

“A Mighty Pulverizing Engine”: the Impact of Native Boarding Schools in North America

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I acknowledge that I am living on the homelands of the Pueblo of Sandia and pay my respects to their elders past and present. I acknowledge the sovereignty and treaty rights of Indigenous peoples.

Today I will be speaking about the intergenerational impact of the Native boarding schools in North America, as well as Indigenous peoples' and their allies' processes of addressing the ongoing effects of the boarding schools, moving toward justice.

In Canada this year, the unmarked graves of hundreds of Indigenous children were discovered, exacerbating the intergenerational trauma engendered by the boarding schools across Native communities in Canada and The United States. The children, who were students at residential boarding schools from the mid-1800s to mid-1900s, died far from home after having suffered brutal abuse and neglect. For decades, Indigenous children in both Canada and the United States were taken from their families and sent to boarding schools, where they were forced to assimilate to White culture.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada found the Native boarding schools to have perpetrated cultural genocide. The definition from the 1948 UN General Assembly Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide defines cultural genocide as

encompassing the schema of denationalization/imposition of an alien national pattern . . . Includes all policies aimed at destroying the specific characteristics by which a target group is defined, or defines itself, thereby forcing them to become something else. Among the acts specified are the forced transfer of children . . . forced and systematic exile of individuals representing the culture of the group . . . prohibition of the national language . . .¹

In June of this year, Cadmus Delorme, Chief of the Cowessess First Nation, announced the discovery of 751 unmarked graves of mostly Indigenous children at the cemetery of the former Marieval Indian Residential School in the southeast corner of the Saskatchewan province. According to Nora McGreevy, in late May Chief Roseanne Casimir, of the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation, announced that researchers using ground-penetrating radar (GPR) had discovered the unmarked burials of 215 students at the Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia. Some children buried onsite had been as young as three years old.²

The Canadian government is responding to these discoveries with financial support to assist in social healing. According to Al-Jazeera, Crown-Indigenous Relations Minister Carolyn Bennett has committed the government to provide \$83 million Canadian dollars to help communities who are searching for unmarked graves. In a news conference on August 10, 2021, Bennett stated, “As a country, we know the truth. Once you know the truth, you cannot unknow it. First Nations, Inuit and Metis communities have lived with the trauma caused by residential schools for generations.”³

Through the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Canada, 70% of the wider population of Canada demonstrates knowledge of the history and effects of the Native boarding schools. However, in the US, although there are local and national initiatives taking place, many people are unaware of the history and contemporary effects of the Native boarding schools.

To begin to understand the ongoing impacts of the boarding schools requires knowledge of their history and background. The late 1890s were considered the official “end” of the Indian Wars, and to deal with what was considered “The Indian Problem” the US Government turned to assimilation policies and processes. Indian residential schools were one of the main aspects of the US Government’s assimilation plan. They began during the 1870s and lasted for over a century. There were more than 350 government-funded, and often church-run, Indian boarding schools across the US in the 19th and 20th centuries.

The intention was to remove every Indian child from their family and educate them into the ways of “civilization.” There were sufficient spaces in boarding schools to accommodate half of all Native American students at any point, and 80% of several generations were educated for at least part of their education in residential schools.

The earlier schools were on reservations, and families settled nearby to continue family life while children were being educated. White concern about the influence of Native culture resulted in a shift in policy, and boarding schools were developed that removed children far from their homes and their families’ and nation’s influence, sometimes across the entire continent. Some students escaped and made it back to their communities. Some died in the process. I would like to refer you to an evocative depiction of these journeys in the work of N. Scott Momaday, Kiowa author, playwright, and poet. He wrote three plays based on the experiences of young native peoples removed from their families. The preface of one of these plays, *The Indolent Boys*, captures the devastating toll of these removals. The foreword includes these paragraphs:

The *Indolent Boys* is based upon a tragedy that is now more than one hundred years old. In 1891 three young boys ran away from the Kiowa Indian Boarding School at Anadarko, Oklahoma, then Indian territory, after the eldest boy had been whipped by a teacher for fighting. They headed for the camps where their families lived, some forty miles away. Overtaken by a terrible storm, they froze to death. Their frozen bodies were found by their relatives on a small bluff south of present-day Carnegie, Oklahoma
. . . .

In some sense the Kiowa boys, who in the ordinary currents of time would be nameless, have now become visible in the long lens of history. When I think of this phenomenon, I think also of the numberless souls whose stories have fallen beyond reach. To all of these unknown, I dedicate this play.⁴

From their perspective, some individuals and institutions involved in planning and overseeing the boarding schools had benevolent intentions; however, at the official level, statements from officials indicate a clear intent to erase Nateness. According to Native scholars Clifford Trafzer, Jean Keller, and Lorene Sisquoc, US Indian Commissioner Francis Leupp called the Indian schools “a mighty pulverizing engine for breaking up the last of the tribal mass.” Brigadier General Richard Henry Pratt, US Army, who created the Indian boarding school system in 1879 and served as supervisor at the Carlisle Indian School, stated that the purpose was to “kill the Indian, save the man” in every pupil, going on to claim, “We make our greatest mistake in feeding our civilization to the Indians instead of feeding the Indians to our civilization.”⁵ At the same time, Pratt resisted the philosophy of other boarding schools where Native students were told they could never be United States citizens; they could be only Native and had to live apart from the rest of society. Pratt argued that Natives could be educated to become full and active participants in US society.

Life at the boarding schools was characterized by widespread patterns of cultural, structural, and direct violence. There was a sustained assault on Native identity. Students had their hair forcibly cut short. The explanation for this invasion often was to reduce the threat of lice, but typically students’ hair was cut because it was considered by school staff to be a sign of “savagery.” In contrast, in many Native communities, long hair holds sacred cultural meaning. The schools also radically altered the clothing of Native students, and pictures from the schools show a shift from aesthetically crafted and culturally significant garments to stiff, ill-fitting Euro-American clothing and shoes. Staff at the boarding schools also renamed the children, eschewing their Native names and requiring students to use English names.⁶ What was lost was the meaning of culturally imbued names that were part of the vast network of relationships that make up the Native paradigm.

In the classroom, students were subjected to incomprehensible pedagogy and severe punishment. Students were frequently and violently punished for not being able to speak English or understand Anglo American culture. Spencer Martin, a Colville Nation elder and spiritual leader, shared with me his experiences at a Native boarding school where he was violently punished by a nun on his first day at school because he did not clean the toilets in the boys’ bathroom properly. He did not know how to clean a toilet because he had never seen one. His extreme punishment traumatized him for many years until the traditional teachings of the Methow people healed his trauma.⁷

Many Native boarding schools were characterized by military discipline designed to ‘tame’ Indians. As some Native women who attended St. Mary’s boarding school commented,

For years we lived by the bell. The nuns had a little bell they would ring and we would sit down. The bell would ring and we would stand up. The bell would ring and we would stand in line and walk out. Then after 8 years, it was over, and there were no

more bells to live by. We didn't know what to do. We were waiting for the bell. Some of us thought, 'we are free,' and we just went wild.⁸

Native students' experience of forced assimilation was dangerous and harsh, yet many Native students demonstrated resilience and resistance in the face of direct, cultural, and structural violence. In their book *Boarding School Blues*, Clifford E. Trafzer, Jean A. Keller, and Lorene Sisquoc describe the devastation boarding schools brought to the lives of Indian children and Indian nations and highlight the resistance and resilience that enabled Native youth to continue to express their culture and connections to their communities in the face of oppression. For example, the authors explain that many Native students took on a hero's journey, in which slaying a monster is a theme. These youth willingly embraced boarding schools to slay the monster of assimilation/colonization, using their experiences to strengthen ties across Native nations and to maintain Native culture and identity. Lakota OksKte (Plenty Kills), given the name of Luther Standing Bear, chose to go to Carlisle, assuming he would die there but die bravely, and thus bring honor to his family and people.⁹

Native students exhibited many forms of resistance. Many Native students ran away and, as mentioned earlier, not all survived. At Carlisle Indian School in 1901, Pratt reported that out of the 114 boys discharged, 45 were dropped for running away. Many of these students were considered "chronic runners" and punished severely.¹⁰ Adams describes the ways other students resisted, from destroying school buildings to passive resistance. He shares an evocative story of a Navajo student at Haskell Boarding School who, when given an assignment to write a poem to glorify the school, wrote instead a paean to resistance: "If I do not believe you, / the things that you say, / Maybe I will not tell you, / That is my way. / Maybe you think I believe you, / That thing you say, / But always my thoughts stay with me, / My own way."¹¹

Across the nation there were many clandestine acts of cultural preservation in which students practiced language and ceremony in private. A particularly powerful depiction of these processes is detailed in the Canadian film *Where the Spirit Lives*.¹²

The direct, structural, and cultural violence of the Native boarding schools continues to impact Native people and their communities. The boarding school policies that disrupted family networks, denied access to good parenting models, and re-shaped tribal governance have resulted in a range of traumas passed through the generations, which are impacting the well-being of Native individuals and communities. For example, suicide is the second leading cause of death—2.5 times the national rate—for Native youth in the fifteen to twenty-four-year-old age group.¹³ Concern over the links between genocidal policies and suicide is widespread in Native communities. When I was preparing to speak at a conference on genocide, Cherokee elder J. T. Garrett admonished me, stating, "if you are going to talk about genocide, you have to talk about the current suicide rate among our youth."¹⁴

There are a growing number of justice initiatives in relation to Native boarding schools, including truth telling and social healing processes, taking place across the nation. On June 22, 2021

“Deb Haaland, Pueblo of Laguna and Secretary of the Interior, announced a Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative, a comprehensive review of the troubled legacy of federal boarding school policies.”¹⁵ In an accompanying secretarial memo, Secretary Haaland directed the Department of the Interior to prepare a report from historical records, emphasizing the documentation of cemeteries and potential burial sites. “The Interior Department will address the inter-generational impact of Indian boarding schools to shed light on the unspoken traumas of the past, no matter how hard it will be,” said Secretary Haaland. “I know that this process will be long and difficult. I know that this process will be painful. It won’t undo the heartbreak and loss we feel. But only by acknowledging the past can we work toward a future that we’re all proud to embrace.”¹⁶

Another justice initiative supported by The National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition (NABS) is the re-introduction in Congress of the bill for a Truth and Healing Commission on Indian boarding school policies. On September 30, 2021, NABS sponsored a National Day of Remembrance for US Indian Boarding Schools, calling for a full account of the impacts of the boarding school policies. The key provisions of the bill are an examination of the locations of children sent to boarding schools, documentation of ongoing impacts of the schools, locating church and government records of the schools, holding culturally appropriate public hearings to gather testimony from survivors and descendants, and public dissemination of the final report with recommendations for justice and healing.¹⁷ Based on a previous survey by NABS, justice and healing will require full acknowledgement from the perpetrators of the boarding school harms. Findings of this survey indicate that 98.8% of respondents believe that the United States needs to acknowledge that Indian children were forcibly abducted, sent hundreds of miles away, beaten, starved, or abused. Additionally, 96.9% said that the United States needs to share the facts about how many children were sent to boarding schools, how many died at schools, and why there are graves that are unmarked or marked “unknown” at many school cemeteries. Finally, 91.7% of respondents believe that due to the high incidence of substance abuse and mental health issues resulting from the historical trauma of having attended boarding schools, increased funding of community-oriented healing programs in Indian Country and urban Native populations should be a priority.¹⁸

I now live to the northwest of Albuquerque, New Mexico, which was the site of five Native boarding schools (There were forty-three Native boarding schools in the state of New Mexico). The trauma these schools have caused to Native communities has been exacerbated by disregard for, and disrespect of, the graves of Native children who died while living at the schools. Currently, there is an initiative to create, in collaboration with Native communities and the Albuquerque City Council, memorials that will honor, create spaces of respect, and increase understanding of the ongoing effects of the boarding schools. An introduction to these processes can be seen in the KRQE video “Plaque Recognizing Albuquerque Mass Grave Site of Native Children Is Now Missing.”¹⁹

The legacies of colonialism affect all of us living in this country, and we all have responsibility to respond. In relation to justice and healing regarding the Native boarding schools,

there are many actions we can take. First, we can inform ourselves of the history of the Native boarding schools near our homes, colleges, and/or places of work. Carlisle Indian School is less than a two-hour drive from Juniata College. Plan a visit there. Examine the comprehensive list of schools on the site of the National Native Boarding School Healing Commission for schools near your home. You can also contact your legislators to support the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies in the US Act.

In closing, I would like to share an excerpt from a poem by Joy Harjo. Last week, I had the privilege of hearing Harjo, the first Native American US Poet Laureate, speak here in Albuquerque. In her presentation, she remarked that poetry can help us give voice to the unspeakable. The following excerpt is from “Bourbon and Blues,” which speaks to the boarding school experience, the contemporary effects of the schools and their policies, and Native students’ resistance to the colonialism imposed through those sites.

*We were wild then,
They said, because we spoke a different language
And would not give over our spirits to them.
And though they tried, they could not ever remake us.
No matter how hard they drilled and forced us.
We died over and over again in those stiff desks,
As our hearts walked home.²⁰*

NOTES

1. Ward Churchill, *A Little Matter of Genocide: Holocaust and Denial in the Americas, 1492 to the Present* (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 2006), p. 6.
2. Nora McGreevy, “751 Unmarked Graves Discovered near Former Indigenous School in Canada,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, Smithsonian.com. Smithsonian Institution, June 28, 2021. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/751-unmarked-graves-discovered-near-former-indigenous-school-canada-180978064/>.
3. Staff, “Canada Pledges Millions to Search for Residential School Graves,” *Al-Jazeera*, August 10, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/10/canada-pledges-millions-to-search-for-unmarked-indigenous-graves>.
4. N. Scott Momaday, *Three Plays* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019), pp. 5-6.
5. Clifford E. Trafzer, Jean A. Keller, and Lorene Sisquoc, *Boarding School Blues: Revisiting American Indian Educational Experiences* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), pp. 13-14.
6. Ibid.
7. Polly O. Walker, personal communication with Spencer Martin, Methow Nation, March 21, 2007.

8. Ibid.
9. Trafzer, Keller, and Sisquoc, *Boarding School Blues*.
10. David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), p. 225.
11. Ibid, 231.
12. *Where the Spirit Lives*, directed by Bruce Pittman, performances by Michelle St. John, Kim Bruisedhead Fox, and Marianne Jones (Amazing Spirit Productions Ltd., 1989).
13. “Fast Facts on Native American Youth and Indian Country - Aspen Institute,” <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wpcontent/uploads/files/content/images/Fast%20Facts.pdf>. (accessed June 23, 2022).
14. Polly O. Walker, personal communication with J. T. Garrett, Eastern Band Cherokee, January 13, 2006.
15. US Department of the Interior, “Secretary Haaland Announces Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative,” news release, June 22, 2021, <https://www.doi.gov/pressreleases/secretary-haaland-announces-federal-indian-boarding-school-initiative>.
16. Ibid.
17. “Coalition Urges Support for Bill Establishing a Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies in the U.S.” The National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition, September 30, 2021, <https://boardingschoolhealing.org/coalition-urges-support-for-bill-establishing-a-truth-and-healing-commission-on-indian-boarding-school-policies-in-the-u-s/>.
18. Ibid.
19. KRQE, “Plaque Recognizing Albuquerque Mass Grave Site of Native Children Is Now Missing.” YouTube, July 2, 2021, 2:30, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vfCERxK06nM>.
20. Joy Harjo, *An American Sunrise: Poems* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), p. 61.