

DISCIPLINE, TERRITORY,  
AND THE COLONIAL MESH

Indigenous Boarding Schools  
in the United States and Canada

*Andrew Woolford*

**To date there has been** very little comparative work on Indigenous boarding schools in the United States and Canada.<sup>1</sup> The extant literature tends to offer only general and tentative comparisons, as in Reyhner and Eder's (2004) *American Indian Education*, where a few key differences between Canadian and American boarding schools are noted amid a broader discussion of U.S. Indigenous education policy: Canadian residential schools lasted longer on average than U.S. schools; Canadian policies were unrelentingly assimilationist, since no reformist period occurred in Canada as it did in the United States in the 1930s; Indigenous parents in Canada had less say regarding to which schools their children were sent; and some Canadian religious denominations lobbied vigorously to prevent diminishment of their control over or the closing of boarding schools (Reyhner and Eder 2004). The cumulative effect of these differences is that Indigenous children in Canada typically entered boarding schools at an earlier age than their U.S. counterparts, and the Canadian system affected more generations of Indigenous children, in a more brutalizing form, than was true in most parts of the United States. However, one must also acknowledge that information about the schools has emerged from very different discursive contexts, since a public culture of traumatic memory and testimony has taken prominence through multiple class actions lawsuits and now the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (e.g., see Niezen 2013).

In the few comparative examinations of boarding schools in the United States and Canada, however, little attention is given to regional and temporal differences in the development, application, and experience of boarding

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school policy. Such is the case with Ward Churchill's (2004) *Kill the Indian, Save the Man*, which uses the term *genocide* to hammer all school experiences into a single block and thereby fails to capture the ebb and flow of colonial genocidal processes. Similarly, but in a wider comparison than that offered by Churchill, Andrea Smith (2009) writes about schooling and forced assimilation in the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, outlining their common assimilative purpose. In contrast to Churchill's and Smith's more critical perspectives, Charles Glenn's (2011) *American Indian/First Nations Schooling* offers a redemptive overview of Indigenous education, treating European schooling as a good that was simply mismanaged for Indigenous pupils. Glenn falls into the trap of accepting perpetrators' claims to humanitarianism as an alibi for their role in the attempted destruction of another group.

While comparative discussion of boarding schools is sparse and, where it exists, over-general, there is a wealth of detailed historical work on Indigenous boarding schools in each country. Some authors offer a broad overview of colonial schooling policy combined with illustrative examples of how it was enacted, in addition to how students adapted to, resisted, and suffered their time at the schools (e.g., Milloy 1999; Miller 1996; Grant 1996; Adams 1995; Szasz [1974] 1999; Reyhner and Eder 2004). But more recent historiography focuses on specific Indigenous boarding schools in an attempt to capture the local particularity of the schooling experience, as well as to offer a portrait of how Indigenous groups, rather than a homogeneous "Indian" people, lived their boarding school days (e.g., Lomawaima 1994; Ellis 1996; Child 1998; Trennert 1988). Most of these authors are critical of schooling policy, but they also seek to show its uneven application across time and space. It is within this unevenness that they locate examples of students who enjoyed aspects of their schooling experience, connected with certain teachers, or eventually used their education for positive purposes unexpected by policy makers, such as by reinforcing rather than shedding their Indigenous identities (McBeth 1983; Lomawaima 1994). Others go further to emphasize that Indigenous students, parents, and communities came to appropriate boarding schools for their own purposes (Gilbert 2010; Gram 2012).

By invoking the term *genocide* I do not ignore the historical nuance of such scholarship. However, my effort is to show how genocidal processes are themselves uneven and uncertain because the colonial networks that generate these processes manifest in unpredictable ways. Like all grandiose modernist projects of statecraft, boarding schools were prone to inconsistencies, variable applications, resistances, and subversions. Therefore, in this chapter *genocide* speaks more to the process of destruction than a foregone outcome. In short,

this chapter looks at the negotiation of genocide—at how groups intending to destroy other groups seek to mobilize their destructive powers, face obstacles and resistances, enroll or combat other actors (including nonhuman actors), and either succeed (in whole or in part) or fail in their efforts.

### Three Guidelines for Colonial Genocide Studies and Boarding Schools

To begin, three guidelines for examining colonial genocide in a settler context are in order. First, a multilevel analysis that integrates macro, meso, and micro factors into a processual account of forced assimilation through schooling is needed (Verdeja 2012). Second, a critical approach is required so that colonial regimes are held to account, even while acknowledging the diversity and unevenness of settler colonialism (e.g., see Moses 2000; Wolfe 1999; Veracini 2010). Third, study of colonial genocide should help decolonize genocide studies by challenging Eurocentric biases within the field (see also Logan in this volume).

A multilevel analysis has potential to overcome false dichotomies between agency and victimization in the historical literature on Indigenous boarding schools (Trevithick 1998; Davis 2001). Indeed the degree of structural victimization and the simultaneous possibilities of agency depend upon a multiplicity of factors and negotiations. To navigate this complex matrix, one can imagine colonialism as a series of nets that operate to constrain agency but are also prone to snags and openings that enable agentic resistance. The first net, the widest, traverses the entire social field and brings together dominant realms of social activity, such as economy, education, government, and religion.<sup>2</sup> It is at this broad level that dominant visions of the colonial order are negotiated, for example, the formulation of what was known as the “Indian problem” in both the United States and Canada. This vast net, however, can be effective only through the implementation of a group of increasingly smaller and more institutionally and regionally focused nets. At the upper meso level, within the bureaucratic field inhabited by government, one finds the institutional netting that brings together various state and state-sponsored agencies (see Wacquant 2009, 2010). Military, police, law, education, welfare, and health are a few examples of colonial institutions that are integral to the operation of settler colonialism. But each institution is itself the space for further levels of netting. Indeed at the lower meso or organizational level of the institution of education, a variety of schools (e.g., reservation and nonreservation, federal and mission, day and boarding) form a network of interactions, as they cooperate and compete with one another, depending on various circumstances. Finally, around a specific school we find the last

layer of netting, which connects parents, children, teachers, principals, and communities in interactions defined by regionally adapted techniques of governance and control, and a local actor network that involves not just humans but also nonhuman interactants like disease, poverty, animals, and territory in the immediate experiences of assimilative schooling (Callon 1986; Latour 2005).

Together these layers of netting form a mesh, and understanding any particular experience of forced assimilative schooling in a local context requires a multilevel analysis of macro, meso, and micro networks so that one can identify when and where the mesh tightens or loosens in a manner that makes the genocidal project of settler colonialism more or less effective. The colonial mesh therefore must be examined processually, as it expands and contracts across time and differentially across space, with gaps in the mesh loosening in some regions while perhaps closing more tightly around Indigenous communities in others. As I discuss below, conceptualizations of the Indian problem, and the institutions coordinated to respond to this perceived problem—actions that occur at the macro and upper meso levels of this mesh—took distinct forms at specific schools, where superintendents and staff negotiated specific conditions and innovated techniques to try to address higher order concerns about the “Indian problem.” These conditions included the resistances Indigenous groups mustered based on a balance of alliances.

This multilevel approach flows into the need for a critical colonial genocide studies (see Hinton 2012) by providing a framework that accounts for the varied and multidimensional nature of colonial destruction rather than basing genocide definitions on comparisons to a “core” of accepted genocide cases. Group destruction is an exceedingly complex undertaking, which requires those who have accepted a genocidal formulation (e.g., the “Indian problem”) to enlist an array of institutions, organizations, and actors in the project. Under such conditions the destructive project of assimilation that seeks to resolve the Indian problem is negotiated, which means there is potential for snags in the colonial mesh. Schools adapt policy to local conditions, parents resist by removing and hiding their children within complicated geographies, and communities mobilize whatever power they possess to adjust the terms of forced assimilation. The mesh tightens or loosens, but the genocidal frame of reference remains, despite resistance or refusals of enrollment on the part of those targeted for destruction or the claims of benevolence on the part of its agents (see Jacobs in this volume). Because of this initial destructive framing, there can be no exculpatory or redemptive story of forced assimilation, even if some children enjoyed schools or some teachers showed kindness to children. Settler colonialism is a structure possessed by

a “logic of elimination” that guides an imperfect network of institutions, organizations, and actors (Wolfe 2006; see also Barta 1987). Under policies of forced assimilation this logic of elimination takes on a genocidal air, since it is directed toward the purposive destruction of Indigenous groups as sui generis entities. As Jacobs (this volume) adds, this logic of elimination becomes entwined with the everyday practices that constitute a “habit of elimination” whereby destructive practices become taken for granted and their veneer of benevolence is seldom questioned.

To fully capture the meaning of group destruction one must begin to decolonize the Eurocentric assumptions of genocide studies. First, recognition of a multilevel colonial mesh comprising innumerable actors allows for the inclusion of those actors usually disregarded in genocide studies or viewed as external to human groups. For example, while one cannot impute agency to territory, territory is enrolled in either carrying out or resisting forced assimilation. The physical space of the campus imposes the alleged superiority of European “civilization,” but proximate Indigenous space offers zones of escape from the designs of colonial destruction. Moreover such nonhuman actors are also potential participants in a group’s identity formation and therefore, in some cases, inseparable from the group itself. (On this point as it relates to the buffalo, see also Hubbard in this volume.) For example, the role of story in many Indigenous cultures is to connect identity to territory (Cruikshank 1998) in a manner that makes any assault on the territory, or the stories that sustain the Indigenous group’s connection to territory, an assault upon the group itself.

Second, the colonial mesh is not reducible to the plot of a single perpetrator or group of perpetrators. It is a collective rather than an individual endeavor. This means that we must move genocide studies past its individualism, as well as its focus on legalistic notions of specific intent, to try to understand how perpetrator collectivities come to problematize a target group and then to organize and undertake the attempted destruction of that group.

Finally, since colonial genocide studies helps us to understand that the group is more than just the sum of its individual members, it also pushes us to expand our notions of destruction. Genocide studies has often fixated on the physical destruction of groups (e.g., Chalk and Jonassohn 1990) rather than the collective interactions that allow the group to persist in the ongoing negotiation of its existence. The bonds of the group are more than the lives of group members, and any assessment of potential destruction requires some knowledge of how the group constitutes and reproduces itself rather than an oversimplified examination of the percentage of group members murdered by perpetrators (Woolford 2009).<sup>3</sup>

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2 A full realization of these guidelines is not possible in this short chapter.  
3 But to illustrate their saliency I will offer a brief discussion of how the “In-  
4 dian problem” was formulated in the United States and Canada, followed  
5 by meso- and micro-level examples of how discipline and desire operated as  
6 paired techniques of forced assimilation and how territory and space were  
7 enrolled in or used to resist the assimilative project.

### 8 **Macro Level: The Indian Problem**

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10 Assimilative education is an example of “thinking like a state” to the ex-  
11 tent that it represents an ambitious attempt at social engineering spawned  
12 by a specific governmental problematization that is perceived to be solvable  
13 through a strictly managed or scientifically guided intervention into the so-  
14 cial world (see Scott 1998; Patzer in this volume). For boarding schools, it is  
15 the so-called Indian problem, a subject of much debate and discussion in the  
16 late nineteenth and early twentieth century, that provided the formulation  
17 of the problem to be solved. In the United States and Canada the settler  
18 population expanded and grew, expropriating Indigenous lands and resources  
19 by any means necessary. But settler violence failed to provide security on the  
20 frontier. Indeed the Indian Wars in the United States were an object lesson  
21 for governments in both the United States and Canada, as attempts to de-  
22 feat Indigenous nations militarily proved an extremely costly approach to  
23 national consolidation (see Madley, Whaley in this volume). As Ben Madley  
24 (this volume) notes, the costs were more than monetary, as reports from the  
25 wars also impacted the nation’s reputation, leaving it grasping for alternative  
26 solutions to the “Indian problem.”

27 So if war and massacre were largely off the table, what was to be done  
28 with the “Indian”? By 1879 boarding schools began to win out as the primary  
29 answer to this question, although other institutional interventions into Indig-  
30 enous lifeworlds would continue alongside and in combination with schools  
31 (see Powell and Peristerakis in this volume). But driving the establishment of  
32 the schools was the belief that Indigenous adults were too stubborn in their  
33 traditions for effective assimilation, making children the primary targets for  
34 a rapid transformation of Indigenous communities away from their cultural  
35 past and toward a Europeanized future (Szasz [1974] 1999; Miller 1996; Ad-  
36 ams 1995). Debates persisted about the level of “civilization” possible for In-  
37 digenous peoples, with evolutionary and race science-based arguments that  
38 suggested only a limited or gradual uplift becoming prominent in the early  
39 twentieth century and to some degree supplanting ideas about Christian or  
40 liberal universalism, according to which all were “blank slates” upon which

civilization could be writ. Despite such disagreements, general consensus was achieved on the necessity of schooling, and the language of “civilization” and (full or partial) “assimilation” served as a shorthand to draw together what might otherwise be disparate views, as well as a broad variety of policy interventions into Indigenous lives (Fear-Segal 2007; Hoxie 1983).

In the United States and Canada mission schools run by various religious groups preceded the creation of industrial-style or vocational boarding schools. These mission schools were sparsely sited, proselytizing institutions that were limited in their power to compel attendance. The birth of modern Indigenous boarding schools is thus often credited not to the missions but rather to Lt. Richard Pratt, who began his experiment in education in the late 1870s, working on seventy-two captured Indian warriors (thirty-four Cheyenne, two Arapaho, twenty-seven Kiowa, nine Comanche, and one Caddo) at the Fort Marion prison in Florida (Adams 1995). Rather than simply let prisoners sit in cells and perish, Pratt launched a school of “civilization.” This education presented a welcome contrast to the brutal conditions of the prison, and many prisoners succumbed to Pratt, accepting his lessons and the improvements to prison life that came with them. Pratt, though, knew that his experiment would gain recognition only if it were visible, and thus he made sure to place his prisoners on regular public display. As public acclaim grew for his methods, Pratt pressed his superiors to allow him to release some of the younger prisoners to an institution where they could continue their education. After some searching, Pratt received word in 1878 that Samuel Chapman Armstrong—founder and principal of the Hampton Normal and Industrial Institute, a school that taught African American freedmen—would accept seventeen of Pratt’s pupils (Adams 1995).

Then, in 1879, Pratt opened his own school in an abandoned army barracks in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Pratt’s vision of the nonreservation boarding school, which he enacted at Carlisle, became the model for the early U.S. federal boarding school system: Indigenous children were removed from their communities and habituated to the ways of European life in close proximity to white “civilization.” As Pratt stated, “We make our greatest mistake in feeding our civilization to the Indians instead of feeding the Indians to our civilization” (quoted in Adams 1995: 53).

Around the time that Pratt was opening Carlisle, Nicholas Flood Davin was sent by John A. MacDonal’s government in Canada to investigate Indian Education in the United States. Davin completed a short tour that included stops in Washington, where he met with chiefs from the “Five Civilized Tribes,” and Minnesota, where he observed a mission-run contract boarding school. In his report Davin favorably cites U.S. efforts to have Indigenous

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peoples concentrated on reservations, possessing lands in severalty rather than in common, and prepared for citizenship through industrial education. Like others at the time, Davin (1879: 1) was unconvinced that day schools, where children returned to their home after a day's education, could work with Indigenous children to overcome the "influence of the wigwam." The industrial boarding school was therefore, in his view, the best option for Indians and half-breeds "to be merged and lost" within the idea of the nation (11). But Davin also felt that the migratory nature of Indigenous groups in the Northwest would make extensive establishment of industrial boarding schools expensive and inefficient; therefore it would be best for Canada to make use of the already existing network of denominational missions as a foundation for the residential schooling system. Soon several government-sponsored, mission-managed boarding schools were opened, including the Qu'Appelle and Battleford Industrial Schools in Saskatchewan. (For further discussion of Davin, see MacDonald in this volume.)

This cursory overview of the conceptualization of the "Indian problem" in the late nineteenth century and the development of a network of schools to attend to this problem gives some sense that a collective action frame was emerging to coordinate forced assimilation and "civilization." Such a frame is seldom entirely coherent or stable; it is subject to ongoing negotiations, influence from lower levels in the colonial mesh, and local applications, and therefore this level of the colonial netting tells us very little about the actual experiences of attempted group destruction. In contrast, looking at the colonial mesh at its meso and micro levels allows one to better understand the uneven spread of such an action frame. At the meso level institutional (upper) and organizational (lower) networks provided the foundation upon which individual schools would negotiate their own particular approach to assimilative education. For example, schools would be buttressed by other state institutions, such as the police, welfare services, or health provisions, drawing upon these resources to compel or entice parents to enroll their children. As well, suborganizational networks of schools promoted the circulation of techniques of school management and assimilation but also fostered competition among schools for students. At the micro level techniques and alliances multiply, making for complicated networks of action that impact the assimilative designs of specific schools. For the purposes of this chapter, I focus on one set of techniques, discipline and desire, and one form of alliance, territorial and spatial, to illustrate some ways that these two layers of the colonial mesh tighten or slacken, making it either more damaging to Indigenous groups or more open to resistance and subversion. For the micro-level analysis, examples will be drawn from the Albuquerque (AIS) and Santa Fe (SFIS) Indian



### Discipline and Desire at the Meso and Micro Levels

In the boarding school literature the term *discipline* is often used to discuss corporal punishment. In contrast, I use it here to broadly capture the techniques and tactics employed within schools to shape student behavior. But it must also be recognized that such visions of order are pursued and achieved by means other than discipline. For this reason the concept of discipline is coupled with desire to capture how pleasure and excitement were enlisted and operated in conjunction with discipline within specific schools as a further technique to facilitate Indigenous assimilation.

Although deriving from a place of mutual influence, boarding schools in the United States and Canada would be erected on somewhat different disciplinary models. Whereas Pratt's militarism would influence U.S. boarding schools in the late 1800s, only to be gradually replaced by a professionalized and expert-driven Indian civil service in the early decades of the twentieth century, monastic modes of discipline were more prominent and lasting within Canadian schools. These different disciplinary styles often resulted in similar treatment for students: loss of all emblems of cultural identity upon entry into the school, prohibitions against use of Indigenous languages, a regimented time table with days split between education and manual labor, and severe punishments for perceived indiscretions.

Differences can also be discerned, such as the more frequent use in the United States of military marching and parades and the organization of students within battalions or other military units. In general, Indigenous children were perceived to be lacking in discipline. According to Samuel Armstrong, military discipline was necessary because it "enforces promptness, accuracy and obedience and goes further than any other influence could do to instill in the minds of the students what both the Negro and Indian sadly lack, a knowledge of the value of time" (quoted in Coleman 1993: 42-43). Superintendent Cart at SFIS agreed about the need for military discipline. On May 27, 1891, he wrote to the commissioner of Indian Affairs for a copy of "The New Drill Regulations for the Army," commenting, "I consider any kind of military drill an aid in disciplining a school."<sup>4</sup> Cart also pushed to have all his students in military dress.

Yet the military model in U.S. boarding schools did not have the backing of an upper meso-level institutional matrix to support its continuation. Although several principals and school workers had military backgrounds

and students often found success in the U.S. military, the military was not a primary actor in delivering education. Professional and managerial technologies of control thus came to replace militaristic forms, since the organizational logic of the civil service was much more entrenched within the American Indian bureaucracy. But the transition from military discipline to managerial governance happened more quickly at some schools than others. AIS abolished its military system in 1924, eight years prior to its being formally discontinued within the Indian Affairs system, replacing it with a model of student self-governance (Gram 2012). Ted Jojola, an Isleta Pueblo scholar, argues, “In Albuquerque, Pratt’s approach was short-lived. Almost immediately, pueblo parents began keeping their children home. A lawsuit was filed on behalf of an Isleta boy who was prevented from leaving the school. The parents prevailed and the school quickly softened its militaristic tone” (quoted in Linthicum 2002).<sup>5</sup>

In contrast Christian denominations charged with the delivery of schooling in Canada formed an institutional structure with vested interests in the continuation of schooling and the delivery of religious education. Thus while military discipline largely disappeared from U.S. boarding schools by the late 1920s, monastic discipline would continue in evidence well into the 1950s in Canada. At the Oblate schools, for example, the strictures of the “Durieu system” could still be felt. As Miller (1996: 91) describes it, “This regime, named after Oblate Paul Durieu, employed methods of total control over mission Indians for the purpose of effecting a permanent conversion to Christian religious values and practices. The Durieu system aimed at eradicating all unchristian behaviour by means of strict rules, stern punishments for transgressors, and use of Indian informers and watchmen as proctors to ensure conformity and inflict punishments as necessary.”

In a Roman Catholic boarding school, such as Fort Alexander, prayer and confession were regular parts of the disciplinary regime. Reflecting on his time at FA in the 1930s, Joseph Boubard reports that he “didn’t learn much at school. Lot of praying.”<sup>6</sup> School inspector B. Warkentin noted the continuation of monastic discipline at the FA school in the early 1940s: “What has been wrong, if I may presume to criticize, is that church authorities have been and are concerned about saving the Indian’s soul. . . . Instructors shall not destroy the excellence of the Indian character by ill-advised behavior or by the teaching of incomprehensible and disputed dogma. Our aim always should be to build on the existing foundation rather than to substitute a new basis.”<sup>7</sup> At FA Roman Catholic control over the school, sustained by isolation from regular inspection and reinforcement from Catholic institutional networks, meant a longer experience of monastic discipline than was the case for militaristic discipline in New Mexico.

But discipline was complemented by a regulated desire. Tactile, social, aural, physical, and other pleasures were made available in limited quantities to seduce Indigenous students to the school environment. Superintendent of Indian Schools Estelle Reel, in her 1904 annual report, writes of the girls at AIS who were so desperate to weave that they converted chairs into looms. Rather than discourage such traditional practices, Reel argued that this knowledge of the pleasure Indian girls take in weaving could be used to foster their insertion into American life, namely by encouraging them to use traditional arts as a means to earn income. Reel (1904: 22) wrote, “The arts and crafts of the Indian have a far greater value than is generally known, and in many sections of the country they become efficient aids to him in earning a livelihood.”

Jacqueline Fear-Segal (2007) is one of the few scholars to note the role desire, or seduction, played in Indian education. Drawing from Stephan Lukes, she notes that the subject of power can be seduced into cooperation in his or her own domination (Fear-Segal 2007: 20). Adams (1995) likewise sees the force of “ritual” within the schools as religious ceremonies and secular holidays implemented a new set of rituals to replace the ceremonials of traditional Indigenous life. Dances and socials were occasions when exhibition of a regulated desire was acceptable and students could “acquire habits of politeness, refinement, and self possession” (Indian Office quoted in Adams 1995: 177). Sports were another opportunity for simultaneous experiences of excitement and disciplinary training within the schools. As well, schools offered access to American cinema. An anonymous interviewee from Jemez Pueblo recalls the seduction of film and food at AIS: “I went voluntarily there, and they didn’t force me to go and then the kids that were there told such exciting stories about movies every Saturday night and this government gravy and beans, you know, and how they drilled, and that there were many other Indians besides Jemez.”<sup>8</sup>

The last part of this quotation reinforces that discipline and desire are linked rather than oppositional categories. Indeed discipline fulfills certain desires—for regularity, for order—and it offers attractions: the cohesion of marching, the power of the uniform. Many students interviewed after their time at schools spoke fondly of the discipline: “That school was just a strict school, it was like a military school. I like it that way because there is discipline. . . . We used to go out in the field in the morning before breakfast, rain or shine, we used to drill every morning, military training, like the soldiers do in actual combat zones and we knew how to handle guns.”<sup>9</sup>

The role played by desire as an assimilative technique is more evident at SFIS and AIS than at FA or PlaP, although the latter schools did use ritual, sports, dances, and movies to draw students to Westernized lifestyles.

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Nonetheless instances of these enjoyments are more frequently mentioned in U.S. boarding school testimony. In contrast students more often recall the drab, brutal, and repetitive nature of Canadian residential schools. When newly arrived as principal at PlaP, A. C. Huston wrote, “An observant visitor to certain of our Indian Residential schools would ask why we have deliberately set out to make our residences such dull and unattractive places. I must confess that it might easily appear that we had done so intentionally. Some schools are as void of light illuminative colors as a medieval dungeon. Where an attempt has been made to introduce color dark brown floors and battleship gray walls has been the answer. The whole appearance is in many cases depressing. Hades could not appear more colorless, drab or forlorn.”<sup>10</sup>

In these brief examples a glimpse is available of how meso-level institutional forces could bolster disciplinary regimes or create spaces for the emergence of less restrictive and more autonomous systems of control. In New Mexico the shift toward managerial strategies of governance meant schools were not beholden to a strict disciplinary regime and had more room for innovation and for increased micro-level applications of techniques of desire and seduction to enlist students in the project of their assimilation. In contrast, in Manitoba meso-level institutional networks propped up regimes of monastic discipline, leaving less space for micro-level variations.

### **Territory and Space at the Meso and Micro Levels**

Adrea Lawrence (2011: 18), in her study of the day school at the Santa Clara Pueblo, writes, “Land—the physical geography, the flora and the fauna of a place—is a full-fledged participant in the story of how Santa Clarans, Hispanos, and Anglos leaned their positions, roles, and strategies in the colonization of the place called ‘New Mexico.’” Indeed territory and space are at once the crucial stakes of settler colonialism, a basis for Indigenous collective identity and resistance, and actors enlisted to resolve the “Indian problem.”

With respect to territory, at the meso level the location of U.S. federal boarding schools in urban centers placed them more within the observational sight lines of other institutional actors and the general public. In contrast the distance of a school like FA from centers of government meant that although policies continued to be developed by government and circulated among schools, inspections were rare. As the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2012: 18) notes, “Indian Affairs regularly adopted various policies regarding health, discipline, and education, but these were not enforced consistently. At the outset, it had few school inspectors (and those it

did have lacked educational qualifications). In later years, provincial school inspectors, who had no power to have their recommendations implemented, inspected the schools.”

At the micro level territory and space could play numerous roles in the assimilative education. First, the buildings and grounds of the schools were themselves actors enrolled by governing authorities to transform Indigenous children, but also subverted for purposes of resistance. The buildings were typically larger than any the children had seen before and were meant to impart the superiority of European culture in both their grandness and style (de Leeuw 2007). Moreover space was used to separate children from opposite-sex siblings and to culturally disorient them, replacing the openness of Indigenous territory and structures with the regulated and compartmentalized space of the classrooms. Agricultural lands around the school communicated the taming of nature, and guardhouses, principals’ offices, and the school cemetery were reminders of the destructive and punitive power of the white man (de Leeuw 2007; Fear-Segal 2007). But students also sought out and occupied the interstices of this regulated space—for example, hiding places where food could be stored, conversations could go unheard, plans could be made, love could blossom, or tears could be shed.

Second, space factored into how students and communities could avoid forced attendance at the schools or negotiate the terms under which they were instructed. At AIS Superintendent Bryan (1894–96) was persuaded that Indian students should be drawn from nearby communities rather than brought from long distances, and given opportunity to visit these communities on occasion, contrary to Pratt’s vision of boarding schools. McKinney (1934) attributes this belief to Bryan’s independence, but Gram (2012) more convincingly demonstrates that the Pueblo communities did much to influence Bryan on these matters, namely by using their proximity to monitor conditions at AIS and interschool competition to threaten to remove their children to mission schools unless AIS operated on terms more acceptable to the Pueblo. Under such pressure Bryan reformulated his compromise so that it was consistent with the goals of the Bureau of Indian Affairs: “The ultimate object of the Indian schools is, as I understand, not so much the improvement of individuals as the gradual uplifting of the race. To this end it is important to guard against the formation of a wide gulf between parent and child, and to prevent the child from acquiring notions inconsistent with proper filial respect and duty. . . . I would recommend that at this school, therefore, the term consist of nine months, giving the children three months at their homes” (quoted in McKinney 1934: 11). In this instance Bryan supported the government’s objective of transforming Indigenous communities through their children

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2 but also suggested that the “Indian problem” was better addressed by keeping  
3 children in some provisional contact with their communities.

4 Complicating this picture, however, is the fact that there is no singular way  
5 in which territory factors into the boarding school experiences. For the Na-  
6 vajo (Diné), as for the Pueblo, territory is important, but its role is different.  
7 Removal from territory, in particular by the “Long Walk” (1864–69), served  
8 as a threat used to compel Navajo assimilation, but territory also intervened  
9 to obstruct this assimilation. The Navajo territory is vast, and, during the first  
10 half-century of assimilative schooling, the roads were poor to nonexistent.  
11 Because the U.S. government failed to provide the local schools promised  
12 under Article 6 of the Treaty of 1869, which returned the Navajo to their  
13 traditional territory after their forced removal to Fort Sumner during the  
14 time of the Long Walk, the Navajo were able to resist sending their children  
15 to boarding schools with the assistance of their territory. When trying to  
16 recruit Navajo for SFIS in 1891, Superintendent Cart noted, “At the Navajo  
17 Agency the prospect is not encouraging. The Indians are scattered over such  
18 a vast extend of rough country that at this time of the year, they are almost  
19 inaccessible.”<sup>11</sup>

20 Students from Sagkeeng First Nation (formerly the Fort Alexander re-  
21 serve) would, like the Pueblo, appear to be at an advantage in terms of their  
22 proximity to their boarding school. However, territorial proximity in and  
23 of itself was not sufficient for loosening the colonial mesh and creating op-  
24 portunities for greater Indigenous control. As a Roman Catholic school in  
25 a relatively isolated region, FA was part of a Canadian colonial network that  
26 exhibited fewer policy fluctuations than the American network. The location  
27 of the school, which was difficult to reach by road, even though it was rela-  
28 tively close to the town of Selkirk, also meant there was less opportunity for  
29 inspection and less opportunity for Indigenous leaders to speak to officials  
30 beyond the school to voice their concerns. Isolation and the power of the  
31 Indian agent helped ensure continued Indigenous enrollments without the  
32 Sagkeeng people, whose children were the majority at the school, increasing  
33 their negotiating power. But whereas FA was isolated, PlaP had more pressure  
34 to serve as a demonstration school, since visitors were more likely to come  
35 by: “I am particularly anxious that this school should always present a good  
36 appearance. It is in rather a public place and they always have a number of  
37 visitors, and people get a better impression [when] everything is up-to-date.”<sup>12</sup>  
38 Under such circumstances accessibility of the school resulted in concerns  
39 about impression management that were not characteristic of all Canadian  
40 boarding schools.

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Third, schools enlisted distance from territory to forge a radical break with

Indigenous communities. Child (1998: 27) argues, “Distance caused hardship, distress, and unimagined miseries but failed to extinguish the very real influence parents and family continued to exert over the lives of students. . . . The power of home was so intense and comforting that few students left that world behind.” Child counters those who see distance as a pure break with the sociocultural world of the Indigenous community, but we must complicate her analysis and push it further to get to the variety of ways in which space, territory, time, and distance were enlisted by various actors in negotiating the boarding school experience. Distance could be catastrophic or overcome because it was always interacting with other factors, such as access for and the political power of the Indigenous group in question.

Child’s insight speaks to another terrain of resistance: memory. Theodore Fontaine (2010: 11), who contributed the foreword to this volume, addresses this space in his memoir of FA when he writes, “Early on, I discovered that I could escape from the loneliness and sadness of my life at Indian residential school by recalling and reliving my joyous life as a boy at home before school. . . . The practice of retreating into my mind and my memories became a life-long survival skill.” And yet the disciplinary structure of the schools, and the disciplinary regimentation of time, meant it was often difficult for children to occupy this space of memory and to overcome the imposed distance. Later in his book Fontaine suggests that students regulated one another in a manner that made it difficult to inhabit the terrain of memory: “Memories of happy times surfaced a lot in my first year at school, particularly at night and in the dark. Eventually they came less and less often—perhaps mercifully, for whimpering and crying were reason for the older boys to belittle and abuse the younger ones—and later I thought perhaps they were only a dream” (91).

The proximity of a school like Fort Alexander to Sagkeeng First Nation did not automatically result in community empowerment, the retention of Indigenous traditions, or less loneliness for the children. Indeed looking outside to see a family member walking past the fence, yet with no ability to make contact with that person, could intensify longings for home and create resentments among those community members outside the schools who had failed to protect them from enrollment. One FA Survivor recalls, “When I was at the residential school there, my home was only about a quarter mile away. I can see my home from the boarding school, like, when you, you know, I was lonely, wondering why I can’t go home, or why people can’t come and visit me.”<sup>13</sup> Reservation boarding schools could also taint the space of the reserve for Survivors. A child of Survivors tells of how her parents (Survivors of Portage la Prairie and Sandy Bay Residential Schools) moved away from their community to protect their children from attending such a school: “And so

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they raised us off reserve for one of those reasons, for that particular reason, so that none of us would ever have to go to residential school.”<sup>14</sup>

In these examples one can see the regionally and temporally differentiated role played by territory and space within the project of assimilative schooling. Although the Indian problem was mapped over most of North America, its assimilative mesh was advanced or interrupted by the diverse alliances of key actors (schools, staff, families, communities, and students) formed with territory and space.

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I have conceptualized a colonial mesh to understand the many layers of assimilative genocide in North America, as well as how this mesh tightens or loosens at different times and in different places. Although a comprehensive narrative of the processes by which this mesh tightens and loosens across time and space was not possible, illustrative examples were drawn from boarding schools in Manitoba and New Mexico to show how macro, meso, and micro levels of the colonial mesh interact with one another to create novel formations of assimilative schooling in specific locales. The destructive project of forced assimilation as conceptualized through the Indian problem therefore succeeds or fails depending on a set of institutional, organizational, and local conditions that are very complex and need to be carefully traced. In attempting to trace multilevel intersections of policy, institutions, organizations, and actors, this approach remains critically focused in that the collective framework of destruction envisioned at the higher levels of the colonial mesh is still held to account without sacrificing historical nuance. In addition this approach seeks to contribute to the decolonization of genocide studies by making space within it for participation by nonhuman actors, capturing nonindividualistic notions of destructive intentionality in the complex negotiation of the Indian problem, as well as the multipronged nature of government and school responses to this problem, and by leaving space for a deeper understanding of group life that acknowledges the importance of territory in both group self-definition and protection.

#### Notes

1. I use *boarding school* to refer, in general, to all forms of dormitory-based schooling for Indigenous children. This term therefore encompasses residential and federal boarding schools, industrial schools, mission schools, on- and off-reservation schools, and other variations. I use the term *Indigenous* to refer to both Canadian Aboriginal and American Indian peoples, although terms such as *Aboriginal* and *Indian* are used when appropriate to the historical or legal context of the discussion.



2. According to Bourdieu, a field is “a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 97). Within such networks competition occurs for the symbolic power to determine the valuational standards of the field.
3. These three points are merely a preliminary contribution to the decolonization of genocide studies. More needs to be done in terms of conducting community-based participatory research, preventing epistemological violence, and recognizing the power of the researcher as he or she represents the experiences of members of targeted groups (e.g., see Smith 2012).
4. Letter from Superintendent Cart to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, May 27, 1891, RG 75.20.36, Reel M1473, Roll 1, vols. 1–2, Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Records Created at the SFIS, Press Copies of Miscellaneous Letters Sent, SAL.
5. It is worth noting that Superintendent Rueben Perry transformed Sunday drills and parades into a health inspection exercise during which students would present their clothes and fingernails for inspection prior to marching to the athletic field for exercises.
6. Joseph Boubard, Sagkeeng Cultural Education Centre Oral History Project, August 5, 1987, C1623, AOM.
7. Letter from B. Warkentin to R. A. Hoey, Superintendent of Welfare and Training, Department of Indian Affairs, June 23, 1942, RG 10, vol. 8448, file 506/23-5-019, LAC.
8. Doris Duke American Indian Oral History Collection, 1968–72 (MSS 314 BC), Tape 446, interviewed December 4, 1970, CSWR.
9. Jerome Brody, Zia Pueblo, started at SFIS in 1916, Doris Duke American Indian Oral History Collection, 1968–72 (MSS 314 BC), Tape 24, interviewed April 5, 1968, CSWR.
10. Letter from A. C. Huston (Portage la Prairie Indian Residential School principal) to J. Waite, Indian Agent, February 4, 1946, RG 10, vol. 6274, file 583-5, part 8, LAC.
11. S. M. Cart to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, April 1, 1891, RG 75.20.36, Reel M1473, Roll 1, vols. 1–2, BIA Records Created at the SFIS, Press Copies of Miscellaneous Letters Sent, SAL.
12. Letter from W. M. Graham, Indian Commissioner, to D. C. Scott, Deputy Superintendent General, January 29, 1929, RG 10, vol. 6273, file 583-5, part 4, LAC.
13. File number 01-MB-26JY10-009, Long Plain, interviewed July 27, 2007, TRC.
14. File number 01-MB-26JY10-011, Long Plain First Nation, interviewed July 28, 2010, TRC.

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