

A. Woolford, *This Benevolent Experiment: Indigenous Boarding Schools, Genocide, and Redress in Canada and the United States*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2015, 431pp. USD 90.00 (hardback).

Reviewed by Marianne O. Nielsen

Andrew Woolford's book is a must-read for any scholar interested in Indigenous genocide as manifested in the American Indian boarding schools in the USA and Aboriginal residential schools in Canada. He describes the schools as a prong of each government's less than successful answer to the "Indian Problem". Rather than exterminate Indigenous Peoples, they would save them by turning them into workers. Adults were too recalcitrant, so they targeted the children. This book goes beyond a recounting of the schools' far from "benevolent" methods, the tragic experiences of survivors and the life-damaging impacts of the schools on communities, though such topics are not neglected. The two most important contributions of this book are the comparison of the assimilative projects in the two countries, and the "colonial mesh" framework he developed to analyze them. As a non-Indigenous researcher, he used critical sociological tools to "unsettle all that I have taken for granted from a lifetime within my formative context" (17).

His theoretical framework views the actions of the multiplicity of human and non-human actors as nets operating at three levels—macro-, meso- and micro—that combine into a mesh that "entrap[s] Indigenous peoples within the settler-colonial assimilative project" (3). Where the mesh loosens, Indigenous resistance occurs. The macro-societal level functions within broad institutions such as economics, culture and law where Indigenous cultures are deemed valueless and Indigenous peoples are conceptualized as economic "Problems" that ought to be solved with government policies. At the upper meso-societal level, government bodies and other institutions develop strategies such as education, in concert with, for example, law and policing, to handle the "Indian Problem". The lower meso-societal level is where educational organizations are located, including boarding and other types of schools. The micro-level is the individual school with its everyday interactions among the inhabitants and their surroundings, that either further or hinder the assimilative project. At this level Woolford introduces the non-human players such as disease and food (or lack thereof) that complicate such interactions.

This framework is a valuable tool in comparing the national initiatives throughout the remainder of the book. He points out similarities and differences between the two countries, focusing particularly on the role of religion and funding. He argues that genocide is a dynamic and uneven process purposively designed by settler-colonist institutions to destroy the culture of a people, so that they no longer exist as a people.

Woolford bases his analysis on four case-study schools established during the settler-colonial era after the end of the American Indian Wars, as assimilation became the government policy of choice. He chose the Albuquerque Indian School and the Sante Fe Indian School in New Mexico, and the Portage la Prairie Indian Residential School and the Ft. Alexander Indian Residential School in Manitoba to illustrate the many variations in the colonial mesh. He used both archival data and survivors' oral histories. These schools are not representative of other schools, but were chosen for their nearness to large Indigenous communities and their archival and oral historical sources. His focus is not so much on their overt violence and deprivation, but on their techniques of assimilation—some brutal and some subtler.

The colonial mesh theoretical framework is introduced in Chapter 1 to describe the settler-colonial genocide of Indigenous Peoples and to account for the unevenness of genocide. The boarding schools are described in Chapter 2 as part of a genocidal process. He deconstructs Lemkin's definition of genocide, and relates it to the ongoing colonial destruction of cultural relationships, so that genocide is more than physical extermination but transformation of a group out of existence. Chapter 3 provides a comparative analysis of boarding school policies in Canada and the USA as the solutions to their respective "Indian Problems". Such schools communicated the states' vision of the place of Indigenous Peoples. He describes the complex history of early educational efforts and contrasts the religion-based school policies in Canada with the changeable policies of the USA Bureau of Indian Affairs.

The four case-study schools are compared in Chapter 4, as are their interactions with other kinds of schools for Indigenous students. The various actors at the micro-level who either reinforce or resist the assimilative processes are described. Using Foucault's concepts of discipline, desire, knowledge and violence, he analyzes in Chapters 5 and 6, some of the strategies used by the four schools to assimilate their students and destroy Indigenous communities. Desire is an unusual concept to be used in connection with boarding schools but he uses it to explain the success in student recruitment in the USA, and the good experiences that some students had (it was not a common strategy in Canadian schools). He also discusses the gendered division of labour as an attempt to transform Indian homes.

Boarding school educators began to use knowledge and violence as assimilative techniques when they realized that understanding the diversity of Indigenous cultures might aid in assimilation (Chapter 6). He expands the discussion of violence to include symbolic violence that is, the use of reason, obligation and caring among other practices, to make students accept a worldview that defined them as inferior. He points out that, when violence was critiqued, it was for its failure to

discipline children into docility and obedience, not because of the damage to the children, their families and future generations.

In Chapter 7 he analyzes the complex roles played by non-human actors such as disease, territory, space, food and poverty, in either facilitating or resisting the assimilative project. The settler-colonial lust for territory was one of the main factors leading to the Indian Problem and hence the boarding schools. Space, or the lack of it, in the overcrowded dormitories led to disease; threats of starvation coerced student attendance; and distance challenged student resistance when they ran away. Time served to tighten or loosen the colonial mesh depending on government policies and changes in school personnel. Health was affected by government neglect and indifference. The fear of damnation and hell controlled children's behaviour.

The continuing impacts of the colonial mesh and their consequences are described in Chapter 8, as are the possibilities for reparations in Canada and the USA. Woolford observes that prisons may be the new way to deal with the "Indian Problem" minus boarding schools, and that efforts are ongoing to dispossess Indigenous peoples of their lands. He gives examples of some of the activism occurring particularly in Canada and the challenges it faces, and analyzes why attempts at redress have not been successful in the USA. He suggests that redress can be a way to remove Indigenous Peoples as challenges "to the legitimacy of the settler-colonial nation and potentially hiding the violence of settler-colonialism within the language of reconciliation" (287).

In the last chapter, he concludes that, by attempting to remove Indigenous culture, settler-colonists are attempting to remove the group as a group to gain access to their lands. He comments that North Americans are reluctant to identify genocide as anything but a phenomenon occurring outside our borders. He critiques reconciliation initiatives as another mutation of assimilation efforts. The book ends with extensive, thorough and useful notes that include concepts, sources and expansions on his thoughts.

Scattered throughout the chapters are information nuggets that add to the story, such as the non-human actors mentioned above, or the female teachers who tried to use feminist approaches to avoid teaching outmoded gender roles to the female students (Chapter 6); the racism inherent in the choice of vocational training for students (in Chapter 3); the role of Indigenous staff in aiding resistance within the schools (in Chapters 4 and 7); the "Indian Problem" being perceived as an obstacle to settler-colonial nation-building (Chapter 5); and the political networks that grew out of boarding school friendships (Chapter 7). His intermittent focus on survivance and resistance by students, parents, Indigenous leaders and community members is a welcome and necessary part of his analysis.

His hope for this book is that it will be seen as “an allied and decolonizing effort” that will “open space for new engagements with history and the present in the United States and Canada” (xiii). By all counts, he has succeeded in his goals and made an important contribution to the emerging literature on state crime and colonialism.

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