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

Baligh Ben Ahmed Ben Taleb
*University of Nebraska-Lincoln, beligh.bt@gmail.com*

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Settler colonialism is a winner-take-all project, where the colonizer comes to stay, occupies the land permanently, and accepts nothing less than the removal of indigenous nations. Australia and the United States are two salient cases of settler colonies that became settler nations, where settlers used various tactics to dispossess indigenous peoples of their land. One of these brutal methods of colonization, according to Margaret Jacobs’ *White Mother to a Dark Race,* was the removal of indigenous children from their families and the breaking of the affective bonds that tied indigenous peoples together. Australia’s “protection” policies and the U.S. government’s “assimilation” program, each of which included indigenous child removal, are central to Jacobs’ book. “What was it exactly that reformers and officials hoped to change about indigenous children by taking them from their families?” Jacobs asks (xxx). The fundamental goal of these reformers and officials was to consolidate control and complete the colonization of the American West and Australia as two growing settler nations from the 1880s until well into the twentieth century.

In the U.S., Jacobs argues, the goal was “cultural” assimilation. In Australia, the goal was biological assimilation, or “breeding out the color.” As a result, the “Aborigines were doomed by their own genetic inheritance” (67–69). Deeming native mothers as hopelessly inadequate, many male authorities considered it “necessary” to invade the most intimate spaces of indigenous homes and families. By taking on the mission of relieving the patriarchal plight of women in the colonies, white women acted as enlightened agents, not only to assert their own political rights and agency, but also, as surrogate mothers, “to break the children’s sensory connections to kin and homeland” (280). Jacobs focuses on the role white women played in “rescuing,” “educating,” and “civilizing” indigenous children. Through these practices, they enabled and implemented colonial policies.  

3 Unlike Kipling’s illustration of the “white man’s burden,” which treats other cultures as “childlike” and “demonic,” mainstream theories and studies on gender reflect the “white woman’s burden,” which offered a sense of mission in settler nations. This mission included politicians, missionaries, social reformers and, indeed, academics.
and nation-building in Australia and the United States (5). As moral guardians of the intimate realm of indigenous communities and families, white women were seen as the appropriate agents to carry out child-removal policies to colonize, “civilize” the untamed wilderness, and build new settler nations. Not all white women, however, as Jacobs suggests, showed support for these colonial scripts, as many white women developed individual relationships with indigenous peoples. In Australia, white women’s benevolent endeavors did not dovetail in large part with colonial authorities. In the United States, they worked together with like-minded male colonial agents. These concerted efforts were “produced and performed” in small theaters like the homes and on the bodies of indigenous peoples, breaking the affective bonds that tied indigenous peoples together (xxxi).

Jacobs’ personal voice from her own childhood, coupled with her striking case studies, challenges readers who might not be familiar with the “scars of our settler colonial histories.” Her engaging narrative reconstructs indigenous peoples’ own understanding of their childhoods, spaces, and relationships with adult women in settler colonial nations. It is indeed a very powerful technique as it forces readers to think about these wounds of the past and the “horrendous abuse at the hands of boarding school authorities” (432). Jacobs concludes that “such wounds cannot heal by covering them with happy-face Band-Aids or, worse yet, refusing to recognize the injustice that was done. History has had enough concealments. It’s time to discard the

Baligh Ben Taleb

University of Nebraska-Lincoln