



## **“No one cares more about your community than you”: Approaches to Healing With Secwépemc Children and Youth**

Natalie Clark,<sup>a</sup> Jeffrey More,<sup>b</sup> Lynn Kenoras-Duck Chief,<sup>c</sup> Duanna Johnston-Virgo,<sup>c</sup> Sharnelle Matthew,<sup>c</sup> Anonymous,<sup>c</sup> Norma Manuel,<sup>d</sup> and Jann Derrick<sup>e</sup>

a Métis and Secwépemc kinship community healer

b Mohawk and Secwépemc community healer

c Secwépemc healer

d Elder and Secwépemc healer

e Elder and Mohawk healer

Corresponding author: Natalie Clark, [nclark@tru.ca](mailto:nclark@tru.ca)

### **Abstract**

This paper shares stories from multigenerational Secwépemc and Indigenous healers (including social work and counselling practitioners) with Secwépemc kinship ties. Each Secwépemc and Indigenous healer works with Secwépemc and Indigenous children and youth in Secwépemcúlcw, the land of the Secwépemc Nation. The work is a form of “ancestor accountability” (Gumbs, 2016), as it is one that is embedded in our kinship relationships and our learning on the land together with our children, family, and Elders. Through the methodological framework of *Steseptekwle* – Secwépemc storytelling – together with Red Intersectionality, these stories are examples of new tellings, or re-storying, of the *Snine* (Owl) story that not only illuminate the ongoing resistance to colonial power, but also of the resurgence and reinstatement of Secwépemc ways of addressing wellness and healing.

*Keywords:* Indigenous healing; Indigenous child and youth wellness; Secwépemc storytelling

## Acknowledgments

Throughout this project and subsequent article writing, we acknowledge the many Elders, Knowledge keepers, those we currently walk with and those who have gone before us. We also honour the Secwepemc children, youth and families we learn from and walk beside. We acknowledge We, a multi-vocal and multigenerational group of Secwepemc and Indigenous healers, would like to begin with a story, and invite you, the reader, to join with us on this journey by reading the *Snine* (Owl) story below. Do not remain absent from this knowing. We write you into this paper with this story.<sup>1</sup>

### Owl Story

A very long time ago, a woman who lived in a village gave birth to a baby boy who cried all the time. “If you don’t stop crying, I’ll leave you outside in the cold and Owl will take you away,” threatened the child’s mother. It was cold outside, for this was in the middle of winter. The baby boy continued to cry.

Finally, the woman took the child outside and left it there. The child continued to cry. After a while, the child’s grandparents who were living with the young woman, heard Owl swoop down and land. Then the child stopped crying. Suddenly, the people realized what was happening, and they dashed outside, just as Owl was carrying the child away. “Hoo-Hoo-Hoot!” cried Owl. “Owl has gone in that direction,” the people agreed. They listened until they couldn’t hear the Owl any longer.

The people looked everywhere, but they couldn’t find the baby boy. In the morning they resumed their search. The brothers of the baby decided to look for him, so they packed what they would need for their trip and started off in the direction that Owl had taken.

The brothers walked and walked until they came to Owl’s first camp. They camped the night and started their search again in the morning. Every day the boys travelled in the direction that Owl was flying. When they found one camp, they stayed there for a night and then continued on their journey in the morning. The boys followed Owl from one camp to the next. They searched in the valleys and up the mountains.

Finally after a long journey, the boys came to the first camp where Owl had stayed for a length of time. The little boy was growing older by this time and had killed a mouse; Owl had showed him how to skin it and stretch the hide. He had then killed a chipmunk. Owl, who was the little boy’s grandmother, made a bow and arrow for him and showed him how to use it.

---

1 This version of the Owl story was given to Clark by her Father-in law Johnny Ben Jules from his collection of Shuswap Stories. The Owl story precedes colonization but its use in this context demonstrates the key role of Secwepemc stories in helping us understand the challenges before us. Other versions of the owl story can be found in Teit (1909, p. 698) as told by Sixwilexken of Dog Creek.

Eventually, Owl moved her camp to another place. The little boy, by this time, was able to kill larger deer. Whenever they left their camp, the skins of rabbits and deers were left stretched out in the sun to dry.

The young boy's two brothers reached the camp and found the stretched skins drying in the sun. They searched and searched around Owl's first camp, but they couldn't find which way Owl had gone. After they circled around the camp, they finally came upon a sign indicating which way Owl and the boy had gone.

Then the boys reached Owl's second camp. They searched around until they found the skins that their little brother had stretched and then they looked for a sign which would show them which way Owl had gone. The boys followed Owl for a very long time.

The little boy was growing up and becoming a young man.

One day while the boys were travelling around, they met their little brother, who was out hunting. They were very happy to meet each other, for it had been a long time since the boy was taken from his home. "Owl is a very smart old lady," said the youngest boy, "she knows everything that happens! I will go home to her now, but in the morning, when I go hunting, I'll go far away and kill a deer which I will leave for her to pack home."

The youngest boy went home to Owl and went to bed. Early in the morning, he walked over the mountain ridge and killed a deer. Then he skinned and quartered it and left it with a tumpline<sup>2</sup> for his Grandmother, Owl, to use while packing the meat home. The boy spoke to the tumpline, "as Owl lifts the pack, I want you to break. Break several times when she tries to lift the meat." Then, leaving the meat and the tumpline, the boy went home.

It was very late in the day when the boy got home. Noticing that he wasn't hungry, the old woman felt sorry for him and said, "Oh, you poor boy, you must be tired, for you have walked a long way." "Yes Grandmother, I am very tired. Would you pack the deer home for me?" he replied.

In the morning, the old lady prepared everything that she would need in order to pack home the meat. She looked and looked for her tumpline, but she couldn't find it. "Oh, you don't need it, Grandmother. I made a tumpline for you and left it on the tree beside the deer," the young man told her. "I'll take my own, if I can find it," replied the old lady. "You don't need it," insisted the boy. Owl agreed and left for the mountains.

---

2 Tumpline is "a sling formed by a strap slung over the forehead or chest and used for carrying or helping to support a pack on the back or in hauling loads." Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tumpline>. Accessed 16 Aug. 2020.

The boy waited until he was sure that Owl was far away before he called his brothers. They packed up the best dried deer meat and bundled up some hides. They pressed the packs down so that they could take as much as possible. Taking some bones, the boy placed them on his bed and spoke to them, “when Owl comes home and finds these bones, she will think that it is me. She will think that I was burned to death.”

When they were completely ready, they set the house on fire, and then they all ran away. Old lady Owl was far away from her house when she saw the smoke. She flew back home and looked among the ruins where her grandson used to sleep. All that she could find were some burnt bones; Owl felt very sorry!

The boy passed judgment on Owl, “never again will you bother children. If someone dies, you, Owl, will tell them about it. You will deliver messages to the People, but never again will you steal children.” The brothers travelled for a long, long time before they reached the home of their parents. The old couple were happy to see their sons, and comforted them after their long journey. (as told by Charley Draney, edited by Bouchard & Kennedy, 1979, p. 42–43)

## Situating the Research

The Secwépemc people have been in Secwépemcúluw – the land of the Secwépemc People – for time immemorial. The Secwépemc Nation occupies a large territory, spanning 180,000 km<sup>2</sup>, throughout the interior plateau of south central British Columbia. Historically, the Secwépemc were a Nation of over 30 communities, or fires. However, due to colonization and colonial genocide enacted through small pox and other diseases, 13 villages were destroyed (Coffey et al., 1990, p. 8). The Owl Story that begins this paper has many versions within the Secwépemc Nation. It has been interpreted by a number of Secwépemc scholars (e.g., Jules, 2016, Shuswap Nation Tribal Council, 2014) to represent the harms done to Secwépemc children and youth by the colonial system of child removal.

A Secwépemc Elder, grandmother, leader, healer, and co-author shares a story of her own journey to working with children that illustrates the Owl story and the removal of children from the Secwépemc community in the 1950s:

In 1955, '56 ... There was a report about these children ... where they came in and took five children and what I did was go over there and tried to stop them ... I knew the parents would eventually come back so I said, “Can't you just wait for a while?” And they say, “No, because there is no food in the house.” And at that time I could not provide and that was really hard. So she made all the arrangements and the saddest thing is that none of those children ever came back, they all died. Suicide, whatever. They never came back home ... so from that time on, I became interested (Elder Norma Kenoras).

Colonization is not a thing of the past, it is a regular, active process happening again and again.<sup>3</sup> In fact, Indigenous children and youth are experiencing the “colonial fallout” (Tagaq, 2015) of past genocidal policies as enacted through residential schools and other simultaneous agents of destruction at the same time as they are subjected to unrelenting acts of colonialism through the “etiquette of lies” (Gottfriedson, 2010, p.51) “good intentions” (Blackstock, 2009, p.36) and the logics and interpretations of “best interest” (Blackstock, 2016, p. 297; Kimelman, 1985, p. 29; Sandy, 2011, p. 31). Secwépemc legal and child welfare scholar Nancy Sandy (2011) asserts that this settler-colonial logic of “best interest” through child welfare policies and practices has resulted in the disruption of Secwépemc child safety laws, and the health and wellness of Indigenous children, their families, and their communities.

This paper does not focus on a decolonization of social work or other helping professions. We honour the long history of Indigenous social workers advocating against racism within social work policies and practices (Blackstock, 2009, 2016; Hart, 1999; Reid, 2005; Sinclair & Albert, 2008). The current over-representation of Indigenous children and youth in child welfare systems<sup>4</sup> across Canada today highlights the need for visioning, and for immediate transformation – a transformation that has been called for over and over again by Indigenous social workers and communities and in report after report (John, 2016; National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019; Representative for Children and Youth, 2013; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). The current system of “care” is in fact a form of violence<sup>5</sup> against Indigenous children and youth. In other work we have examined the harms done by state “care” systems (see Clark, 2016b). This paper turns away from the focus on the transformation of social work to instead direct attention to the sophisticated resources we have inside of our Indigenous communities to support transformation for Indigenous children and youth.

### **Methodology: Our Xqwlewmén (Berry Picking Basket)**

Just as we can turn to the ways that our *stsptekwll* (ancient stories) refract the consequences of our colonial history, we can turn to them for wisdom about how to heal ourselves from being divided, broken into fragments, and colonized. (Ignace & Ignace, 2017, p. 496)

- 
- 3 draw here on Philips (1989) decolonization of language through resistance of the passive voice as seen in her definition of the word rape; “Raped – regular, active, used transitively, the again and again against women participate into the passive voice as in “to get raped”; past present future-tense(d)” (p. 66).
  - 4 More Indigenous children and youth in Canada have been extracted by child welfare agencies than during the height of residential schools (Canadian Human Rights Tribunal, 2016).
  - 5 Clark defines violence as acts of abuse on the bodies of Indigenous children and youth through colonial policies, practices, and programs, alongside the everyday enactments of this “colonial fallout” of past genocidal policies, on and in their bodies and kinship networks, including non-human relations, through the intersections of grief and loss, physical abuse, sexual abuse, lateral violence, poverty, racism, heterosexism, ageism, resource extraction, and all acts of removal from land and community.

Secwépemc stories, such as the Owl story, provide a form of protection, resiliency, healing, and guidance for the challenges that we are experiencing now, as well as those that are to come (Ignace, 2008). Each story is embedded with the values and laws of Secwépemc society, including how to care for our children (Jules, 2016; Shuswap Nation Tribal Council, 2016). These values include: the value of relationship – *Kweseltnews* (we are all family); the value of individual strength and responsibility – *Knucwetsut* (take care of yourself); the value of knowing and training your gifts – *Etsxe* (vision quest/coming of age); the value of sharing – *Knucwentwe'cw* (to help each other); the value of humility – *Qweqwetsin* (gratitude for life); and the value of renewal – *Mellelc* (take time to relax, regenerate).<sup>6</sup>

Indigenous storytelling is inherently relational and intergenerational and it is often done by the grandmothers to teach values and lessons (Secwepemc Elder Mary Thomas, 2010). Further, the touch of a grandmother while storytelling is in and of itself a form of healing medicine (Secwepemc Elder Flora Sampson, 2017, personal communication).

This *Xqwlewmén* (berry picking) methodology is rooted in a specific space, *xq'wle`wten*, our various berry picking locations on Secwépemcúlcw. The knowledge shared by the co-authors and healers comes together to co-construct or weave a basket of knowledge rooted in Secwépemc stories, teachings, and practices.

This basket also holds the theoretical and methodological framework of Indigenous intersectionality, or red intersectionality (Clark, 2012, 2016a), an Indigenist feminist and holistic model that follows in the tireless tradition of love, resistance, and resurgence (Allen, 1986; Armstrong, 1996; Maracle, 1988; Zitkala Sa, 1924). Indigenous feminists not only named the violence and harm found in gendered colonial policies, but also the central role of white women and the professionalization of caring within Canadian social work and other helping professions. Finally, red intersectionality recognizes the importance of local and traditional Secwépemc teachings and the intergenerational connection between the past and the present; it also acknowledges the emergent multiplicity of Indigenous child and youth identities that have arisen from colonization, the geographic movement off and on reserve,<sup>7</sup> and the gendered construction of Indigenous peoples through the Indian Act.

## Method

Through the overarching question guiding Clark's PhD work (2018), entitled *What is in your basket?*, several themes emerge from the practitioners' stories: (a) their own story of being raised up as healers on the land; (b) "Let's do it this way first," centering Secwépemc approaches; (c) family

---

6 The information on the values is compiled from Elder Mary Thomas (2001); Billy, (2009); Ignace, (2008), Jules (2016) and Michel, (2012) who articulated the values shared by the Elders of Chief Atahm School.

7 Secwepemc scholar Dorothy Christian (2000) describes her own dislocation while living in Toronto, "thankfully, my ancestors were travelling with me, even in the concrete jungle ... my grandmother who gave me strength as a child was still guiding me" (p.92). Also see Secwepemc scholar Georgina Martin PhD thesis (2014) for example of healing found in reconnection after dislocation.

and community as central; (d) Children and youth resistance narratives; and, (e) (re)newal of the Owl story as medicine. These narratives form a “public genealogy of resistance” (Philip, 1997, p. 25) in which all shared their story against the ongoing struggles, resistance, and sites of active colonization through policies and practices. This storytelling and the subsequent retelling or re-storying of the Owl story is part of a genealogy of resistance to colonialism and, more importantly, points to the resurgence of Secwépemc child safety laws and practices of healing.

The stories shared through this research were part of Clark’s PhD work, and stand alongside the stories from our own children and youth, and the children and youth we work with in the Secwépemc Nation. A purposive sampling method was used to identify participants through a community advisory of knowledge keepers, youth, Elders, activists, Clark’s own role as a healer, and her Secwépemc kinship and community relationships.

These stories are shared in the same tradition as the stories that emerged after colonialism. As described by Ignace (2008), the stories that emerge after colonialism not only tell the truth about colonialism but provide guidance for addressing its violence. Similarly, each of the healers’ stories hold truths about the violence of colonialism while being a form of medicine and guidance for addressing the violence against Indigenous children and youth.

These narratives raise many important questions: What does it mean when Owl is no longer the non-Indigenous social worker removing our children and youth? What does it mean when Indigenous social workers and counsellors from Secwépemc or other Nations are working with our own children and families, and within the Secwépemc Nation? How will these stories help our future generations? What guidance will these stories provide? Will it be of resistance, survival, and, more importantly, what it means to provide protection to our children and youth? These stories all affirm the importance of not removing Indigenous children and youth from their families and communities, and instead provide examples of the “on-the-ground-practices of freedom” (Coulthard, 2013) within the Secwépemc Nation.

## **Findings**

### **Raised up as Social Workers/Healers on the Land and in the Circle**

For all of the healers, and co-authors of this paper, there was a story of being “raised up” to be healers or “social workers” in their family. This was further demonstrated in the family groupings that participated in this research, including two Elders and their children, as well as an aunt and her niece.

Well, I always say I got into social work for several reasons. The first was growing up and seeing the work that was done at home. My mother was a foster parent back in the day before foster parents, that was even the definition or term, so what she did, I remember this as a little girl, getting excited because I knew the weekend was coming and I knew kids

were going to come over and I would have a house full of kids to play with and it wasn't until I was an adult that I learned that they were actually kids that were taken by the police and brought to our house for a safe place for the weekend. (Lynn Kenoras-Duck Chief)

Duanna Johnston-Virgo shares about the modelling and teachings her maternal grandparents and mother passed on to her:

... my journey started at a really young age ... I would see my mom often taking food from the house and often jackets that we may have not fit, my mom took those in ... So I got to watch her do that work and on a bigger scope my grandparents were working at a political level for the betterment of Indigenous women and Indigenous families on the reserve in BC. I just watched and observed them ...

In addition to being raised up as helpers and healers, all of the authors and those interviewed cited Elders, knowledge keepers, and ceremonies as part of their training. Although we are all trained in Western trauma and counselling approaches, this training was not the focus in the stories. There was a strong sense of the ways in which “trauma” best practices were not working:

[The Western approach] wasn't working, so how could we do things differently? So what really did it for me was my work with Jeff (co-author Jeffrey More). I mentored under him and we really talked a lot about the struggles with our Indigenous families with the youth and families we worked with ... the process that our families were enduring, and decided we have to do things differently ... So Jeff and I really talked about an Indigenous perspective, and who we are and how do we bring that into sessions with the kids and youth and families that we worked with. (Duanna Johnston-Virgo)

All the healers spoke of how if using a Western trauma or counselling approach, we were doing so as an Indigenous person, first and foremost, and sought training and mentorship from other Indigenous healers. Like the child in the Owl story, many of us had to leave our communities to seek formal training, yet we all identified the importance of being part of the circle with the children and youth with whom we work. This is illustrated in a story from Matthew, one of the participating healers, “I recently had an Elder who knew that my partner has been struggling badly with diabetes and she gave me. She goes on to say that is the change she would like to see for the future – having a more “we are part of the circle” as opposed to having that families and communities are there and we are separate. For example, Matthew shared in her interview, “I recently had an Elder who knew that my partner has been struggling badly with diabetes and she gave me some (traditional medicine). Like how touching is that. That's being part of (the circle).” She goes on to say that is the change she would like to see for the future – having a more “we are part of the circle” as opposed to having counsellors and healers as separate from the community.



## “Let’s do it this way first”: Centering Secwépemc Approaches

Another important theme in all of the stories shared was the importance of advocating for starting with Secwépemc ways, and listening to and focusing on the community, family, or child and youth needs in our practice. Instead of the first intervention being a Western counselling response, the healers all shared examples of “let’s do it this way first.” In the example below, the Secwépemc healer challenged a colonial response to a public community tragedy, in the form of dispatching mental health clinicians from outside the community, and instead promoted the sovereignty of the community:

I was the person saying, “Whoa, what does the community want?” When we have things like this happen to us, we have a way, we have a process and it’s collaborative, we need to hear what they want and what they need. So, the first couple of days, some of the things they wanted was Indigenous counsellors and they wanted Indigenous healers. So, it was a little bit of a battle because I just kept saying, “I want to hear what the community wants.”: ... We know we don’t need to be fixed, we know, and we just have to listen to what our people are asking for. (Duanna Johnston-Virgo)

Further examples of the reinstatement and resurgence of Secwépemc healing approaches are found in the work of other Secwépemc counsellors trained in spiritual work:

[Another Indigenous family counsellor] and I worked with these two girls that came in and they were in there and they were seeing spirits. So, I got a hold of [the counsellor], so he came out right away, he’s done this before and he knows the song he was taught, the song when there are spirits around. So, we called the family, we explained to them what we wanted to do and we brought the smudge and we talked about what prayers are and why spirits might be around. So we all sat in a circle and did that, and then [the counsellor] sung the song and talked more in the language with regards to when spirits come. He had a story, so that was something that we used. So, thank goodness the principal was very open. Once we did that she was like, “Do we need to call mental health?” and we were like let’s do it this way first and we did and after that there wasn’t any other episodes. (Lynn Kenoras-Duck Chief)

## Beyond Risk: Family and Community as Central

Instead of removing children or using a risk or deficit approach (Clark, 2012, 2016b) that is focused on problems and/or diagnosis, all the healers who shared stories in this research spoke of walking alongside children and youth – together with their families, Elders, and communities – and trusting that the families know what is required in order to address their own wellness needs. This healing practice is necessary given colonial policies’ focus on the breakdown of the family and community circle with the child in the middle. As described by co-author Jann Derrick during her interview,<sup>8</sup> “rather than indigenize family therapy, be Indigenous and bring family therapy into it.”

---

8 For an example of this see Derrick’s PhD thesis (2017), entitled *Kahwa:tsire: Indigenous Families in a Family Therapy Practice with the Indigenous Worldview as the Foundation*.

A focus on reinstating Indigenous ways of being and knowing, and in particular family and community centred practices grounded in the strengths of the Elders, family, and of children and youth, was reflected in all of the stories shared:

Just recognizing that people are the best judge of knowing what they want ... and just that piece of when mom is well, or parents are well, then the whole family is well. So just pulling in that holistic piece and always thinking parents have the skills already so how do I enhance those. (Anonymous)

In co-author Kenoras-Duck Chief's interview she makes central the importance of respect for families, as well as taking the time to build relationships given the distrust Indigenous families have of the colonial system:

As we talk, that's one of the main things that the family says, being so beaten down by the system that they have no trust and so whatever entity it is, if it's MCFD [Ministry of Children and Family Development] or if it's court, even at the schools, if they are in there they feel that they have no voice and maybe lack confidence to even say anything. So my role has always been to be their ally and advocate. So, garnering their trust.

All stories shared also highlighted approaches that are anchored in an understanding that the wellness of children, youth, families, and our communities are all rooted in everyday acts of resurgence and reclamation on the land, but also in our everyday lives in our homes and relationships. These everyday practices include the picking of medicines and the harvesting and preparation of food, together with ceremonies that flow from these that are embedded in Secwépemc values and knowledge.

I think in our Secwépemc Nation we're seeing a lot more of going back to the land ... and our medicines, we need to keep the medicines rejuvenated and the sacredness of it and the rituals and traditions of how we harvest and how we do things. (Duanna Johnston-Virgo)

Similarly, one Secwépemc healer shared that healthy community events are returning and she marked this as a sign of wellness for children and youth:

I remember when I was growing up we would have community nights ... I feel like there might've been a period when those went away and I think they're coming back. So I think even if communities are struggling, they are starting to find their voice ... And just wellness, when we come together as a group, good things happen ... So I think back to the question, *because no one cares about your community more than you do [emphasis added]*. (Anonymous)

## **“Let’s open the door and see what we can get through”: Everyday acts of Resistance and Naming Colonial Harms**

It is important to note that in the Owl story, the child is not passive: the child who is removed by the Owl also resists, as does their family. S/he tricks Owl after learning Owl’s ways and returns home. These stories point to the resistance of Secwépemc children and youth and their ingenuity and bravery in confronting and naming the harms of colonialism in all its forms, which in this case takes the form of child welfare practices in social work. An example comes from Clark’s son, Cohon, age 9, who questioned his mother saying, “Mom, I know what you do. You don’t think I know history, I do. Why would you be a social worker? How does that help children?” Other healers shared similar challenges from their children or family members.

In each of the stories shared, there are encounters with the harms of colonialism and state interventions. Each of the healers shared examples of the harms done through their Western education and their resistance strategies within this system. The impact of colonial social work policies and practices on the children, youth, and families with whom we work, and on our own bodies, was also clearly identified by all participants. Some described how they made decisions to never work within the provincial social service ministry, or refused to contract with it, or report to the state: “I refused to sign a contract with a system that I totally disagreed with ... it was simply, that’s my boundary and they figured it out” (Jeffrey More).

The impact of witnessing the effect of this system on children, but also on one’s self, is echoed again and again. The acts of trying to change the system from within, including deciding when and how to push or advocate within the system, or refusal to engage with the system, are told alongside stories of activism about ways they tried to be a force of resistance and change within the system:

I’ve always kind of been a rebel, when I practiced at MCFD as social workers we only had a \$25 limit of a budget, that’s all we could spend on incidentals if we had a family that needed something. Say a family of a single mom of three, her two school-aged children came home with lice and she needed help, all I could spend was \$25. So I would spend \$25, send one check out, two checks out, three checks out, all at \$25. (Lynn Kenoras-Duck Chief)

In addition to their own stories of making space in the system, what one healer described as “let’s open the door and see what we can get through” (Anonymous), the participants also told stories of the resistance practices of the children and youth they worked with. They gave examples of approaches that ranged from everyday acts of resistance both during the violence, but also after in speaking up, such as disclosing and naming offenders on social media, or speaking about the ongoing violence of racism and sexualized violence.

## Reinstatement and Resurgence: Telling New Owl Stories

In telling new Owl stories, participants shared their own connections to colonialism, residential school, and abuse, alongside events and stories of hope and healing. In all stories, there is a particular emphasis on the reinstatement and reclamation of ceremony and of the backlash encountered in first practicing in an Indigenous way.

Johnston-Virgo reflects back on a few years ago and how she almost lost her job for teaching a child she worked with about residential schools:

I actually got thrown out of a school for talking with a student about residential school. I got called by the secretary down to the principal's office and they said that it's not my place to speak about it and I shouldn't be speaking about it in his school.

The principal then escalated his use of power through contacting her employer and the school district. Johnston-Virgo shared that her mother said to her, "Why so much fear?"

I often think about that principal because he's still in the district and I wonder what he's thinking now with the Truth and Reconciliation [Commission] and we're teaching it in the school, what he's thinking now. (Duanna Johnston-Virgo)

Johnston-Virgo's story reminds us of the dangers and risks that Indigenous practitioners face in truth-telling about genocide and violence, but also in practicing social work in an Indigenous way. However, it is important to note that all of the participants described the risks they took in shifting their approach, in acts of refusal, yet all now practice from a Secwépemc or their Indigenous way. Johnston-Virgo shares that by shifting her approach to a Secwépemc and land-based approach, it also shifted her work:

I was bringing my place and my culture into it and I did see a difference. I saw a stronger relationship building and I started to see Indigenous kids wanting to see me as an Indigenous counsellor. Jeff[rey] and I ... [engaged in] a real different movement and the big one was incorporating the families which was a real struggle in a child protection agency because these parents have had their children removed, but taking a different look at it and saying "you're still the parents." Jeff[rey] and I talked a lot about some things that we really saw with our Indigenous kids, one was regardless of how long they remained in care or the behaviours that their parents exhibited, they loved their parents very much. And the other one is that they will come back to their Nation, to their land, to be connected. That was something I often say you can never take away from an Indigenous child.

These stories also highlight the courage and ongoing resistance of Indigenous practitioners and communities. Similar to the parents and siblings in the Owl story who search for their child and struggle to return them home, we suggest that the narratives of Indigenous practitioners reveal the

persistence and ongoing hope that each one of us has sustained in this work. In each story, we see how Indigenous healers are now centering Secwépemc knowledge, including using ceremony in their work and other practices. Even for those who are not of Secwépemc ancestry, all healers interviewed for this research have Secwépemc kinship ties, and work within Secwépemc protocols and practices from within Secwépemcúlucw. The healers also acknowledge the specificity of teachings from their own nations. There is a strong recognition of the importance of creating those relationships and connections, and sharing medicines and approaches across and between Indigenous nations. As Johnston-Virgo shared of her work with Mohawk healer Jeffrey More:

And so that really enhanced my practice and my self-reflection and understanding that as Indigenous people we are different and therapies need to be different. That doesn't mean that mainstream doesn't work sometimes, but we need to do things differently and so in my practice with Jeff[rey], we started bringing in the drum and the smudge and talking about different ceremonies. And Jeff[rey], with his Mohawk ancestry was different than my Secwépemc ancestry, so we talked a lot with our youth and children how they can look different and how we do things differently as Indigenous peoples ... We just started doing things differently and we started practicing differently and it was good, really good.

### Discussion: The Stories are the Medicine

The authors share the insight that our wellness approaches, or practice frameworks, are found within the stories, the language, the land, and the people. In each of the interviews, the healers shared stories of our work with children and youth that had touched our hearts. The Secwépemc stories provide the medicine here. In returning to the question that guided Clark's (2018) research – “what's in your basket?” – each healer shared examples of Secwépemc or their own nation's approaches in our baskets.

What does it mean to turn away from Western trauma and mental health approaches and instead centre Secwépemc knowledge and practices as guides to our healing and wellness, as they have for centuries? We suggest that these practices have been not forgotten but they were embodied and protected until it was safer to revive them, as in the individual response to violence, but enacted on a community scale. What are the scales of colonial violence? If the body's reaction to violence is to freeze, then we must attend to the scales of violence and the survival strategies that were and are employed collectively to resist this violence.<sup>9</sup> Just like Coyote never dies in the Secwépemc stories (Michel, 2012), Secwépemc wellness and healing practices are being reinstated and revived through the collective resurgence of language, ceremony, and everyday practices of returning Indigenous children and youth to the centre of the circle.

---

9 Sarah Hunt's work continually reminds us that the binary between the lived experiences of violence and the public sphere needs to be challenged. In a review of Glen Coulthard's book, Hunt (2016) asserts that “these sites of resurgence and recognition are not separate, but unfold in the same spaces, within our territories, in relation to the same people, upon the same bodies.” (p.112)

These stories are examples of renewal in the re(storying) of the Owl story within the Secwépemc Nation and more importantly of the reinstatement and re(vival) of Secwépemc laws and approaches to child safety and healing. As Secwépemc scholar Rebecca Jules (2016) states in her Master's thesis about Secwépemc ways of caring for children and families, "the story teaches about working towards creating strong, healthy children, families, and community rooted in Secwépemc ways of knowing, being and doing (language, culture, practice)" (p.110). The stories are one medicine in our berry-picking basket, along with language revitalization, traditional medicines, or *melamen*, and other practices and ceremonies that address emotional and physical injury and restore health and balance.

In sharing these stories in some length from the research alongside the Owl story, we are invited to witness the power of stories for healing through our own listening and engagement.

Kenoras-Duck Chief shared her work in co-creating story while creating a forgiveness quilt within an Indigenous girls' group:

Again, going with what felt right – this was something that we have to do and sitting and storying with her. It was the quilt of forgiveness, so as we were saying, that was the main theme we talked about forgiveness. So, at first I shared my stories of when I forgave and what I needed to forgive and individual stories and then she started sharing hers. So then we finished it off with her quilt of forgiveness. Storytelling, it's like a magic that happens, at first we're sitting together and at first I open it up with like, "Who has a homemade quilt?" And there might be the odd girl that has a couple, and some not and those who say, "I can't even sew." And so we talked them into sewing, and they're like, "this is fun." Just sitting there quilting and eating and telling stories.

It is also important to identify that storytelling does not always happen with words; art, play, song, and dance are in and of themselves a form of storytelling. Matthew provides another important insight from her practice of how to work with children's stories from a Secwépemc perspective:

We don't have that European "dig, dig, dig" and "probing, probing, probing." We allow people to share what they need to share. And I like the piece of not having to challenge. You're going to laugh; this is what I love. I work with children who have different realities. I've heard people say that they're liars and they challenge them, and I just say, "you know they're telling a story. People tell a story for an important reason. Try and get under what they're needing from the story. What are they trying to get?" And for me, don't ever discredit that some people might have that spiritual realm that people forget about. They might have things that aren't explainable within this sort of paradigm. So I don't ever forget about those cultural pieces. That people could be spiritually in tune. There could be all sorts of things. But when I've listened to some counsellors in the school and they tell me (how they interrupt the child's story and don't allow them to go on), and I just think,

“wow, we’ve just stopped her story and her process.” So she’s going to hide her stories or we don’t have an idea about how that impacts her.

Secwépemc stories are alive, providing guidance and transformation. The stories shared in this research are important examples of the assertion of sovereignty and self-determination of Indigenous nations in addressing our own care, wellness, and healing from violence. The stories shared also document Indigenous resurgence and creative resistance to colonial powers. Strategies and solutions rooted in the Secwépemc community are found in the “on-the-ground practices of freedom” (Coulthard, 2013) demonstrated in grassroots and intergenerational movements within Secwépemculucw, like the “Indian Child Caravan” in 1980 where Splatsin fought for sovereignty and jurisdiction over child and family services to the current Indigenous girls groups (Clark, 2013), Secwépemc family hunting camps (Adams Lake Indian Band, 2013, p. 15), and other intergenerational learning practices like the Birch Bark camp held on the land and attended by author Clark (Secwépemc News, 2013).

The Owl story and the stories of the healers and co-authors of this paper all raise multidimensional considerations of healing, of justice, and ultimately of care, love, and the best interest and protection of Indigenous children and youth. These stories illustrate the importance of not removing children from their families and communities. Thus, as Indigenous counsellors, social workers, and healers, we are transforming what protection looks like, including the multiple forms of protection from the colonial state, from the neglect of parents, or from sexualized violence in all its forms. The narratives of healers are multidimensional and they combine together to form a larger basket of knowledge that both bears witness to the realities of ongoing colonialism but also acts as a basket that holds the medicines of love, resistance, and activism of Indigenous peoples. In the words of Secwépemc scholar Rebecca Jules (2016), “In creating a new story, there is a chance for creating a new experience for future generations: a story based on culture and language” (p. 19).

Again and again in the stories offered, the themes of love and respect resonate. Secwépemc healer and co-author Sharnelle Matthew answered the question about Indigenous best practices with, “You know what, I’m going to say it, love. Unconditional love.”

Matthew goes on to share her understanding and teachings about love, connecting the loss of the experience of love and loving relationships to residential schools, and the healing to the return to these loving practices in our communities.

This perhaps is the greatest evidence of Secwépemc resurgence – the return of the radical possibilities of intergenerational love.

## **Implications: Limitations and Future Research**

The everyday acts of resurgence and reinstatement of Secwépemc laws and healing practices are present not only within ourselves as Indigenous healers, but also in the narratives of the children and youth we work with. This captures the essence of the research findings of returning our children and

ourselves as healers to the circle through Indigenous family and community-centred approaches, and the centering of love and resurgence in our practices. This research and the stories shared are only a small part of a genealogy of resistance to colonial intervention and, more importantly, resurgence and revival of Secwépemc laws, practices, and processes – including in research. We are all witnesses to these and other stories and the ways that they call into account the workings of colonialism, in particular through and between Indigeneity, sex, gender, age, and violence. This “hydra-headed quality of violence” (Alexander, 2006, p. 3) has now touched everything and everyone on this planet, but we are dreaming together inside of and through these intersecting oppressions, reinstating Secwépemc laws and healing approaches in everyday acts of relationship and kinship.

The stories shared in the basket and in this paper are only part of a larger revival of Secwépemc child and youth wellness practices, and current and future research will centre the voices of Elders, children, and youth of all genders in considering wellness and through our love and yearning towards Indigenous futures.

As Kenoras-Duck Chief shared, these approaches are passed down through stories from grandmother to mother to daughter:

I'll share with you what my mother shared with me [about traditional Secwépemc healing approaches]. When she was a little girl she would see that her granny was a medicine woman, her granny always had a medicine pot brewing, on the fire. And people would come. So, for the physical sense, so, if they had a sick child they would come see her or they would bring the child to her and she would fix them up with the medicines and stuff and then as my mother grew older, my granny Susan kind of took on a role too when there was chicken pox, didn't see this, her granny was telling her this story, my granny was really lucky in that she must've had some sort of resistance to chickenpox or smallpox because as a young girl she was able to help her mom and go help the other kids and nurse them and she never got it but she does know that there is this big part of the Neskonlith graveyard that's all children. And my granny would go out there and tell whoever was listening, like that's all the babies and when I was a girl they all died of smallpox and chicken pox and me and my mom try to help them but they didn't make it. So that's kind of like the physical.

Kenoras-Duck Chief's story of her great-grandmother describes not only the ways in which healing happened in the Secwépemc community in the past, but how it continues to happen, and the important role of intergenerational storytelling in keeping these traditions alive. This story also holds a powerful metaphor for the raising up of healers with an ability to work with and resist violence.

Elder Norma Kenoras shared a story in contrast to the one that she shared earlier in this paper, where a non-Indigenous social worker removed the five children and none of them ever returned to the community. She offered instead a new story where through her love and work in opening her home as a foster parent to Secwépemc children and youth, she has been keeping Secwépemc in the community:



Afterwards when the police did not bring them, the kids just came on their own. Some nights I'd have 25 kids just playing in the yard. I'd only got 12 cinnamon buns we had to cut them in two. ... And now I get fish and they know to give me little packages. They know I like liver so they give me these little packages.

The stories like the intergenerational ones shared by Kenoras-Duck Chief and Kenoras capture the feeling of the healing work and the love with which it is being done intergenerationally in the Secwépemc community and of the power and wingspan of the renewal of the Owl stories.

## References

- Alexander, M. (2006). *Pedagogies of crossing: Meditations on feminism, sexual politics, memory, and the sacred*. Duke University Press.
- Allen, P. (1986). *The sacred hoop: Recovering the feminine in American Indian traditions*. Beacon Press.
- Armstrong, J. (1996). Invocation: The real power of Aboriginal women. In C. Miller & P. Chuchryk (Eds.), *Women of the First Nations: Power, wisdom and strength* (pp. ix–xii). University of Manitoba Press.
- Billy, J. (2009). *Back from the brink: Decolonizing through the restoration of Secwépemc language, culture, and identity*. (Unpublished Doctoral dissertation). Simon Fraser University.
- Adams Lake Indian Band. (2013). *Taking initiative* [Newsletter]. [http://adamslakeband.org/sites/default/files/Feb\\_1\\_13\\_News\\_Weekly.pdf](http://adamslakeband.org/sites/default/files/Feb_1_13_News_Weekly.pdf)
- Blackstock, C. (2009). The occasional evil of angels: Learning from the experiences of Aboriginal peoples and social work. *First Peoples Child & Family Review*, 4(1), 28–37. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1069347ar>
- Blackstock, C. (2016). The complainant: The Canadian human rights case on First Nations child welfare. *McGill Law Journal*, 62(2), 285–328.
- Christian, D. (2000). Without shades. In R. Marsden (Ed.), *Crisp blue edges: Indigenous creative non-fiction* (pp. 89–98). Theytus Books.
- Clark, N. (2012). Perseverance, determination and resistance: An Indigenous intersectional-based policy analysis of violence in the lives of Indigenous girls. In O. Hankivsky (Ed.), *An intersectionality-based policy analysis framework* (pp. 133–158). Institute for Intersectionality Research & Policy, Simon Fraser University
- Clark, N. (2016a). Red intersectionality and violence-informed witnessing praxis with Indigenous girls. *Girlhood Studies*, 9(2), 46–64. <https://doi.org/10.3167/ghs.2016.090205>

- Clark, N. (2016b) Shock and awe: Trauma as the new colonial frontier. *Humanities*, 5(1), 14. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h5010014>
- Clark, N. (2018). Cu7 me7 q'wele'wu-kt. "Come on, let's go berry-picking." *Revival of Secwepemc wellness approaches for healing child and youth experiences of violence* [Doctoral dissertation, Simon Fraser University]. Simon Fraser University.
- Coffey, J., Goldstrom, E., Gottfriedson, G., Matthew, R. & Walton, P. (1990). *Shuswap history: The first hundred years of contact*. Secwépemc Cultural Education Society.
- Coulthard, G. (2013, March 23). Indigenous peoples and the "politics of recognition." *New Socialist*. <https://newsocialist.org/indigenous-peoples-and-the-politics-of-recognition/>
- Draney, C. (1979). Owl story. In R. Bouchard & D. Kennedy (Eds.), *Shuswap stories* (pp. 42–43). CommCept Publishing.
- Froneman, K. (2014, August 1). Community brings Secwépemc stories to life: Runaway Moon Theatre and Splatsin Language and Culture Program present community play Tuwitames (he/she is growing up.). *Vernon Morning Star*. <https://www.vernonmorningstar.com/life/community-brings-Secwépemc-stories-to-life/>
- Gottfriedson, G. (2010). *Skin like mine*. Ronsdale Press.
- Gumbs, A. P. (2016, July 25 & 26). *Breathe underwater: A baptismal intensive for ancestor accountable artists, activists and scholars*. <https://blackfeministmind.wordpress.com/2016/07/13/breathe-underwater-a-baptismal-intensive-for-ancestor-accountable-activists-artists-and-scholars/>
- Hart, M. (1999). Seeking Minopimatasiwin (the Good Life): An Aboriginal approach to social work practice. *Native Social Work Journal*, 2(1), 91–112.
- Ignace, R. (2008). *Our histories are our iron posts: Secwépemc stories and historical consciousness* [unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Simon Fraser University.
- Ignace, M. & Ignace, R. (2017). *Secwépemc people, land, and laws: Yeri7 re Stsq'ey's-kucw*. McGill-Queen's University Press.
- John, E. (2016). *Indigenous resilience, connectedness and reunification – from root causes to root solutions. A report on child welfare in British Columbia. Final report of Special Advisor Grand Chief Ed John*. BC Ministry of Children and Family Development. <http://fns.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Final-Report-of-Grand-Chief-Ed-John-re-Indig-Child-Welfare-in-BC-November-2016.pdf>
- Jules, R. (2016). *Exsxe, on the path of revitalizing Secwépemc ways of caring for children and families: A community-based model of child care* [Unpublished master's thesis]. University of Regina.

- Kimelman, E. C. (1985). *No quiet place*. Review Committee on Indian and Métis Adoptions and Placements. Department of Community Services.
- Maracle, L. (1988). *I am woman: A Native perspective on sociology and feminism*. Press Gang.
- Martin, G. (2014). *Drumming my way home: An intergenerational narrative inquiry about Secwépemc identities* [Doctoral dissertation, University of British Columbia]. UBC Theses and Dissertations.
- Michel, K. (2012). *Trickster's path to language transformation: Stories of Secwépemc immersion from Chief Atahm School* [Doctoral dissertation, University of British Columbia]. UBC Theses and Dissertations.
- National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. (2019). *Reclaiming power and place: Executive summary of the final report*. National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. <https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/final-report/>
- Philip, M. N. (1989). *She tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks*. Synergy Books.
- Philip, M. N. (1997). *Genealogy of resistance and other essays*. Mercury Press.
- Reid, M. (2005). Aboriginal social workers speak out. *Perspectives: Newsletter of the BC Association of Social Workers*, 27(5), 4–6. <https://members.bcasw.org/Images/PDFs/Nov2005.pdf>
- Representative for Children and Youth. (2013). *No shortcuts to safety: Doing better for children living with extended family*. [https://rcybc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/no\\_shortcuts\\_to\\_safety.pdf](https://rcybc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/no_shortcuts_to_safety.pdf)
- Sampson, F. (2017, December 10). Personal communication.
- Sandy, N. (2011). *Reviving Secwépemc child welfare jurisdiction* [Master's thesis, University of Victoria]. University of Victoria Electronic Theses and Dissertations.
- Sandy, N. (2016). Stsqey'ulecw re St'exelceme (St'Exeleme Laws from the land). *The Windsor Yearbook of Access to Justice*, 33(1), 187–219.
- Secwépemc News. (2013, July/August). Secwépemc birch bark and cedar root harvesting camp. *Secwépemc News*. [https://issuu.com/Secwepemcnews/docs/august\\_2013](https://issuu.com/Secwepemcnews/docs/august_2013)
- Shuswap Nation Tribal Council. (2014). *Stsemelt: Secwépemc Nation final report*.
- Shuswap Nation Tribal Council. (2016). *Secwépemc lands and resources law research project*.
- Sinclair, R., & Albert, J. (2008). Social work and the anti-oppressive stance: Does the emperor really have new clothes? *Critical Social Work*, 9(1).

- Tagaq, T. [@tagaq]. (2015, June 02). *#MyReconciliationIncludes not being blamed for post colonial fallout* [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/tagaq/status/605768672229998592>
- Teit, J. (1909). The Shuswap. In F. Boas (Ed.), *Publications of the Jesup North Pacific expedition*. (vol. 2, pt. 7, pp. 443–507). G. E. Stechert.
- Thomas, M. (2010). *The legacy of Mary Thomas – Interviews and lectures featuring the words of the late Mary Thomas*. [Podcast series]. [voiceoftheshuwap.ca/podcast-library/](http://voiceoftheshuwap.ca/podcast-library/)
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015). *Honouring the truth, reconciling for the future: Summary of the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.
- Zitkala-Ša, Fabens, C., & Sniffen, M. (1924). *Oklahoma's poor rich Indians: An orgy of graft and exploitation of the five civilized tribes – legalized robbery*. Office of the Indian Rights Association.