



Book Review

Suffer the Little Children: Genocide, Indigenous Nations and the Canadian State

Starblanket, Tamara. (2018). Atlanta, GA: Clarity Press. ISBN 9780998694771 (paper) US\$29.95; ISBN 9780998694788 (ePub) US\$21.00. 374 pages.

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Reading *Suffer the Little Children*, I was reminded of the words of African-American activist, Ella Baker: “In order to see where we are going, we not only must remember where we have been, but we must understand where we have been.” At the heart of Ahtahkakoop Cree legal scholar Tamara Starblanket’s first book is a searing critique of the exclusion of cultural genocide from the crime of genocide as defined in international law. Starblanket also argues that the Canadian state has rationalized, legitimized, and evaded accountability for colonialism and genocide – and suggests a way forward.

Focusing on the ongoing impact of residential schools and the more recent forced removals of Indigenous children from their communities via the child welfare system, Starblanket argues that this narrow definition of genocide has serious consequences for Indigenous Peoples. Starblanket illustrates that the deliberate exclusion from international law of cultural genocide and forced assimilation measures by colonial settler states such as Canada makes it almost impossible for Indigenous Peoples to articulate a claim of this nature either within Canada or in international law.

After a foreword written by Ward Churchill, in the introduction, the author maps out the book’s main arguments. She begins with an explanation of her own location as a Cree woman and the sole survivor of her family devastated by the impacts of residential schooling on earlier generations. The book evolved from Starblanket’s Master of Laws thesis, in the course of which she ran up against “the barriers erected by Canada’s academic gatekeepers to

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prevent or at least limit exposure of the culpability attending certain actions of the Canadian state, and those of the colonial society” (p. 23). As the book unfolds, the extent of these intellectual, political, and legal barriers is revealed and confronted.

The first chapter, “Naming the Crime: Defining Genocide in International Law” offers a legal-historical analysis of the term genocide and the definition used in the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (UNGC). It notes that Raphael Lemkin, the Polish Jewish jurist who coined the term and initiated the UNGC, understood cultural genocide to be a process of colonialism in his analysis of the Nazi occupation and invasion of the lands and territories of Eastern European countries. Lemkin held that genocide is a process that has two phases: firstly the destruction of the national pattern of the oppressed group, and secondly, the imposition of the national pattern of the oppressor. He stated that this imposition could be made on the oppressed population that is allowed to remain in a territory, or upon the territory alone, after removing the population and the colonization of the area by the oppressor’s nationals. Starblanket painstakingly walks us through how the legal definition of genocide has been narrowed since Lemkin’s two-phase version, and the politics that reshaped it. In doing so, she analyzes key debates and arguments at the United Nations during the drafting of the crime of genocide in international law, highlighting their serious implications for Indigenous Peoples.

Chapter two, “The Horror: Canada’s Forced Transfer of Indigenous Children,” discusses the residential school system in terms of Goffman’s notion of a total institution, and Lemkin’s two-phase definition of genocide. She contends that the traumatized and destructive patterns it set in motion led to the later forcible removal of future generations of Indigenous children by the child welfare system. Several pages of photos further remind us of the brutal impact on Indigenous children and Nations of the carefully-planned process to absorb them into the “body politic” of Canada through residential schools “until there is no Indian question” as then Deputy Minister of Indian Affairs Duncan Campbell Scott once put it. Reviving and applying Lemkin’s definition, Starblanket makes the case for how this constitutes genocide.

“Coming to Grips with Canada as a Colonizing State,” the third chapter, contends that alongside the dispossession of lands and territories, the effects of residential schools meant that the “ability to transmit to the next generation the healthy characteristics of [Indigenous] society in terms of its land, laws, worldview and nationhood becomes severely impeded and, in the worst case scenario, terminated” (p. 205). This chapter draws on Steven Newcomb’s (Shawnee/Lenape) (2008) work on the language of domination and political subordination, arguing that metaphors of domination are the imaginative (cognitive) means by which a dominating society – and the language of international law – is able to constitute and maintain a reality of domination and subordination over nations and peoples being dominated. Starblanket, like Newcomb before her, argues that this provides a vocabulary for

dehumanizing Indigenous Peoples and entrenches state domination. She also draws from other Indigenous and anti-colonial thinkers to present readers with a clear picture of the violence and dehumanization wrought by colonization, including the psychological damage caused by residential schools and other “civilizing missions.”

The fourth chapter, “Smoke and Mirrors: Canada’s Pretense of Compliance with the Genocide Convention” addresses what the author calls the “made in Canada” approach to genocide, the equation of genocide only with mass killing or physical destruction. It traces the history of a watering down process of an already limited definition of the crime of genocide alongside Canada’s refusal to accept cultural genocide as a crime in the drafting of the UNGC. She notes that while the Canadian government was involved in the drafting of the UNGC between 1946-1948, it was engaging in crimes against Indigenous Peoples’ children. Moreover, she suggests that “the Canadian state’s effort to remove cultural genocide during the drafting stages of the crime in international law shows its earlier efforts of denial and obfuscation where it claimed not to know that destruction of this kind was occurring in Canada” (p. 229). The chapter advances the case that Canada is culpable for crimes of genocide due to colonization. In conclusion, Starblanket contends that the only solution for genuine peace and justice is the right of Indigenous Peoples to self-determination as subjects in international law.

Besides the sharpness of its arguments, a major strength of this book is its accessibility for an interdisciplinary, and indeed non-academic audience. In different ways, it resonates with the work of Sharon Venne (1998, 2013), Irene Watson (2018), and Radha D’Souza (2018) in tracking the histories of international legal and political doctrines, processes and instruments from Indigenous/anticolonial perspectives and unravelling their material, real world consequences. Starblanket explains international and Canadian legal processes with the layperson in mind. Her writing is refreshingly clear and direct as she walks us through the twists, turns, and implications of this legal history and its consequences. Thus this book is recommended reading for education, legal, and social science scholars, educators, students and broader publics alike – including activist audiences.

At a time when many initiatives claim to respond to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s (TRC) calls to action, this book makes an important intervention. Much liberal literature fails to adequately engage with the broader context that understands residential schools and the ongoing widespread removals of Indigenous children into Canada’s child welfare system as intrinsic parts of colonization and genocide. This point is amply driven home by Starblanket’s research which highlights the way in which these processes were used to isolate children from their land, and destroy Indigenous Nations. Histories of racism and colonialism in Canada, when recalled at all, rarely go beyond what are presented as unfortunate past episodes, events or moments. As Starblanket notes, there is ample evidence to show that not only was there intent to destroy Indigenous societies through

residential schooling, but that government authorities were aware of the destruction and did not intervene to stop the brutal treatment of the children, which included many deaths from disease, hunger and other forms of abuse. In her afterword to Starblanket's book, Cree lawyer Sharon Venne affirms: "Why target the children? The colonizers wanted to have access to our lands and resources. In order to accomplish this task – the colonizers needed to have no one able to speak for the land and the resources" (p. 284).

Furthermore, Starblanket sharply interrogates the intent and politics of Canadian state reconciliation policy and practices. She writes that,

It would have been viewed as absurd for any other regime engaging in crimes of genocide against other peoples' children to evade its crimes internationally and domestically and then, as the perpetrator, to set up another destructive process that purported to investigate the issue and seek to resolve it. But such was the so-called Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a body set up by the perpetrator government. (p. 274)

She notes that the TRC remedies almost entirely centre on redressing violations of individual human rights rather than that of the group rights inhering in the Indigenous Nations explicitly targeted for destruction through the forcible removal of their future.

Finally, *Suffer the Little Children* belongs on the reading list of anyone concerned with social justice and addressing the ongoing colonialism on which the Canadian nation-state stands. At a time when the terms "decolonization" and "decolonial" are being taken up in many settings, and open to a wide range of meanings and interpretations, many of which eschew an actual politics of decolonization and self-determination, this book is not decolonization-lite. Indeed, in the words of the late Arthur Manuel (2015), it makes a vital contribution to "unsettling Canada." For those seriously committed to social justice and confronting and transforming colonial power relations, taking up the challenges that Tamara Starblanket puts forward – including her perspective on the Canadian state's reconciliation project – would be a step in the right direction.

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