

Heather Dorries, Robert Henry, David Hugill, Tyler McCreary and Julie Tomiak (eds), *Settler City Limits: Indigenous Resurgence and Colonial Violence in the Urban Prairie West*, Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2019. ISBN: 978-0-88755-843-6 (paper); ISBN: 978-0-88755-589-3 (ebook)

There are years where settler colonialism rears its head in such visceral ways that the notion of relegating settler violence to some colonial past-tense is impossible. 2020 was certainly one of those years in Canada. A series of flashpoints brought the settler state and society into direct conflict with the Wet’suwet’en in Northern British Columbia, the Haudenosaunee in Southern Ontario, and the Mi’kmaq on Atlantic waters around Nova Scotia. The militaristic drive of settler economic growth, clearly preferring rapid resource extraction over nation-to-nation diplomacy, sparked Indigenous and solidarity movements across Turtle Island and beyond. Land-defenders took over roads, railways, and Twitter proclaiming that reconciliation, Canada’s name for addressing Indigenous rights, had died.

Like these movements, *Settler City Limits* reminds us that settler colonialism is unsettled business. The essays in this collection provide a varied and vital discussion of the ways that settler violence, dispossession, and “common sense” continue to rage against contemporary practices of Indigenous sovereignty. Beyond locating settler colonialism in the present, this collection explores how settler colonial power takes shape in urban spaces. The heart of the book is set in and around Winnipeg, but the scope extends throughout the Prairie West in order to craft an analysis of settler colonialism across borders. The regional approach attends to how cities are shaped by relations and mobility at various scales, and how “the Indigenous production of space is not bound to settler geographies” (p.4). This is important intellectual work that de-naturalizes the “settler common sense” which imagines cities as stable engines of settler life and relegates Indigenous life to non-urban space and non-modern time. Nick Estes invites us to reframe urban spaces across Turtle Island as “border towns”, or “unsettled frontiers defined by their own illegitimacy and contestability” (p.51). By reframing the city as a colonial settlement we begin to see the ways in which frontiers – for instance, between neighbourhoods or around housing

projects – are deployed to defend notions of a white “civil society”, and how colonial territorialization remains a continual “performance of ownership and belonging” (p.53).

Colonial Categorization

Throughout the 12 essays in this collection, authors take turns articulating definitions of settler colonialism. This discussion truly flourishes in a complex and timely dialogue between Tyler McCreary and Métis scholars Chris Andersen, Adam Gaudry and Brenda MacDougall, who compare different definitions of Métis nationhood. MacDougall explains that the work of settler colonialism begins intellectually by creating categories of settler and Indigenous subjects. The logic of partitioning operates according to Foucauldian concepts of appropriate/deviant behaviour and precipitates a “constriction of space, constriction of identity, constriction of opportunity to be Indigenous” (p.159). MacDougall, Gaudry and Anderson explain that this has real implications for how Métis people garner recognition and resources from the state. But categorization also bleeds into everyday practices of First Nations and Inuit peoples as they shape identity and space. Even when Indigenous peoples win rights to the city, Julie Tomiak explains that they continue to face scrutiny from a settler entitlement to determine “what is considered urban, and who and where” (p.111).

These categories are, of course, related to the land. One of the central features of settler colonialism, as Heather Dorries explains, is the claim that Indigenous peoples are incompatible with the modern city. The city, here, embodies all of the modern characteristics that are denied to Indigenous people, rooted in pre-modern traditions. As Dorries explains, this discourse not only determines “what kinds of spaces and categories Indigenous peoples can legitimately inhabit” (p.30) but also naturalizes the city as settler space. This move “allows urban space to represent the political and moral coherence of the settler polity” (ibid.) which further serves to build what Tomiak calls “the fantasy of the settler city” (p.98). Even though most major prairie cities are located on traditionally and spiritually important Indigenous sites, settlers are led to think of these places as relatively recent and permanent settlements of modern society. When we reimagine urban spaces as border towns, we can attend to the fragility of settler space, which must continuously repaint itself in new coats of Victorian moral norms, which dedicates

increasing amounts of municipal spending towards police forces in attempt to maintain a colonial order, and which cultivates a settler common sense that is threatened by the mere presence of Indigeneity in the city.

The Settler Relation

Settler colonial cities are also spaces of Indigenous resistance and resurgence. Indigenous peoples living in the Urban Prairie West have certainly faced housing discrimination and police brutality, but the spatial violence of partitioning, confinement, and surveillance has not gone unmatched by Indigenous strategies of survivance and solidarity. In Rapid City, and Winnipeg and Minneapolis, respectively, Nick Estes and David Hugill identify the development of Indigenous nationalism in the face of settler colonial encroachment, including gentrification. Estes broadly explains that “an anti-colonial common sense [is] embodied in the grounded practice of living in one’s homeland or remaining in cultural or spiritual relation to it despite its continued occupation” (p.51). This can be exemplified by the practice of ceremony or the refusal to sell land, but it can also take more oppositional forms as demonstrated by the American Indian Movement, which from 1968 onwards organized actions in direct response to settler violence. Through the occasional use of violence, the AIM forced “settlers to come to terms with their own unbelonging and conditional existence on stolen land” (p.63). According to Estes, this vulnerability hardens into an “anti-Indian common sense” leading to even more repressive forms of policing.

Increased repression is not the settler state’s only response to the challenge of Indigenous resistance. Liberal notions of benevolence and multiculturalism have also played a part in restructuring claims to settler governance and territorialisation. Nicholas Brown writes about the Montana Study, an experimental performance-based project that sought to form links between Missoula’s cultural and academic institutions and surrounding rural and reserve communities. The project was grounded in what Brown calls “colonial good intentions”, working with members of the Flathead reservation to promote mutual understanding between settlers and Indigenous peoples. However, the larger goal of the project was to invigorate a sense of regionalism that could “serve as a bulwark against the state’s colonial economy and empower its

(settler) citizens to protect themselves against further exploitation by outside corporate interests” (p.138). Through the settler-Indigenous relation, settlers sought to form their own connection to the land, indigenizing themselves in the face of a different kind of white opposition.

Reforming Settler Economies

The friction of a contested settler relation has pushed the colonial state to restructure its claims, but this blend of repression with more “caring” approaches has always been a way of forming colonial economies. Michelle Stewart and Corey La Berge trace a line from the Canadian residential school system, to the Sixties Scoop, to the current Child and Family Services system, and find that a continuous rhetoric of benevolence has been used to apprehend and confine Indigenous children. The traumatic history of residential schools can be understood as a strategy of erasure and assimilation, severing inter-generational ties to the land in order to open new extractive economies. But Stewart and La Berge suggest that benevolent rhetoric also works to form its own strategies of accumulation. They see the Canadian settler economy expand “through narratives of welfare and care – where there is neither welfare nor care in these cases, but rather the extraction of surplus value found in disposable lives that render value through their management” (p.209). Under a “settler good intention” of paternalistic care, damage-centered narratives are used to reify colonial categories and to create new opportunities to extract value from damaged subjects.

The accumulation of capital through practices of “care” is also explored in Zoe Todd’s animated analysis of public art in Edmonton. As a round-table of non-human creatures discuss what to do about a racist sculpture, a northern pike wonders, “why and how is it that public art that portrays exceedingly violent depictions of brutalization of Indigenous bodies is being created and funded with public dollars?” (p.299). Stewart and La Berge offer an answer to this question, but we might also refer to Jasbir Puar’s (2017) writing on the speculative rehabilitative economy of settler colonialism in Palestine. The benevolence of “caring” or “rehabilitative” discourse can be used as one side of a coin which justifies intense repression and violence on the other. But more centrally, and crucially for the neoliberal post-industrial era, we see settler

colonial economies turn towards a rehabilitative capitalism that finds profit through the description and management of Indigenous pain and the foreclosure of recovery.

Conclusion: Urban Indigenous Sovereignty

While settler colonialism has primarily been about the appropriation of physical space, *Settler City Limits* shows how expansion has been waged ontologically through the creation and reapplication of subject categories. Reflecting on the history of Métis resistance, Adam Gaudry explains that “[s]ometimes it’s physical, but almost always intellectual and political” (p.168). Breaking down discursive and non-discursive boundaries drawn by settler colonialism is itself a practice of resistance. Even the works of Sterlin Harjo, a Seminole-Muskogee filmmaker whose characters flow in and out of urban space, strike Lindsey Claire Smith as “an act of visual sovereignty” (p.260). They assert an Indigenous right to the city. As Indigenous peoples continue to reshape urban space, this work tears away at the fantasy of a settler colonial city. However, the tendrils of colonial economies have woven into urban life such that decolonization occurs on many fronts. In the face of renewed colonial strategies to expand territorialization and governance through the moral economy of rehabilitation, decolonization is not only achieved through land-based movements, but also through self-determination in the territory of care and the construction of recovery.

Reference

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