

Reckoning with genocide and the denialism of the Canadian state

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An interview with Cree jurist and scholar Tamara Starblanket

Tamara Starblanket is a Nehiyaw Iskwew (Cree woman) from Ahtahkakoop Cree Nation in Treaty Six. She holds an LLM from the University of Saskatchewan, an LLB from the University of British Columbia. She is the Dean of Academics at the Native Education College. She won the 2020 Nora and Ted Sterling Prize in Support of Controversy for her book [Suffer the Little Children: Genocide, Indigenous Nations and the Canadian State](#). She is also a guest in the lands and waterways of the of the x^wməθkwəyəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and Səlilwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.

She is interviewed here by Aziz Choudry, a writer and academic based in Johannesburg, South Africa, about Canada's history of genocide, the failures of reconciliation, and the imperative of decolonization.

It is a couple of years since Clarity Press published your book, *Suffer the Little Children: Genocide, Indigenous Nations and the Canadian State*. What led you to write the book?

The devastation of my family and people caused by the residential school and child welfare systems is the inspiration for the legal research in my Master of Laws that then became the book. My family underwent dehumanizing forcible removals by the government. Four generations and counting underwent government transfers of children into the residential schools and child welfare systems. A more accurate term for both systems is a comprehensive total institution concentration camp. Our children are not "individuals," but children of the Original Nations of our Great Turtle Island.

As part of the plan to destroy their national identities, the young ones are taken apart and reassembled into the government's intended vision. As John A. MacDonald [stated](#) to the House of Commons in 1883 on the so-called "savage" influence of Indigenous parents: "Indian children should be withdrawn as much as possible from the parental influence, and the only way to do that would be to put them in central training industrial schools where they will acquire the habits and modes of thought of white men; so that, after keeping them a number of years away from parental influence until their education is finished, they will be able to go back to their band with the habits of mind, the education, the industry which they have learned at these schools." The government and church's onslaught of violence and forced indoctrination, in sum, the destruction, is exhibited in my family and across our Nations on an enormous scale.

Our Nations depend on our children to transmit our languages, spirituality, cultures, laws about our societies and relationships with each other and, most importantly, our lands, and our identity and responsibility. However, instead, massive patterns of trauma and confusion, sorrow and pain are passed on, severely impeding our Original Nations' ability to perpetuate ourselves for the next seven generations.

The residential school genocidal trauma shaped my grandparents' lives and the generations of my family that followed. My maternal and paternal grandparents, mother and aunts and uncles were in the Thunderchild, Birtle, and Prince Albert residential schools and child welfare systems and suffered dehumanization and brutalities in starvation, sexual violence, forced labour, and torture. The effects on my grandparents, mother, father, aunts, and uncles were devastating.

My generation witnessed the long-term effects of genocide caused by these forcible transfers. The emotional, mental, and bodily trauma that began in the residential school system affected every generation of my family. Through no fault of my parents, aunts or uncles, trauma was the norm. In the space of nine years, my mother, father, and siblings passed away—in short, the genocide snuffed out their lives and their inherent birthright to be healthy and happy Nehiyaw People.

While experiencing the immense grief and loss in my own family, I witnessed other families endure this genocidal trauma. As a youth, it was painfully evident that non-Indigenous People did not have these same problems. I internalized dehumanizing theories of racial domination and violence. I did not have confidence. I suffered complex trauma issues, indoctrination, fear, self-loathing, anxiety, insecurity, survivor guilt, intense sorrow, and great confusion about my Nehiyaw national identity, spirituality, and culture.

One day I began to question and scrutinize this genocidal trauma and its source on a much larger scale. While undertaking post-secondary and legal studies, I examined the root causes. I directed my investigation at government oppression and the illegitimate claiming of the underlying title of our lands, waters, mountains, airspace, and minerals.

We are responsible for protecting life, and not just human life on this Earth for future generations. So, my life and the lives of other Indigenous People are impacted by the government's intent to destroy our national identities by stealing our lands and assimilating our identities into the Canadian state via the effects of their genocidal programs. Until we understand the full implications of the state's intent to destroy our Nations, we will continue to suffer the far-reaching catastrophic consequences of this process.

Can you explain why the history and politics behind the definition of genocide are important to understand?

Canada portrays itself as a peaceful humanitarian state, and this image is vital to its image internationally and domestically. But when you examine the underbelly of this façade, the history and politics tell a different story. For example, what I described earlier is not understood as "genocide," because of the Canadian state's manoeuvres to mask the reality of genocide by framing the issue using obstructed and occluded words such as physical, emotional and sexual "abuse," "mistreatment," and "neglect." Canada forcibly transfers our children into the child welfare system by the trauma, sorrow and devastation built into the residential school system. The conditions it caused, such as traumatic parenting, become the basis for mass and ongoing removals today. But this is not seen as genocide because of the word game the Canadian state plays.

It is not adequate to say there is "intergenerational" trauma. It must be named and described for what it is. Children are still developing their brains, identities, and languages at the age of 4 or 5. Instead of loving parents and learning their own Peoples' traditions and languages, it was an incredible onslaught of dehumanizing colonial terror for the children of Indigenous Peoples. Children terrorized by brutal acts will not have had a chance to form a healthy human Nehiyaw identity. Instead, they will pass on the trauma, confusion, and sorrow to future generations of Indigenous Peoples and ultimately our Original Nations.

The Travaux Préparatoires (the official record of the negotiations of the United Nations Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (UN Genocide Convention)) underscores the importance of a human group's survival to their children. The Original Nation depends on the stolen generation of children for their continuity into the future. When examined from this standpoint, the full ramifications are evident. The Nehiyaw and the multitude of Nations cannot transmit their spiritualities, cultures, languages, responsibilities to their lands because of the massive and widespread "serious bodily and mental destruction" beginning in the residential school system and persisting in the current child welfare system. The forcible transfers are a criminal abomination and must be understood if there is ever to be an authentic, substantive change. The catastrophic suicides, addictions, incarceration rates, poverty and collective despair across our Nations are evident for all to see. It is time to revert the lens onto the state perpetrator of genocide.

The deletion of cultural genocide reveals the politics and history of Canada's involvement in the drafting of the UN Genocide Convention. First, Canada was instrumental in deleting the definition of cultural genocide. It was the only point it vehemently disagreed with. It threatened a "reservation" if cultural genocide remained in the UN Genocide Convention. Canada, the United Kingdom, and other countries successfully removed the crime, and Canada later reframed the final accepted version in international law in its domestic laws. In 1965, the Hate Propaganda committee was aware that the residential school system would be an act of genocide based on the Canadian Civil Liberties Association's recommendation. In 1970, the Canadian government excluded Articles 2 (b), (d), and (e) from the Criminal Code, acts of genocide in which they have openly engaged for over 127 years.

What is at stake here? What has the Canadian state's role been in the way in which genocide has been defined? What are the implications of this for the self-determination of Indigenous Peoples?

Canada claims underlying title to all our lands, yet it cannot prove this. This fact is evident given the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination's (CERD) question to Canada in 2012. [\[1\]](#) The CERD Committee asked Canada to provide the legal proof of underlying title, and the State has not yet provided this proof in 2021, nearly nine years later. The laws and policies that force our children's removal are about our lands and how to gain domination over the lands, minerals, waters, and airspace. The government attempted forcible denationalization, also known as genocide, by massive and widespread forcible indoctrination. There is no doubt that intense violence and dehumanizing repetitions ingrained in their developing brains will forcibly indoctrinate young people. The effect is that our children do not understand their responsibilities, languages, cultures, spirituality, laws, and direct connection to our lands and their duty to protect our lands for future generations.

These are state crimes and should be recognized as such. The colonial clause debate and the deletion of cultural genocide have a two-fold effect on the crime of genocide and understanding for people. The colonial clause reveals that the colonization of other Peoples' lands and territories is inherently a criminal enterprise. Comments by state representatives from Yugoslavia, Poland, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and Ukraine Soviet Socialist Republic (UkraineSSR) in 1948 demonstrate that colonial territories were left vulnerable with the deletion of cultural genocide from the UN Genocide Convention. The State continues to forcibly transfer our children under this destructive colonial framework. Canada is a product of its colonial human imagination. It created itself on the genocide and attempted genocide of our Nations on Great Turtle Island. It feeds off our lands and the oppression and long-term devastation, the effects of which we are forced to live with daily. My legal research reframes the Canadian state and society as the predator body politic. The state is a predator because it preys on our lands and Peoples to create itself. It employs many people in this society in criminal justice, social work, health, resource exploitation, education, law, and other fields by feeding off the land and the original Peoples and Nations under colonial occupation.

The implications for Indigenous Peoples and Nations' self-determination are tremendous if the state continues its trajectory of completely devouring our lands and identities into its state framework. Also known as assimilation, which is a euphemism for genocide, most people are not aware that the government has nearly implemented the White Paper of 1969. [2] The state benefits from the effects of genocide because it uses Indigenous Peoples to manufacture consent. That is to say that the government indoctrinated Indigenous Peoples through an all-out attack on the national identities of the children, who now think and speak in a western world view and language. The forced indoctrination has dire consequences as agreements are made under the domination of the land claims policy and other policies and laws of occupation. With no critical thought or careful consideration of the implications for future generations, the agreements made under the state's policies cede and surrender the lands and their way of life. Thus, the colonial state benefits from its programs of genocide.

The genocide must stop in all its various forms. The Indigenous Nations and the Crown must implement the Treaties according to their original spirit and intent. We are Nations, not subparts of the Canadian State. We promised to live in peace. We do not violate the peace, but the colonizer does at every turn. Second, the colonizer must leave us alone and stay in their lane. We know what must be accomplished to heal our Nations.

In *Suffer the Little Children*, you challenge the intent and politics of Canadian state reconciliation policy and practices, writing that: "It would have been viewed as absurd for any other regime engaging in crimes of genocide against other peoples' children to evade its crimes internationally and domestically and then, as the perpetrator, to set up another destructive process that purported to investigate the issue and seek to resolve it. But such was the so called Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a body set up by the perpetrator government." Can you explain more about the politics, language and framing of "reconciliation" and the problems with it?

Canada is a perpetrator of the crime of genocide. For over 127 years and counting, the state continues to remove our children. The government created the atrocious conditions for the ongoing forcible transfers in the child welfare system. Creating legislation such as Bill C-92 and passing off this monstrosity of a system under the guise of "*reconciliation*" does not meet the standard of free prior and informed consent of our Nations. The legislation violates our inherent jurisdiction and it does not provide the proper resources to heal and break the cycle by recovering from genocide and the intergenerational trauma and the effects of the crime on our Nations' ability to perpetuate themselves. The truth concerning the crime of genocide is swept up in the rhetoric and the word game of reconciliation.

Under international law, a perpetrator of genocide cannot investigate itself by creating a so-called truth and reconciliation process. The Canadian government violated customary international law, Article 18 of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, by not being transparent about its non-inclusion of critical elements of the UN Genocide Convention in its domestic Criminal Code. It left out articles 2 (b) causing serious bodily and mental harm; (d) preventing births within the group; and (e) forcibly transferring children of the group to another group. It redefined the UN Genocide Convention and made it inapplicable in the Canadian state. Clearly the government omitted the acts of genocide it engaged in before and during the drafting of the UN Genocide Convention from 1946-48 and after it became law in 1948. It would be illegal elsewhere in the world for a state to engage in the crime of genocide for over a century and then set up a process to investigate itself under a TRC process. The state's conduct is an international crime and should be viewed as such.

"Reconciliation" is [not a peaceful process](#). It is a fallacy and projects the illusion that "we," meaning "Canadians," have resolved the issue, and this is how we right the "wrongs." We can add the word to

the list of already long-established words that render the state's conduct less than genocide. It occludes a deadly and destructive intent to obliterate our Nations and steal our lands. The term is meaningless. It is an oxymoron of the highest kind.

What kind of impact has your book been having? I know that you have given quite a few talks and lectures over the past few years, and in 2020 you were awarded The Nora and Ted Sterling Prize In Support of Controversy by Simon Fraser University. What has been the reaction to the book and the arguments you put forward in it?

Surprisingly, the reception has been positive. There are several reviews. The reviews are lovely and respectful expressions of why the work is critically important. One in particular, by lawyer and human rights expert Dr. Alfred de Zayas, astounded me. At the beginning of the review, he writes:

There are books that should make us pause and reassess how we look at history and how it impacts today's world. Among such books are David Stannard's ground-breaking *American Holocaust* (Oxford 1992) and Tamara Starblanket's dissertation revealing the continuing process of physical and cultural extinction the Original Nations of North America. The potential of these books would be achieved if historians and the media were committed to comprehensive truth in the correct context and if they would abandon double standards, selective indignation and that most effective weapon: silence. *Damnatio memoriae* occurred not only in Roman times, it has been practiced by all civilizations. Ours continues the tradition through direct and indirect censorship.

It is an absolute honour to have this legal research reviewed and compared to David Stannard's work in his [American Holocaust](#) and to have the support of other renowned scholars in the fields of education, history, law, and criminology. The support is outstanding. It is an immense honour to receive the Sterling Prize. We must begin to engage with the truth and stop occluding the horror of genocide. Winning this award is a positive step in that direction of facing reality.

Besides "reconciliation," another word we hear a lot of is "decolonization." Some universities and other organizations and institutions are talking about their commitment to decolonizing, whether that is knowledge or some other aspect. Can you address the politics and implications, uses and abuses of "decolonization," including educational settings?

Decolonization belongs to the Original Nations of Great Turtle Island. Post-secondary universities are colonial institutions. What does it mean to commit to decolonizing in a post-secondary university? It is another oxymoronic process. The institutions co-opt the discussion and make it an academic enterprise. They too feed off the genocide created by the Canadian state. There are millions of dollars for "reconciliation" and decolonization research, monies that should go to the Original Nations, not educational institutions.

Rather than hijack the discussion on decolonization, universities should be critically examining their complicity in genocide. The "decolonization-speak" couches this discussion in the so-called critical examination of "white privilege." Privilege is another word that deserves special mention here. It is defined as "a right, advantage, or immunity belonging to a person or class." What led to this so-called right, advantage or immunity? The academy should ask this critical question, but it does not. Denying the truth immunizes the colonizer from discussing reality.

The only reason for this so-called privilege is genocide, which continues today. It is not impossible to discuss complicity in genocide in the academy; there only has to be a willingness. The education system plays an immense role in creating either a truthful dialogue or perpetuating further

ignorance.

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

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P.S.

Canadian Dimension

<https://canadiandimension.com/articles/view/reckoning-with-genocide-and-the-denialism-of-the-canadian-state>

Footnotes

[1] Onion Lake Cree Nation Submission to the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination Eightieth session (13 February–9 March 2012) General Assembly United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD). Vice Chair Nouredine Amir at the CERD's eightieth session in Geneva in February 2012 asked Canada, "On what legal basis does Canada claim underlying title to Indigenous lands?"

[2] The White Paper policy of 1969 was an attempt to get rid of the Treaties and assimilate "Indian" peoples and their lands into Canadian society and the state. See: the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs (1969); Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian Policy (Ottawa, ON: Queen's Printer, 1969); Harold Cardinal, *The Unjust Society* (1st ed. 1969); for Indigenous Peoples' response to the White Paper. Cardinal wrote that it was "a thinly disguised programme of extermination through assimilation."