“Why can’t Aboriginal people just get over Indian residential schools? Why can’t they just get on with their lives?” These are two of the most common questions asked by Canada’s non-Aboriginal peoples when confronted with the consequences of Indian residential schools as experienced through seven generations of Indigenous Nations in Canada and the United States.

These questions arise from societal denial of five centuries of colonization. History books and governments consistently portray the intent of colonization as the “discovery” of new lands, the establishment of agricultural economies, and the harvesting of natural resources to sustain westward immigration in the building of this “New World.” Canadians therefore think of the Indian residential school policy as merely an isolated era of necessity to assist Indian people to adjust to a “better” (European) way of life and not as part of ongoing colonization efforts to rid the “New World” of Indian Nations, persistent barriers to lands and resources.

However, the consequences experienced by Indian residential school survivors and their descendants are a complex tangle of political, social, cultural, economic, mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual harms. The compounding burdens take an ever-increasing toll on the health, well-being, and very survival of Indigenous people.

I had just turned seven when I was taken to the Fort Alexander Indian Residential School, and later to the Assiniboia Indian Residential School. My life was not my own for the next twelve years. Although the Fort Alexander school was situated less than two miles from my home, I lost my family, my mishoom (grandfather) and kookum (grandmother), and my community, and I was lost to them.

Children taken to Indian residential schools were removed from their families either by force or by threat. We were locked up in these institutions behind barbed-wire fences, some of us close enough to see our own homes or our family members walking by on the road. Others were removed hundreds of miles from their community, not knowing if they would ever see their family again. We didn’t know why we were locked up in these institutions or
if we would ever get out. Those who died or were gravely ill or injured simply disappeared from our ranks; we were never told what happened to them.

Most attention has been given to the physical and sexual abuses that were common in the schools. Students were assaulted and maimed, resulting in lifelong deformities and social dysfunctions that often led to widespread criminalization and incarceration. Through these years of abuse and turmoil, I was filled with anger and imagined that when I was older I would be free to seek revenge. I had visions of dying alone, without ever seeing my mom and dad or grandparents again.

It was not until much later, in my intense discomfort with being an Indian, that I understood that the government and its agents, the churches, had in fact been intent on killing me as an Indian person. Their aim was to destroy the Indigenous Nations by taking away the children, using the tools of racism, indoctrination, removal, and institutionalization. We would no longer exist as Indigenous People or as Nations.

Despite what has already been written and published about the experiences of these child victims, less is understood about the spiritual and emotional abuses that were endured. Most survivors will not speak about their experiences because of shame and traumatization. Post-traumatic stress disorder is common among survivors. Untold numbers did not survive the schools or the devastating aftermath of their experiences.

The children lost their identity, name, home, family relationships, and sense of belonging. We lost our understanding of who we were, where we came from, and where we were going. Many never found their way home again. Many died trying.

The worst thing that was done to us was psychological manipulation. It was pounded into us repeatedly that Indians are no good, evil, savages, with heathen languages, no intelligence, no culture, no caring families, and no reason for existence. We were left, helpless and hopeless, to despise ourselves and our own people, with only anger, resentment, and deep sorrow over our abandonment and losses.

No mention of genocide was used by Canada in its reluctant message of apology to Indian residential school survivors. In response to legal action initiated by survivors, the government of Canada, very careful to exclude the term or even the insinuation of genocide, was court-ordered to enter into the Residential Schools Settlement Agreement with survivors.

The apology in the House of Commons became a feather in the hat of the government, distinctive in its attention to ceremonial detail yet almost self-congratulatory for its own perceived success in the removal of First Nations influence and participation in the development of the country.
Canada’s government was confident that the apology would appear to be guided by its goodwill, as with all Indian treaties and countless agreements and commitments, while equally confident that it would control any and all ramifications. Aboriginal acceptance would be managed with short-term financial investment and limited, time-controlled programming.

Thus the term genocide was not applied to the deliberate, Parliament-sanctioned action to “kill the Indian in the child,” and the Indian residential schools policy was portrayed as a well-intentioned though misguided, brief event in history, while also viewed darkly as a victory in the rape of the lands and natural resources of Turtle Island (aka North America).

Canada meanwhile lost forever the rich resource of generations of its First Peoples. The ingenuity and creativity of young minds were extinguished, the extreme amount of potential and talent were never nurtured or allowed to flourish, and the character and integrity of an Indigenous society founded on prized values and principles were almost destroyed.

Some individuals say that the term genocide is appropriate only to convey the complete destruction of a race. Ironically, given that we Indigenous Nations have inconveniently survived by the threads of our own spirituality, resilience, and courage, these same individuals use our survival to deny the truths of our history, whether or not it is called genocide.

There is only now a small, growing acknowledgment in Canada that everyone in Canada has been, is, and will be affected by the legacy of the Indian residential schools policy. For those who think of this as “ancient history,” the last Indian residential school in Canada closed its doors only in 1996. The documentation and analysis in Colonial Genocide in Indigenous North America is thought-provoking and compelling. It reaches to the heart, mind, and spirit. From the voices of these scholars comes a call to every reader to examine our own awareness, depth of caring, and the integrity with which we apply our own thought processes and our voices to the lives and relationships we build, influence, protect, and empower.

In the end we must each make our own informed assessment about colonial genocide as a descriptor of the history of Indigenous North America and, more important, as a context for the future we must build together.

For myself, while in Indian residential schools I never did think that I would be killed there. I knew that my life as I knew it had ended and that I would never again experience the joy and freedom of my early years, the freedom of laughter, love, and security. They say that time heals all wounds, but that isn’t true. The wounds just become part of you: the fear and frustration, tears and anguish, and the overwhelming feeling of futility.

At this point in my life I am coming to terms and dealing with what
Canada did to me and my people. As children, we were victims, helpless, unable to help ourselves or to change anything. I have reclaimed my language and my culture, family, and community and am working toward a higher degree of reconciliation. I am proud now to be an Anishinaabe, of the Ojibway Nation, one of Canada’s First People.

Kitchi miigwech neechis. Thank you my friends, for building a platform for truth, reconciliation, restoration. This book has the power to lead us forward in building bridges of respect, caring, and change in the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.