

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Faculty Publications, Department of History

History, Department of

Spring 2017

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 Taleb

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, beligh.bt@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/historyfacpub>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Ben Taleb, Baligh, "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*" (2017). *Faculty Publications, Department of History*. 202.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/historyfacpub/202>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the History, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications, Department of History by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Past Tense

Graduate Review of History

AUTHORS WHO PUBLISH WITH PAST TENSE AGREE TO THE FOLLOWING TERMS:

Authors retain copyright and grant the journal right of first publication with the work simultaneously licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution License that allows others to share the work with an acknowledgement of the work's authorship and initial publication in this journal.

Authors are able to enter into separate, additional contractual arrangements for the non-exclusive distribution of the journal's published version of the work (e.g., post it to an institutional repository or publish it in a book), with an acknowledgement of its initial publication in this journal.

Authors are permitted and encouraged to share their work online (e.g., in institutional repositories or on their own website) prior to and during the submission process, as it can lead to productive exchanges, as well as earlier and greater citation of published work.

Past Tense Graduate Review of History is published online by the Graduate History Society at the University of Toronto at www.pasttensejournal.com.

Copyright © 2017 by the Authors

All rights reserved

First Published April 2017

Typeface Herr Von Muellerhoff and Minion Pro

Cover design by Katie Davis

Layout design by Eriks Bredovskis



VOLUME 5, ISSUE 1
SPRING 2017

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.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009.

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

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

Jacobs wanted to believe that most white women, who celebrated motherhood, challenged these colonial paradigms and sympathized with indigenous women, but her findings paradoxically showed a different reality. In their own quest for agency, equality and public authority, many white women reformers "undermined Indian and Aboriginal women through their support for the removal of indigenous children" (433). Inspired by the maternalist movement of the era, white women, she says, "hitched their maternalist wagons to the train of the settler colonial state" (148). For example, in chapter three, "The Great White Mother," Jacobs cites the case of one social reformer, Estelle Reel, who worked as a superintendent of Indian education between 1898 and 1910. Reel, in a number of published articles, showed a self-congratulating attitude while making concerted efforts to pass a compulsory education law to remove most indigenous children from their families and place them in boarding schools. Reel considered the removal of indigenous children her moral duty to save them from a "savage" background and grant them a "civilized" environment (135–136).

This policy of alienation and dispossession of indigenous communities echoed a desire to build homogenized nations founded on racialized, evolutionary paradigms—whiteness, Christianity, and modernity—while indigenous families were conceptualized as a "pesky impediment to settlement,"

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 (xxx).

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

Band-Aids, remove the blindfolds, and squarely confront our past” (433). By exposing the “microphysics of imperial rule,” to use Ann Stoler’s term, Jacobs, like the so-called “New Western historians,” has unearthed the wounds of the American and Australian past and laid the groundwork for further efforts at historical decolonization and steps toward reconciliation.

Jacobs’ compelling book is based on government documents, national and state archives, personal papers, written memoirs, and oral histories of white women reformers and indigenous children. These materials, interspersed with Jacobs’ personal voice, buttress her arguments in a beautifully illustrated manner. Aside from being too long, Jacobs’ Bancroft Prize winning book brings an original approach to women’s, gender, and settler colonial studies, and deserves wide readership across disciplines.

Baligh Ben Taleb

University of Nebraska-Lincoln