

THUNDER AND LIGHTNING: THE HARMS OF THE CANADIAN CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

Damien Kakewash

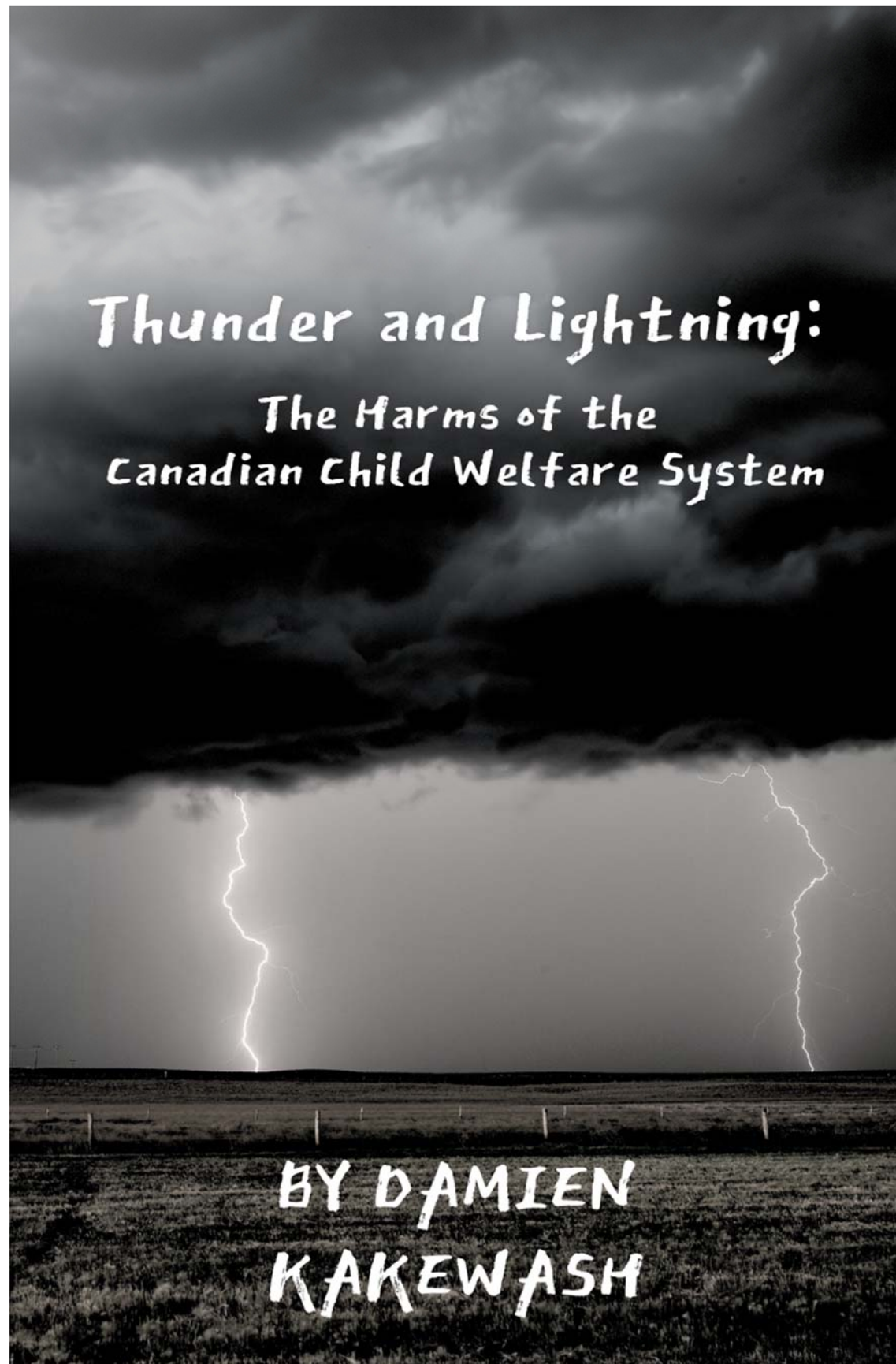


Keywords: residential schools, impacts of colonization, Indigenous children/youth in care, Indigenous child welfare

Acknowledgement: We raise our hands in deepest respect and gratitude to the ancestors and families of the *ləkʷəŋən* and *WSÁNEĆ* nations and to our own ancestors and Nations. We raise our hands to all Indigenous children and youth who have grown up in colonial systems, to those we have lost, and to those who survive, resist, and imagine justice and resurgence. INVINCIBLE is grateful for funding provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (Insight grant 435-2020-1191) and the Canet Foundation.

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Thunder and Lightning:

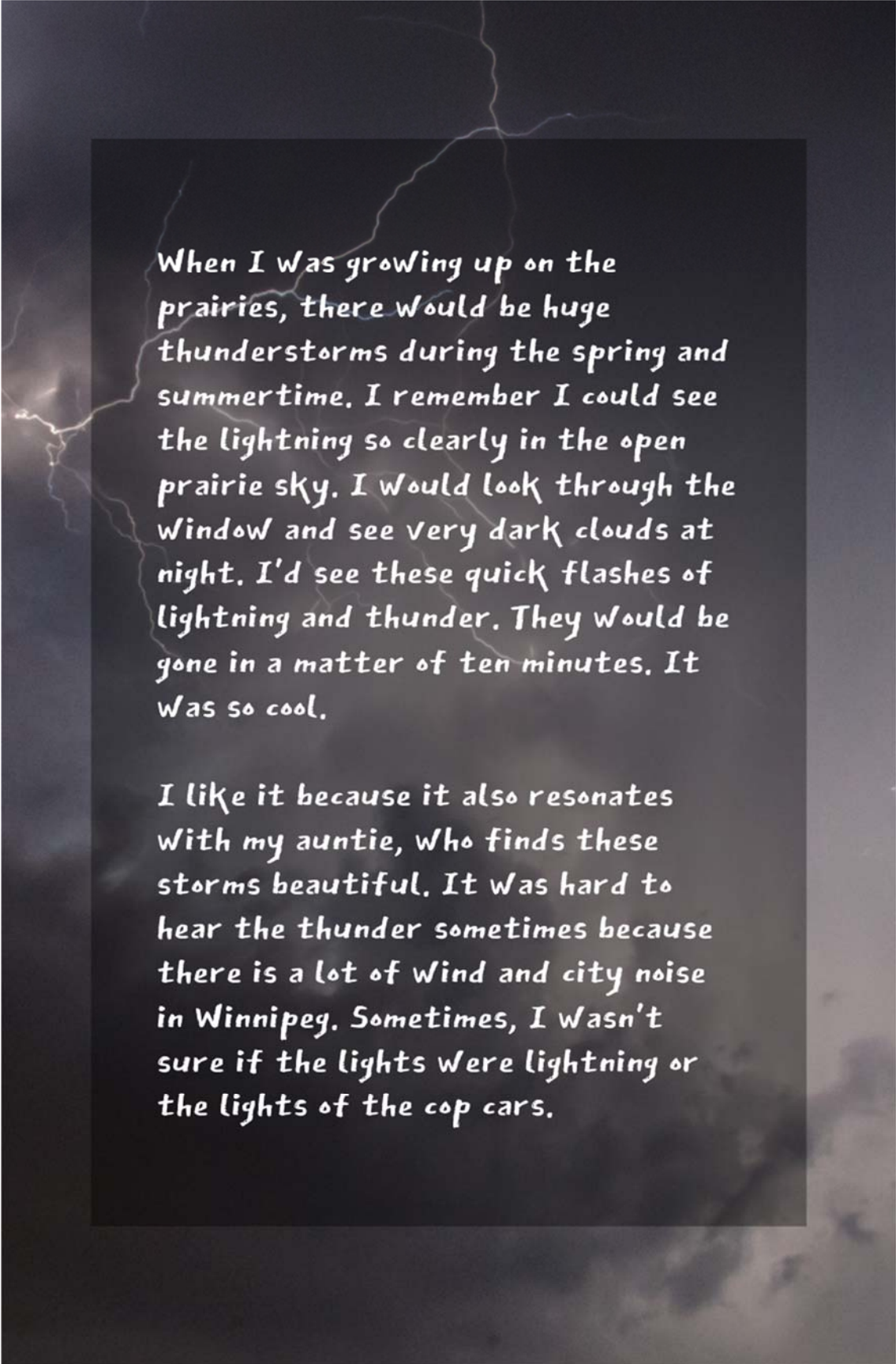
The Harms of the
Canadian Child Welfare System

BY DAMIEN
KAKEWASH

The child welfare system in Canada is a complex thing to understand. Foster care can be a very heavy topic for those directly impacted by the system.

I am writing this article as a victim of the child welfare system, being an Indigenous youth from Winnipeg, Manitoba. I grew up in the system under Manitoba Child and Family Services (CFS). I know firsthand that whoever goes through the system loses a piece of their identity. I am also a student and an amateur analyzer who likes to research these topics that have impacted my family for many generations.

I picked thunder and lightning as my title and main image for my story, because thunder and lightning can start very destructive fires, but they also inspire awe.



When I was growing up on the prairies, there would be huge thunderstorms during the spring and summertime. I remember I could see the lightning so clearly in the open prairie sky. I would look through the window and see very dark clouds at night. I'd see these quick flashes of lightning and thunder. They would be gone in a matter of ten minutes. It was so cool.

I like it because it also resonates with my auntie, who finds these storms beautiful. It was hard to hear the thunder sometimes because there is a lot of wind and city noise in Winnipeg. Sometimes, I wasn't sure if the lights were lightning or the lights of the cop cars.

In this article, I won't share a lot about my personal experience in the system, because I know it can be triggering to others who have gone through similar experiences, and I want to respect their healing. There are a lot of questions that need to be asked about the system, but for me, the question I most want answers to is: How and why did the foster care system cause so much harm to those who were a part of it?

To answer this important question, I wanted to do my own research into this topic. I focused on reliable, published sources and I found some interesting information as well as firsthand stories of victims who grew up in the system. The information I found was focused on three topics: trust, colonization, and residential schools.

Trust

The first point I want to make is that trust is an important aspect surrounding the child welfare system and Indigenous people. Trust issues go way back as the child welfare system has contributed to horrible things against the Indigenous peoples of Canada.

I know that in Manitoba, CFS (Child and Family Services) still isn't trustworthy as, despite claims and changes, they still take children away from their homes and parents upon birth or in early childhood. In my research, I found articles and stories by several survivors of the system who stated they felt "hopeless," "fearful," and "scared" because the government that they thought they could trust ended up throwing them in places where they were considered "unfit" (Edwards, n.d.; Hobson, 2022).

As stated in the article "Fighting Foster Care" by Kyle Edwards (n.d.), many parents, when they give birth, are skeptical about social workers, as certain agencies such as CFS put practices in place that determine if a parent is suitable for raising their child. The actions of CFS lead to many parents rebelling against the system, mainly keeping the pregnancy private and not seeking help on other essential matters.

The distrust between social workers and Indigenous people is a serious matter. The child welfare system has been described as a "toxic loop" that is "broken" (Miljure & Jones, 2021). The 2021 census tells us that Indigenous children make up 7.6% of the child population in Canada but 53.7% of children in foster care (Statistics Canada, 2024).

Cindy Blackstock, executive director of the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society, has called for direct action and won several legal orders in court to get better justice for Indigenous children in care, but the government didn't comply (Somos, 2021). Many calls for action have been made, such as those of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2015 (TRC, 2015a) and Jordan's Principle (Government of Canada, 2024), which aims to eliminate inequalities and service delays for Indigenous children. Justin Trudeau introduced new Indigenous child welfare legislation in 2019 (Government of Canada, 2019). But what's important to note is that even if things were more unfair in the past, the issues of discrimination and racism are still there, reflecting how the government treats Indigenous people.

As stated by Mary Teegee, executive director of Carrier Sekani Family Services in British Columbia, "this isn't just because Indigenous people can't take care of their children. It's because of generation after generation of attacks on family, class, and nation structures" (quoted in Hobson, 2022).

Even today, despite many changes to improve the system to a certain degree, nothing significant has happened to restore that broken trust. I personally don't think it will be fixed anytime soon. The point I'm making here is that trust is something that must be earned, and based on past and current events, the trust between Indigenous peoples, the child welfare system, and the federal government isn't being restored. Trust is like a chain, and the chain linking the system and government to Indigenous people is eroded; it is rusty and broken. The links are no longer connected.

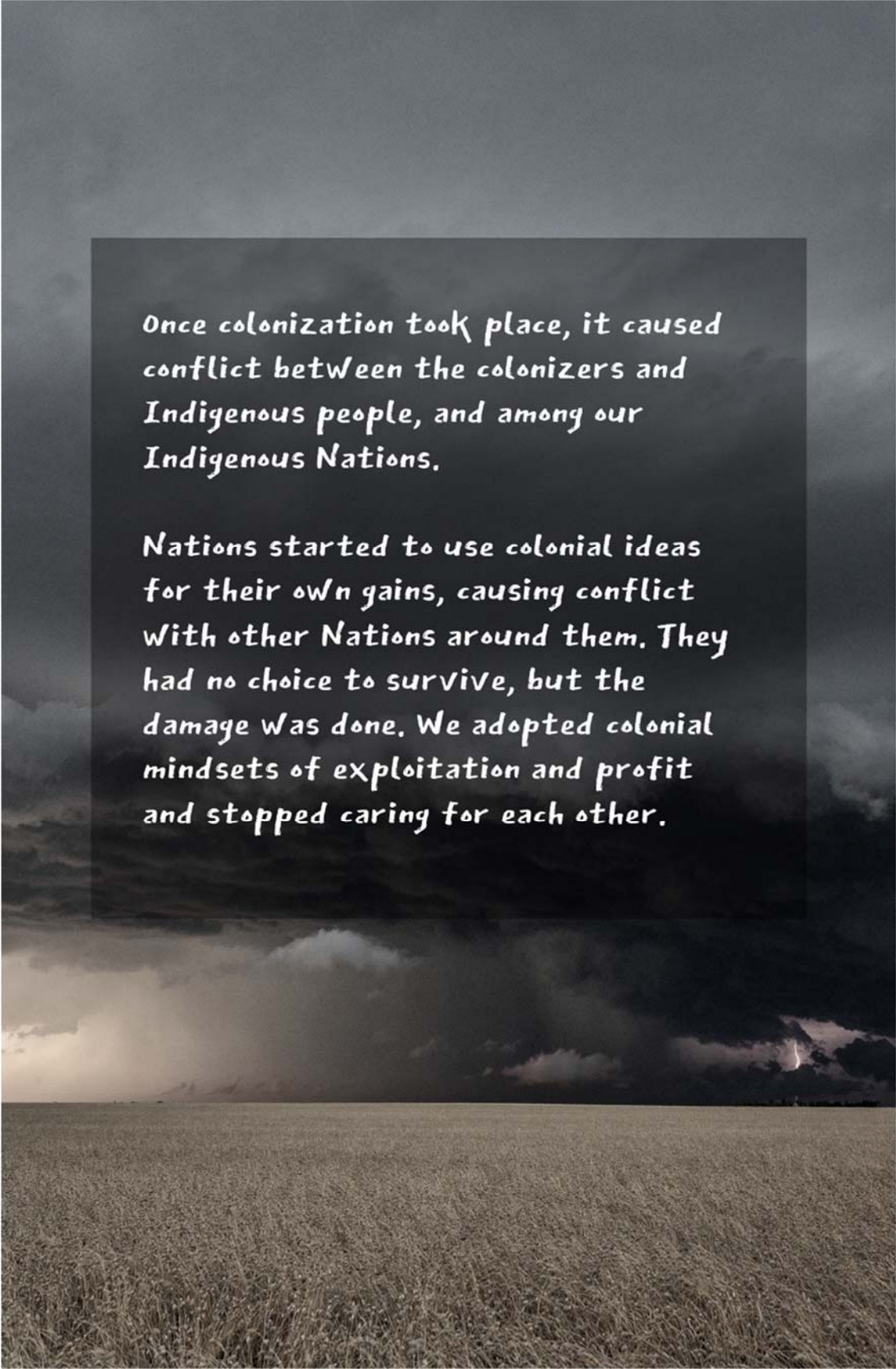
Colonization

Another factor that plays into the child welfare system still not being trustworthy is the impact of colonization. Colonization has had a lasting effect on many First Nations communities here in the Americas. The foster care and child welfare systems still carry a very harmful past, due to their roots stemming back to the residential school days, the 60s Scoop, and when the child welfare system was established during the second half of the 20th century (Hobson, 2022; TRC, 2015b).

It is clear that discrimination and racism were the main values of colonization. The fact that Indigenous people were targeted throughout history caused a lot of intergenerational trauma that now adds to the rocky relationship between Indigenous peoples and the child welfare system.

To me, how Indigenous people were treated in the past led to many abusive acts towards them, restrictions, and repercussions. Residential schools were put into place, which then slowly transitioned into the child welfare and foster care system that we know today. Discrimination and racism are still the main reasons for the system's existence. That's why it's hard for a lot of Indigenous people to trust the government and the child welfare system.

Colonization also impacts our environment. Promises of protecting old growth forests, our homelands, keep getting broken time and time again. This is why trust has to come before any improvement to services. We deserve our own self-government; we had this before colonization. Even small Nations managed to find success in their own self-governments to improve their communities and trade with other Nations.

A dark, stormy sky with a lightning bolt striking a field of grain. The text is overlaid on a dark, semi-transparent rectangular box.

Once colonization took place, it caused conflict between the colonizers and Indigenous people, and among our Indigenous Nations.

Nations started to use colonial ideas for their own gains, causing conflict with other Nations around them. They had no choice to survive, but the damage was done. We adopted colonial mindsets of exploitation and profit and stopped caring for each other.

The Residential School System

Colonization has impacted millions, but the introduction of residential schools is one of the main reasons why the child welfare system still isn't trustworthy from the perspective of Indigenous peoples.

This is a very deep topic as residential schools have impacted thousands of Indigenous people, including my own family. My two biological parents went to residential schools, and my grandmother also attended. This explains where things started. The effects still linger to this day as it's a direct result of the values of colonization. It's clear that the residential school system was intended to separate children from their homes so those children could live in a 'white people home'. It was a harmful, very destructive strategy for getting rid of Indigenous people's culture and heritage.

The child welfare and foster care systems originate from the residential school system (Somos, 2021; TRC, 2015b). When residential schools were full or started to close, the government created the child welfare system. As many people have stated, the current child welfare system is the new residential school system, as "foster care replaced residential schools for Indigenous children" (Somos, 2021).

Journalists Ben Miljure and Alexandra Mae Jones (2021) discuss how the current child welfare system is now often called the "Millennium Scoop" because more children than ever before are being taken by the system.

The lingering issue that happened in residential school is trauma. The trauma can cause people to do things such as drinking and drugs, which impacts next generations.

Trauma is a very complicated and complex issue for those who don't understand the system. Poverty is also mentioned by advocates as another cause of intergenerational trauma (Hobson, 2022; Somos, 2021).

The system and government caused the traumas which lead to children being taken away. They caused the mess and they are now facing the consequences of their actions.



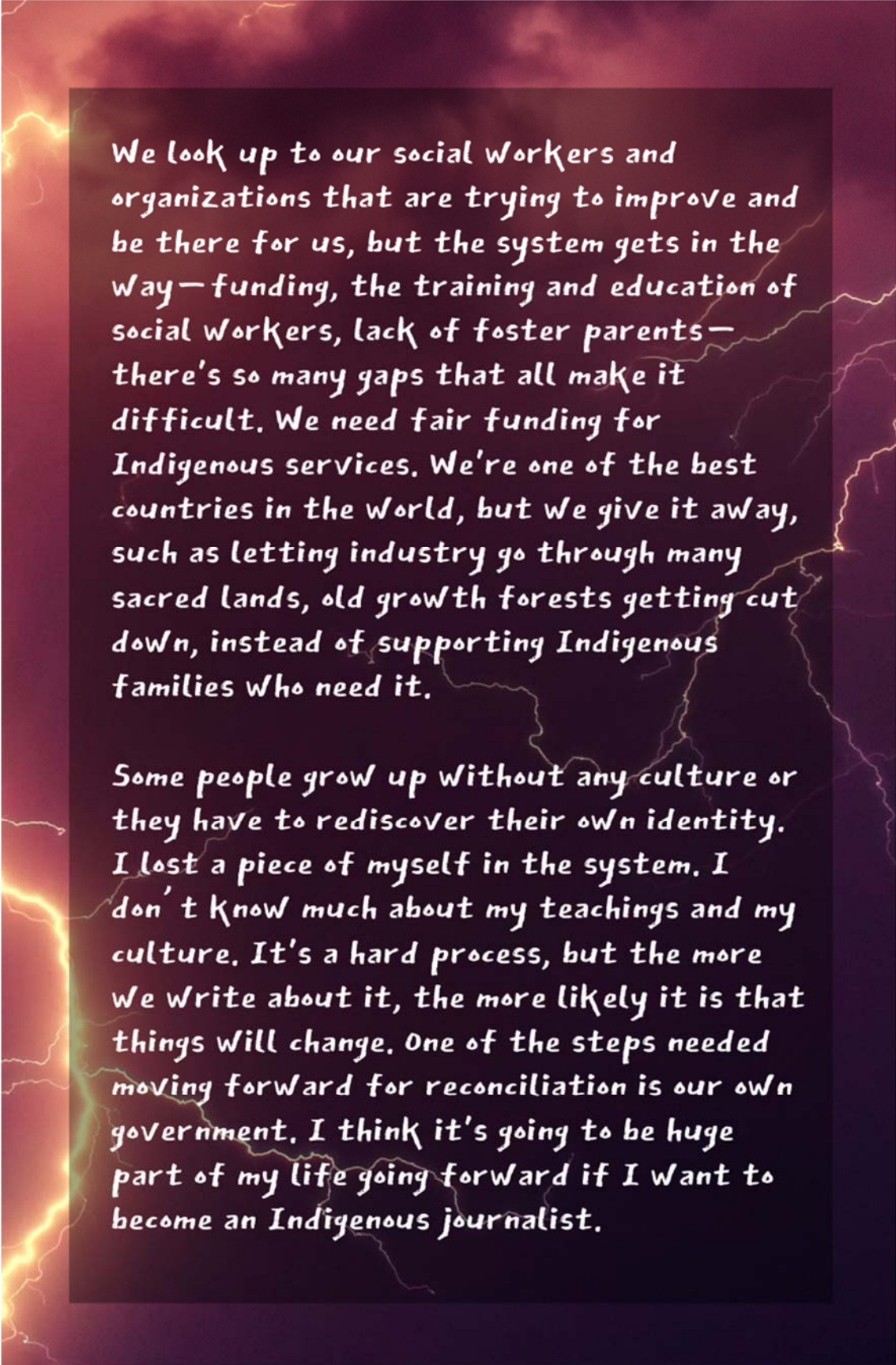
Conclusion

The three topics that I covered – trust, colonization, and residential schools – are clearly connected to each other. They have all had negative impacts on Indigenous people. There have been steps to try and earn trust back by both the system and the government, but there's still work needed from both sides as Indigenous peoples learn to trust the government again.

Colonization created a road that led us to residential schools, and this road led us to the current child welfare system. When I think of the child welfare system, the image that comes to mind is an unpaved, rocky road full of potholes. No matter how much we patch it up, the cracks will always be there. Our people continue to fall through these cracks. The road is under-resourced, it is not safe to navigate, and it is a real hazard to us as Indigenous people.

In writing this story, I wanted to educate social workers, especially white ones, to learn about these issues and navigate better toward Indigenous people to understand what we went through, the racism and the discrimination we experience.

The foster parents and the social workers are the ones who need to be educated, because the child did nothing wrong; it's not their fault their childhood wasn't perfect, and every child deserves a parent. We are more than a paycheck. The system has to deal with foster parents in a more professional way rather than neglecting these cases where children are abused, because it's still going on today. These youth had troubled childhoods; they need supports.



We look up to our social workers and organizations that are trying to improve and be there for us, but the system gets in the way—funding, the training and education of social workers, lack of foster parents—there's so many gaps that all make it difficult. We need fair funding for Indigenous services. We're one of the best countries in the world, but we give it away, such as letting industry go through many sacred lands, old growth forests getting cut down, instead of supporting Indigenous families who need it.

Some people grow up without any culture or they have to rediscover their own identity. I lost a piece of myself in the system. I don't know much about my teachings and my culture. It's a hard process, but the more we write about it, the more likely it is that things will change. One of the steps needed moving forward for reconciliation is our own government. I think it's going to be huge part of my life going forward if I want to become an Indigenous journalist.

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Likes: hockey, writing, the internet

Life goals: become an Indigenous voice
for Indigenous communities

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