

## INTRODUCTION

June 10, 2018: It's a typical summer day in Nebraska—hot, humid, hazy. An insistent wind blows the heat around, like a convection oven. We are on a farm. Yes, there will be corn. The farmers Art and Helen Tanderup are white and in their sixties. Art is portly, a bit aloof and gruff. Helen exudes both stand-by-your-man farm wife and tough-as-nails take-no-crap rural woman.

This farm has been in Helen's family ever since the late nineteenth century, pioneering days. If you are imagining a two-story clapboard farmhouse, circa 1900, with a big porch, surrounded by a tangle of rosebushes, dignified old shade trees, and a generous circle of grass, you'd be right. Art is preparing to plant corn in his field near Neligh (pronounced Neeley) in north-central Nebraska. Helen is working the kitchen.

But the tractor remains in the barn, and the big sacks of field corn—the kernels all the same size and the same weak yellow color—sit unopened in the utility shed. Art won't be planting those today. Instead, about one hundred people are slowly gathering to help Art sow something else on his land, by hand. They come bearing small beaded bags of seeds. Poured out in your palm, they are dusty blue, pomegranate red, with some cream and butter thrown in.

These sowers have also brought tubs of potato salad and coleslaw, hefty watermelons, and still-warm pies, and many are pitching in to help Helen serve the large crowd. Perhaps, you think, it's a neighborly barn raising, a return to the homesteading era. Maybe you feel a little nostalgic, just thinking about it, if you're from a farm family, or if your childhood diet of pop culture was filled with such scenes, as mine was.

But this isn't a reunion of pioneer families. Many of the visitors are members of the Ponca tribe—separated by federal fiat into northern (Nebraska) and southern (Oklahoma) branches for over 135 years. Indians from other nearby tribes—the Omahas, Winnebagos, and Santee Sioux in the northeastern corner of the state—also have come to the gathering. They ride up to the Tanderups' farm in fully decked-out pickups. They tumble out of their trucks, laughing, in shorts, jeans, and flip-flops. Some of the women dress in handmade calico skirts ringed with ribbons. Some sport hand-beaded accessories. Almost everyone is wearing a turquoise-blue T-shirt, made especially for this day, emblazoned with several ears of multicolored maize. There are non-Indians, too, in their baseball caps and cargo shorts, their Birkenstocks and sneakers. Kids turn cartwheels on the grass; their grandparents lounge in folding chairs near the big utility shed where the food will be served.

It's clear from the hugs and the smiles, the comfortable ease, that many of these people have known one another for a while. Indeed, these modern and these ancient corn planters had originally come together in 2013 to oppose a transnational oil pipeline—the Keystone XL—that would bisect the Tanderups' farm and the homelands of the Poncas. These strangers didn't know each other then, but they shared a common concern that a pipeline spill would contaminate the water, quietly flowing underground in the Ogallala Aquifer. They feared the poisoned water would disperse for hundreds of miles.

They worried, too, that the pipeline, which would transport sticky tar sands oil over 2,200 miles from Alberta, Canada, to the Gulf of Mexico, would just make climate change worse. Against the pipeline's champions who claimed it would create much-needed jobs in rural Nebraska in the immediate future, they said it would only bring environmental calamity in the long run. And they shared a common indignation that a foreign corporation, with the government's backing, could simply take the precious land for its own purpose without the consent of its owners. Slowly the strangers became political allies.

And then something else happened. Political alliances grew into personal friendships. In November 2013, the Tanderups hosted their first spirit camp, "where a group gather together and do a lot of prayers,

ceremony, visiting, getting to know each other,” as Art explains. The harvest was done. Winter was creeping in and starting to chill and darken the bright days of autumn. Everything grew quieter.

For four cold days, with about six inches of snow on the ground, forty to sixty people gathered each day at the spirit camp. Many of them hailed from seven or eight nearby tribes. Non-Indian farmers and environmental activists converged on the farm, too. They built fires to keep warm and raised a tepee. They joked that cowboys and Indians were finally uniting.

The Keystone XL protesters strategized politically, but they also became closer as they tended the fire, made and shared meals, prayed together, and told stories. Most attendees left at twilight as the temperature dropped and night set in. But a few hardy souls remained. “A bunch of us would stay and . . . we would go into the tepee, and we had a fire in there,” Art recalls, “and we could take our coats off and . . . be nice and comfy, and we would sit around and talk about things.”

Mekasi Horinek, from the Ponca tribe of Oklahoma, was one of those who stayed during the cozy evenings in the tepee. From him and other Poncas, the Tanderups learned the tribe’s history. The Poncas had been a small tribal nation; by the 1870s, they numbered just about seven hundred. In the early 1800s they had lived for most of each year in a village where the Niobrara River greets the Missouri River, about fifty miles north of the Tanderups’ farm.

There in the fertile river bottom the Poncas grew the “three sisters”—squash, beans, and corn—as well as tobacco. Each summer most tribal members journeyed out onto the vast surrounding grassy plains for the annual buffalo hunt. They returned to their home base each August or September to harvest and preserve their crops for the winter ahead.

The site of the Poncas’ former village in Nebraska is now a state park. It attracts state residents and some out-of-state tourists, intent on canoeing, rafting, tubing, or tanking down the Niobrara River. This last endeavor consists of riding with a bunch of people in a big metal stock tank, usually with large quantities of beer. You hear tales of virtual traffic jams on the river on hot summer weekends. Since I’m a bit of a recluse, and sunburn easily, I always stayed away from the scene.

I had lived in Nebraska for fifteen years before I made it to the Poncas' homelands. I could not believe how stunning it was. From a high bluff in Niobrara State Park, the tall grass willowing all around in the early summer, you can turn to the north and track the Missouri River as it might have looked hundreds of years ago, before Lewis and Clark rowed up its waters. You can face to the south and see the sand bars forming little islands in the broad Niobrara River. At this spot there is no sign of the dams that plug the rivers. The water flows as if it were free.

Walking along the bluffs today, you can appreciate why it was a favorite spot for European and American traders, as well as artists, in the early 1800s. You can see why other tribes, the American government, and settlers coveted this land. You can understand why the Poncas loved this place so much and resisted attempts by all these other invaders to wrest it away from them.

To stay in their homelands, in 1858 the Poncas sent a delegation to Washington, D.C., to negotiate a treaty, their third, that secured for them a small reservation of about 58,000 acres on the Niobrara River in exchange for ceding the rest of their land—an estimated 2,334,000 acres—to the U.S. government. They thought that with this concession they could finally live undisturbed and in peace. But it was not to be.

On one of those tranquil nights in the spirit camp tepee, Mekasi told the Tanderups that in the mid-1870s the U.S. government decided to forcibly move his tiny tribe to Indian Territory, present-day Oklahoma. The Poncas could not fathom why they were to be uprooted. They were not at war with the United States, as many of the nearby Lakota nations were. The Poncas, in fact, impressed American government authorities as “friendly,” “loyal,” “peaceable,” and “well-behaved.”

The Poncas got along well with their settler neighbors and had their sympathy when the government suddenly ordered them into exile. Local white settlers sent telegrams to the secretary of the interior and the commissioner of Indian affairs to protest. Two local newspapers vociferously opposed the Poncas' removal.

But the Poncas' record of amiability and their support from local settlers did not matter. The U.S. government insisted on their removal. And it did so in the cruelest fashion. A federal inspector simply showed

up out of the blue at the Ponca Agency in 1877 and informed the tribe that they were to be removed. Most of the tribal members refused to go. The inspector brought sixty members of the cavalry to force the Poncas to move. As Chief White Eagle described it, "The soldiers got on their horses, went to all the houses, broke open our doors, took our household utensils, put them in their wagons, and pointing their bayonets at our people, ordered them to move." Despite Ponca protests, the government marched the seven hundred Ponca men, women, and children six hundred miles to Indian Territory.

In the tepee, as the fire crackled and bathed each person in an amber light, Mekasi told the Tanderups the story of what happened on the Poncas' Trail of Tears. Their ancestors had trudged over this very spot 136 years earlier. Storms pummeled them almost every day of their journey. Many died on the long walk, including an eighteen-month-old child, White Buffalo Girl, who was buried nearby in Neligh.

When they finally arrived in Indian Territory after fifty-five days, the government had not made any provisions for their new home. The Poncas, who had been living in wooden frame houses in Nebraska, now had to huddle in makeshift tents. They had arrived too late to plant crops, so they faced starvation. About a quarter of the tribe succumbed to malaria and other diseases. That's right. The Poncas lost 25 percent of their members. Most of their livestock died as well.

What happened to the Poncas also happened to hundreds of other Indigenous groups in every territory and state of the United States. We could call what happened something benign, something euphemistic, and we often do. We could label it westward expansion. Winning of the west. Pioneering. Homesteading. Even in 2019 a *New York Times* writer dubbed it "opening the West." But what happened to the Poncas, and other American Indian nations, was theft.

The theft did not stop with the land. Settlers stole the primary food source from many tribes: buffalo. Settler livestock appropriated the grass of the Great Plains that Indian horses and buffalo had long grazed on. Travelers on the Overland Trail plundered Indian timber and destroyed habitats where Indian people grew food or hunted. Miners dug coal and extracted uranium from under the ground on which Indian

people lived. Today the theft continues. Multinational companies are fracking oil and natural gas underneath and running pipelines on top of what remains of Indian land.

Settlers also stole what we might call—in a deceptively abstract way—*human resources*. European and American invaders, especially in New Mexico, Arizona, California, and Utah, stole the labor of children. Later, the U.S. government's agents stole Indian children outright, shipping them off to boarding schools—often without the consent of their families—for years of their young lives. There, too, the schools exploited the children for their labor. After World War II authorities removed thousands of Indigenous children from their families and communities to be raised in non-Indian families.

From the beginning of the European colonization of North America, many settlers sexually assaulted Native women, robbing them of sovereignty over their very bodies. This continues today with the disproportionate numbers of American Indian women who go missing, are murdered, or are sex-trafficked.

Then there is the pillage of Indigenous *cultural* resources. The boarding schools sought to eradicate Indigenous languages. Settlers stole Indian ceremonial items, sacred objects, and cultural artifacts and put them on the market or in museums. They even lifted Indian skeletons right out of their graves. Some settlers appropriated Indian spiritual traditions or artistic styles.

Most of this theft went unpunished. And most of it also went unrecorded, at least within settler society. The crimes involved elaborate cover-ups. Settlers sought to destroy the evidence: to erase the presence of Indigenous people from the land and to silence their voices and repress their histories. Settlers told and retold a heroic history of western expansion that denied that the crimes had ever occurred in the first place. This story—of intrepid European explorers, of colorful fur traders and plucky miners, of rugged cowboys, of brave pioneers and long-suffering homesteaders—remains our dominant popular narrative about the West.

Our national mythologies claim that the United States was founded on the principles of equality and freedom. The persistence of slavery

over two and a half centuries has long belied that uplifting narrative. But the history of settler colonialism is another stark rejoinder. Our nation is built on the plunder of Indigenous people. In Australia, where settlers engaged in similar robbery against Aboriginal people, the Australian settler writer Xavier Herbert declared in the 1970s that his country was “not a nation, but a community of thieves.” You could say the same for the United States.

For many settlers, it is tempting to stiffen into a defensive position when confronted with the disquieting truth of America’s founding crimes. Maybe this is all true, and it might have been unfair or unfortunate, some settlers concede, but look at all the progress we’ve made: the railroads laid, the settlements founded, the crops grown, the cities built, the millions of people employed. It is common to tie the settling of the West with the growth of the American nation, to protest that it all turned out great in the end.

It can be deeply uncomfortable for many settlers to face the illegitimate foundations upon which our settlement is based, to consider that what might have been progress for settlers was devastation for the Poncas, and for other Indian nations. It’s hard to acknowledge that we settlers are trespassers on Native land. It just doesn’t square with the stirring heroic story we like to tell. We settlers have been taught through our formal education and countless informal messages to believe that we are entitled to be here. It can unsettle us—literally—to realize that our settler histories of triumph are inextricably intertwined with Indigenous histories of theft.

Many academics call this theft “settler colonialism,” a phrase that sounds nearly as evasive as “westward expansion,” until you learn what it means: a form of foreign intervention bent on transferring vast territories from Indigenous peoples to their colonizers. Settler colonialism sought to replace the Indigenous population with that of settlers, a process of subjugation meant ultimately to eliminate Indigenous people rather than merely exploit them as laborers, as is so common to other forms of colonialism.

We may be tempted to see “settler” as a simple stand-in for “white person.” But the term “settler” homogenizes an enormously diverse

group. There were newly freed African Americans who took up homesteads in the West, land that had only recently been expunged of Indigenous people. There were immigrants from Asia and Mexico, who faced their own set of indignities, humiliations, and injustices when they came to America but who nevertheless occupied land once belonging to Indigenous people. Settlers encompass more than those who have been classified as white.

Nevertheless, it is clear that settler colonialism has worked in tandem with the American racial caste system to compound the privileges and magnify the benefits of white supremacy. Settler colonial dispossession of Indian people was intimately bound up with America's other founding crime: slavery. Slave owners imported 450,000 Africans to work the land from which they had removed Indigenous people. After the slave trade ended in 1808, slave owners gained ever more Indigenous land. Millions more African Americans, now born into bondage, labored on their new plantations. Native-born Protestant white settlers often guarded the perimeter of settlerdom, putting those immigrants they regarded as non-white on a provisional probationary status as settlers. Some immigrants, then as now, were good enough for labor but not for full-fledged citizenship. Thus, coming to terms with settler colonialism also entails reckoning with white supremacy.

The United States is not the only British settler colonial nation that sought to appropriate Indigenous lands. It shares this designation with a number of other countries around the world with similar histories: Australia, New Zealand, and Canada. In Australia, British authorities gained possession of nearly the entire continent, confining Australia's Indigenous people to a few tiny Aboriginal reserves or missions. In New Zealand, in just one generation, the British transferred over 95 percent of the land from Maori to settler hands.

British authorities negotiated dozens of treaties with Indigenous people in the North American lands that would eventually become Canada and the United States. U.S. officials brokered 374 treaties from 1778 to 1871. These treaties and other land acquisition schemes effectively redistributed 98 percent of Indian land to settlers in what became the United States.



The idea of negotiating treaties has the air of legitimacy, but authorities rarely compensated Indigenous peoples adequately for the land they ceded through treaty, and tribal leaders often signed many treaties under extreme duress. And as the Poncas found, settler authorities routinely violated the treaties' provisions. Treaties could not protect Indigenous people from further theft.

On a global scale, settler colonialism involved the appropriation of millions upon millions of acres worldwide from the hands of Indigenous people to those of European colonizers. In just a few generations, Indigenous people lost lands and waterways that they had possessed for centuries or millennia. New Zealand settler historian James Belich calls this the settler revolution. He notes that the spread of European migrants from their continent to settler colonies exploded in the nineteenth century, from one million migrants in the eighteenth century to fifty-six million in the next century. It was, indeed, a shockingly fast and nearly thorough change in landownership and the status of Indigenous people.

For the Indigenous families and communities that lived through this revolution, settler colonialism was not some abstract phenomenon that occurred far removed from their daily lives. Nor, as noted literary scholar and writer Beth Piatote pointed out to me, could her Nimiipuu (or Nez Perce) ancestors gain distance from or a bird's-eye view of it. It exerted a relentless and insidious force that intimately affected all those who endured it. As Larry Wright Jr., chairman of the Ponca tribe of Nebraska, puts it, "we became strangers in our own land."

What would it be like to lose so much, over so many generations? How would it feel to fear that there is no safe place, that one must always be on guard against violence and abuse? What must it be like to live with a constant threat to one's land, one's home, one's labor, and even one's children? Many Indigenous people speak of "intergenerational trauma," as well as a fierce resilience, that passes down through the generations. Black theologian and ethicist Katie Cannon wrote memorably, "Our bodies are the texts that carry the memories."

But it is not just Indigenous people who carry these embodied memories down through the generations. These histories became embedded

within settler families, too. In this case, however, they conferred benefits, advantages, and privileges to settler descendants more than trauma, impoverishment, and hardship. This history is thus an intimate one for settlers, too. We need to engage in truth and reconciliation to heal from it.

Learning of and from our settler colonial past is part of the historical reckoning we are going through collectively as a nation. Many white Americans are finally willing to face up to our nation's history of slavery and its ongoing legacies of systemic racism. It is also crucial for Americans to reckon with our occupation of stolen land, and this is a task of particular import for *white* settlers.

I myself am a white settler, and I address this book primarily to other settlers. We have work to do to educate ourselves about our settler colonial past, to seek out and listen to Indigenous voices, past and present, and then to become accountable for what has been done in our names and from which we have long benefited. It can no longer be acceptable to reap the advantages of settler colonialism without facing up to the damage it inflicted, and still inflicts, on Indigenous people. It can be deeply uncomfortable to confront and take responsibility for this history, but it can also be liberating and lead in unexpected and rewarding directions. The Tanderups learned this as they deepened their friendships with the Poncas.

American Indian people like Mekasi want settlers like the Tanderups to know their histories, but they get weary of telling their tales of misery and despair. It's hard to talk and think about the atrocities your grandmothers and grandfathers had to endure. And what's more, Indian people don't want to be defined solely by what Dakota intellectual Vine Deloria Jr. identified as narratives of "plight." "Other groups have difficulties, predicaments, quandaries, problems, or troubles. Traditionally, we Indians have had a 'plight,'" Deloria wrote in his classic *Custer Died for Your Sins*.

To American Indians an equally significant story is this: We endured. We are still here. We survived. And even more than that, we are reviving our lifeways, and we will thrive. Survive, revive, thrive. So it was that

Mekasi and other Poncas shared their dreams for the future in the spirit camp tepee. Mekasi told the Tanderups, "Our people lost the sacred corn when we were removed to Oklahoma, and it would be great to bring that corn back to its homeland. This is where it grew; this is the area it used to grow in, and it would be great to revitalize that corn." Mekasi asked Art, "Would you mind if we plant it here?" Without hesitation Art said he wouldn't mind at all. "Absolutely. Absolutely, we can plant it here," he enthused.

But the last time the Poncas had planted corn in their homelands had been 137 years before. Had any of their seeds survived? Art explained that Mekasi "and another gentleman, Amos Hinton, started searching for the medicine bundle that had some of that corn crop, that the Lakota had harvested [in the] fall of 1877," when the Poncas had been removed. "They found that medicine bundle and were able to get that handful of red sacred corn." The Poncas worked with the Pawnees who had also resurrected some of their sacred corn in the Grand Island, Nebraska, area. They brought some of their seed varieties, too, to plant at the Tanderups' farm.

After more than one hundred winters, however, would the seed grow again? Art, who had been planting corn for decades, was concerned that the seed would not germinate. "We had planted about four acres of corn that year," Art recalls. "When we were planting the red [corn] first, I said to Amos and Mekasi, 'Did you save some, in case it doesn't grow?' And they said, 'It'll grow, have faith! It will grow. This corn is sacred, and it will grow.'"

Sure enough, the Poncas and Art were delighted a few weeks later when little corn seedlings pushed out of the spring soil and began to climb toward the sun. "We had a beautiful crop of corn that year," Art remembers. "We harvested the five different varieties. Mekasi hauled it all back to Oklahoma, and they planted eighty acres of corn next year." Ever since then, the Poncas have been converging on the Tanderups' family farm twice a year, first in the early summer to plant and then in the fall to harvest their corn.

This fifth year of Ponca corn-planting at the Tanderup farm is special. Before the planting begins, a ceremony is held. Four VIPs sit in front of

a large table, covered with a bison robe. Art Tanderup sits on one end; Larry Wright Jr. is seated on the other. Helen nestles cozily between her husband and Casey Camp-Horinek, a councilwoman of the southern Ponca tribe of Oklahoma and Mekasi's mother.

Almost exactly 160 years ago, Ponca chiefs had signed over millions of acres of their homelands to the U.S. government, later to be redistributed as homesteads to people like Helen Tanderup's family. Today, on this topsy-turvy farm, instead of the Poncas giving up more of their land, Art and Helen Tanderup are signing a different kind of treaty, a deed that returns the Poncas' one-acre corn plot to them. Later the Tanderups will expand to ten acres the parcel of land that they are repatriating to the tribe.

During the ceremony, Art talks about how the Tanderups' return of the land grew out of facing the Poncas' history together at the spirit camp. This day on the farm "has been many years in the making," Art says. "We remember Mekasi talking about such an action several years ago when we sat in that tepee at the Ponca Trail of Tears camp. . . . We talked about bringing the corn back to its homeland. We talked about the homeland being taken away from the people. We talked about growing that corn again. And making all the relatives healthy. We talked about how it would be great to have some of the homeland back again."

Art acknowledges, too, that the Tanderups' return of ten acres to the Poncas is one modest step toward making amends for the history that dispossessed and divided the Poncas. "It's an honor for Helen and [me] to make this happen," he says, "and to give a small piece of what was theirs, and so terribly taken away. Such a tragedy in our American history and then to have to be driven away from this land that was taken from them. So, this is just a small gesture. . . . It can never make what went wrong right, but it can show how we feel about this and how we are honored to give this small piece of land back to the people that . . . were the stewards of this land. They took care of it. They knew how to take care of it."

After he speaks, Art signs the deed to transfer the land to the Poncas and then passes it to Helen, who quietly and decisively adds her signature. The onlookers clap their hands. Casey and Larry wipe tears from

their eyes. Casey is to speak next, but she is overcome with emotion; she bows her head on Larry's shoulder. Helen comforts her. After a few moments, Casey composes herself and says, "This day our Mother the Earth sustained us, and gave us reason to live. This day the wind is blessing us . . . allowing us to become one in spirit."

It is clear Casey is thinking of her relatives and their painful experiences. She offers "my deepest sincerest prayers to the ancestors of my people," and breaks down again. Referring to those standing behind her, she says, "My children back here; they're all named for those who walked this very trail you're standing on. And when we call their names, we're calling those spirits. They're here with us." Casey then signs the deed to great applause. She hands it to Larry to sign.

Larry tells of how pleased he is to be "with our friends, our relatives . . . to be here as part of this historic [day]. For Art and Helen and their family to be willing to do this says a lot of them." He continues, "This means a lot. To be able to sit here as partners, to come together out of the goodness of your heart and undo what the federal government did. The federal government separated our Ponca people into two different governments but Art and his family . . . have brought our nations back together to unite us with this land." Larry adds that the Ponca Tribe of Nebraska is buying 1,800 acres of land near Niobrara. "One day we'll plant Ponca corn there," he says. The Poncas then honor Art and Helen by draping Pendleton blankets, woven with colorful geometric patterns, over their shoulders. The couple accept the gift gratefully, even as the sweat rolls down their faces on this summer day.

It is not often that settlers learn about the specific piece of land they occupy, of how Indigenous people were dispossessed and displaced from it. It is rare, too, that Indigenous people have the opportunity to meet and share their history with the descendants of the settlers who displaced them. The Tanderups came to know the truth of the place where they had settled. The Poncas gently offered this truth to them, as a kind of gift.

It is even more unusual for settlers to take some responsibility for this truth, and rarer still to take action to make amends for it. The Tanderups are uncommon settlers, indeed. They went from allying with the Poncas

politically, to working with them to plant their sacred seeds, to repatriating some of their land to them in an act of accountability and personal atonement.

I don't tell you this story to lionize the Tanderups as white saviors who took pity on the Poncas and gave them a small donation of land. I am relating what the Tanderups did because they show us what can happen when settlers and Indigenous people face their painful truths together, plant new seeds of friendship, uncover paths to reconciliation and redress, and imagine new futures. They show us other possibilities of how we can hold unsettling knowledge within us and learn to live together on haunted land.

The ceremony that took place on the Tanderups' farm was reminiscent of much grander processes to reckon with and make amends for widespread human rights abuses that have occurred around the globe since World War II. These enterprises go by many names, including restorative justice, reparative justice, transitional justice, redress, and truth and reconciliation. They are big umbrella concepts that cover an array of measures: restitution, compensation, reparations, rehabilitation, apologies, and memorials.

Some atrocities have involved so many victims, have entangled such a web of perpetrators, and have been condoned by so many members of the larger society that conventional legal systems cannot adequately deal with them. Truth and reconciliation experts—whether survivors, activists, scholars, or lawmakers—have all struggled to figure out how to bring healing and justice to huge numbers of people who have suffered collective trauma. They have wrestled with how to hold perpetrators responsible for such heinous abuses and how to properly engage with the bystanders who stood silent in the face of these crimes or benefited from them.

Beginning in the 1980s, nations in Central and South America, the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia established truth (or truth and reconciliation) commissions to investigate and make redress for human rights abuses as they sought to transition from dictatorships to democratic societies. Nelson Mandela's government enacted the most high-profile

Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) after the majority-black population finally toppled apartheid and gained power in South Africa in the 1990s. In the twenty-first century, other nations have continued to use TRCs to investigate past crimes and make amends.

Everyday citizens have also initiated truth and reconciliation processes to bring to light abuses and agitate for redress. In 2004, for example, the city of Greensboro, North Carolina, established a TRC to inquire into a 1979 confrontation between white supremacists and anti-racist demonstrators that left five protesters dead. Two criminal trials by all-white juries had failed to convict any of the white supremacists involved, although a civil trial had found the Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazis jointly liable with the city's police department for the wrongful death of one victim. Many Greensboro residents believed that there was a larger systemic problem at the heart of the conflict and that Greensboro needed a truth and reconciliation process in order to address it.

Nearly all truth and reconciliation efforts, whether at the international, national, or local level, encompass at least three components: truth telling, bearing witness and acknowledgment, and redress. The humble ceremony at the Tanderups' farm followed this model. Ponca leaders told of the mistreatment their people had suffered. The Tanderups acknowledged these past harms while witnesses looked on. The Tanderups then made some recompense for past acts of dispossession.

This gesture of personal truth and reconciliation may seem like a quaint throwback to the early civil rights era or a naive dream of a utopian future. Many Americans may think the Tanderups and the Poncas are Kumbaya-singers hopelessly out of touch with the mainstream.

Yet, in a global context, the Tanderups and the Poncas are in step with a growing movement for reconciliation between settlers and Indigenous people. It is the United States that is the outlier. New Zealand created a tribunal to hear and respond to the grievances of its Indigenous people, the Maori, way back in 1975. In 2008 the Canadian and Australian governments both made official apologies for Indigenous child removal. Truth and reconciliation processes in these places have been far from perfect, but all of these nations are seriously confronting,

in a very public manner, the damages their past policies inflicted on Indigenous peoples.

But in the United States, wide public dialogue about and awareness of American Indian experience is nearly nonexistent. Most settler Americans are willfully forgetting these histories. Sometimes an event, like the protest against the Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock, flares up and briefly ignites a public conversation, but most Americans have little understanding of the broader context of Indigenous struggles. The fire of interest burns down and leaves only a faint whiff of smoke.

As a historian for more than two decades, I have written about and discussed how settler authorities forcibly removed Indigenous children in Australia, Canada, and the United States. Wherever I speak—whether on a college campus, in a church, or for a civic organization—I am invariably asked why the United States has not done what Canada and Australia have done. Why have we not held an investigation about and apologized for this heinous abuse?

Sadly, the United States is simply engaging in business as usual. As Canadian historian and politician Michael Ignatieff wrote in 1998, “All nations depend on forgetting: on forging myths of unity and identity that allow a society to forget its founding crimes, its hidden injuries and divisions, its unhealed wounds.” Or as Roger Epp, another Canadian, puts it, for a liberal democratic society to operate, “some things ha[ve] to be forgotten.”

This book explores what could be possible in the United States if we engaged in collective soul-searching and dared to remember and acknowledge. Histories of dispossession have shaped all of us on this stolen continent. And they will continue to do so. Witness the 2020 Supreme Court decision *McGirt v. Oklahoma*, which ruled that land that had been reserved for the Muscogee (Creek) nation in the nineteenth century—most of the eastern half of Oklahoma—remains Native American territory.

If you are a settler descendant, you didn’t point the bayonet, shoot the gun, or sign the law that led to dispossession. You didn’t squat on Indian land or take up a homestead. That was a long time ago, and something that maybe your ancestors, but certainly not you yourself, did.



What's more, many of you do not even have ancestors who took part in dispossession. They may have come here not as settlers but as slaves. Or they may have been recruited from Asia to build railroads in the Sierra Nevada or from Mexico to pick grapes in the Central Valley of California or harvest sugar beets in Colorado. Or maybe your ancestors immigrated directly to urban areas in the twentieth century, far removed from Indian lands. Maybe you and your family just recently arrived. You had nothing to do with America's founding crimes.

But unless you are an American Indian or Alaska Native, you are living on stolen land. The theft may have happened a long time ago and been carried out by others, but most of us are nevertheless still trespassers. And we are also ongoing beneficiaries of this theft. Even though we rarely admit it, Indian dispossession and removal opened up new possibilities and prospects for settlers, even as it foreclosed so many opportunities for Indigenous people.

We do not have to remain captive to this history, however. Many tribes, like the Poncas, and many settlers, such as the Tanderups, have made truth and reconciliation an intimate encounter and practice. They show us that confronting our painful histories can enrich and empower all of us. As Art puts it, "This whole pipeline thing is something we wish didn't happen. But, the other side of it has fulfilled our lives so much. . . . the experiences we've had, the relationships we have built. . . . it has been just phenomenal."

What would it mean to face our history of settler colonialism, as the Tanderups and the Poncas have done? How would it change us, in our everyday lives and in our relationships, to confront our past? How would it transform our society? Reckoning with the past is not to be feared or avoided. It is a path to living more fully and responsibly. Not just to survive, but to revive and thrive.

The first step, as I learned from the Tanderups and the Poncas, is for each of us settlers to become familiar with the history of our own families and the places where we have settled, to learn how this land passed from Indigenous to settler hands.