

A PUBLIC APOLOGY
to
SIKSIKA NATION

at the
Toronto Biennial of Art



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Determined To Keep Up Their Dances

What the 1895 Siksika Rebellion and Reverend J.W. Tims' dramatic flight from the Siksika Reserve can explain about the past and present of settler colonialism.

I first met AA Bronson in Berlin in 2017, but we are both from somewhere else. I was born on Massachussek land, in present-day Massachusetts, land the matrilineal Massachussek referred to as *Nutohkem-minnit* but that was renamed after them by puritan religious fanatics wielding bibles and smallpox.

I come from mixed descent: half Lithuanian Jewish, half Sicilian. My own academic research focuses on white gay activist appropriation of various racialized others seen as 'primitive.' AA heard of a paper I had delivered on this subject at Berlin's Schwules Museum and invited me for coffee to get to know my work a little. Some time after, he asked me to join this project as his research assistant. The task was to unravel AA's family story of "trouble" involving his great-grandfather, the Reverend (and later Archbishop of Calgary) J.W. Tims, when he was the first Anglican missionary on Siksika land. Together we travelled to Calgary and spent several days in the archives of the Glenbow Museum and visiting the Siksika Nation.

We met the Siksika artist Adrian Stimson, and attended a dinner at his home with residential school survivors. Later the trail took me to Library and Archives Canada (where the help of the brilliant and kind Cyndie Campbell, Head of Archives, Documentation, and Visual Resources at the National Gallery of Canada, was invaluable) and to the warehouses of the British Museum in London, where, stunned, I unwrapped Siksika artifacts originally given to AA's great-grandfather from the plastic bags they're kept in. I read as widely as I could from Siksika sources: if you're compelled by this story, order and read books by Siksika writers and scholars. In the following text I have tried, as best as I'm able, to recover a hidden history and to connect it to the most incisive and justice-oriented scholarship available on the relationship between cultural genocide and material dispossession.

In 1883, the Church Missionary Society sent the Reverend J. W. Tims from seminary in Oxford, England to the western plains of Canada, as the first Anglican missionary to the Blackfoot, or Siksika, Reserve.¹ Then, in 1895, he left abruptly. This essay will begin to explain why.

My introduction to this history began with a family story, a legend with deep emotional resonance across several generations. AA Bronson, the great-grandson of the Reverend Tims, remembered hearing about his great-

grandfather's time on the Siksika Reserve while growing up, saying these stories were part of the "fabric" of his family.² His grandfather, who had followed in his father's footsteps and run a residential school, told the following story: the Reverend Tims had been the first Anglican missionary to the Blackfoot Reserve. He learned their language, developed its written form, translated Bible verses into Siksika, and christianized the people. His was one of the first residential schools, whereby children were taken from their parents, dressed in Victorian clothing, and trained up to be little Englishmen. Due to its pagan character, he worked with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police to ban the bloody ritual of "making braves," which involved piercing the breast and dancing into trance. This, according to the family story, aroused the ire of Old Sun (1819–1897), one of the chiefs. On the day the ritual was outlawed, a "friendly Indian came to the kitchen door" and warned the Reverend to leave with his family immediately. They fled to Calgary, and the house, school, and church were burned to the ground that night. AA had never been able to corroborate the story of the flight and the fire. Now, embarking on a project of artistic research and conciliation with Adrian Stimson, the great-grandson of Old Sun, he set out to explore his family story in more depth, to probe its dimensions and meaning, and to offer his apology to the Siksika people.

Hearing this, I turned to existing scholarly material on the Siksika and Tims. The story I found there, in the work of the historian Hugh Dempsey, was markedly different. In this version, the Reverend Tims was a uniquely obnoxious and difficult man: stricter than government agents in enforcing attendance at the boarding schools he set up, a fighter in petty bureaucratic wars with little ability to work with others.³ Nothing was burned to the ground and there were no “friendly Indians” raising the alarm; rather, several children had become sick and died in the boarding schools, and Tims had been rude to their grieving parents. He had fled under pressure from rebelling Siksika, angry state officials, and the Church itself. Despite being corroborated by more archival sources, this story also seemed frustratingly incomplete — lacking an analysis of how this particular rebellion fit into broader histories of settler colonialism, the structure of violence and profit encompassing the arrival of white people on the plains of Canada.

Here were two conflicting stories, equally unsatisfying in their centering of settler personalities over historical processes and Indigenous voices. I was left with many questions. How was Tims’ practice connected to the broader history of the white settling of Canada? How were land, culture, and religion connected in Siksika ways of knowing and living, and how did the arrival of missionaries disrupt those processes? How could recent

thought on settler colonialism help resolve these contradictory stories and bring new meaning out of a fresh examination of the available archival material?

The story revealed by this new analysis is a microcosm of a bigger history. Recent scholarship emphasizes that taking Indigenous land — a process referred to as dispossession — has also required eliminating Indigenous cultures and ways of knowing. These ways of knowing emphasize relationships between people and land in ways that challenge settlers' understanding of land as property. Robert Nichols points out that Indigenous land claims are duty-based rather than rights-based: they are a claim about responsibility to something larger than the self, that is, the Earth.⁴ Understanding settler colonialism's need to eliminate these ways of knowing helps us understand how settler policies that might otherwise seem contradictory — in Tims' case, learning the Siksika language and banning their rituals, and taking pains to educate children while at the same time allowing them to die of illness in the schools — can be understood as expressions of a single coherent historical process.⁵ It was not for nothing that the federal policy of subdividing reserves was described by the Canadian government in 1890 as a "policy of destroying the tribal or communist system ... to implant a spirit of individual responsibility instead."⁶

Framed by that theory, here is the story, as true as I can tell it: In 1877, the Siksika, one of four tribes in the Blackfoot Confederacy with a land claim extending across broad swaths of present-day Montana, Alberta, and Saskatchewan, had been relegated to their small reserve by the seventh treaty between Indigenous people and the British Crown, signing away the majority of their land under pressure from white settlers' hunting-to-extinction of the buffalo. After his arrival in 1883, Tims set up a system of boarding schools in which students were forced to speak English, follow the Anglican religion, dress in Victorian school clothes, and prepare for careers as farmers and menial laborers. The students were not allowed to see their parents, even in the case of a death in the family or a Siksika religious holiday. Indigenous religious rituals, including the piercing ritual, were suppressed. After a diphtheria epidemic and recession leading to rations cuts, in the first months of 1895, at least two Siksika children died while in the gender-segregated boarding schools. This prompted a rebellion in which the rations distributor, Frank Skynner, was shot and killed by a Siksika man. Four months later, after the death of another child, Tims was forced to flee the Reserve on fear of his life. The rest of this essay is dedicated to this story: to elaborating on what happened, thinking it as best I can through Siksika ways of knowing, and attempting to honor those implicated in this history.

Siksika Ways of Knowing

It is impossible to understand the rebellion without understanding Siksika culture and ways of knowing. Tims' missionary work was, as will be explained later, designed to destroy these ways of knowing and of relating as part of a concerted effort to eliminate Indigenous people and culture and replace them with white settlers. This threat of elimination prompted the Siksika to rebel. Today, Siksika Knowledge courses are available at Old Sun Community College, an institution established by the Siksika Nation in the building where the final iteration of the residential school was housed.⁷ Siksikaitsitapi (anglicized as "Blackfoot Nation") is the Siksika word for a confederacy of three tribes — the Peigan (Blood), Piikani (Peigan), and Siksika (Blackfoot).⁸ While the 1895 Rebellion involved only the Siksika, the Siksikaitsitapi people share a language and common religious practices, and until the signing of Treaty Seven celebrated annual religious rituals together and had regular intertribal contact. This contact continues, albeit troubled by settler borders (and, historically, travel restrictions).

Siksikaitsitapi religious and economic systems emerge out of a way of knowing in which economic action, and interaction between animate beings and land, are interrelated. As such, they present a challenge to settler colonization's transformation of land into profitmaking property. Betty Bastien, a Piikani scholar,

describes “complex levels of kinship relations that constitute a cosmic world of balance and harmony.”⁹ Knowing, in this system, “is relational and dependent on relationships that are learned in childhood,” these interactions can include dreams, animals, spirits, and other human and non-human actors.¹⁰ Economic exchanges such as ritual gifting and the distribution of food after a hunt or harvest reproduce this system of relationships. Far from being arcane, archaic, or “pre-modern,” Siksikaitsitapi religion and sociality are central to modern thinking about human cultures and interactions: they formed the basis of the psychologist Abraham Maslow’s classic theory of the hierarchy of human needs laid out in his 1943 paper “A Theory of Human Motivation.”¹¹

While Siksikaitsitapi religion is an oral tradition, a 1985 book by Percy Bullchild, a Piikani man born before the buffalo genocide who lived into the 1980s, collects examples of Siksikaitsitapi religious and historical texts and reflections on the differences between Siksikaitsitapi and settler ways of knowing. Ako-katssinn (translated as Sun Dance or Circle Camp) is a primary annual religious festival for all Siksikaitsitapi people.¹² This festival’s traditional location was the ancestral home of the Siksika, where Treaty Seven was signed, close to the site of the Tims rebellion.¹³ Ako-katssinn, before contact, would take place in summer after a communal buffalo hunt and during the season in which Saskatoon berries

were plentiful, providing the basis for cultural reproduction through festivals of giving and exchange.¹⁴ The camp consists of a series of transfer rituals in which “holy ceremonies” take “several hectic days” and land, spiritual beings, and humans engage in exchange with one another.¹⁵ Reciprocity, in this system, “is not just a religious ideal, it is a fact of life” — a fact reflected in the Siksika language’s gender division which occurs not between male or female but between animate and inanimate, a status determined by one’s presence and activity within these systems of cultural exchange and renewal.¹⁶ One crucial subject of this exchange is the “bundle,” a collection of sacred items such as skins, rocks, plants, pigments, and pipes, collected inside a piece of elkskin.¹⁷ As such, they are transferred regularly in order to share the “other-than-human persons embodied.”¹⁸ Bundles are transferred, and vows made in their names carried out, at times of the year determined by cycles of weather.¹⁹ Bullchild describes elaborate ceremonies of exchange, transfer, and gifting in which bundles are exchanged for food just harvested or hunted, or paid for with ritual sacrifices or self-mortification.²⁰ Bundles and other objects are removed from these exchange economies when removed from Siksikaitsitapi land; therefore, repatriation from museums is crucial to the maintenance and renewal of Siksika cultural practices.²¹

The piercing ritual of self-mortification taking place annually at the Ako-katssinn became inaccurately known as the “making of braves” and was (alongside evocations of the supposed profligacy of their culture) one of the justifications for the suppression of Siksikaitsitapi religious practices after contact and during the early settler colonial era. In this ritual, described by Bullchild as the exchange of blood with Creator Sun (the religion’s primary deity) in reference to a religious myth involving the same mythic-historic figure involved in the first bundle transfer, young men make cuts through their shoulder blades and breasts, and place sharpened sticks through the skin.²² Then, they attach ropes to the sticks which are tied to a central pole, and dance around the pole until blood flows and they temporarily collapse.²³ This is understood as a downpayment on future assistance from Creator Sun at times of danger or during war; historian Blanca Tovias views this practice as one of many sacrifices or exchanges “ranging from the giving away of material goods to the offering of a person’s own flesh.”²⁴ Crucially, the land is necessary to support these rituals of exchange — the duty to care for the land and to care for the spiritual beings in the bundles, like the duty to mortify the flesh to care for Creator Sun, are tied to the cycles of harvest and hunt and to areas of Siksikaitsitapi land which themselves have spiritual or religious value.²⁵

During the first intensive period of settler colonization, these economies and lifeworlds survived in various forms despite persecution. The Siksika Winter Counts have been translated into English and published by the Piikani in present-day Montana, and preserve historical records from all four of the Siksikaitsitapi tribes.²⁶ In the counts, *Ako-katssinn* (translated as ‘Sun Dances’ or ‘sundances’) is said to have taken place most years from 1883 to 1895, when the Rev. Tims was on the reserve.²⁷ Years without a Sun Dance or lodge during this period are also marked:²⁸ “No Sundance it was a hard winter but the Blackfeet got through the winter.”²⁹ During this period, as new settlers challenged and sought to eliminate Siksika religious practices, Sun Dances where the exchange of gifts occurred in violation of the prohibition are noted with special pictograms. In 1889, for example, the Bull Plume winter count notes that the Thunder Pipe Bundle was exchanged in defiance of government prohibition.³⁰ The persistence of these practices is explained by Narcisse Blood, a Siksikaitsitapi woman and former keeper of the Thunder Pipe Bundle: “For us, relationship is our life — the relationship to the land, the relationship to the bundles, the relationship to the animals that are in them, the relationship to the ... cosmos, you know, the family relationship. Everything is about relationship.”³¹

Referring to rituals like *Ako-katssinn* as “memory capsules that Native peoples used to encode their belong-

ing to the land, repopulating their intellectual ecology,” a “mnemonic house of history,” and “a program of shared ethics that placed honor ... on giving away,” Isaiah Lorado Wilner argues against an analysis seeing settler logics as ‘modern’ and Indigenous ones as ‘traditional.’³² “All people are modern people,” he writes, “faced with the historical struggle between rupture and re-weaving, born with the burden of searching for a memory capsule to reconnect them to their roots.”³³ Siksika lifeworlds were, and remain, such a capsule, a house, a program, a struggle.

J. W. Tims and the Religion of Dispossession

The Reverend Tims arrived on Siksika land in 1883 at the age of 26, long-bearded and full of purpose. His letter of instruction from the Church Missionary Society in London read, in part, “the wise and humane treatment that [the Siksika] have met with from the Canadian Government, and the obvious superiority to themselves of white men in all the arts and comforts of life will dispose them to believe both in the sincerity of your friendship and the truth and utility of your teaching.”³⁴ In 1862, gold had been discovered in Montana and the buffalo hunts began, with white hunters greeted by hordes of millions of beasts grazing on the vast prairies of Montana and Alberta. By 1877, the Siksikaitsitapi had been sufficiently weakened that they signed Treaty 7.³⁵ In 1882 the North-

ern Pacific Railroad shipped 700 boxcars of buffalo hides to processing facilities in the East; by 1884 the total harvest fit in a single boxcar.³⁶ Famine was the predictable result, and starvation eventually forced the Siksikaitsitapi to settle and accept farm instruction and missionaries. Several months after his arrival, Tims would write: “the Blackfoot are certainly well looked after by the Government. They think of today and never look beyond it.”³⁷

Tims had been sent to the plains straight from seminary at Oxford, which he’d attended after being apprenticed as a boatbuilder as a young man.³⁸ He had never traveled in continental Europe, nor even widely in Britain, but had lived his life along the river Thames, surrounded by hedges and trees and low hills. He would never have seen anything like the vast landscapes of the western Canadian prairie: flat planes of gold or green or white extending in all directions under an endless dome of sky, the snowcapped Rockies rising up like a mirage on the Western horizon. One might expect to find some note on this landscape in one of his early diaries, or one of his many later written reminiscences of this time. What far-flung part of God’s creation had he been sent to? No: while he would later tell a few stories of the difficulty and “roughness” of early life on the Reserve, the diaries are full of obscure Anglican doctrinal reflection, notes on building materials purchased and needed, and terse descriptions of daily activity.³⁹ The most detailed

surviving diaries are from 1887 (many diaries from other years, frustratingly including the time of the rebellion, have pages ripped out or are incomplete). In March of 1887 he was preoccupied with building a small extension to his house and to the school. "Caught two boys stealing my wood tonight. They were packing it away in a sack for carrying off. They came from the lodge of Kaitsogi where I have been daily attending the girl for over two months past. Gratitude!"⁴⁰

Days were spent running the school, and evenings were spent trying to convert smaller groups of adults. In July 1887, after the Ako-katssinn, for example, he convened a "meeting of men in Chief Old Sun's lodge. Only 9 present. They discussed the question of God; having given them the sun dance."⁴¹ A few weeks later, all the white settlers on the reserve "met... for an afternoon of cricket, croquet, and tennis," flat prairie apparently working as well as manicured English lawns for such a purpose.⁴² In October, he noted a meeting with Siksika chiefs about a land transfer, during which the Siksika were convinced to trade parcels of land, slightly altering the boundaries of the reserve; this meant, as was not explained to them, that they had signed away valuable mining deposits.⁴³

Later speeches given to remember this time and advocate for increased funding for the boarding school system reveal Tims' conviction that the Siksika were be-

ing treated well by the state and his moral objection to their religious practices given their receipt of state aid. "In 1883," he said, "when I first arrived in the country ... they did nothing except dance and attend the ration house. They were poor in the extreme. The Tobacco Dance and Sun Dance with their smaller accompanying rites occupied the tribe from April to the end of July when they all went berry picking. Tea and other dances occupied them through the winter season ... their religion consisted solely in the desire to propitiate the many spirits of evil which they seemed to think constantly surrounded them."⁴⁴

Kept from privatized farming and Christian education by the religious and cultural demands of Siksika life, they had made "no attempt ... at agriculture. What was done was done by employees of the government who ploughed, sowed, harvested for the chiefs in whose names the fields were held."⁴⁵ Tims' horror that chiefs were relying on public assistance to 'improve' property thought to have been 'owned' by them reveals how integrating Indigenous people into settler notions of land title and property ownership has often been part of, rather than a step against, settler colonization.

In Tims' way of knowing, work was holy and laziness was evil: and anything other than learning small-holder farming and attending boarding school was considered laziness. "It has always been impossible for any

minister of the gospel to do anything with a lazy man in any part of the world. The most successful work has always been among peoples and communities that are industrious. We have illustrations of this in holy scripture.”⁴⁶ Siksika children, it was thought, could be saved from a life of idle idolatry through assimilation, as long as they were educated in boarding schools to prevent their exposure to “the baneful influence of camp life,” which would “more than counterbalance” any good done in the schools.⁴⁷ This language of godliness structured, and continues to structure, the necropolitics of genocide.

How could one, according to Tims, measure the ‘progress’ that had been made since 1883? No mention of the 1895 rebellion was made, but he did note that on a recent visit back to the Siksika, an “Indian Feast” used chairs and gilt jugs, men had “dressed in tweed suits and the women in gowns of their own make after a civilized pattern.”⁴⁸ New wagons built by boys trained for menial work (and “fair instruction in the three ‘r’s;” girls recieved “a capital education in domestic affairs”) indicated the “civilizing advantages of the removal of pupils from the retrogressive influence of home life.”⁴⁹ Finally the Siksika would become self-supporting small-scale farmers, just like any white settler. This process of assimilation and elimination was always framed as being about weaning Siksika people off government support, without any acknowledgement that they had been self-

sufficient until the death of the buffalo. Tims saw removing pupils from Siksika lifeworlds and preventing them from continuing to interact with their culture as central to the project of 'civilizing' and assimilating them. This system of residential schools across Canada, in addition to committing cultural genocide, was also the site of horrifying cases of physical and sexual abuse.⁵⁰

Attempts to stop the practice of Ako-katssinn were a crucial part of the establishment of settler colonial relations. Academic analysis of the settler colonial intervention into and prohibition of Indigenous practices of ritual giving and exchange has mostly focused on the Potlatch practice of the Indigenous peoples of the Canadian Northwest. These practices, and studies of them, have been enormously influential in the discipline of anthropology.⁵¹ The so-called Potlatch Law of 1876 was aimed at the practices on the Northwest Coast, and put the banning of Ako-katssinn and other exchanges of material goods on Siksika land at the discretion of the local Indian Agent. These exchanges, writes Candice Hopkins, "set in motion a separate system of governance and social structure that colonizers could not countenance."⁵² Ako-katssinn was intermittently banned during Tims' stay on the Reserve, he consistently supported these bans and repeatedly pleaded for their permanence in written exchanges with state agents.⁵³ His opposition, as with his broader opposition to Siksikaitsitapi religious

lifeworlds, was that the rituals interrupted the process of assimilating, and thereby eliminating, the Siksika people and their culture.

The 1895 Rebellion

These two central elements of Tims' colonizing religious practice — his attempts to prohibit Ako-katssinn and the forced residential education of Sikiska children — set the stage for the 1895 Rebellion. There were then two related instigating factors: the deaths of several children in Tims' boarding schools due to diphtheria, and an ongoing recession which led the Canadian state to further reduce its treaty-obliged payments of rations. Earlier that year, when a missionary on the neighboring Blood Reserve asked for increased funds for medical treatment, the Department of Indian Affairs replied that "in the present condition of the public finances, the Department ... is compelled to seek for every possible direction in which to make retrenchment."⁵⁴ In 1894 the Indian Commissioner wrote Tims: "our desire is to keep the issues down to the lowest possible point consistent with fairness to the Indians, for the slightest increase of issues means in a very short time an extremely large expenditure of money."⁵⁵ Inadequate food ushered in sickness and death: 88 Siksika people died of tuberculosis, diphtheria, flu, and starvation in the hard spring of 1895.⁵⁶

Among those who died were several children in Tims' boarding schools. After the death of his son, a Siksika man named Scraping Hide⁵⁷ killed Frank Skynner, who was responsible for distributing the rations on the Reserve. Scraping Hide had removed his son from the boarding school and then "went to the white ration man — to ask for food for his boy ... " and was denied, given that the rations had been distributed to the school where he was supposed to be held.⁵⁸ The Winter Counts recall that "Atsaowan then told his brother, "I'm going to fix that white man, for he refused me food. White man think we Indians are like children."⁵⁹ The murder of Skynner triggered an investigation by the Department of Indian Affairs, which concluded that Scraping Hide was simply crazy: "... as the Department understands, the wretched perpetrator of the crime was not in sound mind, otherwise it would suggest the existence of a state of feeling between the wards and employees of the Department which would be most deplorable, and point to something radically wrong about their mutual relations."⁶⁰ A letter written by the same Department employee the day before demonstrates the state's use of protestant religion to justify its necropolitics: "These Indians require to be roused to exert themselves ... the Apostolic doctrine that if a man would not work, he should not eat, must be strictly supplied."⁶¹

If the deaths of Scraping High and Skynner had raised tensions on the reserve, the death of Mabel Cree approximately one month later brought them to a breaking point. "The girl died early this morning," wrote Magnus Begg, Indian Agent, to the Indian Commissioner in Regina on May 4.⁶² "Her death was terrifically sudden," wrote William Hardyman, a teacher in the school; so sudden, in fact, that she died while Tims was in Calgary on Church business.⁶³ William Baker, the farming instructor, would later remember that Mabel's father, known as The Wood, had heard his child was sick and was reprimanded by Tims for attempting to enter the school through the front rather than the kitchen door.⁶⁴ Begg remembered that the father had asked for the girl to be removed to be treated by an Indian doctor but that Tims had refused, they had agreed that if she were still sick in two days she would be removed. She would not live to see the bargain tested. "Shortly after the removal of the girl's body," Baker later wrote, "her mother arrived and with drawn knife was making for the Home but was stopped by three men and taken away to where her child was."⁶⁵ The *Toronto Globe* later reported that "when the father of the child arrived ... [he] swore vengeance on Mr. Tims" and blamed him for Mabel's death.⁶⁶ Siksika men made a series of demands and began protesting in front of Tims' home, shooting dogs as they chanted his name. A few weeks later, Tims had fled his post for

Calgary, asking the Church Missionary Society for re-assignment.⁶⁷

Tims' abrupt departure from the reserve was noted by the media. The *Toronto Globe* covered the event under the headline "INDIANS IN PAINT — Excitement on the Blackfoot Reserve." On June 27, they wrote, "the clergyman was forced to leave the ungrateful people among whom he had labored like a slave, with scarcely a slave's recompense, for twelve long years."⁶⁸ In Parliament in Ottawa, the opposition Liberals, who would take power the following year, used the news coverage to score political points; a Conservative parliamentarian replied that the article was "exaggerated ... calculated to do harm on ... excitable natures."⁶⁹ The *Globe* article referred to the Siksika's demands and the reason for their rebellion as "childish and indefinite;" adding that "vague charges" of bad behavior had been made against Tims.⁷⁰ The story that had made it to the highest levels of power and to national news coverage was that the 'trouble' had been unrelated to broader questions of the material distribution of power and land. While this was the conclusion reached by top officials in both the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the Department of Indian Affairs, the collected case files from both organizations demonstrate otherwise.

On June 8, 1895, Sergeant Marshall of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) filed his weekly report

to his higher-ups in Winnipeg. "Considerable discontent exists" among the Siksika, he wrote, "owing to the present Boarding School system which does not allow parents to take their children out of the home when once they have been placed there ... the compulsion is obnoxious to them. By this it will be seen that they are not in sympathy with the present system and that they strongly resent any attempt on the part of other people taking absolute control over their children. As a consequence the Rev. Mr. Tims ... in thus strictly carrying out the regulations has become an especial object for their hatred."⁷¹ The Siksika chiefs had made a series of demands, he wrote, namely, "An increase in the rations. Fatter beef, \$1.00 per day working pay ... instead of 50 cents at present paid on the irrigation ditch ... To be allowed to continue their Sun Dances. That the Rev. Mr. Tims be removed from the Reserve and another and kinder man put in his place. That their paternal rights be respected, that the School attendance be voluntary and not compulsory as at present ... That the children be given from one to two months summer holidays and that parents be allowed to take children from the schools whenever they liked ... No mention was made of the late murder except that Chief "White Pup" said that of two grievances, that he and his people had prayed to be removed, that God in his wisdom and kindness of heart for his children had saw fit to remove one of them (refer-

ring to the late Mr. Skynner) the other still remained (referring to Rev. Mr. Tims) He hoped that God would not see fit to remove this last in the same manner.”⁷²

The underlying demands, especially in light of the inseparability of exchange from Siksika religious life-worlds, are clear: both more control over the reproduction of their culture — including a summer holiday for and the full allowance of Ako-katssinn — and material demands for more pay and better rations. Resentment against Tims was due to his “strictly carrying out the regulations.”⁷³

Other reports of the time from investigators and interview subjects actually present on the reserve confirm this version of events. “It appears that no holidays are allowed in these schools,” wrote an RCMP officer named L. Herchmer, “a system which white parents would not tolerate, much less Indians. This, at the Blackfeet, has been rectified temporarily by closing the school for a month... The Indian department must relax their school laws, or be responsible sooner or later for an outbreak.”⁷⁴ Letters from varied observers included in the investigation files and written as the tension escalated, read, respectively, “I firmly believe compulsory education and chiefly taking them into the Home is the sole root and cause of the troubles” and “I understand its all on account of a shortage of rations.”⁷⁵ Nonetheless, despite these reports, official reports concluded

that “the whole cause of complaint and grievance was the Rev. J.W. Tims ... he has,” according to the Superintendent of Indian Affairs at the time, “undoubtedly a pugnacious and I might say an offensive manner which undoubtedly jars on the Indians’ feelings.”⁷⁶ This version of the story has persisted in some Western histories which sensationalize detail and minimize the brutality of settler colonial domination.⁷⁷

Tims himself would rage furiously against the idea that he had behaved improperly. In a series of barnstorming letters he decried “laxity on the part of the Agent in dealing with the school question so has there been laxity in other matters. Indians have been allowed to do much as they like for the sake of peace ... Their heathen dances are encouraged, cattle killed and flour doled out to assist them in their heathen feasts and to-day they are more than ever determined to keep up their dances.”⁷⁸ He was angry that he had been forced to flee based on what he saw as inadequate support from a state which wished him as a missionary to carry out its education regulations: “throughout the whole report [there is] a clearly designed scheme to protect the Department and its officers from any blame, and to throw the whole blame upon my shoulders.”⁷⁹

With Tims’ departure, relative quiet returned to the Blackfoot Reserve. The armed rebellion had dispersed, but the regular rhythms of settler genocide and Indigen-

ous resistance persisted. Midway through the Rebellion, the Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs sent a letter to the Beupre brothers, white ranchers whose cattle roamed the prairie on which the buffalo had herded by the millions less than 20 years before. “Your tender for the supply of beef at the North and South Blackfoot Reserve ... has been accepted. A Contract for execution by yourselves and sureties will be sent to you in due course.”⁸⁰ Beasts roaming the plains would continue to feed the Siksika; but now, the Beupres would profit.

Refusing, Shedding, and Listening

The 1895 Siksika Rebellion was more than a passionate and inchoate response to death: it was a coherent response to the twinned processes of cultural genocide and material dispossession. It demonstrates the inseparableness of ways of knowing, economic exchange, dispossession, elimination, and capitalist accumulation under settler colonialism. Settler colonial dispossession is characteristic of ongoing capitalist processes: the implications of this story are not limited to the past. In 2016, Patrick Wolfe, writing with David Lloyd, described a “fundamental continuity between the historical development of European settler colonialism and the present-day development of the neoliberal world order,” a “settler colonial present,” a continuity in which populations considered surplus — migrants, racialized minorities,

the poor — are managed using techniques pioneered on the 19th-century frontiers of settler colonization.⁸¹ Effective resistance requires an understanding of the granular structures of assimilation and elimination. The stakes are high for Indigenous people and settlers alike: all of us who live in settler states share the burden of trauma. Settler historians and citizens must refuse continued collaboration and to turn to the work of conciliation, healing, and decolonization.⁸² It is up to those of us who are settlers on these and other lands to shed our ways of knowing, to teach ourselves the true stories, to learn to listen, to let go of power. Only then can the work of conciliation begin.

Footnotes

- 1 Letter of Instruction from the Church Missionary Society to John William Tims, 5 June 1883. M1233.3, Archdeacon Tims Family Fonds, Glenbow Museum Archive, Calgary, Canada. (Henceforth “Glenbow Tims Fonds”).
- 2 Ben Miller, “Interview with AA Bronson about the Tims Family,” conducted 2018. AA Bronson Private Collection, Berlin.
- 3 Hugh Dempsey, “Scraping High and Mr. Tims,” in *The Amazing Death of Calf Shirt, and Other Blackfoot Stories* (Oklahoma City: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996), 186–209.
- 4 Robert Nichols, “Theft Is Property! The Recursive Logic of Dispossession,” *Political Theory* 46, no. 1 (February 2018), 13.
- 5 Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event* (London: Continuum, 1998), 163.
- 6 Canada, “Annual Report Department of Indian Affairs,” Sessional Papers, 1890, no. 12, 165, as cited in: Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 13.
- 7 “Siksika Knowledge.” Old Sun Community College. Accessed July 16, 2019. <http://oldsuncollege.ca/siksika-knowledge-program/>.
- 8 Since the introduction of the border between the present-day United States and Canada the Piikani have been split into two groups, one on each side of that border. The Blackfoot Gallery Committee, *The Story of the Blackfoot People: Nitsitapiisinni* (Richmond Hill, Oregon: Firefly Books, 2013), 3.
- 9 Betty Bastien, *Blackfoot Ways of Knowing: The Worldview of the Siksikaitsitapi* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2004), 1.
- 10 Ibid, 71.

- 11 Cindy Blackstock, "The Emergence of the Breath of Life Theory," *Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics* 8, no. 1 (2011): 3.
- 12 Throughout this essay I use Siksika terms whenever possible.
- 13 *The Story of the Blackfoot People*, 9.
- 14 Blanca Tovias, *Colonialism on the Prairies: Blackfoot Settlement and Cultural Transformation, 1870–1920* (Sussex: Sussex Academic Press, 2012), 15.
- 15 Percy Bullchild, *The Sun Came Down: The History of the World as My Blackfeet Elders Told It* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 284.
- 16 Kenneth Lockensgard, *Blackfoot Religion and the Consequences of Cultural Commoditization* (London: Routledge, 2010), 74–75.
- 17 Bullchild, 282. It is strongly discouraged for non-Siksikaitsitapi people to open bundles or to disclose their specific contents.
- 18 Lockensgard, 76.
- 19 Ibid, 290–291.
- 20 Ibid, 386.
- 21 See: Gerald T. Conaty, ed., *We Are Coming Home: Repatriation and the Restoration of Blackfoot Cultural Confidence* (Edmonton: AU Press, 2015).
- 22 Bullchild, 370–374.
- 23 Tovias, 22.
- 24 Ibid, 23.
- 25 *The Story of the Blackfoot People*, 4.
- 26 Paul M. Raczka, comp., *A Blackfoot History – The Winter Counts: Sikaitapi Itsinniiki – Telling the Old Stories* (Choteau, Montana: Blackfoot Books, 2017), 52.
- 27 Ibid, 312–316, 318, 320–321, 323–325, 329, 333, 335–336.
- 28 Ibid, 321, 327–328, 330, 334.

- 29 Ibid, 330.
- 30 Ibid, 325–326.
- 31 Lockensgard, 81.
- 32 Isaiah Lorado Wilner, “Body Knowledge: Motion, Memory, and the Mythologies of Modernity” (The Stevanovich Institute on the Formation of Knowledge 2019–2019 Workshop Series, The University of Chicago, 2018), <https://sifk.uchicago.edu/events/719/2018-19-comparing-practices-of-knowledge-workshop1/>, 8, 15, 25.
- 33 Ibid, 43.
- 34 Letter of Instruction from the Church Missionary Society to John William Tims, 5 June 1883, M1233.3, Glenbow Tims Fonds.
- 35 Tovias, 24.
- 36 Tovias, 25.
- 37 Letter from John William Tims to the Church Missionary Society, December 1883, M1233.3, Glenbow Tims Fonds.
- 38 Certificate of Apprenticeship to James William Grissell, Boatbuilder, December 24, 1871. M1234.23, Glenbow Tims Fonds.
- 39 1887 Diaries, M1233.23, Glenbow Tims Fonds.
- 40 Ibid, March 12.
- 41 Ibid, July 3.
- 42 Ibid, July 23.
- 43 Ibid, October 24.
- 44–49 Speech by John William Tims to a conference of school employees on the Indian Reserves in Edmonton, 1909. M1233.6, Glenbow Tims Fonds.
- 50 See: *Canada’s Residential Schools: The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, (Montreal: McGill University Press, 2016).

- 51 See: Ned Blackhawk and Isaiah Lorado Wilner, eds. *Indigenous Visions: Rediscovering the World of Franz Boas* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2018) ; Christopher Bracken, *The Potlatch Papers: A Colonial Case History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997) ; Isaiah Lorado Wilner, "A Global Potlatch: Identifying the Indigenous Influence on Western Thought," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 37, no. 2 (2013), 87-114.
- 52 Candice Hopkins, "Outlawed Social Life," *Documenta* 14 (2017): https://www.documenta14.de/en/south/685_outlawed_social_life/
- 53 Letter from John William Tims to the Indian Commissioner of Canada, 18 April 1891, M1234.7, Glenbow Tims Fonds.
- 54 Letter from the Deputy Supt. General of Indian Affairs to Rev. Father Legal, Missionary, Blood Reserve, MacLeod, CA, 16 April 1895, Indian Affairs Letterbooks, C-8234, Library and Archives Canada.
- 55 Letter from the Indian Commissioner to John William Tims, 24 February 1894, M1234.8, Glenbow Tims Fonds.
- 56 Hugh A. Dempsey, *The Amazing Death of Calf Shirt and Other Blackfoot Stories: Three Hundred Years of Blackfoot History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996), 186.
- 57 While Dempsey mistranslates his name as "Scraping High," the Winter Counts give an accurate translation of his Siksika name, Atooawan.
- 58 & 59 Winter Counts, 35.
- 60 Letter from the Deputy Supt. General of Indian Affairs to the Indian Agent in Winnipeg, 6 April 1895, Indian Affairs Letterbooks, C-8233, Library and Archives Canada.
- 61 Letter from the Deputy Supt. General of Indian Affairs to the Indian Agent in Winnipeg, 5 April 1895, Indian Affairs Letterbooks, C-8233, Library and Archives Canada.

- 62** Letter from Magnus Begg, Indian Agent, to Indian Commissioner, 4 May 1895, Indian Affairs Record Group 10, C-10163, Library and Archives Canada.
- 63** Letter from William Hardyman to Indian Commissioner, May 1895, Indian Affairs Record Group 10, C-10163, Library and Archives Canada.
- 64 & 65** Letter from W. M. Baker to Indian Commissioner, 6 June 1895, Indian Affairs Record Group 10, C-10163, Library and Archives Canada.
- 66** “Indians In Paint.” *Toronto Globe*, 4 July, 1895. In: RCMP-RG18 vol. 10, The Royal Canadian Mounted Police Fonds, Library and Archives Canada.
- 67** Letter from John William Tims to the Indian Commissioner, 3 July 1895, Indian Affairs Record Group 10, C-10163, Library and Archives Canada.
- 68** “The Blackfoot.” *Toronto Globe*, 4 July, 1895. In: RCMP-RG18 vol. 10, The Royal Canadian Mounted Police Fonds, Library and Archives Canada.
- 69** Canada, Parliament, House of Commons, Debates, 7th Parl., 5th sess., vol. 27 (1895), 3798.
- 70** “The Blackfoot.” *Toronto Globe*, 4 July, 1895. In: RCMP-RG18 vol. 10, The Royal Canadian Mounted Police Fonds, Library and Archives Canada.
- 71–73** Weekly Report of Sergeant Marshall of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, RCMP-RG18 vol. 10, The Royal Canadian Mounted Police Fonds, Library and Archives Canada.
- 74** Letter from L. Herchmer to the Indian Commissioner, 2 July 1895, RCMP-RG18 vol. 10, The Royal Canadian Mounted Police Fonds, Library and Archives Canada.

- 75** Letter from William Hardyman to the Indian Commissioner, 2 May 1895, Indian Affairs Record Group 10, C-10163, Library and Archives Canada; Letter from Inspector A. M. Jarvis to the Officer Commanding, Macleod District, 7 July 1895, RCMP-RG18 vol. 10, The Royal Canadian Mounted Police Fonds, Library and Archives Canada.
- 76** Letter to the Commissioner of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police from Superintendent Howe, 3 July 1895, RCMP-RG18 vol. 10, The Royal Canadian Mounted Police Fonds, Library and Archives Canada.
- 77** Hugh Dempsey, for example, tells the story this way in *The Amazing Death of Calf Shirt*. In a later book on Treaty 7, Dempsey describes the Government of Canada's failure to live up to its treaty obligations as "real or imagined" and praises the "heritage of protected land" created by the treaties. Hugh Dempsey, *The Great Blackfoot Treaties*. (Calgary: Heritage House Publishing, 2015), 174.
- 78–79** Letter from John William Tims to his supervising bishop, 2 July 1895, M1234.12, Glenbow Tims Fonds.
- 80** Letter from the Deputy Supt. General of Indian Affairs to the Beaupre Bros., Ranchers, 11 April 1895, Indian Affairs Letterbooks, C-8233, Library and Archives Canada.
- 81** David Lloyd and Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonial Logics and the Neoliberal Regime," *Settler Colonial Studies* 6, no. 2 (April 2, 2016): 114.
- 82** For more on refusal, see: Isaiah Lorado Wilner, "Reembodying Our Occupied Geographies: Boyd Cothran's *Remembering the Modoc War*, Benjamin Madley's *An American Genocide*, and the Future of Native American Studies," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 41, no. 2 (January 2017): 130.

Colophon

A PUBLIC APOLOGY TO SIKSIKA NATION

by AA Bronson, with an essay by Ben Miller

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TORONTO BIENNIAL OF ART

158 Sterling Road, 5th Floor

Toronto, Canada M6R 2B2

ISBN 978-1-9992186-0-7

First edition, printed and bound in Canada by Marquis.

Graphic design by Fritz Grögel, Berlin

TYPEFACES USED

Cassise Grotesque & Egyptian by Malte Herok

Meret Pro by Nils Thomsen

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