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Native Truth and Healing, The California Genocide Conference

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November 30, 2019



“Native Truth and Healing,” the California genocide conference of 2019 at San Diego State University (SDSU), was held Nov. 21-24. The formal title of the event was [“The Genocide, Oppression, Resilience, and Sovereignty of the First Peoples of California.”](#)

The focus of the conference was on the genocide committed against the California Indigenous population by the U.S. federal government, the state of California government and the settler colonists that started coming to California in large numbers following the discovery of gold at Sutter’s Mill in 1848.

The first governor of California put a price on the heads and scalps of Indigenous

people as part of a campaign to exterminate the Indigenous people of California. The U.S. government reimbursed the state of California for the expenses related to this campaign. Spain, through its conquistadors and missionary priests, had previously started its own campaign of Indigenous genocide before the so-called California Gold Rush.

The conference began with a daylong film festival that consisted of a series of documentaries, including “Native America,” “The Doctrine of Discovery,” “Gold, Greed, and Genocide,” “Native Veterans and Genocide Studies” and “Tribal Justice.”

The documentary [“The Doctrine of Discovery”](#) was followed by a discussion with the lawyer Steven Newcomb (Shawnee, Lenape), who was featured in the film and is the author of “Pagans in the Promised Land: Decoding the Doctrine of Christian Discovery.”

Newcomb compared the Papal Bull of May 4, 1493—Pope Alexander VI’s decree authorizing Spain and Portugal to colonize the Americas and enslave the Native peoples, as well as justifying the enslavement of African peoples—with the still-current U.S. law called the Doctrine of Discovery, which Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg used to deny a land claim of a Northeastern tribal nation in 2004.

The showing of [“Native Justice”](#) was followed by a discussion with the two tribal judges who were featured in the documentary, Honorable Judge Claudette White (Fort Yuma Quechan Indian Tribe) and Honorable Judge Abby Abananti (Yurok Tribe). Both judges shared their moving personal and professional struggles to keep Indigenous children from their respective nations under tribal jurisdiction.

Most of the presenters spoke of the role of capitalism, capitalist imperialism and settler colonialism as being among the root causes of the genocide that occurred throughout the Western Hemisphere.

Dr. Anthony R. Pico (Viejas Band of the Kumeyaay Nation), who is a past tribal chairman of the Viejas Band, gave an inspiring keynote address.

Following Dr. Pico, presentations included:

- “The Free and Independent Existence of the First Peoples in California Before Invasion”;
- “The Doctrine of Discovery and the Code of Domination”;
- “Glory from Pre-contact to the 21st Century”;
- “Ninis’a:n-na-ng’a’/The World came to be lying there again, the World assumed its present position: California Indian History, Genocide and Native Women”;
- “An American Genocide: The California Indian Catastrophe, 1846-1873”;
- “Surviving Genocide: Native Nations and the United States from the American Revolution to Bleeding Kansas”;
- “Resisting the Myths of Discovery and Erasure of Genocide”;
- “Genocide: Indigenous Nations and the State”;
- “VAWA (Violence Against Women Act), Resiliency, and Empowerment”;
- “MMIW (Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women)”;
- “Reevaluating Junípero Serra’s Canonization: Inverted Meaning, Modern Myth, and Human Rights Violation”;
- “The Branding of Genocide, the California Mission System, and Dispelling the Spanish Fantasy Heritage”;
- “Fausta and Sarafina: Indigenous Women and the Preservation of Power”;
- “Boarding Schools and the Contemporary Understandings and Oppressions of Native School Children”;
- “Child Welfare and ICWA (Indian Child Welfare Act): Healing Our Children, Families, and Communities”;
- “Native Language Restoration and Native Stories”;
- “Land Restorations & Retelling of California Indian Histories”;

- “The Possibility of Compensatory and Non-compensatory Reparations in the Context of the California Genocide”; and
- “Tribal Chairwomen Leadership: Indigenous Women Continuing the Protection and Safety of our Tribal Communities”.

The speakers connected the dots from the Papal Bull of May 4, 1493, which called for the non-Christian “heathen” peoples of the world to be conquered and subjugated—taking their lands and resources—and enslaved. This Bull was the third in a series related to the reconquest of most of Spain by Ferdinand and Isabel of Castile from the Muslim Moors who were then expelled from Spain along with the Jews.

Most of the focus of the conference was on the real history of what occurred and the incredible resistance and resilience of the Indigenous peoples.

Several of the presentations began with the violent conquests that precipitated the Mission System and the resistance of the Indigenous nations to these attacks, and tracked on through the land grants and *ranchería* system that followed the end of the missions.

The most horrendous attacks with the largest number of people massacred occurred during the [California Gold Rush years from 1848 to 1855](#), followed by the period of the [Indian “Wars”](#) of the Reconstruction era — mostly blatant massacres of Indigenous peoples in their camps and settlements.

Then came the horrors of the boarding schools, the intentional kidnapping of Indigenous children, sending them hundreds of miles from their people for the express purpose of “[killing the Indian to save the man](#).” These institutions were about training the girls to be maids and the boys to be field workers as the only type of “education.” The children had their hair cut, their clothing changed to European styles, and they were brutally punished if they spoke their native language or tried

to follow any of their Native customs.

The presentations made it clear that California Indigenous people were faced with only two possibilities: to assimilate and serve as the lowest class of laborers or to be exterminated. The U.S. Congress passed laws like the Dawes Act of 1887, ending communal ownership of reservation land, transferring traditional systems of land tenure into government-imposed systems of private property by forcing the Indigenous peoples to “assume a capitalist and proprietary relationship with property” that did not previously exist, and opening the “excess” reservation lands to white settlers and corporations for agriculture, ranching and corporate business development.

Following the period of the boarding schools, the federal government instituted the policy of termination of tribal reservations where Indigenous peoples were induced to move to cities to find work, after years of not being allowed to leave the reservations without written permission. The people were promised there would be support systems to help them find places to live and work. The reality was that they were transported to cities and left on the streets. The government’s next effort was to assimilate Indigenous peoples into white, settler society and break their ties with their traditional cultures. More recently, the U.S. government has made numerous attempts to open Indigenous lands to mining, energy and resource development by capitalist monopolies.

On the second day of the conference, an apology from Gov. Gavin Newsom on behalf of the state of California for the past actions of harm done to the Indigenous peoples and cultures by the state was heard. Speakers on the following days said that the apology as an acknowledgement of the genocide committed against the California Indigenous nations was a good step in the right direction. However, as Dr. Cutcha Risling Baldy (Hupa/Yurok/Karuk) said on the third day, when people asked what they could do now, she told them to return the land to the Indigenous nations.

Dr. J. Angelo Corlett, a speaker on reparations on the fourth day, said that before the apology could be accepted, concrete actions like the payment of financial reparations and the inclusion of the real history of the Indigenous peoples in California in the public education system needed to happen.

The closing ceremonies on the fourth day of the conference included the raising of a Kumeyaay flag on the SDSU campus and the display of a collection of Silent Witnesses, appropriately dressed cardboard human figures to represent the hundreds of thousands of Indigenous peoples murdered during the campaign of California genocide.

The personal accounts of the women dedicated to the healing of their Indigenous communities — children, elders, women and men — and the documentary films revealing the genocide of California's First Peoples committed by the European settler/colonialists in the name of spreading "civilization" — Western capitalism — can only strengthen one's resolve to become part of the change leading to the liberation and self-determination of all oppressed people, which can only really occur in a socialist society.

