

Killing the Spirit of a Nation: Necropolitics, Residential Schools and the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc first nation in Canada

On 27 May 2021, the remains of 215 children were uncovered at the site of the former Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia, the largest school in the Indian Affairs residential school system. Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc was the home community of the Kamloops Indian Residential School. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) noted that large numbers of Indigenous children who were sent to residential schools never returned to their home communities; some ran away, and others died of illness and inadequate living conditions at the schools. The [Missing Children Project](#) documents the deaths and the burial places of more than 4,100 children. This substantiates the claim by Indigenous groups throughout Canada and the 2015 TRC that the residential school system constituted a culturally genocidal policy- one not only of physical death but also cultural death.¹ This aligns with the Cameroonian philosopher and postcolonial theorist Joseph-Achille Mbembe's conceptualisation of necropolitics: the settler state utilising social and political powers to devalue the lives of marginalised groups and dictating which citizens will be allowed to live and who will die to serve political goals. The first nations alongside other Indigenous people in Canada have been subjected to western colonial practices since first contact. This is exemplified by the removal of land rights and territories, the limiting of hunting and farming rights, and the forced rejection of indigeneity to achieve citizenship. The outlawing of cultural and spiritual practices in addition to the residential school system and other forms of 'cultural genocide' have resulted in the permanent disruption of the Indigenous ways of life for the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc first nation. This essay will outline the treatment of indigenous children at the Kamloops Indian Residential School, examine the policies that facilitated this cultural genocide, and drawing upon Mbembe's idea of necropolitics, will evaluate the treatment and policies.²

Inside Kamloops

The Kamloops Indian Residential School was set up in 1890 by the Catholic Church as an industrial school. It soon became a residential school and remained in operation until 1969 when it was taken over by the federal government which used it as a day school until 1978. When the school first opened in 1894 there were 50 students, but numbers quickly increased, peaking at 500 in the 1950s. The industrial school system that preceded that of the residential schools was designed to promote acculturation - the process of balancing two cultures and adapting to the prevailing state of society.³ While Indigenous groups varied across the nation,

¹ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Volume 6* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015), p.19.

² Before describing the origins and the nature of the school a comment for the sake of positionality. Survivors will be used as a term throughout this essay following the example of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and other reports such as Inside Kamloops which centralise the indigenous voices of the former students. As a white non-Canadian woman from a settler society, ensuring that I used primary sources informed by marginalised peoples was a priority to ensure I didn't become complicit in the continuation of a whitewashed narrative and to ensure my work remains as ethical as possible.

³A M Carion, *Dominion of Canada Annual Report of the Department of Indian Affairs for the Year*, (Kamloops: 1986), p. 606.

the cultural legacy of each group was passed through the generations by incorporating a mixture of teachings, ceremonies, and daily activities to form the basis of an interconnected world view that lacked a separation between the secular and the spiritual. Elders acted as teachers and healers (physically and spiritually) and children primarily learned through storytelling and example. Yet a high level of personal autonomy was granted to children, limiting the use of disciplinary acts, corporal punishments and teaching instead community responsibility and self-reliance.⁴

Thus, socialisation within indigenous communities infused cultural and spiritual beliefs which made parents reluctant to grant the state power over their children's education. Mission schools set up by early French colonists only added to this reluctance, as the French boarding school experiment of 1620 was quickly abandoned as students ran away to re-join their families. Yet some groups were interested in extending schooling to their communities, as exemplified by Augustine Shingwauk, an Ojibway leader from Ontario, who undertook a journey in 1871 through Sarnia, London, and Toronto to seek the support of Church leaders for a proposed 'big teaching wigwam'.⁵ Furthermore, there were indigenous communities on the Prairies who recognised that following colonisation, education was necessary to adjust to changing socioeconomic conditions and they tried to make sure that schools, teachers, and salaries were included in treaties that they signed with the government in 1870. According to government negotiator Alexander Morris, the 'The Queen wishes her red children to learn the cunning of the white man and when they are ready for it, she will send schoolmasters on every Reserve and pay them'.⁶

However, the intention behind the schools was openly one of cultural genocide, with the Principal of Kamloops Father Alphonse-Marie declaring in his report to the Department of Indian Affairs (1896) that the school aimed to 'civilize the Indians, to make them good, useful and law-abiding members of society'.⁷ When attendance was made mandatory in the 1920s, children were forcibly removed from their homes and their parents were threatened with imprisonment if they refused. Students lived at the school from September to June. They were isolated from their families due to the long journey to the school, with family visits only allowed at Easter and Christmas.⁸ Students experienced harsh treatment: physical abuse was used to punish those speaking in their native tongue, for wetting the bed, struggling with schoolwork and running away. One survivor recalled the punishment for one group of girls who ran away was being made to lie on their fronts in just their underwear while Father Kennedy beat them.⁹ They were also punished for not being productive enough. Students had to undertake gruelling labour under the half-day system – academics in the morning and vocational training in the afternoon with housework and domestic chores for the girls and construction and agriculture for the boys. The vocational work undertaken

⁴ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *The Final Report Volume 6*, pp. 7-9.

⁵ The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *They came for the children: Canada, Aboriginal peoples, and Residential Schools* (Winnipeg: TRC, 2012), p. 9.

⁶ Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *They came for the children*, p. 9.

⁷ A M Carion, *Dominion of Canada Annual Report of the Department of Indian Affairs for the Year*, (Kamloops: 1986), p. 607.

⁸ Kenneth Favrholt, "Kamloops History: The dark and difficult legacy of the Kamloops Indian Residential School", accessed 4 August, 2022, <https://www.kamloopsthisweek.com/community/kamloops-history-the-dark-and-difficult-legacy-of-the-kamloops-indian-residential-school-4446093> .

⁹ Secwepemc Cultural Education Society, *Behind Closed Doors- Stories from The Kamloops Residential School* (Kamloops: Theytus Books, 2000), p. 37.

ultimately served the residential school system as it was dependent on student labour to survive due to vast underfunding.¹⁰

But the abuse was not just physical, also sexual, emotional, negligent, and religious. One supervisor was charged in the 1990s with several dozen sex crimes. In recent years, more survivors have come forward with allegations against other staff members of Kamloops. For instance, an anonymous female survivor claimed that a large group of girls had formed a cohort to protect a girl from a male staff member after the supervisors and priest told them not to speak about the abuse they faced.¹¹ However, the residential school system was rife with sexual assault, with an estimated 5000 perpetrators committing these crimes at residential schools during the system's 100-year existence, with fewer than 50 convictions.¹² This sexual abuse was made easier by a lack of rules to safeguard students and failure to report any alleged abuse to the authorities. In fact, staff known to have abused students were often given employment elsewhere rather than punished for their sex crimes.¹³

Another common thread throughout survivors' accounts is poor nutrition. According to George Manuel, who founded the National Indian Brotherhood and the World Council of Indigenous Peoples, at Kamloops 'hunger is both the first and the last thing I can remember about that school.... Every Indian student smelled of hunger'.¹⁴ This sentiment is echoed in the TRC reports¹⁵ and interviews of former students by the tribal government's cultural society. It is also substantiated by dietary studies of the schools in the 1940s undertaken by such agencies as the Red Cross which condemned it as 'appalling'.¹⁶ Already in the 1910s the Kamloops principal admitted that the government did not provide enough funding to properly feed the students.¹⁷ However, in the 1970s, Nathan Matthew, a Secwepemc man, became a senior administrator and he initiated a 'revolution' in the dining hall, introducing waffles, eggs, bacon and real milk which students described as 'a god send'¹⁸, which differed greatly from previous accounts of students scavenging dandelion roots and leaves from the outdoors to supplement their diets.¹⁹ This "revolution" highlights that the school underwent changes over the years, depending on who led the school and how much funding it was allocated. As such, not all survivors had the same experience. Certainly, as student numbers increased after the war and before the federal government took over the school, conditions deteriorated.²⁰

The treatment at the schools left many survivors traumatised, consequently leading to generational trauma within their families- the psychological effects experienced by one group has on subsequent generations, e.g., fear of authority figures, addiction and resource

¹⁰ Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *They came for the children*, p. 35.

¹¹ Secwepemc Cultural Education Society, *Behind Closed Doors- Stories from The Kamloops Residential School* (Kamloops: Theytus Books, 2000), p. 63.

¹² Tristan Hopper, "Why so many sexual predators at Indian Residential Schools escaped punishment", accessed 3rd August 2022, <https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/why-so-many-sexual-predators-at-indian-residential-schools-escaped-punishment>

¹³ Bryanne Huston Young, *Killing the Indian in the child: Materialities of death and political formations of life in the Canadian Indian residential school system* (Chapel Hill, 2017)

¹⁴ Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *They came for the children*, p. 31.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 33.

¹⁶ John S Milloy, *A national crime: The Canadian government and the residential school system* (University of Manitoba Press, 1999), p. 263-265

¹⁷ Favrholt, "Kamloops History"

¹⁸ Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *They came for the children*, p. 34.

¹⁹ Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *They came for the children*, p. 33.

²⁰ Favrholt, "Kamloops History"

guarding/hoarding as common symptoms – as a result. Some of those interviewed admitted enjoying their time at the school but most had been students in the 1970s when the school had just been placed in the hands of the federal government. This shift was largely because the federal government lacked the finances to continue funding the schools and teachers.²¹ For example, those who attended school in the 1970s mentioned the greater cultural awareness of staff²², an end of year school trip across Canada in which they even stayed with another residential school, even participating in sports to the extent they voluntarily stayed the weekend at the school.²³ One former student compared this experience with their mother's who had attended the school in the 1930s when girls were taught and supervised by nuns.²⁴ It is possible that the more secular approach in the 1970s prevented the abuses previously justified in preceding eras due to the removal of the offending staff and religious shame being weaponised against the students.

Scholars and others have debated the impact of the school. For instance, Haig-Brown (1988,) has argued that Kamloops was unsuccessful in its attempts to assimilate the Indigenous group into the culture of the settler state because the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc first nation through its resistance survived the 'cultural genocide'.²⁵ Yet an article in the *Secwepemc News* from 1991 argued that the school more or less achieved its aim as English had become the predominant language within the Shushwan nation and the original Shuswap language was bordering on extinction, which affected storytelling that was a major vehicle of education, kinship, and spirituality. When determining whether Kamloops was a key agent in the "cultural genocide" of the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc both perspectives must be taken into consideration. Yes, the nation remains but it is fractured by grief of not only the physical deaths of victims but also the loss of language, dance customs, Indigenous education, and family structure.

Necropolitics

The systemic racism, structural violence, and social isolation inherent in the residential school system echoes Mbembe's description of necropolitics as used to keep certain populations 'alive but in a state of injury'.²⁶ Another key conceptualisation which applies to Kamloops is that of a 'death world'²⁷ which is a social existence characterised by a limited ability to survive due to poor conditions, as opposed to directly killing them. Mbembe argues that the settler state actively wound populations through forms of social control. We can see this clearly in the Kamloops school such as the distribution of resources, as exemplified in 1918 with an Indian Agent describing the meal as 'very slim for growing boys'.²⁸ This active wounding is further illustrated by the passing of legislation to legitimise and enforce political forms of violence, such as mandated attendance in the 1920s with threats of imprisonment for Indigenous parents who refused. The policy to mandate the severance of familial bonds was

²¹ Secwepemc Cultural Education Society, *Behind Closed Doors*, p. 56.

²² Secwepemc Cultural Education Society, *Behind Closed Doors*, p. 56.

²³ Secwepemc Cultural Education Society, *Behind Closed Doors*, p. 55.

²⁴ Secwepemc Cultural Education Society, *Behind Closed Doors*, p. 56.

²⁵ Celia Haig-Brown, *Resistance and renewal: surviving the Indian residential school* (Kamloops: Arsenal Press Pump, 1988)

²⁶ Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Duke University Press, 2019), p. 21.

²⁷ Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, p.40.

²⁸ J. Smith to Assistant Deputy and Secretary, 8th February 1918, RG10, Volume 3918, File 116659-1, MR C 10161, Library and Archives Canada.

introduced by Duncan Campbell Scott who acted as Deputy Superintendent in the Department of Indian affairs from 1913 to 1932. He was an extreme assimilationist, which he expressed clearly in his introduction to the mandatory attendance Bill: 'I want to get rid of the Indian problem. Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department, which is the whole object of this Bill'.²⁹ The necropolitical framework is largely dependent on the civilised/savage binary as the colonial state formulates its claim of sovereignty and legitimacy through its constructed narrative of authority based on the identity of those perpetuating necropolitical policy.³⁰

Physical death was extremely prevalent within the schools. Reports by the medical inspector show that between 1888 and 1905, 1537 students were admitted to 83 schools but of those 25 percent died. But some schools in the system had a higher death rate. At one school nearly 70 percent of students died, mostly from tuberculosis.³¹ However, instead of implementing the recommendations provided by the medical inspector following these reports, which included the federal government taking a hands-on role in nutrition, accommodation and influenza quarantine reforms, the Indian Affairs department reached an agreement with the churches in 1910 to increase funding, nutrition, ventilation and stipulated that sick students were not to be admitted. Yet only eight years later, Superintendent Scott forced the health inspector out of his job before eliminating the position entirely, thus leaving the department vulnerable to the yearly influenza epidemics which swept the schools. And due to chronic underfunding, schools started to accept infected children.³² In 1910 when faced with a death rate at the schools which far excelled the rates in Indigenous communities, Scott stated, 'it is readily acknowledged that Indian children lose their natural resistance to illness by habitating so closely in these schools, and that they die at a much higher rate than in their villages. But this alone does not justify a change in the policy of this Department, which is being geared towards the final solution of our Indian Problem'.³³ By recognising the issue of child mortality but refusing to rectify the conditions causing these deaths, Scott engaged in necropolitics. His acknowledgment four years later that 'buildings were not carefully designed for school purposes, and these buildings became infected and dangerous to the inmates' not only highlight his presumption that the children in his care were needing to be reformed describing them as "inmates", but also that he was aware that poorly maintained schools were integral in the spreading of tuberculosis and which he acknowledged 'resulted in a very large percentage of deaths..... fifty percent of the children who passed through these did not live to benefit.'³⁴

However, it needs to be stressed that the residential school system was part of larger necropolitical policies levied at Indigenous groups like the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc first nation. The residential school policy originated from subsequent amendments to the Indian Act 1876 in 1894 and 1920 which first allowed the children to attend industrial schools then

²⁹ Duncan Campbell Scott, 1920, RG10, volume 6810, file 470-2-3, volume 7, pp. 55 (L-3) and 63 (N-3), National Archives of Canada.

³⁰ Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, p. 11.

³¹ Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *They came for the children*, p. 29.

³² Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *They came for the children*, p. 30.

³³ Department of Indian Affairs Superintendent D.C. Scott to B.C. Indian Agent-General Major D. McKay, 12th April 1910, DIA Archives, RG 1-Series.

³⁴ James Miller, *Shingwauk's Vision: A history of native residential schools* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), p. 133.

the residential schools. This act allowed the Canadian government to assume control of the Indigenous groups' governments, economy, religion, land and empowered it to depose chiefs and overturn decisions made by band governments. The cultural genocide element can be exemplified by the prohibition of sacred ceremonies such as Potlatch on the West Coast and the Sun Dance on the prairies. The ultimate goal of the act was to bring Indian status to an end and to achieve complete assimilation into settler Canadian society.³⁵ Therefore, it is obvious that the residential schools were not supposed to meet the government's treaty obligations outlined earlier but to further aid the assimilation and overall dissolution of Indigenous populations.

Furthermore, the religious aspect of the schools in relation to the savage-civilised binary needs to be stressed. The nineteenth-century missionaries who first attempted to convert the Indigenous population to Christianity believed their efforts would aid the struggle for salvation. While this could be read as having positive intentions, the actualisation of this belief entailed the banning of sacred practices, undermining spiritual leaders and imposing a new moral code on the communities which led to a structural change within family dynamics. While the church and the Canadian state had their differences, both parties committed to civilising and Christianising Indigenous children, resulting in the formation of a residential school system that severed children from their culture, imposed Christian norms and values and implemented a European industrial capitalist work discipline.³⁶ This also exemplifies Mbembe's point of living in a 'state of injury'³⁷, as being taught in missionary residential schools left the children isolated from their own culture and spiritual beliefs resulting in religious and, as argued earlier, also generational trauma. According to one Kamloops survivor, "everything was of the devil... I want to get into our culture, but I just can't, there's a big block there" alongside admitting that to this day watching children play games with sticks scare her due to the religious abuse she undertook, consequently cannot attend spiritual ceremonies such as the Yuwippi ceremony for healing due to the stigmatisation of her native spirituality within the Catholic school.³⁸ As such, it can be argued that in Mbembe's words the schools successfully created a 'death world' in which Indigenous people occupied a socially isolated space – neither part of their own community nor the colonial state, limiting their opportunities, life chances and successfully severing them from holding resistant political opposition to the settler state via assimilation.

Conclusion

The Kamloops Indigenous Residential school will always have a genocidal legacy and will remain notorious for its role in the necropolitical policies enacted against the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc first nation. Yet it also serves as a reminder of the resistance Indigenous groups showed (and will continue to show) against the colonial state; in the 1980s the school opened as the Secwepemc Museum, attracting many visitors each year. While the tragedy is far from over, due to the long road to reconciliation and debate surrounding reparations which will continue in the foreseeable future, the stories of those who attended the schools serve as a poignant step towards understanding the effects of colonialism in its systematic and systemic

³⁵ Zach Parrott, "The Canadian Encyclopaedia", accessed 27th August 2022,

<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/indian-act>

³⁶ Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *They came for the children*, p. 10.

³⁷ Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, p. 21.

³⁸ Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, pp. 29-30.

forms. The foregoing has shown that the policies that underpinned the residential school system in Canada can best be labelled as necropolitics, as they aimed to remove and assimilate children and in that process failed to protect students from physical, cultural, and spiritual harm. There are many instances mentioned in first-hand and other accounts where authorities responsible for the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc children remained wilfully dismissive of the suffering they faced in the school - especially the children who attended school under the tenure of Scott. To achieve their goal of assimilating the children into settler Christian Canadian culture, the state allowed cultural genocide to ensue not just in Kamloops but residential schools across the country and believed they were justified in doing so due to the savage-civilised binary that had been culturally constructed around the supremacy of white Christian identities.