



## VOICES FROM THE FIELD

Welcome to [\*Voices from the Field\*](#), a podcast produced by the National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health (NCCAH), which focuses on innovative research and community-based initiatives promoting the health and well-being of First Nation, Inuit and Metis peoples in Canada.

This *Voices from the Field* podcast is a collaboration between the NCCAH and [Media Indigena](#).

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## EPIISODE 7

### **Turning a new page: Cultural safety, critical creative literary interventions, truth and reconciliation, and the crisis of child welfare**

This episode of *Voices from the Field* is based on the article, [\*Turning a new page: cultural safety, critical creative literary interventions, truth and reconciliation, and the crisis of child welfare\*](#), co-authored by Drs. [Sarah de Leeuw](#) and [Margo Greenwood](#), of the National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health (NCCAH). The podcast is an extended conversation between Sarah and Rick Harp of Media Indigena to explore cultural safety, the arts and creative expressions as offering up solutions for decolonizing the child welfare system. de Leeuw explains how child welfare is a form of ongoing colonial violence that is rooted back to colonial policies and structures of residential schools and the 60s Scoop. She describes how the present day child welfare system is an extension of colonial violence that disproportionately impacts Indigenous children, families and communities. However she indicates that ‘literary immersion’, or opportunities to read Indigenous literary arts and creative writings, has the potential to disrupt colonial discourses, catalyze “cross-cultural cross-generational understandings,” and encourage greater cultural safety for Indigenous children and families within the child welfare system.



## BIO

[Sarah de Leeuw](#) grew up in northern British Columbia, a landscape which early on inspired her interests in cultural geographies, colonialism, and relationships between non-Indigenous and Aboriginal peoples. In partnership with artists, healthcare professionals, and Indigenous scholars and communities, Sarah de Leeuw works at the crossroads of creative arts, humanities, and the medical-health sciences. Her academic scholarship, literary practices, and community activism expand Canada's understanding about: marginalized rural northern geographies; colonialism as a harmful

determinant of Indigenous peoples' health, and; ways for medical-health sciences to open spaces for imaginative and decolonizing ways of knowing and practicing.



## BIO

Rick Harp was born and raised in Winnipeg, Manitoba, a city located both at the heart of the continent and smack dab in the middle of nowhere. Rick is a citizen of the [Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation](#) in what's now known as northern Saskatchewan. While pursuing his BA as a student of political science at Carleton University in Ottawa, he got bit hard by the radio bug at the campus and community station, CKCU-FM. Thus began a twenty-plus-year career in broadcast media, including national and regional stints at CBC Radio, the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN), and NCI-FM. A

former Artistic/Managing Director of the Winnipeg Aboriginal Film Festival, he is a co-founder and president of the INDIGENA Creative Group (MI's parent company). In 2010, Rick was eager to chart his own course, launching the online magazine [MEDIA INDIGENA](#), whose roster of original Indigenous voices offered an intelligent alternative to mainstream perspectives. Although the site's output has ebbed and flowed over the years, its recent re-invigoration as a weekly podcast heralds a return to form as a lively, active source of 'Interactive Indigenous Insight.'

## TRANSCRIPT

**Rick Harp:** Welcome to *Voices from the Field*, a podcast produced by the National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health (NCCAHA). This program focuses on innovative research and community based initiatives promoting the health and well-being of First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples in Canada.

Written in conjunction with Margo Greenwood, the paper, "*Turning a new page: cultural safety, critical creative literary interventions, truth and reconciliation, and the crisis of child welfare*", was produced as part of their work at the National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health where Sarah is a Research Associate and Margo the Academic Lead.

In a moment we'll hear how de Leeuw and Greenwood argue that the ongoing crisis of Indigenous child apprehensions must be viewed in their historical and cultural contexts – that is, as an extension of long-standing violent discourses that validate the rights of settler state powers like Canada to intervene into the lives of Indigenous families and communities with impunity. Let's turn now to my conversation with Sarah de Leeuw who joined me from Kelowna, BC. Sarah de Leeuw, welcome.

**Sarah de Leeuw:** Hi, thanks Rick. I am so excited to be talking with you this morning.

**Rick Harp:** So Sarah, in this paper you co-authored with Margo Greenwood, you write "broadly speaking, cultural safety starts with identifying inherent power relationships between service providers and the people who use the services." Why does that identification potentially matter for Indigenous people who find themselves on the receiving end of child welfare services?

**Sarah de Leeuw:** I think it matters a lot because I think colonial history is built on the idea that power doesn't matter or that power naturally sits with non-Indigenous colonial subjects, often Euro-white folks. By not acknowledging that power does exist, by sort of making opaque the reality of power, what happens is we can, those of us who are non-Indigenous White settler subjects, easily slip into a role where we normalize and take for granted our right to impose perspectives and ways of living and knowing and being onto other people. If power isn't expressly acknowledged, if it isn't foregrounded, if it isn't highlighted, if it isn't critically thought about, it simply disappears, it becomes normalized, it becomes invisible. And what that defaults to is people with power continuously deploying it in the often worst interests of people from whom power has been removed. Very specifically, I can argue and Margo and I do argue in this paper, in the realm of child welfare – and if you could see me Rick I would be air quoting "welfare"— in the realm of child welfare, what that has looked at really since the earliest settler contact in the Americas is settler colonial subjects, Euro-colonial settler subjects, executing power and believing that they have power over especially Indigenous children. They think that their ways of knowing and being are somehow superior to Indigenous ways of knowing and being. We know from looking at history, particularly in the realm of Indigenous children and non-Indigenous settler subjects, that that kind of execution of power has come to no end of terrifying outcomes. So one of the things that we argue in this paper is that we need to unsettle that kind of normalized assumption about who holds power, who knows best about children, particularly Indigenous children, and

who has the right to impose power through state endorsed power structures like child welfare, like residential schools, like reserve systems, like the eugenics system.

**Rick Harp:** Now something I am sure you've come up against is this idea that you know "well doesn't the child welfare system negatively affect everyone and anyone who comes into contact with it?" So why do Indigenous people need a unique or a specific approach to their situation?

**Sarah de Leeuw:** Well, first and foremost, I do get that question. I've been writing about child welfare as an arm of the colonial state for well over a decade now and it's a fairly common sort of response, "well if it is bad for one person, it is bad for everybody. Why are you kind of highlighting the violence that it imposes within Indigenous communities?" So just to tackle the premise of that question, I would say that it's a false premise. Child welfare does not bear down equally on all people. Similar arguments have been made about residential schooling. There were boarding schools for more children than just Indigenous children in Canada. The difference, however, is a difference in kind. First and foremost, child welfare bears down much more heavily on Indigenous families and communities than it does on non-Indigenous families and communities. There are simply more Indigenous children apprehended for lesser reasons by the state than non-Indigenous children are apprehended. Secondly, the removal of Indigenous children from their communities, their territories, and their families – be those urban or be those on reserve – has much greater impact for a colonized community than it does for settler community because the state has systematically sought to disrupt the rights of Indigenous children and families throughout history. Again since very early colonial contact, because the effort has been so systematic, the continuous erosion of Indigenous identity and Indigenous family connection through state imposed regulations like child welfare does more adversely affect Indigenous children. Finally, non-Indigenous children are often placed with other non-Indigenous families, so the placement of children when removed from families and communities looks different than it does when Indigenous children are removed. In the case of many Indigenous children in this country, until very recently – and I would argue in a fairly minimal way – Indigenous children continue to be placed in the homes and care of non-Indigenous people which means culture, identity, sense of self, connection to territory, connection to family are further eroded and unequally eroded as compared to non-Indigenous children. So the very premise of an idea that, "well child welfare negatively [affected] everybody" is simply... it's a factually incorrect argument. Child welfare much more adversely impacts Indigenous children and the fact that we can see it as an extension of an historic effort to eliminate Indigeneity in the Americas means that it is even more potent and even more imperative that we address it as an act of colonial violence very specifically. It is not unlike the justice system in this country. I don't think it [is] fair to say, "Well the justice system adversely impacts all people who run into it". The fact of the matter is that Indigenous men are incarcerated at rates far higher than any other population. The fact of the matter is that Indigenous children are removed

at higher rates than any other population in this country. It adversely affects Indigenous children, Indigenous families, Indigenous communities, in ways that it just doesn't impact other families and communities.

**Rick Harp:** You also wrote, "Common sense was and is a crucial colonial strategy with remarkable resiliency offering colonizers a means to distance themselves from more obviously coercive or violent ideas, actions or policies". I am wondering are [we] to take from that observation that you regard, that you and Margo regard, child welfare systems as a form of violence?

**Sarah de Leeuw:** Yes, I absolutely 100% unequivocally view child welfare, especially in Canada – particularly as it bears down on Indigenous children, families and communities – as an act of colonial violence. There is just no two ways about it if we look at it historically. The current child welfare system is an extension of the 60's Scoop, which was an extension of the residential schooling project. Colonial violence has systematically made effort to de-Indigenize landscapes, to unsettle Indigenous ways of knowing and being. I'd argue that there are various reasons for that. They tend to do with resource extraction, land claims, eradication of people who might stand in the way of an ultimate supreme colonial ruling. I'd argue that most colonial subjects, most colonial folks, don't want to think of themselves, and maybe don't even consciously understand ourselves, as perpetrators of a certain kind of colonial violence. So instead we cloak what we are doing in best intentions and sort of common sense, "well look, it just makes sense to remove these children and put them in residential schools so that we can give them the best education and we can do what we are doing in the best of intended ways". That kind of logic fueled residential schools and extended into the 60's Scoop and into a variety of other extraordinary invasive activities of the colonial state into Indigenous children and families and communities. I would argue that, absolutely, it is not that an individual social worker wakes up on a Tuesday morning at 7:30 and thinks, "Ah, I'm going to go and actively disrupt Indigenous communities". They are instead enveloped in a larger system of common sense, and that common sense argues things like, "Well you know if a child seems to be neglected, it makes common sense that a child should have the best and brightest future ahead of them." But the thing that goes unquestioned is whose definition of neglect? Whose definition of the best and brightest future? If a child doesn't have a four poster bed and access to swimming lessons and soccer and a series of other tropes and trappings of the brightest future possible – and let's be clear, that kind of language is exactly what's embedded in child welfare policies in this country – if a child doesn't have that, a social worker might think, "It is common sense that we'd want this child to have the best possible outcomes for the future". Who's going to argue against that kind of wording? The thing that might go unsaid is, Wow, maybe this child lives in a house that is a little run down around the edges, maybe they share a mattress with 3 or 4 other kids, but they're embedded in family. They're embedded in community. They have lineage. They have genealogical structure. It may very well be that they have connection to language and land. Yes, perhaps there is some common sense – if we're looking at the common sense of non-Indigenous, often Euro-White

settler subjects – a common sense vision that that child might have a better and brighter future if they had soccer lessons and access to whole foods and, you know, organic coffee down the street, I don't know. But what needs to be unsettled, what needs to get shaken up, is the very definitions of whose common sense we're defining the best interests of children and families in. I would argue that common sense has always been a kind of logic that lies behind apprehension of Indigenous children, disruption of Indigenous families and communities. It's been there for as long as settler colonial subjects have been engaged with Indigenous people.

**Rick Harp:** At one point, your piece references the term “colonial benevolence” - an oxymoron if there ever was one - and yet it is this very fitting description for how child welfare interventions have been rationalized and justified. It occurred to me, thinking about this, there is a deeply paternalistic idea often left unstated, in the ways you've just alluded to, that Indigenous peoples need to be saved from themselves which, I think, it truly insidious because not only does it act as this kind of retroactive rationale for non-Indigenous people seizing control of Indigenous lands and bodies, it frames that as those who enact that as somehow virtuous, as you pointed out ... what someone once ironically called at the time the Whiteman's' burden. But here's where I think it becomes really sinister, if I am using that word appropriately, is that if you colonize a people long enough, break up their families, push them off their homelands, basically alienate them and dislocate them, and you know you will place them into a state of constant disarray, and then you end up in this bizarre place where those who've mangled the lives of Indigenous peoples now decide [that] now they will be the ones who “fix them”. So the architect of the problem also gets to design and implement the solution. I mean this is so messed up, if I may be completely frank.

**Sarah de Leeuw:** So I'll answer your question three ways. First and foremost, yes, I couldn't agree with you more. I think that colonial subjects have been extraordinarily good at consistently distancing ourselves from our own culpability. We always come up, if I may be sort of puny here, as shiny and white, virtuous, clean, tidy. Our hands aren't bloody. We love to look that way. This is a global phenomena. Margo and I have anchored our argument in Canada, you know, a lot of the language we've sort of interrogated comes out of British Columbia. But this is exactly – you know what the Dutch did in the West Indies – it is what the French did in the Congo. This is a colonial trick if you will. It is sort of a magical play that we get to not only have the hat, but we know where the rabbit comes from and we explain it all and it's as if everything else on the stage just doesn't really exist. We get to explain ourselves away. We get to be benevolent. My second response to your question is, and I'll be frank here and I'm not trying to be slippery, I'm not convinced that it is my place... I look to better minds than my own, indeed the minds of Indigenous scholars, to talk about some of the challenges that Indigenous communities and families face. I agree those are there, they are absolutely the outcome of carefully planned colonial architecture as you said. But I think one of the things

that especially non-Indigenous people need to pay more attention to is the remarkable strength that still exists in Indigenous communities.

**Rick Harp:** Oh absolutely!

**Sarah de Leeuw:** And I wasn't in any way, shape or form suggesting that you were not acknowledging that. What I am saying, and I'll bring this back to child welfare, I think that one of tricks that...I'm just going to segue here for a moment, Rick, and say I recognize that colonial subjects, especially in Canada, are not all White. So you know I think racialized colonial subjects bring in a new discussion into this but for the sake of this discussion, I am going to sort of argue that I'm often talking about Eurocentric White Colonial subjects and this sort of White supremacy that supersedes a lot of these conversations. A bit synonymously, I am going to use colonial violence and White supremacy as meaning the same thing. I think one of the tricks of White supremacy, particularly in child welfare, is to constantly understand Indigenous communities and families as pathologized, and there I'll quote a Cree Elder, Willie Ermine, who observes that that is, in fact, one of, as you were saying, one of the most insidious tricks of White supremacist colonial violence is to constantly pathologize Indigenous people. I think that tracks perfectly onto the rationales that sit behind the child welfare intervention into Indigenous families. I think one of the things that especially White Euro-colonial subjects need to do to unsettle that orientation is to just bloody quit speaking about Indigenous peoples as this pathologized group and somehow suggesting that White people are beyond all of kind of the crap and muddiness that we seem so comfortable linking to Indigenous bodies and Indigenous lands. I think that's an imperative role of White settler subjects to engage [in] conversations that really laude and valorize and celebrate Indigenous people in this country. I think, in fact, if we did more of that we'd probably see less of a common sense under gridding towards Indigenous families and communities that suggested apprehensions of Indigenous children was a fine laudable benevolent action.

**Rick Harp:** But wait, Sarah, are you suggesting that we take a complex nuanced approach to Indigenous humanity?

**Sarah de Leeuw:** Wait! Hold on! That might be too radical first thing in the morning. Fundamentally, as humorous as that sounds, I think – and I don't want to go casting too many stones – but you know one of the things that this paper doesn't [do], isn't' able to point out.... I worked in women's centres for years. I worked in women's prisons. I've worked with dozens of social workers. I've worked with hundreds of families who've had their children removed, and consequently hundreds of social workers who do that removal, and again, I don't think you know Jane Smith wakes up in the morning and thinks "I'm going to enact colonial violence today". I think the thing is there's just a common sense, unquestioned, sort of

normalcy that for instance comes to my shiny house and sees a bottle of wine on the counter and thinks, “Oh that’s fine, she’s a pleasant professor and she probably had a nice glass of white wine last night,” as opposed to walking into an apartment that, you know, has some rougher around the edges kind of components to it, sees a bottle of white wine and thinks, “Ok, we’ve got a drinking problem”. There is whole series of anti-Indigenous racist discursivities that frame the way we understand people. I don’t think social workers are fully taught to think about these sort of common sense assumptions in the nuanced and problematic ways that they deserve to be thought about.

**Rick Harp:** And I think it is an ongoing challenge to name peoples’ pain without, like you say, pathologizing them, and it’s quite remarkable how paternalism and pathologization fit hand in glove when it comes to these situations.

**Sarah de Leeuw:** Yeah, I think... you know, I grew up in very, very small remote communities in British Columbia. I grew up in Haida Gwaii and in Terrace. I think that this pathologized, paternalistic lens has so many characteristics to it, and it’s so insidious and complicated. It’s sort of this constant unquestioned hierarchalization of, “Well it’s the margin, therefore it needs our attention. Oh, it’s it the outskirts”. You know, it’s these strange discursive, even linguistic, structures that set up how we understand the world. “Oh, it’s outside. Oh it’s beyond”. I think we do need to unsettle those things because if there’s anything to be learned from history, it’s that people aren’t always setting out to do evil when they undertake the most egregious kind of action. Common sense and benevolence have often been under the guise for some of the most heinous of activities that humans have conducted on each other.

**Rick Harp:** So let’s turn to methods that hopefully destabilize these systems. I am going to quote you and Margo again, “A growing body of evidence in both the medical and health sciences highlights a powerful connection between creative arts and cultural safety. For individuals in positions of power, studies have shown that immersion in creative arts can help build the empathy and understanding required for culturally safe practices”. So can you give us a sense of how this might translate into better concrete outcomes on the ground?

**Sarah de Leeuw:** I think one of the ways that that insidious sort of benevolence and pathologization works is because people simply haven’t made efforts to unsettle their common sense perspectives. I mean I think peoples’ perspectives and attitudes change often through proximal relations. So for instance, you know my granny was quite homophobic but that changed when I brought home people who didn’t adhere to her sort of clichés about non-heterosexual people. Those sorts of laws and regulations have shifted over time in this country because of the proximity, the realization that, “Wait, my assumptions about certain kinds of people

and bodies are simply wrong. I know they are wrong because I come into close contact with them and I realize goodness, I could be doing better, I could be thinking better, I could be engaging differently.” The truth of the matter is that we don’t, in this country, all have the capability, for instance, to go and live in Kispiox, or Skidegate, or you know a myriad of vibrant, incredible First Nations communities. For instance, child welfare social workers are not always able to gain proximal and nuanced understandings about Indigenous families and communities by living and being immersed in them. So what’s the next best thing? The next best thing, the evidence suggests, is the immersion into voices, and visions, and stories, and realities of the people [who] we want to change attitudes about. For instance, if we want to ensure that the child welfare workers of tomorrow have a deeper understanding about resiliency and humour and law and protocol and strength in Indigenous communities, why not have them read things like, you know, Lee Maracle’s Raven Song? Why not have them immersed in an exhibit by Bill Reid? Why not have them interact with a work of Rebecca Belmore? Why not have people gain a close up immersive understanding of Indigenous people through the arts and stories that Indigenous people have been so generous to put on the public record? This is not disruptive for Indigenous communities. It is not a bunch of sort of guilt ridden, hand wringing, White people doing and asking Indigenous people to sort of please give more to us. These are things that [are] already on the public record. They’ve generously been put there in order for non-Indigenous, White settler, subjects to gain deeper understandings of Indigenous communities and families. And the truth is, those voices and stories and words and images provide incredible insight so that Indigenous people and families and communities cease to be such a mystery to non-Indigenous people and can thus be attended to in a more nuanced and, I would argue, empathetic way.

**Rick Harp:** So that’s their place in the whole system. How does that then transform how they behave going forward? What does that mean? How does that benefit an Indigenous person whose son was just taken by the system? Are you saying that it is less likely, for example, that the child will be seized? They will try to find ways for them to keep them with their family. I’m trying to get a sense of that.

**Sarah de Leeuw:** How does this rubber hit the road? It is a great question Rick. First and foremost, I’ll harken back to something that Margo and I said early on in this paper, and this is something that I’ve argued in a number of other papers and places that I’ve written, which is that in my estimation, the child welfare system simply needs to be dismantled. It doesn’t work. It’s hinged and linked to a colonial history. It’s an extension of residential schooling and the 60’s Scoop. I am not a believer in the state apprehending Indigenous kids, full stop. I think before we get to that place of a dismantlement of the child welfare system, however, we have to make the players involved in the current systems somehow understand, in a more nuanced way, their role in the apprehension process. To be very clear, I would like fewer Indigenous children to be apprehended. I think that might come about if child welfare workers had a more nuanced

understanding of Indigenous families and communities. I do think that that will potentially come about through their engagement through the arts. Now, I think there's other ways that Indigenous families and children might deploy arts-related activities in order to make their voices better understood by child welfare workers. Here I am thinking particularly of child welfare workers in a culturally safe environment or in an environment that was leaning towards cultural safety, engaging the people they apprehend through things like letter writing. Imagine if an Indigenous teenager was able to write their perspectives of the world and have a case worker read that, know that case worker was going to read that. The truth of the matter is that most of case workers in this country are overloaded. They don't engage with the children that they apprehending, [gaining an understanding of] those children's perspectives on the issues of apprehension. So again, things like letter writing, you know co-creation of poetics, things like that might serve to amp-up the communication between child welfare workers and Indigenous families and communities. It takes pressure off of things like filling out forms. I get lost filling out forms. I wouldn't get lost writing a heart-felt letter about my state and what I want in the world. I do get hampered by having to fill out a zillion forms. I think the apparatuses through which apprehension works also have to be changed. Again, I'm not suggesting that we need to somehow make child welfare more comfortable. I'm suggesting these as somewhat interim solutions. An end-game goal for me really is to see the dismantlement of what I cannot help but think in another 50 years is going to be viewed as a system as archaic as the 60's Scoop and the residential schooling system.

**Rick Harp:** So emphasizing that this is at best an interim measure, I still would like to engage in a conversation about the willingness perhaps of the child welfare workers, or the capacity thereof, to engage in these kinds of activities because as the saying goes, "You can lead a horse to water you can't make it drink". Who's to say that child welfare workers will even engage this material? I raise [this] because frankly a lot of cultural production is designed precisely to distract us from reality, which I think kind of conditions our expectations of arts and entertainment where we seek to be soothed, not so much challenged. So how would we overcome that conditioned expectation?

**Sarah de Leeuw:** I think it probably has to be uniformly instituted, and I agree. You know Rick, I work in a faculty of medicine and I know that discussions of cultural safety or anti-Indigenous racism are tuned out by exactly the future professionals for whom that conversation is most needed, right? There will always be, I think, people who are simply uninterested in engaging. You are right, you can lead the horse to water but you can't make them drink. I think, however, that there are people who straddle a more middle line who actually haven't really thought about this. I'm amazed, when I teach 4<sup>th</sup> year students in my university classes, up until 4 or 5 years ago, I remember I had a class of 14 or 15 4<sup>th</sup>-year students in British Columbia here and 8 of those students had never heard of residential schooling, and when they went home to talk to their parents about it, their parents hadn't heard about it. I don't think that these people are necessarily horses who are

unwilling to be led to water. I don't think they act or are unwilling to drink the water. I think they actually weren't aware that the water was there. I think there's a possibility of reaching a fairly significant number of people by offering professional development courses, by insisting that part of the curriculum for social work classes and social work courses and curriculum at university [is to] have an immersion in arts and letters produced by Indigenous people in this country. I suspect there's going to be a percentage of people who go through social work programs who simply say, "I know what's best. I'm here to implement the rule of the law, this is law. I know the need for apprehension when I see it. I don't need to be told what constitutes it. I don't need it to be nuanced. I know it when I see it". But I think there's also a good percentage of people – to return to the metaphor of bringing that horse to water – who simply didn't know that the water existed. If we can point out that water, they very well may drink it more willingly than we knew they would.

**Rick Harp:** At the risk of some repetition here, I'm trying to get a sense of what your hope is, or maybe even expectation, when it comes to the results of this kind of approach because, with all due respect to the immense body of work out there, I've yet to come across the book or the movie that is going to compel or convince Canada to give the land back. This is something you allude to in your piece and I'll quote it for peoples' benefit, "Still, and as we and others have observed, much of the work claiming or aiming to be decolonizing or anti-colonial either falls short in its good but misplaced intentions or fails to fully comprehend the virtually impossible nature of the work that is truly and fully decolonizing and anti-colonial; that is, reinstating lands, resources, cultures, languages, families and nations that have already been destroyed or are still permanently occupied and can never be given back. Other scholars have noted that neither decolonizing nor anti-colonial work tidily wraps up or finishes with an unsettling of colonial power. This too suggests that caution should be rightfully applied to ideas about cultural safety work which can also never be understood as wrapped up or 'complete,' but which must instead keep evolving in pace with the transformative power of colonial privilege and power." Where would you like to leave people in terms of reasonable expectations about the outcome of this? I mean I think I agree with you and Margo, really we want to see an end to the child welfare system or at least a system that seems to be built around the core and seemingly only tool in their toolkit of apprehension. What do you not hope to see [but] what do you think can be made possible through destabilizing peoples' ideas around child welfare, specifically as it applies to Indigenous families?

**Sarah de Leeuw:** So just let me start with the initial part of your question Rick, and I think it's a question that deserves the most fulsome of answers and yet the only answer that I can honestly give is I don't have an answer. The question of full decolonization, which is for settler people in this country to exit, in my estimation, that's probably not going to happen. I don't know. I can't, you know, foresee the future, but if I were a betting woman, I would bet on the fact that concepts of reterritorialization by Indigenous people in

the lands of the Americas will never occur. I think we have to be honest with the again magnitude of colonial power. It means that colonial subjects will always be occupiers, will always be extensions of the system that they sought to implement for our own gain. With that in mind and with the more pragmatic set of realizations, and I guess – and I don't mean this flippantly – I guess in part reaching towards some of the goals of, say for instance, the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation report and Calls to Action, I think we do have to change now and do better as soon as we can. I think it's imperative. I think there has to be some kind of systematic nuancing and unsettling of very violent tools that really are blunt instruments that are... they're just raw extensions of the colonial power that has consistently wrought damage for the last 250 years, and by that I mean non-Indigenous intervention into Indigenous families and communities. So while I'm not... I don't believe that full decolonization will ever occur, I do think if non-Indigenous White settler subjects begin to much more critically self-reflect on the power that we will always hold and attempt to destabilize and not use that power in an unnuanced, uncritically thought about, way we can at least stop some of the most egregious ongoing colonial violences that we see. I would argue that those are the things, like the child welfare system, the "Justice system" in the country, things that are really blunt apparatuses that have changed very little since early colonial times. In other words, I hope we can all do better. I don't know if that's naïve. Ultimately, I'm not convinced that I have the answers to it. I think we have to understand that there may be no tidily wrapped up answers to this, but surely we can do better. We can do better than the numbers of Indigenous children that are being taken out of families and communities, that have been taken out of families and communities since contact began. Surely we can do better than that. I guess that's what I hope for Rick. You know, even 1 or 2 kids not being removed from their territory, lineage, genealogy, family, the strengths and webs of love that they would experience in their community and family, that's better than 1 or 2 kids being removed, I guess ultimately is what I feel.

**Rick Harp:** It almost sounds like a harm reduction approach to colonialism.

**Sarah de Leeuw:** You know there are, I suppose, arguments for harm reduction. I think it's a pretty harmful system and I don't know the answers to undoing it.

**Rick Harp:** But it's interesting, right? Because the concept of reterritorialization... I guess on one end of the spectrum you have the land given back and on the other end 0%. According to the late Art Manuel, we currently sit at 0.2% so there's hope that we can somehow move a little closer to 100%. It is a low bar so far.

**Sarah de Leeuw:** Well, unfortunately, I was going to say it is an embarrassing low bar. I think consciously or unconsciously that bar works in favour of White Euro-settler supremacy. I don't know that it's working for White settler folks either. I don't think it is working for anyone.

**Rick Harp:** Well that's a whole other discussion. I mean it's been said many times that those who enforce and implement oppression are themselves dehumanized in the process. They get to maintain their privileges so they have more resources to deal with it, I guess to go to psychotherapy, but it eats away at everybody in the ultimate consideration.

**Sarah de Leeuw:** When I hear folks imbued with White supremacy complaining about their hurt, I tend to tune out. I think that maybe they should go do a little more to alleviate the hurt that has been so violently imposed from coast to coast to coast in this country. But that is just my own idiosyncratic pessimism being unveiled I supposed.

**Rick Harp:** No doubt some of those feelings have motivated people to work in child welfare and there's a whole other discussion about savior complexes so...

**Sarah de Leeuw:** Yes there are but we could go on and on Rick!

**Rick Harp:** Kind of like colonialism!

**Sarah de Leeuw:** We could come up with some new tricks in order to re-perpetuate and rebill ourselves.

**Rick Harp:** I have to say, I think you rightly connect the ideas and the concepts and I guess the underlying colonial drivers that saw non-Indigenous people intervene into the lives of Indigenous people. I think you rightly connect that from the residential school era to what happens now. But as you know, and as you refer to in your piece, we had a TRC about the past and yet the present, it's like an analog and yet no one is apologizing for that now. Maybe they just cast their gaze down and shuffle their feet. We've had a lot of discussion about John A. Macdonald. How do we judge him? Do we judge him by the standards of his time? Notwithstanding the fact that there were people judging him at the time for what he did. What's our excuse today?

**Sarah de Leeuw:** I think, against the risk of retreading some of the actual wording that we've already used, I think one of the tricks of colonialism is to look behind us and not look right now at the present. I think we try to constantly distance ourselves from the past, and I suppose you know just quite broadly one of the intents of what I do is to say we can't put the past into a tidy box and disconnect it from the present. These things that are unfolding today are unfolding in the most remarkably similar fashions as precisely what it is that we are critiquing and apologizing for from the past, and unless we make those linkages, unless we stop

kind of discursively, linguistically, ideologically suggesting that, “Oh that was then, this is now. We are so sorry for then. Look at our shiny bright now and even better, let’s envision how wonderful we will be in the future”. If we constantly sever that past from the present and future, we really don’t stand a hope in terms of significantly shifting the direction that we are going. We simply continue to retread and revisit exactly the kinds of ills that we are now so ashamed of obstensibly from the past. I think that just pointing that out, just constantly insisting that that conversation be had, is one of the duties of people who are entrusted in at least attempting a little bit to unsettle normative colonial power as it currently stands.

**Rick Harp:** Sarah de Leeuw, thank you.

**Sarah de Leeuw:** Rick, it was a real pleasure.

**Rick Harp:** And once again, that was Sarah de Leeuw who along with Margo Greenwood co-authored the paper, *[Turning a New Page: Cultural Safety, Critical Creative Literary Interventions, Truth and Reconciliation and the Crisis of Child Welfare](#)*. Now as I noted off the top, both Sarah and Margo work at the National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health. Thanks again to the Centre for allowing us to co-release this conversation. To learn more about the Centre’s considerable body of work, including multiple podcasts, go to [nccah.ca](http://nccah.ca).

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