# THIS BENEVOLENT EXPERIMENT

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INDIGENOUS BOARDING SCHOOLS,
GENOCIDE AND ABORIGINAL CANADA AND THE UNITED STATES

# 9 Conclusion

The "benevolent experiment" of Indigenous boarding schools in North America was an effort to destroy Indigenous groups as self-sustaining and self-defining entities. It is for this reason that I have brought the term "genocide" into the discussion in this book. However, my goal has not been to shock the reader with use of an overly politicized term, and I have not used it out of naive optimism that the term is somehow sufficient to mobilize public opinion toward a certain political issue. Instead, I approach this topic as a genocide scholar who seeks to recover, but also to develop and advance, Raphael Lemkin's insights into the harm of genocide. In particular, genocide is the purposeful destruction of a group, and if we are to take the survival of groups seriously then it is incumbent upon us to know something about how groups persist and survive in a world of almost constant change. I have argued that culture, as a fluid and negotiated quality of the group, or, as some might prefer, identity, is as pertinent to the discussion of the survival of groups as are other key elements of group life. Culture is what holds the group together as a group, even as the group adapts to new circumstances and encounters. To forcibly remove the tools of culture is to seek to eliminate the group as a group.

This effort was directed toward importing into genocide studies a notion of culture that is not simply "frozen in time" but interactive in that it is negotiated among members of a collectivity as they reproduce themselves

as a unit. Genocide, when it targets the cultural bonds of the group, disrupts such interaction. In this sense, Indigenous boarding schools, by disrupting lines of cultural transmission, by severing links between child and parent or child and community or child and territory, by attempting to invalidate the traditions and practices of the cultural group, by seeking to replace cultural affiliation with affiliation to non-Indigenous groups, and so on, sought to disrupt the interactions that make group life possible, thus making group claims to territory impossible. That this attempt at total destruction often failed, or came up against unexpected and powerful resistance, does not absolve settler colonialism of the charge of genocide. A collective action framework, built upon the notion of an Indian Problem, that guided a multiplicity of settler colonial interventions, including Indigenous boarding schools, operated toward the elimination of Indigenous peoples as obstacles to settler colonial designs on Indigenous lands and souls.

Some fear, however, that culture is too vast and diffuse a category to sustain the notion of genocide. An argument against including "cultural" genocide within the definition of genocide has been that the concept would become so broad as to be meaningless. Such a response has almost become a reflex among certain genocide scholars and members of the general public. But this stems from a positivist inheritance assuming that precision lies within the limited applicability of a concept. Like most limits, however, this one too is arbitrary, because it finds precision in elevating certain forms of attempted group destruction above others. It reinforces a hierarchy of genocide studies, and establishes a genocidal canon of cases worthy of research, by reifying destruction in the most narrow terms and excluding all other forms of potential group demise.[1] Moreover, such manufactured precision can obfuscate and oversimplify processes of actual genocide. Recent genocide scholarship has sought to trace the complex patterns of destruction that emerge in actual historical contexts, whereby genocidal actions do not unfold neatly in accordance with a fully articulated plan.[2] Instead, groups seeking to destroy other groups come up against contingencies, including resistance from those targeted for destruction, to which they must adapt. In this book, I have presented a model for examining such processes in a settler colonial context. Referred to above as the settler colonial mesh, this model describes various levels of netting, or networking,

that link together actors whose participation must be negotiated for the process of destruction to unfold. These networks exist at different societal levels—the macro, meso, and micro—and stretch across time and space, tightening in some circumstances, loosening and creating more opportunities for resistance in others.

At the macrosocietal level, my focus has been on those late-nineteenth-century actors engaged in addressing the so-called Indian Problem in the United States and Canada. These efforts at problematization and solution are important because they provide a basic yet flexible collective action frame that informed lower-level efforts to institutionalize assimilation. In each country, a diverse group of political, economic, military, and religious actors, among others, engaged in this project of problem framing. However, in the United States, one sees more influence among a group of largely Protestant reformers who believed assimilation and civilization to be humanitarian responses to the poor condition of Native Americans, itself a product of government and settler intrusion upon their lives and lands. In Canada, the same humanitarian justification was mobilized, but the conversation about the Indian Problem was more squarely located in the halls of government, though other actors did provide input. Indeed, multiple motives and intentions were at work in crafting the Indian Problem, but what emerged, whether framed as benevolence or racial social engineering, was the idea that *the Indian as an Indian was a problem* for each country, and therefore the Indian had to be eliminated through assimilation and civilization. These two notions provided a flexible action framework for the various institutions and organizations engaged in solving the Indian Problem.

Implementation of this collective action frame required multiple forms of intervention. The intervention of concern in this book is the Indigenous boarding school first used by religious missions but given formal shape by Richard Pratt through his experiments at Fort Marion, Hampton (alongside Samuel Chapman Armstrong), and Carlisle. At the upper mesolevel of the settler colonial mesh, the Christian denominations that oversaw schooling in Canada formed an institutional matrix that mediated between the federal government and the boarding schools. The churches were invested in preserving their control over their schools and students, while the government prioritized that the schools be managed in a frugal

manner. These two factors combined to produce spare and often brutal conditions in Canadian Indigenous boarding schools over most of their existence. In contrast, one sees larger shifts in the way that American Indigenous boarding schools were governed, since there was no mediating institutional matrix that resisted changes in governance at the schools. Add to this the fact that the Canadian Department of Indian Affairs saw less turnover among its personnel than was true for the American Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the more static nature of the Canadian Indigenous boarding school experience can be better understood.

This is not to suggest that boarding schools were experienced in a uniform manner in either the United States or Canada. When we move in closer to the schools, and focus on lower meso- and microlevels of analysis, we can observe how specific relations of cooperation and competition emerged among various school types (e.g., reservation, nonreservation, and day; mission based; federal) as well as how specific techniques and actor networks determined the local dynamics of each school. The bulk of the empirical evidence presented in this book has been directed at these lower levels of analysis. It is there that we see how schools in Manitoba and New Mexico dealt with their perceived competitors, secured the students that they required to ensure their per capita budgets, administered assimilation to the students, and contended with a variety of actors, including not only staff, students, parents, and Indigenous communities but also space, time, disease, food, blood, and hell. It is also at this level that we see how gaps emerged in specific segments of the lower meso- and microlevel nets, allowing Indigenous groups to resist assimilative pressures and to assert themselves on the schools, demanding better treatment of students, though they were not sufficiently empowered to overturn or decolonize their contexts. Because of the distinct characteristics of the schools in New Mexico, in contrast to those in Manitoba, one sees more such gaps forming; however, this is not to suggest that resistance was not evident at the Manitoba Indigenous boarding schools examined in this study.

The final chapter of this book addresses the different pathways to redress in each country. I have suggested that the shadow of Indigenous boarding schools is present in each country, as are the legal mechanisms necessary to force government redress. However, only in Canada have significant

measures been taken toward redressing the boarding school past. I have argued that there are discursive, political, and structural factors that explain why the United States has not taken a path similar to that in Canada. These factors have to do with the perception that American boarding schools were not as malevolent as those in Canada, the more fractured nature of pan-Indigenous politics in the United States, and the fact that the U.S. government simply has not thought that it is too risky to continue to ignore this history. However, I have also raised the question whether or not the Canadian model of redress offers a viable basis for U.S. redress policies. Based on statements drawn from Truth and Reconciliation Commission testimony, there are limitations to the Canadian process that should be of concern to those seeking redress in the United States. In particular, there is the danger that redress policy might be enlisted as a new technique of assimilation and thereby become but another mutation of the settler colonial mesh.

For those who wish to read only a scholarly treatise on Indigenous boarding schools, genocide, and redress, this might be as good a place as any to end this book. My efforts up to this point have been to show rather than tell about my topic. Although as a critical scholar I have been putting forward an argument, I have refrained from prescribing or imposing an ethical course of action. In what remains of this conclusion, I briefly consider where I believe my analysis leads us (even if I still work to avoid rigid prescription). Such discussion might be unwelcome for some in a scholarly book, but as a member of a settler colonial society who continues to work on how the settler condition has shaped his own perspectives and privileged his position, I feel responsible at minimum to venture some small suggestions with respect to what my analysis means for a broader project of North American decolonization.

## Genocide, Accountability, and Redress

Some fear that, if the genocide concept is not restricted in its application, it will not inspire political intervention. However, recent years have proven that the term does not have the cachet to mobilize political will through its mere utterance. Whether in Sudan, Syria, Rwanda, or Congo, the term "genocide" can become a distraction from rather than a trigger

for intervention. As Henry Theriault has noted however, the term can serve another purpose by setting the stage for redress.[3] The term is thus not solely purposed to work as a legal category for prevention and punishment. Indeed, the value of the genocide concept is often in how it captures the potentially catastrophic nature of certain interventions in the life of a group and provides a framework for setting a path for how we might live differently, together. In the American and Canadian contexts, the term can alert us to the destructive path of settler colonialism, highlight the centrality of land dispossession and elimination to this process, and press us toward a project of *decolonizing redress* rather than projects of redress that merely affirm the status quo. It can also prompt us to reckon with both our past and our present. In writing about the challenge facing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, Paulette Regan notes that, "in the public mind, there has been no epitomizing moment of genocidal crisis or mass human rights violations that would trigger a need for transitional justice mechanisms such as international criminal courts, tribunals, or truth and reconciliation commissions more commonly associated with so-called developing countries or despotic regimes."[4] Regan's statement captures settler North America's reluctance to see genocide as a problem in our midst; genocide, and therefore transitional justice, are problems out there, not of concern to North Americans. Because of this reluctance, history is an important part of moving forward, and this includes creating public awareness of the full meaning of the genocide concept and its applicability to settler colonial North America, including its present day mutations. Understanding genocide is a way to understand ourselves as inheritors and perpetuators of settler colonialism who have benefited from its ongoing processes of dispossession and assimilation.

As a legal concept, genocide directs our attention toward a perpetrator who has exhibited specific intent in seeking the destruction of a group. In contrast, the sociological and historical notion of genocide used in this book is less focused on the individual accountability of particular actors and more concerned with the collective responsibility that issues from a set of social relations that promoted the elimination of Indigenous groups. In particular, the impulse to assimilate and civilize Indigenous persons in North America, which rose to dominance as a framework for collective action in

the late nineteenth century, is understood here as part of an ongoing and multidimensional attempt by American and Canadian settler societies to resolve the so-called Indian Problem. Here Indigenous boarding schools had a primary role to play as vehicles for the forcible transformation, and therefore attempted destruction, of Indigenous societies. These schools varied in their effectiveness, took on different forms and functions in different times and different places, and were subject to local resistance and adaptation to, or subversion of, their destructive project. Moreover, those who attended the schools, or those who ran them, possessed a degree of agency in shaping their interactions, and occasionally they succeeded in softening these interactions. None of this, however, takes away from the fact that they were a manifestation of a collective settler attempt to address the Indian Problem through the elimination of Indigenous groups. Even in a gentler or softer form, Indigenous boarding schools were part of an infrastructure, a settler colonial mesh, intended to remove Indigenous peoples from the North American landscape, absorbing them into a lower tier of the mainstream society, and opening their lands for unimpeded acquisition.

This collective rather than individual understanding of accountability requires us to consider collective rather than individual approaches to redress. This is not to take away from processes of individual reckoning (for perpetrators of residential school violence) or reparation (for survivors), which might be deemed important remedies by survivors, who are the only ones who can speak about their own needs. However, from a societal perspective, how we have lived together as collectivities, as much as individuals, has set us on such a damaging course. So it cannot simply be left to the courts, the government, or the TRC of Canada to correct the past (and present). Such auspices can only serve as initiators of the discussion necessary to, in Regan's apt phrase, "unsettle the settler within" and contribute to the co-production of a decolonizing Canadian society.[5] The larger project is for individual Canadians to recognize that, regardless of their own perceived status as good and caring people, their very lives are built upon complicity with a project of societal destruction that can only be brought to an end by a similar collective project, a reframing of what Canada and the United States could be if they were to do the hard work of unsettling their colonial pasts and forging relations of mutual respect,

sharing, and a never-ending commitment to redressing not only those pasts (so that they might be left behind us) but also our common existence on Turtle Island with all peoples.[6] Such redress, however, requires that each settler society no longer interfere with Indigenous resurgence and well-being, so that thriving Indigenous nations can participate on an equal footing in reconciling and decolonizing our relations. Until then, too often our processes of redress mutate into forms of affirmative repair that simply reinvent and reinforce the old society in a slightly reformed guise.[7]

But settlers can begin processes of collective redress sooner rather than later. This requires that American and Canadian settler societies find ways to come to terms with the fact that our nations have been founded upon a form of life that, if we follow Patrick Wolfe's insight that settler colonialism is a structure (not an event), functioned to replace the Native with the settler.[8] The question thus becomes much larger than simply one of who should go on trial or how many dollars in compensation are owed. Instead, the question is how do we radically alter a way of life that has resulted in such attempts at Indigenous destruction and remains with us today? How do we redress the fact that we live and have benefited from our lives upon Indigenous lands? Indeed, that aspects of IRSSA have received such criticisms from boarding school survivors is a testament to the unfortunate fact that, in such circumstances, the current mode of redress is felt not as a decolonizing impulse pushing toward a new society but as another form of settler colonial administration and assimilation.

This is where I think that the term "genocide" can do its most important work. My effort in this book has not been to act as hanging judge for specific accused individuals, nor has it been to mobilize an oversimplified concept of genocide as a means to hammer a diversity of experiences into a single hole. Instead, my effort has been to add to the conversation an understanding of genocide as a complex process that, like most human processes, unfolds in an uneven manner. Such an understanding demands that we not simply look for scapegoats—bad men and women whom we condemn for past crimes. Instead, we must look closely at our own societies, born from a genocidal impulse and built upon destructive processes that can only be redressed through a long-term commitment to transforming ourselves and our nations.

## Genocide, Redress, and Indigenous Education

When confronted with a host of social problems, the knee-jerk response is to call for more education. In Euro-Western societies, we tend to view education as innocent, as mere knowledge transmitted to those eager to learn. However, as I have argued in this book, particularly in an intercultural context of contesting sovereignties, education is anything but innocent. In its institutional form, it transmits not mere knowledge but culturally specific knowledges designed to facilitate citizenship of a certain type. The knowledge that we obtain, what Bourdieu would refer to as our cultural capital, is a resource that allows us to navigate the social fields of the dominant society. It is knowledge shaped toward a cultural context that allows us to refer to the "right" books, explore issues from the "right" perspective, and exhibit the "correct" rationality in our day-to-day lives. In this manner, education is always an intervention.[9] This is partly why I continue to refer to those who attended Indigenous boarding schools as "students" rather than opting for some other term, such as "prisoners." Using the former term is not intended to mollify the boarding schools but to remind readers of the dark side of schools, where students can be subjected to a great deal of violence. Schools can be spaces where brutal violence, techniques of destruction, and deadly alliances are introduced and assume genocidal proportions. At the same time, it is true that the term "school" is not enough to describe the disciplinary admixture that existed within Indigenous boarding schools, which was influenced by a variety of European carceral institutions, including the monastery, military, the workhouse, prisons, and the orphanage. These were hybrid and destructive spaces that demonstrate the violence "schools" can contain when designed under circumstances of asymmetrical power.

In a settler colonial context in which Indigenous education has been marred by genocidal processes, it is very difficult to reinvent education at the state or societal level. In Canada, where the education of young Indigenous people is still viewed as an answer to a problem, IRSSA has led to new questions about how Indigenous education should take place. Certainly, models such as the contemporary Santa Fe Indian School, or Children of the Earth high school in Winnipeg, represent innovative and locally guided

efforts to deliver education in a manner that allows for survivance—both the adaptation and the continuation of culture. But the success of such schools depends not solely on the best intentions of those who work in and create programming within their walls. If these schools are still locked in a settler colonial mesh that continues to set expectations, place limits, and govern outcomes through a variety of institutional channels, then they might represent only fleeting moments of Indigenous control soon to be undone or mitigated by a settler colonial society that continues to deliver colonizing messages: you must assimilate if you want to succeed in the world of work; you must learn to speak, think, and present yourself like us to enjoy success; your culture is backward and impractical, and you must enter into the modern world; forget your claims to territory and self-determination.

To this extent, education is still part of a broader settler colonial mesh that continues to weigh on local efforts to educate and to achieve cultural and territorial survivance. And it is for this reason that educational reform is not sufficient to address the challenge of Indigenous-settler relations in North America. It is also for this reason that genocide is a useful lens for looking at these issues. As I have presented it in this book, "genocide" is not a term intended to mire us in the past. Nor is it a term intended to lock Indigenous peoples into the role of passive victims. It is a term, rather, that asks us to think deeply about destructive relations (and not just symbolic relations, but material relations as well) between groups. In particular, I have drawn attention to the ways that clashes between a dominant culture and multiple Indigenous cultures take shape in a manner whereby the former seeks to eliminate the latter, thereby threatening the very existence of the groups themselves. Comprehending the complexity of these destructive relations allows us to trace the mutations of this "logic of elimination," since it fits itself into the redress processes and educational reforms that we muster in attempts to correct this past.[10] Thus, genocide, not as a legal concept but as a tool for tracing destructive relations, offers us a means to seek a decolonizing path.[11] If we confront genocide as an aspect of our destructive relations, then our efforts at redress must find nondestructive forms of interaction and mutual existence, which we can only approach by working through the settler colonial foundational assumptions, economic

conditions, and unspoken expectations that guide current interactions between Indigenous peoples and settlers.

The analysis above asks us not only to look at our Indigenous educational policies or our efforts at redress but also demands closer observation of settler colonialism at the local level. In the microcontexts of education and redress, settler colonialism and processes of Indigenous destruction are carried out in novel ways beyond the gaze of policy makers. Kindness in education, or inclusion of Indigenous stories or arts, are not of themselves emancipatory acts, especially if the kindness becomes symbolic violence directed toward assimilative change or the inclusion of Indigenous culture is superficial and geared toward the marketing of that culture. Likewise, an apology to survivors of Indigenous boarding schools is undercut when other nodes of the settler colonial institutional mesh tighten just as the government expresses its regret over the abuses of the former educational system, placing these abuses only in the past and ignoring their current mutations. More concretely, the apology means little if the government, while apologizing, works toward intensifying a carceral system that continues to capture more Indigenous peoples than any other group in the nation and withdraws money from social services intended to help Indigenous peoples in their everyday lives. Or as it makes further encroachments upon Indigenous territories in pursuit of wealth and profit (not to mention environmental devastation). As well, compensatory schemes that are so rigid and actuarial that they compartmentalize the past in order to make it more certain, and the need for the government to deal with this past finally, are unlikely to scratch the surface of contending with a settler colonial mesh that features but is not fully defined by assimilative education.