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Debates on Colonial Genocide in the 21st Century

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I would also like to thank the undergraduate students at the University of Utah who have taken my classes on the documentation of genocides. Over the last decade, whenever I got the chance to teach that class I updated the materials, and as I collected various case study materials, I realized that I needed to write a short book on colonial genocide debates.

I was able to finish writing several drafts of this book while I was on sabbatical during the fall of 2018, but as the Chair of the Department of Communication, Danielle Endres, can attest, it was a very strange sabbatical semester filled with a number of challenges. For many years, even before she became chair, she has been one of my strongest supporters, and I want to thank her, as well as Professor Kent Ono, for keeping me on task.

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Introduction: Critical Genocide Studies and the Need for Twenty-First-Century Decolonization Debates

Abstract In this particular chapter the author explains how critical genocide studies differ from traditional Holocaust analyses or orthodox social scientific studies of “modern” genocides. The author contends that twenty-first-century scholars and public care very deeply about apologies, expressions of regret, the repatriation of remains, and reparations for colonial wrongdoing, and that we need more nuanced “decolonizing” debates about these topics. This chapter also helps explain some of the reluctance of former colonial-settler states to revisit these postcolonial topics that oftentimes ask nation-states to “master” their fraught imperial or colonial pasts in the same way that Germany was once asked to “master” Nazi pasts. Portions of this chapter also defend the heuristic value of critical genealogical and critical genocide studies approaches to genocide disputation.

Keywords Critical genocide studies • Holocaust • Palestine • Reparations • Settler colonialism • Tasmania

The scholarly and public recognition of any genocide, including the Holocaust, depends on the confluence of a host of factors and should be viewed as a rhetorical and argumentative achievement. Raul Hilberg, who wrote one of the most famous books that outlined some of the major features of the Nazi machinery that was responsible for the perpetration of

ethnic cleansing of Jews,¹ tells the story of how post-World War II publishers were reluctant to publish a book that went beyond recognition of concentration camps in analyses of death camps.² Norman Finkelstein tried to explain some of the politics behind this reluctance:

It is hard now to remember that the Nazi holocaust was once a taboo subject. During the early years of the Cold War, mention of the Nazi holocaust was seen as undermining the critical U.S.-West German alliance. It was airing the dirty laundry of the barely de-Nazified West German elites and thereby playing into the hands of the Soviet Union, which didn't tire of remembering the crimes of the West German "revanchists."³

Cold War politics thus influenced both the scholarly and public reception of some Holocaust research.

Before journalists traveled to Jerusalem to cover the Adolph Eichmann trial, few communities knew very much about the Judeocide.⁴ There was a deal of confusion about what happened in both the Nazi concentration camps as well as the death camps. Thanks to survivor testimony, the interrogation of massive numbers of German documents for Nuremberg prosecutions, and the curatorial efforts of those who assemble museological displays at places like the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) we have learned a great deal. We have also learned how millions of global denizens can combat all types of Holocaust denialism. Thanks to these consciousness-raising efforts Auschwitz, Treblinka, or Sobibór are now recognizable names that appear in canonical academic Holocaust texts and in vernacular commentaries.

That said, some of the same community members who have applauded this Holocaust-consciousness-raising have oftentimes been circumspect in the ways that they evaluate calls for inclusion of other mass murders in the pantheon of acceptable genocides. As Alexander Hinton would note in 2017, critical genealogical studies of Holocaust scholarship and genocide studies would show that they had been "informed by an implicit canon and prioritization of cases, led by the Holocaust prototype and an exemplary triad consisting of the Armenian genocide, Holocaust, and Rwandan genocide."⁵ Hinton elaborated by noting that some gatekeepers wanted to make sure that only a few genocides could meet the high standards set by that triad of historical incidents.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that only scholars want to place restrictions on the usage of genocidal labels. This is not some

example of “mere rhetoric” where grammatological choices are inconsequential. The political fallout that came from belated interventionism in Srebrenica⁶ or Rwanda⁷ underscored the point that labeling of large-scale massacres as a “genocide”—the “g word”—carried weight and triggered potential legal, economic, social, and political repercussions.⁸

Interest in expanding the number of genocides—to include more “modern” genocides (like what is happening to the Rohingya in Myanmar)⁹ or “colonial genocides” (like the Ovaherero and Nama genocide in “German South West Africa”)¹⁰—waxes and wanes, depending on a number of factors, including the number of stakeholders, access to international presses, the historical sensibilities of audiences, the contours of public memories, and the presentist needs of communities.¹¹

In March 2019, some readers of global news outlets were shocked to read that Mexico’s president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, was demanding that Spain and the Vatican apologize for the violent conquest of Mexico.¹² Mexico’s first leftist president in some seven decades has previously talked about reducing inequities in Mexico and helping combat poverty, and now President Obrador was tweeting out video addresses from archaeological sites as he explained to viewers that he wanted Felipe VI of Spain to acknowledge and apologize for the atrocities that were committed against “indigenous peoples for the violations of what we now call human rights.”¹³ Reconciliation was important, noted Obrador, but before that time the former conquerors needed to admit that the sword and the cross were used to commit reprehensible colonial acts that warranted public acknowledgments and apologies. Spanish governmental officials in Madrid quickly rejected President Obrador’s request, and they publicized a text that indicated that the “arrival, 500 years ago, of Spaniards to present Mexican territory cannot be judged in light of contemporary considerations.”¹⁴

Was Obrador implying that Spanish conquerors had once carried out a “genocide” in this part of the world? Was Mexico’s president basing his arguments on scholarly research on these topics, or was his commentary directed at national or international audiences who might share some of his postcolonial views? It is telling that in a public survey that was conducted by the Center for Sociological Research in 1992, it was found that some 33 percent of those Spaniards surveyed indicated that they were “proud” of the Spanish conquest of America while only 5 percent mentioned any “genocide.”¹⁵ One Spanish lawmaker tweeted during the spring of 2019 that the Spaniards “went there and finished with the power

of tribes who assassinated their neighbors cruelly and viciously,” and that was the reason why just a few Spanish warriors “conquered and civilized that land.”¹⁶ Spain’s Foreign Minister, Josep Borrell, noted that Spain would not offer any “extemporaneous apologies” to Mexico, and he elaborated by arguing that his nation had no interest in asking the French Republic for an apology for what Napoleon’s soldiers did when they invaded Spain. Borrell was fairly sure that the French were not going to demand “an apology from the Italians for Julius Caesar’s conquest of Gaul.”¹⁷

All sorts of moral equivalence arguments were being made in these contentious disputes over colonial wrongdoing and potential postcolonial apologies.¹⁸

Depending on the criteria that these arguers use, the availability of evidence, disciplinary expectations, and other rhetorical factors, scholars or members of public who write about colonial atrocities or imperial genocides can either contract, or they can expand, the list of administrative mass murders or ethnic cleansings that deserve to be called “genocides.” Is it possible that many twenty-first-century scholars and audiences are willing to use the term “genocide” when they talk about happened during the twentieth century in places like Armenia or Rwanda or Srebrenica but are unwilling to use that phrase in disputation over conquests that happened 500 years ago? How much time must have passed, and what other factors help influence the ways that academics, journalists, laypersons, and others converse about these topics?

In this particular book I join Alexander Hinton, A. Dirk Moses, and other critical genocide scholars who argue that it is time that Holocaust scholars and postcolonial critics start talking to each other as they revisit the question of how twenty-first-century social agents should define, describe, and explain everything from the causes of genocides to genocidal prevention. In place of more restrictive ways of defining genocide—that are often based on narrow interpretations of the work of Raphaël Lemkin¹⁹—I will be advocating that researchers *operationally define genocides* in more expansive ways by paying more attention to the structural, functional, or material features of large-scale massacres. Moreover, I will be arguing that members of the public and many others should be involved in the process of determining when genocides will be acknowledged and when interventions are needed to help with the pursuit of post-conflict restorative justice.

These dialogues about the expansion of the number of acknowledged genocides should be carried out in many different venues. Decision-makers, researchers, diplomats, and others should risk opening up what scholars and investigative journalists call the “Pandora’s Box” that might lead to many future requests for official apologies or the filing of many (post)colonial lawsuits.²⁰

I believe in the need for more debates about the revisionist labeling of colonial atrocities because genocides are not simply events but structures and processes as well.²¹ The Armenian genocide was carried out in several phases,²² and it could be argued that Ottoman militarists and other imperialists carried out similar genocidal attacks on Greeks and other communities.²³ The few dozen Nazi leaders who met at the Wannsee Conference were only some of those who were “Hitler’s Willing Executioners,”²⁴ and writers like Timothy Snyder remind us that Stalin and Hitler received a great deal of help when they, and their minions, were carrying out atrocities in the “Bloodlands.”²⁵ Countless soldiers and collaborators were involved in the perpetration of genocidal acts during World War II, and more than a few knew about the horrors of the death squads, the gas chambers in the death camps, and the forced marches near the end of the war.

As some researchers are now arguing, it may be possible that several different genocides were being carried out throughout World War II,²⁶ and a host of racist, militaristic, gendered,²⁷ and nationalistic ideologies may have motivated both the oppressors and the oppressed when they participated in all of this carnage.²⁸ In the same ways that Holocaust researchers are now complicating the ways that we critique Eastern European representations of the Shoah²⁹ scholars who look back at colonial genocides use comparative approaches as they note how several empires were involved in the perpetration of atrocities.³⁰ A whole host of intentionalist,³¹ functionalist,³² or structuralist approaches are now employed in the carrying out of twenty-first-century investigations of those colonial genocides.³³

In some historical situations transcontinental observers who watched what was happening on the peripheries of empire complained about the commission of “atrocities” or the “extirpation” of the “Aborigines,”³⁴ while at other times other names for these mass murders would be used by earlier generations who wondered about the wisdom of settler colonial exterminationist practices.³⁵

In many ways there are scholarly clues that these multifaceted debates about colonial genocides are once again in the news, fueled by academic or public disputation about whether we should only use definitions of genocide that allow reviewers to show the “intentional destruction” of an ethnic group, in part or in whole in “physical” or “biological” ways.³⁶ Others are equally convinced that participants in these definitional disputes ought to include “cultural” definitions of genocide as well.³⁷

Oftentimes academics indicate whether they want to see expansive or restrictive interpretations of genocidal guidelines. Some scholars, like Günter Lewy, are known for using the work of Raphaël Lemkin in restrictive ways, and it is said that Lewy is one of those researchers who has had qualms about including the Armenian genocide in that list of canonical events that Professor Hinton referenced. Using narrow interpretations of the UN’s adoption of Lemkin’s definitions of genocide Lewy defends the position that few events, outside the World War II Holocaust, deserve to be treated as genuine genocides.³⁸

Other writers, like Norbert Finzsch, have a very different take on this definitional labor, and they do not mind including other genocidal studies in the formation of new canons. Professor Finzsch seems to be bothered by some of the usages of legalistic criteria that restrict the number of recognizable genocides, and he has argued that if “it looks like a duck, if it walks like a duck, if it quacks like a duck,” then it must be a duck. Norbert Finzsch is averring that there are differences between the acknowledgments of the ontological existence of genocides and *the epistemic labelling of those events*.³⁹

Although those researchers who want to patrol the canons and restrict the number of genocides may outnumber those who want to see “critical” revisionism, there are vocal academics who make some convincing arguments about how Holocaust scholars and indigenous writers need to talk with each other instead of ignoring each other’s work. A. Dirk Moses wants to move beyond Auschwitz-centered, legalistic ways of defining genocides, and he opined that the UN Convention on Genocide’s adoption of some of Raphaël Lemkin’s work ought to be treated as a “political-judicial instrument” and not some “timeless” agreement that was “beyond the realm of politics.”⁴⁰ He noted that the reluctance to expand the canons of traditional genocides involved a “conceptual blockage” or a “definitional dilemma” that stemmed, in large part, from genocidal definitions that were based on a “prototype,” a “paradigmatic genocide” that underlies “the normative definition against which all others are

measured.”⁴¹ He went on to claim that some settler colonial genocides, and other historical “atrocities” may not fit that proto-typical Auschwitz-centered way of categorizing intentional large-scale mass murders.⁴²

Professor Moses wanted to see some indigenous types of colonial acts of mass violence treated as genocides, even if they did not resemble the pictures that some had of Auschwitz gas chambers or mobile killing machines.⁴³

Other authors may be interested in defending the formalistic criteria for genocides that I mentioned above, which come from experts like Lemkin, or they may want to defend the conventional ways that scholars, politicians, and laypersons talk and write about the Holocaust or the genocide, but I respectfully disagree. I will be using several cases studies in this book to defend the argument that all decision-makers and global denizens need to *treat genocidal recognition as a rhetorical achievement*. By this, I mean that deciding whether to include a particular colonial “atrocious” or ethnic cleansing of civilians during imperial expansionist years in the traditional pantheon of genocides is not something that can, or should, be determined solely by single authors or small groups of academics. These researchers should not be allowed to police and to cordon off genocidal claims that come from activists and others who are asking for genocidal revisionism. Nor should those decisions be made based on post-World War II definitions of genocide that were intended to deflect attention away from the potential genocidal acts that were committed by American, British, French, Russian, and other victors after World War II.⁴⁴

If this means that we have to acknowledge the commission of dozens of colonial genocides over the course of hundreds of years of imperial expansionism by diverse imperialists, then so be it.⁴⁵ That would be better than pretending that genocidal acts were not perpetrated during colonial periods, where deceptive archives are co-produced by those who wish to believe that benevolent colonizers did their best to peacefully carry out their civilization missions.⁴⁶ It would also be better than pretending that only totalitarian governments are involved in the perpetration of genocides.⁴⁷

In this book I extend the work of critical genealogists,⁴⁸ critical genocide scholars, settler colonial theorists, postcolonial critics, and others who are adamant that publics and activists should have some say in resolving some of these genocidal issues. Historical and current events in places like Canada, Germany, Israel, Namibia, and Tasmania show that the decision to recognize, or to not recognize, historical colonial events as genocidal in

nature can impact everything from the tearing down of statues⁴⁹ to the paying of reparations to the recharacterization of imperial archives. This is especially the case when those who want to make decisions regarding the inclusion or exclusion of particular colonial practices as genocides are living in former settler colonies, where observers have to witness “ideological slights of hand,” the formation of “many layers of psychosocial denial and contradiction,” and calls for acknowledgments that are “fraught with anxiety and guilt.”⁵⁰

Although there are many different dimensions of what I have elsewhere called the “Indigeneity wars,”⁵¹ in this particular Pivot book I want to focus in on the scholarly and public dimensions of disputation over the potential inclusion of controversial “colonial” or “settler-colonial” abuses that might warrant characterizations as indigenocides⁵² or genocides.

As I explain in more detail below, the case studies that I have chosen have been selected because these are cases where large communities of indigenous communities, vocal activists, or others involved in “decolonization” practices have demanded that some colonial events or imperial “atrocities” decisions be viewed in the same ways that Europeans and others view the Holocaust or the Rwanda genocides.

With this in mind, let me briefly explain why I have chosen the two main case studies that provide some of the major scaffolding for this book.

WHY THESE PARTICULAR CASE STUDIES?

The two case studies that serve as the focal points for my claims—the Tasmanian genocide and the Nakba—involve situations where empowered decision-makers *are reluctant to call some historical incidents colonial genocides*. In each of these two situations there have been groups of activists, or dissident scholars, who have asked that these large-scale massacres be treated as a type of “indigenocide” or “genocide,” but in each case researchers, descendants of settler colonial communities, or other groups have refused to characterize these colonial or imperial events as genocidal in nature.⁵³

Take for example, the Tasmanian situation that will serve as the first case study in this book. The Tasmanian Aborigines have oftentimes been treated as communities who either “disappeared” from the face of the earth in 1876—with the recorded death of the Bruny Islander/Palawa Truganini—or as an ethnic group that was almost wiped out by British colonization.⁵⁴ For almost a decade during the first quarter of the

nineteenth century the Tasmanians fought against the British soldiers, convicts, and local collaborators who tried to wipe them out during what would be called the “Black Wars.” Using a variety of confrontational, segregationist, conciliatory, and annihilationist discourses supporters of British expansionism could rationalize their treatment of the Aboriginal “other.” They could rationalize the sheep production, the farming, and the settlement of “Van Diemen’s Land” (later called Tasmania) at the same time that they characterized anti-Aboriginal violence as necessitous colonial warfare. Several generations of colonial settlers would use Social Darwinian, eugenical, anthropological, and other arguments to assert that the Tasmanians were a dying race, and that settlers had an obligation to turn supposedly uninhabited lands (*terra nullius*) into productive colonies.

The remnants of the Tasmanians were first moved to Flinders Island, and then to Oyster Cove the following decade.⁵⁵ By this time only a few dozen Tasmanians were said to be alive, and European researchers and others flocked to Tasmania so that they could conduct investigations before the “passing” of this supposedly exotic “race.”

When Tasmanian activists and others later wrote about all of this colonial settler violence—and characterized it as “genocidal” in nature—this created all types of scholarly and public firestorms. Some alleged that disease and indigenous in-fighting is what caused the demise of the Tasmanians, while others argued that the “Black War” was fought between equally powerful warring communities. More than a few argued that those in London or Hobart did their best to help save, not “extirpate” the Tasmanians, and that all of this benevolence provided historical evidence that could be used to refute allegations that any of this constituted any “intentional” genocide.

In some cases—as I note in the next chapter—academics demanded that before activists and scholars label this a “Tasmanian genocide” they actually count the number of Tasmanian dead during the 1820s and 1830s before rendering historical or legal judgment.

In sum, both the select histories that chronicled these settler colonial acts, as well as the public memories of these archival histories, became contested terrains for disputation that can lead to denialism or revisionism as various observers comment on the heritage rights of more than 23,000 Tasmanians.⁵⁶ It is no coincidence that some researchers have trouble framing these settler colonial affairs in the same ways that they configure what happened during the “true” genocides like the Armenian or Rwandan genocides.