# Decolonization and Life History Research: The Life of a Native Woman

Jyl M. Wheaton-Abraham
Ktunaxa Tribe
*United States*

**Abstract**: Focusing on stories told to the author by her mother, this life history work counters critiques that qualitative life history research is weak on method and theory by taking a decolonizing approach. Working with decolonizing theory to understand the stories shared, the author examines how the continued colonization of native women's minds and bodies impacts their humanity in both perception and treatment by others. The author discuses decolonizing research as both action and process, considers the effectiveness of a decolonizing strategy in life history research, and calls on others to take a decolonizing approach in their own work.

*Keywords*: Decolonization; Indigenous Identity; Life History Research; Native American Women; Indigenous Anthropology; Indigenous Research Methods; Decolonized Research Methods; Native Studies; First Nations Studies; Feminist Anthropology; Feminist Studies

doi:10.18113/P8ik259717

## Decolonization and Life History Research: The Life of a Native Woman

In January 2013 I sat down with my mother, an elder of the Ktunaxa tribe, to record her life history. Growing up she had always been an enigma to me; I hoped this project would help me learn more about her and the history of my tribe. When we began, I handed her a list of questions such as, "What makes a good Kootenai woman?" and "What traditions do you remember as a child?" My mother looked me in the eye and said, "Our lives weren't like this." I put away my list and gave up some of my power. In the end, though I had asked less than twenty questions, I realized I had gained new insights into how we as Western-educated researchers conceptualize native people, particularly women, within the context of the on-going colonization of native lands, lives, and bodies. These are the words of my mother:

When I was about, less than about three years old, I remember we had a terrible winter, and it was in January. The house was really, really cold all the time because we had no insulation. We had wood floors. And we just had one stove, wood-burning stove in the living room. And a wood-burning cooking stove in the kitchen. We had no running hot water. We had one bedroom. Our Grandmother, our Great Aunt, made quilts. The floors were always cold. And it was in January, and I remember, it had snowed and snowed and it covered the windows. And being small I didn't think the windows were that big but they went really high. And I remember standing there looking at them because the snow keep getting deeper and deeper. And then one morning there was a lot of commotion. My Grandfather came in with my Grandmother and told my Great Aunt they were leaving. They had to shovel. And I remember looking out the door when he left and all these men were walking by, they all had shovels. I wondered what was going on. And then I don't remember anything. It must have been maybe a week later…and my Grandmother told my Great Aunt, "They'll be coming back today." And I kind of remembered they said they were leaving but I wondered where they went because I didn't understand time. But my Mother came in the door and she was carrying something. And she put it on the bed in the living room and it started crying. It was my brother, Silas. The reason that they had been shoveling was because the snow was so deep, they couldn't drive the car to the hospital. It had taken them all day to shovel that far. It's about two and a half miles. And then my Mother had to stay there until the snow could be shoveled again so she could go home. And that's the last thing I remembered for a while.

I remember when I started school. I didn't want to go. Man did I fight my Grandfather. He told me, "You have to go to school!" Adrian had already gone through one year so he knew some English, because we didn't speak English…I remember my teacher. I think we probably had maybe, twelve students in class. So they put Adrian next to me. Because he could translate what we were doing, and then he could translate for me and the teacher hated it because, "I should know English! I'd better start studying English!" She'd shout at me in class...the first few weeks…it was horrible. When I started first grade, I had long hair. Long straight hair. Well, a couple of weeks before school started, my Mom went and got a perm kit for little girls. She cut off my hair. She

cut off my hair and she put a permanent in my hair and because my hair is so fine, it just basically rolled my hair into one big curl. It was ugly and my Grandma asked, “What did you do to her? She could wear braids!” “Oh no. She can’t wear braids to school.” She wanted me to be a *siyupi* [white] kid. But I had one dress. I must have worn that four days out of five. And I had Pasco’s shoes from the year before. That’s what I remember about first grade. And I remember one day, maybe it was like, the third day of school, and I really had to go to the bathroom. So I told Adrian, he said, “Put your hand up and say *lavatory*” and I couldn’t say that word. I didn’t know what the heck that meant. So I put up my hand and the teacher says, “Yes?” And I said, “I—toilet?” And she came storming at me and she said, “We don’t say that!” And I didn’t know what she was saying. And Adrian said, “Don’t say that. Say *lavatory*.” And he said it again and I couldn’t. And she just stood there with her hands on her hips looking down at me and I really had to go. And she said “I’m not allowing you to go until you learn to use that word.” Later on, I knew that’s what she had said. And so I peed in my pants.

And…every kid started laughing. And it went on all year long because when she got mad at me, she was so angry, that I automatically peed and she would just get, that would just make her double and triple and quadruple angry at me. “Can’t you learn?” And I’d think, “Well, if you wouldn’t yell at me I could, why can’t I just get up and go, you know?” I don’t know.

The first time I ever shot a gun, I was seven years old and it was a .22 single shot. My Grandmother decided she was going to teach me. She was the tribe’s spiritual leader. And since Helen’s mother had been one, that woman inherited that. So we had two…these are the women that, as they go from house to house they a fire a shot, to welcome the New Year. When I was seven, my first time, she gave me a .22 single shot. And Helen was my Grandmother’s helper so she was there. And so she told Helen to shoot first, then she would shoot, then I would shoot. It scared me so bad when Helen shot a shotgun. My Grandmother shot a .22. And then she loaded mine and she gave it to me. And she told me to hold it up by my shoulder. And I couldn’t get it high enough so she told Helen, “Lean her back, have her hold it like this, put her finger in

there. But lean her back, that will point it up." And so she prayed. And then she said, "*Dahas*" [finished]. Helen pulled the trigger and it went BOOM! And she said, "You can't fall down." So that was the first time I ever did anything.

Two times before I turned ten, I saw [my dad] come home drunk. The first time, I must have been about seven. He came home drunk and he asked Mom what was for dinner. Mom had already fed us. And she said, "It's spaghetti." And he grabbed the pot and dumped it over her head. Then told her to clean it up…Sometimes, he would be so drunk, he would keep me and Libby and Silas awake until one or two in the morning.

And he'd tell us, "I'm trying to dummy you up! You can't understand what's going on in school! I'm going to keep you up until you learn!" And he'd be drunk and he'd scream and yell at us. "You're nothing but a dummy!" Q'Awiss [her Great Aunt] would come out, "Leave them alone. They have school tomorrow." "They're my kids! I don't want them to be dummies in school!" And we'd be up until three or four in the morning sometimes. And then as a reward, he would feed us ice cream. A big bowl of ice cream and we had to eat it all up. I think the most peaceful times that we ever had were the times when he went back to prison, or went to jail. But it didn't last because then Mom would pick up where he left off.

About a week after I graduated [from high school], I opened the paper and there was an article about Women's Army Corps. So, I read it and this woman, this staff sergeant at the recruiting office was talking about, they are looking for women between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five. And it listed all the things you could be. So I thought, "Okay, that's what I'm going to do. Otherwise why would I have found this? This is what I'm going to do. This is what I've been waiting for. So, I'll go for it." And I didn't say anything to anybody…two days later, somebody knocks on the door and I answered. He goes, "Hi, my name is Samson." I said, "Wow! You're here early!" And Mom said, "Who is that?!" I said, "He's a recruiter." "What does he want?!" He steps in and he says, "Ma'am, I'm here to talk with your daughter about joining the Women's Army Corps, being a new recruit." "Well, I'm not going to

allow it!" And I thought, "I'm eighteen." "So, is there somewhere we can talk?" I said, "Yes, there's a restaurant." He said, "We'll be right back." Oh, Mom was so mad, because she couldn't get to me. So we went down, sat down, talked about two hours. And he said, "Are you going to have problems having your mother sign your papers, because you have to be twenty-one?" I said, "No." He said, "If she's willing to sign them, then you can go. But if she isn't willing to sign them, you have to wait until you're twenty-one." I said, "Then I'll wait until I'm twenty-one. But, I don't care." So, he left... So instead of going home I went out to Grandpa's.

Grandma was in the nursing home and I told him. He said, "Well, you know, that's what happens. What you've gone through, that's what happens. You get help." So I told him that I have a problem. And he said, "We can take care of that." So, he said, "Well, spend the night and then we'll go see Grandma." So the next morning we went to see Grandma, and I thought, "Oh, God, she's going to yell at me!" So he started talking to her. And she said, "Yes. That's what we'll do." So, she told Grandpa, "Go in the taxi. Go up to her house and tell her to come down." I don't know what happened when he got up there, poor old man. Finally, they got there. Mom came in and Grandma said, "Sit down." She sat down and Grandma said, "you know, for years we've been asking for help for her. It came today. She's being helped. There is no other way...for her to get ahead, and this is what's going to happen." Oh man, Mom was mad. "You know I'm never going to sign don't you!" And so finally I said, "You know, if you don't sign it now, when I'm twenty-one I'm still going in." "They won't take you!" Finally, Grandma told her, "She is right, if you don't do it now, she'll wait until she's twenty-one. And we're going to help her." And Grandpa reminded her, "She's no longer on welfare. You're going to have to be taking care of her." "She can't live at my house!" And I said, "Then why shouldn't I be in the Army?" It took, like, a week and she finally said she would. And so I called, I said, "Get up here with the paperwork. She said she's going to sign it." So he came and she was mad and she signed it. And fourteen days later I was gone.

What does one do when told stories like these; especially when a project involves collaboration between a mother and daughter, and the words are about people close to you? How can an indigenous person conduct research in ways that do not continue the legacy of mistrust between home communities and anthropologists? Why does life history work even matter, considering it is criticized for being weak on theory and method? These are the questions I wrestled with after working with my mother.

If we had followed my list of questions I do not believe she would have shared these particular stories. My questions framed her as an “other,” disconnected from the family, culture, country, and history that shape us both. When we sat down together I understood the world through a “colonized mind” (Chilisa 2012, 7-8); my ideas and assumptions were predominantly based on Euro-Western science and literature, and I often structured my research in self-serving ways, reinforcing power hierarchies between my participants and myself.

In preparation for this work, I read several anthropological life histories of native women. It did not take me long to realize these works reinforce particular narratives about conquest, history, colonization and gender; contradicting my experiences as a native person. I found myself questioning statements about the love of Indian boarding school, and would cringe when a researcher would press an elder for “shamanic” knowledge or insights long after she had politely demurred. As a native woman these stories did not seem real to me; as a native researcher I did not want to continue these types of power imbalances in my own work. It took me nearly a year of studying with a queer, Cherokee Two-Spirit instructor, who introduced me to decolonizing theory and methods, to move forward with this research.

Decolonizing is a different way of understanding and interpretation, which actively resists gendered and racialized assumptions, along with narratives of domination and the inevitability of European colonization and control. Decolonizing research "center[s] [indigenous] concerns and world views, leading to an understanding of theory and research from indigenous perspectives and for our own purposes” (Smith 2012, 41). Decolonizing research is *action*, “inclusive of all knowledge systems and respectful of the researched” (Chilisa 2012, 4). It involves being conscious of the fact that indigenous people created and sustained lives and cultures on these lands prior to European arrival and that all of our lives and cultures continue to be influenced by colonization today. Decolonizing can also be

understood as a *process*, which entails gaining a deeper understanding of Western knowledge and history, how they are positioned as superior to native knowledge (Chilisa 2012), and how they shape the perceptions and experiences of both colonizers and the colonized.

For me, decolonizing this research was both action and process. Working with my mother was an act of resistance against the continuity of research which privileges a white European experience on this land and within academia. Rather than correcting her grammar and rewording her statements, I present her stories as she spoke them, out of respect for her as an individual and to challenge the academic tradition of changing a native person's words and still calling them their own. I considered how this research would honor the Ktunaxa covenant with the Creator.

Decolonizing this research was also a process of learning about federal and state laws as well as social practices and beliefs regarding native people, and how these have impacted my mother's life. It meant re-examining concepts such as racism, European Imperialism, and primacy, to working through personal fears and judgments as I wrote. In the end, I understood how my mother and her stories exemplify what Gerald Vizenor calls survivance, the survival and presence of native people in the face of the continued colonization of their lands, minds, and bodies (Vizenor 1999, iiv).

Without a decolonizing perspective, I may not have connected the humiliating act of cutting my mother's hair with my grandmother's experiences at an Indian boarding school. I may not have grasped the persistence of the marginalization of my tribe without the knowledge that when my mother was little, her community which included the elderly and pregnant women, had to shovel their own way to town. I would not understand how white European heteropatriarchy has degraded the status of native women within my tribe; my great-grandmother was spiritual leader, while my grandmother and mother were treated as property meant to be abused and controlled.

I did not write this paper to arouse feelings of pity or guilt. I did not intend this research to be "damage centered," characterized by Eve Tuck as research "intent on portraying our…tribes as defeated and broken…operat[ing] from a theory of change that establishes harm or injury in order to achieve reparation" (Tuck 2009, 412). I was not motivated by the possibility of reparations. My intentions were to create a space which honors my mother's humanity; to interrupt anthropological

research portraying the lives of native people, particularly women, as hopeless; and to upset traditional researcher/participant relationships rooted in the support of colonizer/colonized domination and control.

Decolonizing research is often understood as solely for indigenous or colonized communities. Indigenous researchers often cite life expectancy rates and substance use as urgent needs for new research methods and perspectives that take into account particular histories and needs. However, the reality is most anthropological researchers are not indigenous, and they are not producing the bulk of indigenous-centered work. Anthropology is an overwhelmingly white Euro-American profession, shaped by colonial practices and beliefs. We must become aware of how this fact continues to influence our discipline and our research, and decide if that is how we want continue. As researchers, we must ask ourselves these questions; how long can we structure our work with a colonizer perspective and claim it is insightful, useful and helpful? How can we seek to end gendered violence and racialized poverty when our work protects a certain privileged status and fragility? How can we move forward and face the challenges we all share without hearing, learning about, and owning our collective history? Decolonization is about understanding how the past has shaped colonizers and the colonized alike; in other words, you and me. I believe we must move beyond the structures and beliefs that shaped my mother's life and continue to shape all of ours today. I leave you with these words, which my mother told me, "You think these things happened a long time ago."

**Jyl M. Wheaton-Abraham** (Ktunaxa) holds an MA in applied anthropology with a queer studies minor from Oregon State University. Her article, "Decolonization and Life History Research: The Life of a Native Woman," builds upon work for her master's thesis. Prior to attending OSU, Ktunaxa worked as an archaeologist for the USDA Forest Service and has served on her tribal council. Her research interests include Ktunaxa history, native identity, decolonization, power relationships in modern society, and the archaeology of the Pacific Northwest.

References

Chilisa, Bagele. 2012. *Indigenous Research Methods*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. 2012. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. 2nd ed. London: Zed Books.

Tuck, Eve. 2009. "Suspending Damages: A Letter to Communities." *Harvard Educational Review* 79: 409-427.

Vizenor, Gerald. 1994. *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

(cc) BY-NC-ND