

Native America and the Question of Genocide by Alex Alvarez
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On September 6th, 2015, *Indian Country Today* publicized a story that did not make mainstream news but resonated throughout Indian Country: a Navajo/Maidu student, Chiitaanibah Johnson, was ejected from her California State-Sacramento history class after asking the instructor to address the genocide of Native peoples in his coverage of American history. The instructor claimed that Native peoples had simply died of disease and that she was “hijacking” his class when she insisted (Schilling). Meanwhile, amid the protests of 50 different California tribes, Pope Francis made headlines when he canonized the controversial figure Juniper Serra, one of the leaders of the Spanish mission system that was known for its forceful abuse of the Native peoples it attempted to Christianize – a system that many California Native peoples now characterize as genocide (Burke). Both of these examples illustrate how critical the conversation around the concept of genocide has become to Indigenous peoples and how difficult it is to get the wider public to care. It is within such ongoing conversations that Alex Alvarez has published *Native America and the Question of Genocide*. His motivations stem from a concern that it is increasingly “fashionable” to use the word *genocide* to describe American Indian experiences and that the term should not be overused lest it lose its power (4-5). Alvarez endeavors not only to “shed light on the varied experiences of indigenous populations, but also to illustrate some of the definitional and conceptual ambiguity of the concept of genocide itself”(4).

Alvarez writes from the perspective of a scholar in sociology and criminal justice, and so his interest and analytical lens are defined by historical and legal definitions of genocide, beginning with Raphael Lemkin’s work after the Holocaust, the United Nations’ contributions, and the work of contemporary genocide scholars. He structures his work as a general historical narrative of contact in the Americas between European and Native peoples, tracing out the consequences of this contact with strategic examples to illustrate the ways in which the complex concept of genocide, from a legal standpoint, may or may not apply. Alvarez arranges this narrative thematically in terms of “Beginnings” (his take on the Bering Straight theory and the populating of North America); definitions of genocide and the complicated nature of them (“Genocide”); the ideological structures of ethnocentrism and Europe’s history of war, pre-contact (“Destructive Beliefs”); the

consequences of the introduction of European diseases to North America (“Disease”); some selected case studies including the Sand Creek Massacre, the first Wounded Knee, and California state policy regarding Native peoples (“Wars and Massacres”); the Navajo Long Walk (“Exiles in Their Own Land”); and U.S. education policy and boarding schools (“Education for Assimilation”). He concludes with a reflection on specialized language and its relationship to the existing suffering of many Native communities today (“What’s in a Name?”).

Alvarez’s project is ambitious, and he himself admits that it is beyond the scope of one book to address how genocide may or may not apply in each individual historical encounter for 567 federally recognized communities and even more state-recognized communities. His summary of the concept of genocide and its complicated history is illuminating for readers who do not specialize in this topic, and the attention to the broad ideological attitudes of Europeans preceding colonization helps to avoid placing Europeans as mere villains in the narrative. What I particularly appreciate about his analysis is his desire to avoid glossing over differences between Native nations and their unique experiences under colonization. As scholars in Native studies know well, the writing of U.S. history has had a bad habit of lumping all indigenous peoples together, and Alvarez works to respect the historical and cultural differences between the Native communities represented in his chosen examples. As scholars of Native history know, the details of these encounters and relationships are rarely black and white, and there is considerable detail that should be considered when understanding the consequences of those encounters. Similarly, his concern over rhetorical hyperbole with some activists’ desire to equate what has happened to Native peoples with the Holocaust is to an extent warranted, as these histories are not directly equivalent.

At the same time, there are rhetorical and material consequences to Alvarez’s choices in how to address the questions he raises about the appropriateness of how to talk about genocide in relationship to colonization, past and present. Though Alvarez does not want to overtly state a definition of genocide by which to measure Native experiences – nor should he – over the course of the book it becomes clear that what he wants, if we are to use this term, are clear-cut cases of historically documented intent to kill or destroy and clear-cut cases of successfully carrying out that endeavor over a clearly-defined time period. Naturally, that is the “best-case” scenario when defining and applying the concept of genocide, but the end result is that because history is complex, most of the time he does not wish to use it to describe what happened to Native peoples—though he admits at times that the events may be “genocidal” but not “genocide” (106). Ironically, given that none of the events he chooses as case studies

lack in historical documentation, his overly-brief narrations of the events tend to do the simplifying that he desires to avoid with his application of genocide. Finally, purposefully or inadvertently, however much Alvarez claims that he writes this book as a way to more accurately describe individual Native histories, the structure functions to examine and then to dismiss (at least in most cases) what many Native peoples claim in their experience to be genocide or genocidal. The book could have just as easily have been written the other way around, in support of historically and legally accurate applications of genocide while demonstrating what may not qualify; instead, it reads more as a counterargument to Native peoples' claims. The result is a book that appears to privilege the "scholarly discussion" over real-world consequences. Given this orientation, the most useful way this book could be used in is in context with other recent scholarship such as Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz's recent *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* or a well-documented case study that can do better justice to historical events, such as Brendan C. Lindsay's *Murder State: California's Native American Genocide, 1846-1873*.

In his conclusion—which in some ways is the most interesting part of the book—Alvarez concedes that the reason many use the term *genocide* is because it has become a rhetorical "shorthand for the worst possible kind of violence and criminality" (162) meant to communicate the scope of atrocities to the general public, and it is used because "the vocabulary of atrocity was and still is quite limited" (163). Yet he follows this concession with the concern that it is too easy to use "genocide" as a way to "elevat[e] one people's suffering over that of other similarly victimized groups" toward an "exalted victimhood" (164). Such potentially offensive characterizations of Native peoples' use of the word aside, Alvarez claims that "the reality is that the term used to describe a people's suffering and/or victimization is ultimately irrelevant to their lived experience as human beings," and thus "the fact that academics, scholars, and activists argue definitional issues related to genocide doesn't take anything away from those who lived through the events briefly reviewed and described in this book." I would beg to differ. In a time when a university instructor can try to remove a Native student from class for using the term and when a contentious historical figure who participated in a sharp legacy of Native oppression can literally be made a saint, these conversations are more meaningful than ever. They should be connected to Native communities, in support of Native communities, and not just be had in the abstract about them.

NOTES

1. Reviewer Dr. Lisa King is Assistant Professor of Rhetoric, Writing, and Linguistics at University of Tennessee-Knoxville.

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