

THE QUESTION  
OF GENOCIDE IN NATIVE AMERICAN STUDIES:  
A HISTORIOGRAPHICAL SURVEY

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The question of whether or not the depopulation and mistreatment of Native Americans by the United States government may accurately qualify as genocide occupies only a small portion of Native American historiography. Most Native American history addresses questions of individual tribes, disease, depopulation, and mistreatment, issues that relate to but ultimately avoid the question of genocide. Others argue the primary importance of recognizing the injustices perpetrated against the Native Americans in order to better understand and contextualize Native American history and to better understand genocide itself.

According to the United Nations, genocide involves the commission of at least one of five different acts against a particular “national, ethnic, racial, or religious group: 1) killing members of the group; 2) causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; 3) deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; 4) imposing measures to prevent births within the group; 5) forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.”<sup>1</sup> Native American historians, even those writing before the UN officially codified the legal definition of genocide, published numerous accounts of the United States engaged in many of the criteria described above, particularly those related to killing members of the group, causing serious bodily or mental harm, deliberately inflicting poor living conditions designed to bring about a group’s destruction, and forcibly transferring children to another group. From a purely legalistic standpoint, the answer to

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1. Richard G. Hovannisian (ed), *The Armenian Genocide in Perspective* (Piscataway: Transaction Publishers, 1986), 44.

the question of whether or not the Native Americans experienced genocide is obvious: the scholastic record overwhelmingly proves that they did. The question remains both intriguing and complicated not only because of the technical question but because of the answer's political implications. What claims to moral legitimacy has a nation that committed what most commonly understand as the worst of human cruelty? The majority of Native American historiography avoids the political traps inherent in the question of genocide, instead exploring disease, warfare, and massacre as topics in their own right. The scholarship that does directly address the question of Native American genocide remains mired in the complex politics of genocide recognition. Recognizing the genocide also affects contemporary American politics, challenging narratives of America's virtue and possibly influencing government policy towards existing tribes.

Early scholarship chronicling Native American suffering expressed deep sadness and sympathy but proposed no meaningful political alternatives to upset American pride or the existing social order. In 1931, Robert Gessner's *Massacre: A Survey of Today's American Indian* presented a political argument, sharply criticizing the Bureau of Indian Affairs for leaving Native Americans and their children "...criminally neglected."<sup>2</sup> Gessner combined oral history and primary source references to situate the Native Americans he encountered in a historical narrative of brutality and defeat. He concluded by wondering which is worse, the battle at Wounded Knee, "...in which the suffering and misery were brief, in which the weariness of the living was quickly extinguished...Or today's slow, starving, heart-breaking existence...gradual dissolution through disease, poverty, and hopelessness. Today's slow, torturing massacre."<sup>3</sup> Gessner's style of overt political critique would not become prominent in Native American studies until the late 1960s and early 1970s. Until then, the field's most prominent scholar was Grant Foreman, whose combination of sympathy and optimism created an important template for sympathetic Native American history.

In his 1932 book *Indian Removal: The Emigration of the Five Civilized Tribes of Indians*, Grant Foreman, presents "the account of the removal of southern Indians" that he describes as "...this tragic phase in

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2. Robert Gessner, *Massacre: A Survey of Today's American Indian* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1931), 164.

3. Gessner, 418.

American history.”<sup>4</sup> Foreman informs the reader that “...this book is not written to excite sympathy for the Indians...” and extols the virtues of the officers and soldiers in charge of Indian removal, praising the way they “...devoted themselves indefatigably and sympathetically to the sad task of removing the Indians with as much expedition and comfort as possible within the provisions made by their superiors in Washington.”<sup>5</sup> Foreman’s work situates his unfortunate tale firmly in the past by emphasizing the gains Native Americans achieved since their removal, equating “the rehabilitation of these five Indian nations...with the best traditions of white frontier civilization,” and trumpeting their “recovery” as “...an achievement unique in our history.”<sup>6</sup> In the 1952 forward to a reprint of his significant work, Foreman wrote in the forward that despite continuing research, he “...discovered nothing that would substantially alter the picture presented in the first edition.”<sup>7</sup> Foreman’s optimistic narrative suggests no contemporary problems with relations between white Americans and Native Americans, allowing him to tell a tragic historical tale without generating modern political controversy. His work became the template for Native American historiography.

In 1941, Angie Debo penned *The Road to Disappearance: A History of the Creek Indians*, another detailed chronicle of Native American suffering and decline. Debo dedicates the book to Grant Foreman (“whose work has pointed the way”), focusing specifically on the influence of the Creeks on American culture, arguing that “...their influence upon the history of the white man has been profound and permanent.”<sup>8</sup> She attributes the final decline and defeat of the Creeks to U.S. government policy, describing the policies of the Dawes Commission as a direct result of the United States “...finally determin[ing] to break down the autonomy of the Five Tribes and erect a white man’s state upon the ruins of the Indian governments...”<sup>9</sup> Like Foreman and Gessner, Debo describes mass murder

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4. Grant Foreman, *Indian Removal: The Emigration of the Five Civilized Tribes of Indians* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1932), (np).
  5. Foreman, (np).
  6. Foreman, 386.
  7. Foreman, (np).
  8. Angie Debo, *The Road to Disappearance: A History of the Creek Indians* (Norman: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1941), x.
  9. Debo, 347.

and suffering that correspond with the UN definition of genocide. After the Red Stick War, Debo writes that “white people continued to murder Indians with impunity...local prejudice always ran too high to punish a white man for a crime against an Indian.”<sup>10</sup> Debo contributes to Native American scholarship by expanding Grant Foreman’s influential work and presenting a chronicle of Creek history that exposes injustices done to Native Americans. Although these early works chronicling injustices towards the Native Americans were the minority in a larger body of scholarship that focused mostly on stories of manifest destiny and Native Americans as obstacles in the larger story of American victory, they helped establish the groundwork for later arguments about the question of Native American genocide.

While Ralph K. Andrist does not mention the word genocide specifically in his 1964 book, *The Long Death: The Last Days of the Plains Indian*, his work foreshadows the stronger political condemnations later in the decade.<sup>11</sup> Andrist differs from earlier scholarship in his more forceful condemnation of the mistreatment of Native Americans throughout history. Gessner confines his harshest criticism for the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the present while Foreman laments the suffering of Native Americans but carefully excuses the soldiers on the ground, careful to ascribe the best of motives. Debo’s narrative provides a chronicle in which she describes Native American suffering but avoids completely any political message. Similarly, Andrist avoids any overt political argument but presents a more damning case against the United States army and the process of moving west than any of his predecessors.

Andrist begins with the following clarification of the plains wars, “As in all wars, men died unpleasantly...Women and children suffered... and the Army made it a part of strategy to destroy the enemy’s food and possessions in order to leave him cold, hungry, and without the will to resist.”<sup>12</sup> Although Foreman referred to the removal of tribes in the East instead of tribes in the West, Andrist presents the opposite picture of the United States army in their dealings with the Plains Indians. Andrist later writes that the urge to “‘kill and destroy’...were the same voices that were raised everywhere on the plains, and in all our relations with our Indians,

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10. Debo, 86.

11. Ralph K. Andrist, *The Long Death: the Last Days of the Plains Indian* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1964).

12. Andrist, 3.

from the Atlantic to the Pacific.”<sup>13</sup> The declaration of a sustained campaign throughout the entire nation to kill and destroy Native Americans marks the most scathing condemnation of United States policy and conduct that serious scholarship contained until this point. Such wholesale intent to slaughter entire peoples qualifies as genocide, foreshadowing the perspective adopted by later genocide scholars.

Later in the 1960s, Native American scholars began producing work about their understanding of their own historical experiences. Vine Deloria, Jr. published *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* in 1969, just before Native American scholarship would experience a significant shift in the 1970s towards critically examining the link between Native American destruction and the foundation of the United States.<sup>14</sup> Deloria’s book also represents an important escalation in political rhetoric in Native American scholarship. Whereas earlier scholarship, political in the sense that all scholarship generally belongs to the political context of its time, narrowly explored Native American decline as an amorphous tragedy or at most cautiously advocated better treatment of Native Americans, Deloria acerbically condemns both previous scholarship and Native American mistreatment. He writes that “practically the only thing the white man ever gave the Indian was disease and poverty.”<sup>15</sup> From this perspective, Deloria and other Native American scholars also criticized the scholastic institutions that produced scholarship about Native American history, with especially biting commentary about anthropologists:

“He will invariably have a thin sexy wife with stringy hair, an IQ of 191, and a vocabulary in which even the prepositions have eleven syllables... This creature is an anthropologist. An anthropologist comes out to Indian reservations to make OBSERVATIONS. During the winter these observations will become books by which future anthropologists will be trained, so they can come out to reservations years from now and verify the observations they have studied.”<sup>16</sup>

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13. Andrist, 84.

14. Vine Deloria, *Custer Died for Your Sins* (New York: Macmillan, 1969).

15. Deloria, 35.

16. Deloria, 79.

Interestingly, Deloria presents evidence of genocidal intent but avoids using the word genocide despite his passionate political position. In 2003, Deloria wrote the foreword for a collection of essays entitled *Genocide of the Mind: New Native American Writing*, in which he focuses on the cultural component of genocide by lamenting the loss of Native American culture through the process of urbanization.<sup>17</sup> His later work reveals that Deloria agrees with the classification of genocide, but his earlier work does not use the actual word, likely because of its absence from Native American scholarship generally. For example, he quotes a proclamation from 1755 that announced, “For every scalp of a male Indian brought in as evidence of their being killed as aforesaid, forty pounds. For every scalp of such female Indian or male Indian under the age of twelve years that shall be killed and brought in as evidence of their being killed as aforesaid, twenty pounds.”<sup>18</sup> Deloria advocates a historical perspective that makes the United States the culprit of the mistreatment of Native Americans in the way previous historical scholarship did not. He writes that “The country was founded in violence. It worships violence and will continue to live violently.”<sup>19</sup> This perspective would receive mainstream popular and scholarly attention the following year in 1971 with Dee Brown’s *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West*.<sup>20</sup>

Dee Brown’s enduring classic uses primary records to describe United States history from the Native American perspective; its commercial success generated political controversy and transformed the scholastic landscape of Native American studies. In the Forward to the 2009 illustrated edition of *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, Hampton Sides declares that “...Brown’s work almost single-handedly awakened the public conscience to America’s fork-tongued plundering of her indigenous peoples.”<sup>21</sup> Sides also quotes Deloria in the forward saying, “Every Indian will wish he had

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17. MariJo Moore (ed.) and Vine Deloria, Jr. (foreword by), *Genocide of the Mind: New Native American Writing* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press/Nation Books, 2003), (np).

18. Deloria, 6.

19. Deloria, 255.

20. Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* (New York: Sterling Publishing Co., 2009).

21. Brown, x.

written it...I wish I had.”<sup>22</sup> Brown never uses the word genocide, but cites primary sources that allow Native Americans to speak for themselves and recount the traumas they experienced. Brown includes testimony from prominent Native Americans during a commission to convince the Native Americans to peacefully relinquish land in the Black Hills, including the following from Spotted Tail: “...This war has come from robbery – from the stealing of our land,” and from those who “...came to take our land without price, and who, in our land, do a great many evil things...”<sup>23</sup> Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee began an important transition in historical scholarship that not only examined Native American history from the perspective of Native Americans themselves, but used extensive research to place blame for their suffering directly on the United States government during a time when the American people already felt disillusioned with the government because of the war in Vietnam. In the following decade, scholarship began to appear that more explicitly equates the Native American experience with genocide.

Early scholarship in the 1980s that mentioned genocide spent little time exhausting the logic behind such an appellation and instead focused, like previous scholarship, on the specific wrongs Native Americans experienced. For example, Parker M. Nielson’s 1982 book *The Dispossessed: Cultural Genocide of the Mixed Blood Utes, An Advocate’s Chronicle* hints at genocidal experience, such as when he describes “Brigham Young’s unannounced policy towards any Indians who would deny the territory that the Mormons wanted for their state of Deseret...” as “...in a word, extermination,” but makes no direct argument about genocide itself.<sup>24</sup> More concrete arguments begin to appear later in the 1980s, like Russell Thornton’s *American Indian Holocaust and Survival: A Population History since 1492*. Thornton explains that his book attempts to remedy the lack of studies linking demographics with social and cultural history in Native American scholarship.<sup>25</sup> He compares the Native American experience to the Jewish Holocaust in the 1940s, arguing that “In fact, the holocaust of North

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22. Brown, xi.

23. Brown, 299.

24. Parker M. Nielson, *The Dispossessed: Cultural Genocide of the Mixed Blood Utes, an Advocate’s Chronicle* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982), 6.

25. Russell Thornton, *American Indian Holocaust and Survival: A Population History Since 1492* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), xv.

American tribes was, in a way, even more destructive than that of the Jews, since many American Indian peoples became extinct.<sup>26</sup> Thornton explicitly links genocide with “concerted efforts to destroy Indian ways of life” such as “deliberate destructions of flora and fauna that American Indians used for food,”<sup>27</sup> battles like Wounded Knee Creek “...where several hundred old men, women, and children were massacred,”<sup>28</sup> and failure to vaccinate Native Americans “...due to a lack of interest on the part of United States Officials.”<sup>29</sup> While he tempers his argument with the declaration that disease made the largest contribution to Native American population decline overall, Thornton nevertheless reiterates the importance of genocide as the primary cause of population decline for individual tribes.<sup>30</sup> The combination of demographic statistics couched in inflammatory political rhetoric discounting the scope and importance of the Jewish Holocaust continues throughout genocide scholarship to this day, but remains a small part of Native American scholarship overall.

The same year Thornton’s study was released, a collection entitled *New Directions in American Indian History* examined scholarly trends in Native American studies and never once mentions genocide. Interestingly, however, the collection identifies Thornton’s book as an important trend in demographic studies because it “...presents a new aboriginal population size for North America.”<sup>31</sup> Like earlier scholarship, this collection reveals that academic studies of Native Americans focus largely on issues surrounding genocide but not directly the question of genocide itself. The first essay painstakingly elaborates techniques of studying demographic decline without directly examining the question of culpability such large scale decline naturally invites. Instead, the study identifies the open questions in Native American scholarship as “...Indian family life, economic activity, cultural persistence, and political change.” Quantitative methodologies, such as the aforementioned demographic question, also offer important new directions

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26. Thornton, xv-xvi.

27. Thornton, 51.

28. Thornton, 49.

29. Thornton, 101.

30. Thornton, 44, 49.

31. Colin G. Calloway (ed), *New Directions in American Indian History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 7-8.

for Native American scholars.<sup>32</sup> A few years later, the inflammatory political rhetoric in scholarship that directly addresses the Native American genocide contrasts sharply with Calloway's collection of academic essays that ignore it.

In 1992, M. Annette Jaimes edited and contributed to a collection of essays entitled *The State of Native America: Genocide, Colonization, and Resistance* that echoes Thornton's comparison of the Native American experience to the Jewish Holocaust. In her essay "Sand Creek The Morning After," JaimesJaimes declares that "The purpose of this book is to make a contribution to the emergence of the consciousness necessary to realize the liberation of North America from the grip of its Nazi heritage."<sup>33</sup> Anachronistically declaring that the United States has a Nazi heritage encapsulates the problems with modern Native American scholarship; obviously, a country cannot have a heritage from a political movement that occurred centuries after its founding within a different country. Such political rhetoric distracts from the points Jaimes makes comparing the Native American genocide to the Nazi genocide, arguing that "...the third Reich and the United States did what they did for virtually the same reasons."<sup>34</sup> She compares reducing the Slavic population in Ukraine to the forced relocation of Native Americans and contrasts Nazi killing squads with the famine and disease that destroyed the Native American population.<sup>35</sup> Jaimes makes a stronger link between disease and genocide than Thornton does, attributing starvation to "deliberate dislocation" and disease to "willful early experiments in biological warfare."<sup>36</sup> The essays contain similar political rhetoric to Thornton's and have a particular agenda; the forward written by Evelyn Hu-DeHart explains that they intend the essays to be "...morally disturbing and intellectually disruptive" and that they should "...yank us out of our normal complacency."<sup>37</sup>

In the early 1990s, one could scarcely distinguish Native American polemics from Native American genocide scholarship. Despite its

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32. Calloway, 5.

33. M. Annette Jaimes (ed), *The State of Native America: Genocide, Colonization, and Resistance* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 9.

34. Jaimes, 3.

35. Jaimes, 4.

36. Jaimes, 7.

37. Jaimes, x.

academic contributors, The State of Native America contains explicitly political and scholastically insupportable language, such as the reference to America's Nazi heritage. One year later, Native American activist Timothy "Little Rock" Reed edited and contributed to a collection of political essays that similarly compares the United States government and Hitler. Reed published *The American Indian in the White Man's Prisons: A Story of Genocide* to chronicle injustices against Native Americans to support his larger argument that "American Indians do not belong in the white man's criminal justice system or prisons, and that many of them who are captives of the system are political prisoners."<sup>38</sup> Reed emphasizes the connection between the Native American experience and genocide to highlight the injustice of the American prison system. Reed authored the collection's first essay in which he argues that attempts to assimilate Native Americans into white American culture through coercion and deprivation "[constitute] genocide every bit as much as Hitler's reign over Germany during the Third Reich. The systematic destruction of a people is the systematic destruction of a people. Period."<sup>39</sup> He argues that cultural genocide is the corollary to assimilation and largely focuses on systematic restrictions on practicing Native religions. For example, he criticizes the double standard created by the 1990 Supreme Court ruling that prohibits the use of peyote in religious ceremonies but notes that Christians have permission to serve wine to children during religious ceremonies despite laws that prohibit serving alcohol to minors.<sup>40</sup> Many of his essays also criticize boarding schools that remove Native American children from their families, prohibit their use of their native language, and require conformity to white American dress codes. Reed declares, "This is cultural genocide, but it kills the body, mind and heart as well as the spirit."<sup>41</sup> Ultimately, the radical political goal of removing all Native Americans from American prisons dwarfs any legitimate arguments Reed advances to support the connection between genocide and the Native American experience. That both activists and scholars address the question of genocide with political rhetoric to advance political goals creates a perception of bias that eclipses any substantive arguments. The difficulty in

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38. Timothy "Little Rock" Reed (ed), *The American Indian in the White Man's Prisons: A Story of Genocide* (Taleo, UnCompromising Books, 1993), 24.

39. Reed (ed), 10.

40. Reed, 17.

41. Reed, 38.

producing genocide scholarship lies in negotiating the politics of using the word genocide with the desire to create academic scholarship exploring Native American issues.

Today, the question of Native American genocide appears more frequently in comparative genocide studies rather than specific Native American studies. In the collection *Is the Holocaust Unique?: Perspectives on Comparative Genocide*, David E. Stannard's exploration of the sensitive politics surrounding the use of the word "genocide" in scholarship explains its absence in Native American scholarship. He declares the assumption that "the attempted destruction of the Jews in Nazi-controlled Europe was unique, unprecedented and categorically incommensurable... with the sufferings of any people at any time in any place during the entire history of humanity" is "demonstrably erroneous." Stannard argues that identifying the Holocaust as the only genocide is "the hegemonic product of many years of strenuous intellectual labor by a handful of Jewish scholars and writer who have dedicated much if not all of their professional lives to the advancement of this exclusivist idea."<sup>42</sup> Whereas concerns about American identity and virtue may contribute to the absence of genocide in Native American scholarship, Stannard identifies an additional challenge from a group of Holocaust scholars advancing a political agenda to preserve the uniqueness of a particular genocide. Stannard's essay then follows the pattern of previous Native American genocide scholarship and explains the connection between the Native American experience and genocide, citing disease, starvation, and related causes "...in the wake of direct violence."<sup>43</sup> Unfortunately, he also falls into the political trap of his predecessors, completely dismissing previous scholarship arguing that disease caused the majority of Native American deaths by declaring that, "there does not exist a single scholarly work that even pretends to demonstrate this claim on the basis of solid evidence."<sup>44</sup> Stannard's bias in favor of classifying the Native American experience as genocide leads him to a broad, sloppy conclusion that the larger body of evidence does not support. One can argue whether the role of disease can be directly attributed to genocide, but one cannot dismiss the enormous loss of life it caused in Native American populations.

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42. Alan S. Rosenbaum (ed), *Is the Holocaust Unique?: Perspectives on Comparative Genocide* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2001), 249.

43. Rosenbaum, 258.

44. Rosenbaum, 255.

Like Jaimes, Stannard's politics overshadow the positive scholarly contribution of his work.

In more recent Native American scholarship, questions of representation and analysis carry greater importance than the question of genocide. James F. Brooks suggests genocide as a useful category of political analysis, but emphasizes that the question of genocide itself is less important than its utilization to better understand the past. He argues that "the successful 1998 prosecution of Rwandan Hutu rapists under UN genocide codes... is an important breakthrough in humanitarian law but does not solve the analytical challenge" of incorporating gendered violence into understanding the Native American experience.<sup>45</sup> Brooks' essay appears in a collection entitled *Clearing a Path: Theorizing the Past in Native American Studies* and his is the only mention of genocide in the entire collection. The contrast between scholarship and genocide politics from the late 1980s and early 1990s still remains; the question of the Native American genocide is less important in Native American scholarship and heated political rhetoric still infuses any direct discussion of it.

Native American scholarship has great opportunities to examine the question of genocide in the Native American experience without inviting comparisons to the Holocaust that are fraught with political distractions.

*“Since the word genocide was introduced after the Holocaust, people identified its evil as something new, something rare, something unusual.”*

By focusing particularly on the Native American genocide for the sake of scholarly understanding rather than political advancement, scholars explore the potential for better understanding of the Native American experience as well as greater understanding of the nature of genocide. Because the term genocide connotes what

most commonly understand as the worst evil humanity can commit, scholars will still face numerous difficulties overcoming the political challenges. Since the word genocide was introduced after the Holocaust, people identified its evil as something new, something rare, something unusual. Advocates for Holocaust uniqueness correctly perceive that overuse of the

45. Nancy Shoemaker (ed), *Clearing a Path: Theorizing the Past in Native American Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 191.

*“Perhaps it exposes an unwillingness to recognize that genocide is far more common than anyone would like to admit ”*

would like to admit, and that by extension human nature is more terrifying than people care to imagine.

term has the potential to diminish its potency, the persistent omission of the Native American genocide from scholarship may reveal more about scholars than the Native American experience. Perhaps it exposes an unwillingness to recognize that genocide is far more common than anyone