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Book Review: White Mother to a Dark Race: Settler Colonialism, Maternalism, and the Removal of Indigenous Children in the American West and Australia, 1880–1940

By Margaret D Jacobs

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Reviewed by Trish Luker, UQ Postdoctoral Research Fellow, TC Beirne School of Law, University of Queensland.

Historical accounts of the removal of Aboriginal children from their families and communities in Australia under colonial assimilation policies have proliferated over recent decades. Within the field, white feminist historiography has involved investigations of the function of gender, domestic space and intimate relations in the colonial enterprise. In this, it has often placed the problematic trope of the maternal as ‘a central model of historical identity’ (Moore 2000, 95). While similar histories exist in other settler-colonial nations, notably the United States and Canada, there has been relatively little comparative research. In *White Mother to a Dark Race*, Jacobs provides a substantial comparative account of the removal of indigenous children in North America and Australia during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the period when this was a key government policy in both continents. She focuses on the gendered character of the policies and practices and the role of white women as agents of the state in the removal of children. In particular, Jacobs provides a critique of the discourse of maternalism in its various manifestations. In this task, she takes up a point raised in white feminist analysis that a ‘disconcerting maternalism persists both in the context of academic theory and the practical politics of forging international alliances’ (Jolly 1993, 104).

Jacobs’ argument is that rather than a well-intentioned and benign policy of acculturation and education, indigenous child removal served the overriding purpose of dispossession through the severing of familial and cultural connection. While this itself is not a new argument, her specific focus on the gendered dimension of indigenous child removal is thoroughgoing. Jacobs documents the role of white women as agents in the process of white nation-building. She highlights the paradoxical rhetoric which elevated white motherhood while at the same time depriving indigenous women and children of their familial bonds by pathologising their relations. Jacobs argues that the role of white women in the removal of indigenous children provided them with an avenue for participation in public life at a time when they were otherwise denied such authority. She is particularly concerned with the function of the intimate in the colonial context—domestic spaces, corporeality and relationships—and the significance of gender to the colonial project. In this, she draws on Ann Laura Stoler’s concept of the ‘intimacies of empire’ as her theoretical framework (2002).

Jacobs is a feminist historian based at the University of Nebraska. She draws on primary archival research conducted in the United States and Australia, secondary historical analyses and cultural history. True to her feminist methodology, she has provided an account of her own familial narrative, as well as her white racial identity and her personal reflections upon indigenous sovereignty and dispossession. The book is structured around key themes, each chapter providing an account of the specific historical contexts of the American West and Australia, with a short comparative analysis.

The initial chapters outline the relationship between gender and the settler-colonial enterprise in the policies of indigenous child removal implemented during the late 19th century under the name of assimilation in North America and protection in Australia. Jacobs highlights the parallels in practice between the two locations, and the distinct similarities in rhetoric. The language used to describe and justify the practice of stealing Indigenous children was itself contradictory, simultaneously articulating an appeal to benevolent humanitarianism and evoking fear of the indigenous other. Nevertheless, Jacobs found no evidence within archival sources of reciprocal awareness on the part of officials in each country. As she elaborates, the policies under which indigenous children were removed were the expression of racist ideologies based on the assumption that whiteness and modernity were the cornerstones of western nation-building.

Jacobs maintains that the focus on indigenous child removal as the centrepiece of the colonial endeavour facilitated the involvement of white women 'as moral guardians' of the intimate domain of familial relations, functioning as 'the great white mother'. She argues that maternalism arose as an articulation of feminism to challenge the dominant masculinist ideal of nationhood in western countries. Maternalists revered and promoted the role of motherhood, not only as a value in itself but as a natural predisposition for white, middle-class women's participation in public life, particularly in the area of reform politics. Of course, this involved a racist paradox: whilst campaigning for the right of white women to maintain custody of their children and 'protecting' white women from sexual exploitation, white feminists actively campaigned for the removal of indigenous children by representing their mothers as unfit parents.

Privileging the virtues of white motherhood was accompanied by the representation of indigenous people as a 'child race' and indigenous women as subjugated within their cultures. Jacobs provides accounts of a number of individual white middle-class women who became activists and the organisations they established which had a significant influence over the implementation of government policies. Some of these women were academics, others missionaries. Jacobs suggests that it may have been as a result of Anglo-American women's internationalism that a shared commitment to maternalism was fostered.

The subsequent chapters cover the practice of removing indigenous children from their homes, incarcerating them in boarding schools in the United States and institutions and missions in Australia. Jacobs exemplifies the methods used to coerce Indian families into sending their children to boarding schools, including manipulation and trickery, as well as force. In Australia and the United States, white women performed a crucial intermediary role in this process. In the United States, white women were used in the process of recruiting Indian children for schools. In Australia, white women often exploited intimate connections they had established as a result of living in close proximity to Aboriginal people as missionaries or anthropologists. Jacobs argues that in the United States white women acted as direct arms of the state, while in Australia they tended to act more independently, sometimes even in opposition to government policy.

When documenting examples of individual indigenous people, as well as communities, who sought to oppose the removal of their children on both continents, Jacobs highlights a significant point of difference between the United States and Australia which may have had long-standing consequences. Unlike in Australia, Native Americans eventually exerted a degree of control over whether their children went away to boarding schools. It was also more common for children to return to their communities during the summer and for parents to have some choice as to which school their children would attend; children therefore often went to schools established on reservations or local public schools. In the United States, according to Jacobs, the policy objective was that children would return to their communities having been inculcated in white western ways. In Australia however, the privileging of the eugenicist argument underpinning the policy of 'biological absorption' necessitated complete severing of 'half-caste' children's connections to families and communities.

Nevertheless, Jacobs goes on to describe the techniques used in institutions on both continents aimed at alienating children from their families and cultures, a process she describes as 'grooming to be useful'. She found remarkable similarities between the two countries in the appalling physical conditions of the institutions as well as the rituals and routines employed to inculcate the children with western notions of time and space. In her analysis, Jacobs focuses on the significance of the children's bodies to the process of grooming, where dirt was regarded as a sign of savagery and cleanliness signified civilisation. Gender played a key role in the grooming, as it was white women who were considered by the authorities

to be most appropriate to administer these regimes. The process involved undermining indigenous cultural understandings of gender and attempts to replace them with prevailing western notions of appropriate behaviour. She points out that this placed some white women in an uneasy relationship with authorities, as the influence of feminism led many to challenge patriarchal authority, particularly in the home. While there were attempts to employ a more humane, women-centred approach in some institutions, this was performed with the intention of undermining the children's own cultural understandings of gender through attempts to control the children's sexuality, particularly girls, and break down traditional marriage practices. This was achieved primarily by placing girls into domestic service, employed by white women. However, Jacobs point out that these women often failed to perform the maternalist role and girls were often subjected to exploitation, brutality, sexual abuse and rape.

Jacobs concludes her study with accounts of some white women's attempts to oppose the practice of child removal. She argues that the experience of intimate relationships which were sometimes established between indigenous children and white women led some to lose confidence in the colonial enterprise. A few white women aligned themselves with indigenous women in organised campaigns of opposition.

White Mother to a Dark Race offers a detailed account of indigenous child removal in Australia and North America during a period when this was a central platform of colonial administration. Methodologically, it draws on historical documentation to support and substantiate a primary thesis, providing a rich and coherent body of historical information. While Jacobs provides a detailed account, I cannot help thinking that her theoretical argument may well have been developed further had she taken a more interdisciplinary approach, drawing on the critical theory to which she occasionally refers. For example, her brief comments on some of the photographic images included in the book are tantalising, but deserve further exploration. Similarly, the use of diverse sources—including historical accounts, archival documents, life narrative, oral histories, letters and interviews—raises critical questions about the process of historiography itself, as well as its gendered and racialised dimensions. Perhaps this is an undue expectation, for it would have necessitated compromising the scope of the historical account, but it may have led to a more substantial theoretical contribution. Nevertheless, Jacobs' focus on the role of white women, and specifically the function of maternalism, generates important insights into the interrelationship between race and gender in the creation of the modern white nation. Attention to the specificities of colonial regimes in the different locations of Australia and the American West—revealing the uncanny similarities as well as significant differences—can only enhance our critical understanding.

References

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