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Review of *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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Comparative studies involving similar historical events in different locales have been neglected over the last few decades, in my opinion to the detriment of history. It is indeed gratifying to see this change with the publication recently of several important comparative works. Two that compare North America with Australia are Penelope Edmonds's outstanding Urbanizing Frontiers: Indigenous Peoples and Settlers in 19th-Century Pacific Rim Cities (2010) and Katherine Ellinghaus's Taking Assimilation to Heart: Marriages of White Women and Indigenous Men in Australia and the United States, 1887–1937 (2006). To this we can now add Margaret D. Jacobs's important White Mother to a Dark Race. Jacobs's award-winning book (2010 Bancroft Prize) builds on foundational work of many scholars while extending the accomplished and comprehensive work of the author. It is an enormous tome (over 500 pages) representing over a decade of careful research in archives and libraries across Australia and North America.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Native peoples in North America and Australia were both subjected to state authorized removal of their children under the guise of "education," "protection," or "assimilation." Jacobs endeavors to compare the processes and the underlying motivations of this experience, along with the boarding schools, missions, and "homes" to which the children were confined. The shocking trauma these actions inflicted on the removed children, their families, and, of course, the Indigenous societies more generally continues to the present. Although the official motivations might have been regarded as well-intentioned, there is no denying that they also fed into the desires of the settler nations for a ruling "white" population with unrestricted access to and control over Native lands.

A great deal of previous research has emphasized the role of paternalistic administrators, often masculinizing the historical processes and the narratives told. Jacobs shifts the debate, extending the work of scholars such as Victoria Haskins, Katherine Ellinghaus, and others, to consider more explicitly the role that white women played in these events and
policies. In both the U.S. and Australia the child removal policies were built on an assumption that Indigenous mothers had less attachment to their children. Indigenous motherhood was derided, demeaned, and assumed to be less intense and less valuable than white motherhood. Consequently, as Jacobs demonstrates, white women stepped into the void and became key agents in the child-removal policies. As matrons, “adoptive” mothers, school mistresses, missionaries, and protectors, white women became the “white mother[s]” to the “dark race[s].” Although many of these colonial agents became deeply distrustful of the policies and their outcomes, intended and not, most found themselves implicated in the processes to such an extent that they were unable to extricate themselves.

Margaret D. Jacobs is to be congratulated on producing this fine-grained historical analysis. She does not demonize or idealize any of the key players. Instead, she has produced a balanced, meticulously researched book filled with heartbreaking stories of loss and uplifting accounts of survival. I shall certainly be steering my students to it over the coming years, hoping it will encourage some of them to enter the fruitful terrain of comparative histories.

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