Book Review:

Suffer the Little Children: Genocide, Indigenous Nations, and the Canadian State

by Tamara Starblanket
Atlanta, GA: Clarity Press, 2018, 374 pages
ISBN: 978-0-9986947-7-1 (Paperback)

Reviewed by:
Travis Hay
Lakehead University

*Suffer the Little Children* is a path-breaking text that rigorously and robustly documents the numerous ways in which the Canadian state has and continues to commit genocide against Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island. Starblanket, a Nehiyaw legal scholar, offers a richly researched legal intervention that brings forth the tensions between the definition of genocide as codified in international law (which is inclusive to measures such as the theft of children and the sterilization of women) and the very limited and incomplete ratification of this framework in Canada (wherein the federal government excluded definitional aspects that captured the essence of their own federal Indian policy). In successfully and critically contextualizing these tensions across the 20th century with a focus on the residential schooling system and the politics of reconciliation, Starblanket’s text promises to be a standard in the fields of Canadian legal studies, political science, and colonial history. I also suspect that her work will be cited widely by scholars situated in Indigenous studies.

Starblanket’s originality and unique approach to the legal issue of genocide is appreciated and much needed to deconstruct settler colonization and genocide. The text is neatly organized. In chapter one, readers receive a thorough definitional treatment of genocide in the context of international law. In chapter two, titled simply “The Horror”, readers receive an unblinking and unsettling look into the history and structure of the residential school system. It is within this chapter that Starblanket makes clear in no uncertain terms that what happened in the Canadian residential school system was not merely cultural genocide, but biological genocide, as deaths from starvation, poor living conditions, and tuberculosis caused the suffering and death of
Indigenous children beyond the more widely discussed and understood forms of physical abuse, assimilative violence, and sexual torture that took place in the so-called schools. In chapter three, Starblanket helps readers unpack what these historical infringements of international law and genocide conventions might mean in the context of treaties made between Indigenous Nations and the Crown. Her use of cognitive legal theory to reframe colonization and genocide is necessary to move past the genocide denial that is deeply entrenched in this settler society. In her fourth and final chapter, which should be standard reading for any introductory course in Canadian law and international relations, Starblanket discusses the sordid story of Canada’s very limited ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide.

Starblanket’s text also touches meaningfully on disciplinary questions occupying higher education and its relationship to law at the current moment. Most specifically, she demonstrates that a deep rooting of legal research in the cultural and social location of the scholar need not sacrifice, but indeed strengthen and enliven, the quality and texture of legal research. Further, Starblanket’s work demonstrates the extent to which the field of Canadian legal studies remains quite colonial in its treatment of Indigenous communities, collective and individual rights, and legacies of residential schooling. And while this text will certainly speak and be extremely relevant to those situated within an Indigenous Studies framework, Starblanket’s intervention is foundationally legal in its approach and method. On that basis, Suffer the Little Children is of immediate and immense value to legal scholars, lawyers, and educators seeking to offer students, readers, or colleagues a rich understanding of the politics of genocide and the forcible transferring of Indigenous Peoples’ children and the paradigm of Canadian colonial domination. Of particular importance in this regard is Starblanket’s critique of the atomization and individuation of reconciliation efforts that may have attempted to redress individuals but left the question of nation-to-nation relations largely untouched. As Starblanket’s text makes very clear, while residential schooling systems were a genocidal policy that targeted Indigenous peoples’ children, these children were targeted on the basis of their membership in a distinct national and cultural group, and Canadian discourses of reconciliation have yet to reflect this understanding.

In addition to its legal and historical significance, Starblanket’s intervention is an extremely timely one. For example, the recent decision of the Trudeau regime to purchase the Trans Mountain Pipeline despite the federal government’s unfulfilled promises to end boil-water advisories on-reserve only further politicizes what Mi’kmaq scholar Pam Palmater (2011) has termed “death by poverty in First Nations” (p. 112). Thus, while there is no better monograph to historicize and contextualize the legalities of genocide in a Canadian settler colonial context, Starblanket’s contribution in Suffer the Little Children also succeeds in challenging a national discourse of denial and leads readers to question the contemporary realities of genocide beyond the residential schooling system and into the present-day power relations and inequities that make up material conditions across Canada.
References

