cornbread in the world.

It was through her influence that I understand Ebonics. Her name was Marie Bush. They called her "Blackie." She couldn't read or write. I remember going a couple of times when she was voting, and she would sign an X and a couple of people would sign their name by hers. And I don't remember her ever singing me any lullabies but what she did, she would rock me and sing spiritual

hymns, those she knew very well. Even before she died after my son was born, I took him to see her. She was blind. I cooked her breakfast and she held him and rocked him in the same way, singing the same songs to him. When she died, they had an Eastern Star service. It took six men to pull me away from her casket. How I know I bonded with her was the fact that when my adopted mother died, I never cried.

I still feel spiritually connected to this woman, because during the time I was taking care of my adopted mother and she was dying of cancer, I would go over to Marie's grave and take flowers, and sit at her grave. And I would find myself as I was caretaking my adoptive mother that I could be going through the house and all of a sudden I would smell flowers. And it wasn't just me that could smell them, my son could smell them, other people that was visiting could smell them. And it's just something that I would like to be able to explain.

Another person that helped me evolve was a Cherokee man, a retired major, Lloyd Collins, now deceased. He educated me about the American Indian Movement, American Indian cultures, and unfortunately his involvement with organized crime. I was introduced to him through an adoptive uncle and he became

close to our family. He led a somewhat secret and reclusive life. I traveled with him on numerous occasions. He took me to my first pow wow and my first viewing of the installation of an Indian chief, which he performed the ceremony on a Creek chief, which at that time I couldn't understand why people were so upset. But now I do. The fact that here was a Cherokee man putting a headdress on a Creek man at a Creek installation ceremony. This man was also a black belt in martial arts and had numerous magazines from overseas of him instructing martial arts and performing martial arts. He was also an expert marksman. Taught me how to assemble, disassemble, and use firearms, and introduced me to several of his acquaintances that he worked for; one who my uncle built this house that has appeared in the *Southern Living* magazine.

This man also introduced me to a lifestyle that I kept secret from my adoptive mother. It wasn't until I was about 15 that she discovered he was involved with organized crime. He died suddenly when I was 16. What he did teach me was to be proud to be Indian. His positive influence was what I needed to recuperate from the years of prejudiceness and racism that I was experiencing in school. And he actually supported my efforts in school and encouraged me to look at my identity.

I remember him getting angry with me one day and he said, "Why don't you date an Indian guy?" I said, "There's not any around here, is there?" So a few months after he died, I married at age 16, which I now have one son from that marriage.

My search for my personal identity has taken me many places. It was my religious upbringing that led me to get married at such an early age. I was raised in primarily a Southern Baptist church, all white church. And at age 4, I started publicly singing and sang in public up until the time of my marriage. Which is ironic because my birth mother was a professional singer as well.

So although I wasn't raised in a parochial type system, I was raised in a Christian sector that did not depict a truthful image of God. When you have a group of people as a church and they do not want a person or persons of another color attending their church because of their skin color, then to me that has nothing to do with Christianity.

I feel the only reason I was accepted in the same church of 28 years was the fact that I was adopted and they accepted me for that fact only.

I am the only person of color ever to be a member of that church. Last year, when I was trying to solicit donations from the

Southern Baptist organization churches I had the opportunity to visit there to solicit them for donations. And I commented to them on what they taught me all the 28 years that I was a member of that church. And that was the fact apparently we have two different Gods, because I told them my God is colorblind.

For reasons such as this is why I do not wish to live in Alabama in the community where I grew up. I don't feel welcomed there. I was always the adopted child. I don't have what you call blood relatives. And in the south especially there's a big importance stressed on that.

I have found that being adopted I have never had a sense of feeling grounded because of my experiences in Alabama, no family there, the racism, the biased religion. And living in New Mexico it's a different culture there. Our family is from Paguete Village, where for 50 years the largest running uranium mine in the world operated there. A third of the people that lived there have died from cancer. There are numerous birth defects. I myself was born with a congenital heart defect and developed endocrine system disorders and there's never been any study as to the effects of that open pit mine for those 50 years.



As of yet, I've never made an attempt to locate any relatives that I may have at the Pascua Yaqui Reservation in Arizona. I think I still am overwhelmed by fear and from my experiences of rejection with my Pueblo relatives. And until I am able to locate my birth father or any of his relatives or my other sibling, then I cannot even find out which Sioux tribal affiliation I would have. Therefore, it's almost as if I'm in no man's land. I do not really have a place to be established. To me this is an overwhelming repercussion of my adoption.

The video I have scripted is titled: *Hidden Identity: Native American Adoption*. This documentary will introduce several individuals who were forced to deal with adoption with another race and culture before the 1978 Indian Child Welfare Act. These people will give their views about their experiences with adoption. Also involved are Native American professionals and experts in the area of Native American adoption, historical trauma, Native American psychology, and the 1978 Indian Child Welfare Act. This documentary is intended to be an educational video on Native American issues that led to the implementation of the 1978 Indian Child Welfare Act, and to provide understanding and promote healing. Thus, given the general public's knowledge of Native

American history and the effects that adoption has placed on Indian people. In order for this project to benefit others, I am suggesting that the fiscal sponsor would collaborate in a way to market the video so that the proceeds would benefit the Oglala Sioux Tribe governmental agencies that work directly with ICWA, or to implement changes by revising tribal codes and ordinances that would best protect the interest of children. I have selected the Oglala Sioux Tribe because of their social and economic situation, their large number of tribal members, and the genuine honesty that I experienced from the people themselves. This topic of Native Americans and their adoption experience has never been documented in video form. This documentary will cost approximately fifteen thousand dollars to produce.

The book I am working on is about Native American adoption. Not only will I be addressing my adoption, but also others as well from across the United States who want to express themselves. The beginning of summer, I plan to advertise for this in a national Indian newspaper. My son will be co-authoring the book with me, not only because he is an excellent writer but he possesses the knowledge and experience for being the child of a Native American adoptee.

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