



BOOK REVIEW

Colin Samson, *A world you do not know: Settler societies, indigenous peoples and the attack on cultural diversity.*

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In the burgeoning area of settler colonial studies, Colin Samson's *A world you do not know: Settler societies, indigenous peoples and the attack on cultural diversity*, is part anthropological study, part historical review, and large part social critique of settler societies and nation-building projects. Complementing growing amounts of indigenous scholarship on the topic of American nation-building and its motivational goals, violent underpinnings and damaging effects, this book aims to stamp out, with deep historical contextualization, even the possibility of viewing the colonization of North America as anything less than a merciless and calculated land-grab and genocidal project. Moving impressively across studies of changes in indigenous health, resource management, land use, and making reference to early colonial witnesses including Alexis de Tocqueville and Thomas Jefferson, as well as renowned indigenous orators and leaders including Luther Standing Bear and Black Elk, Samson cogently argues that early and latter-day colonists always intended that indigenous peoples would not live to tell the tale of the incomprehensible cruelty and brutality upon which American democracy is founded.

Samson's friends and informants from the Innu Nation, primarily residents of Natuashish, Sheshatshiu, and Matimekush, in so-called Labrador, northeastern Canada, are the center of this book. Samson centers the specific resource extraction and management, and land claims processes of the sub-Arctic Innu, while contextualizing their struggles, aspirations, and difficult choices within the colonial history and dominant culture that is in such opposition to their way of life. Through propelling into the spotlight individual peoples' voices, and stories, and by referencing specific communities and their dealings with the state, this text documents the collusion between historical and contemporary, indeed, ongoing, struggles for dignity, health, and agency against the backdrop of irreconcilable injustices. With success, Samson weaves together periods of time, as well as moments across the continent to portray the incredible depth and complexity of the struggles the Innu face today, while I believe resisting the impulse to speak to or promote a sort of pan-Indian identity or struggle. In drawing connections between the struggles of indigenous nations from coast to coast, and as far south as Pueblo territory to the Dene Nation of the so-called Canadian Arctic, Samson draws affinities, rather than likenesses, between nations in order to show the extent and the design of the Euro-American imperialist project. With the voices of his Innu friends, experts, and research informants at the forefront, Samson's own authorial voice provides for the constant delivery of figures, narratives, case examples, selected quotations, and historical references demonstrating his formidable expertise on the topic of settler society's conceptual, political, and cultural formation.

It must be said that this book evidences a conspicuous lack of literature that specifically considers the Canadian story of empire building, relying instead upon an American-centric bibliography. This point of critique may be easily made of most studies that endeavour to survey North American political thought (this book also falling into the mistake of conceptualizing North America to the exclusion of Mexico). In this case, Canadian-centric analyses may have been

particularly important to the members of the Innu Nation of Labrador, as the dividing boundaries between Labrador and the French-speaking (originally French-colonized) province of Quebec arbitrarily divide Innu peoples along colonial provincial boundaries. Samson includes no reference throughout to the French colonial projects in Canada, or of the different histories and relations between Francophone and Anglophone Canadians, and their neighbouring indigenous nations. These unique and nuanced histories and cultural memories of differing and converging colonial projects engender, to this day, different contemporary responses to indigenous claims to sovereignty. That being said, I believe that Samson's analysis of the macro-perspective of Euro-American expansionism, standing in for what is a somewhat glossed assessment of Euro-American and early British and French colonialism, now American and Canadian settler societies, does the work of demonstrating the incredible momentum with which the colonial project was rolled out.

One of the most salient messages of Samson's book is his deconstruction of what he terms the *architecture* of the colonial project in Canada. Conceptually, the project of enacting mass dispossession and genocide upon the Innu, and across the continent, required what Samson terms *scaffolding*: namely, the construction of certain religious, cultural, ideological, and of course economic infrastructure from which the nation could be built. An economic model that prized material possession, accumulation, and expansionism as tenants as sacred to life as the Puritan ideals from whence they were appropriated. Tracing the work of the Puritan, or 'Protestant work ethic' through its place in religious discourse through to supposedly secular realms of political discourse, and into law, Samson maps the collusion of all moral and ideological realms with the ideals of free-market capitalism. Leading the reader through European, and Euro-American cosmologies and intellectual histories, he links the creation and reproduction of alliances between Christianity and science, imperialism and missionization, and economic expansionism and policies of elimination and forced displacement. These synchronizations worked together to conceal, in plain sight, the paradoxes, hypocrisies, and base cruelties that were necessary iniquities of the colonial project.

Importantly, Samson elaborately demonstrates how European (Anglo-Saxon) cosmologies and uni-directional theories of time underpin the mechanics of colonialism. For Euro-Americans, even more so than for their European ancestors, time was linear, progress pointed up and forwards was the only natural direction, was in fact the only direction sanctioned as acceptable by the Christian god. Convenient, as it would seem, for justifying the displacement of indigenous lands, the Christian and legal definition of right to possession of land as that time was defined by the tenant of 'improving the soil'. Thus, by squatting and farming land, one earns the God-given right to ownership, and this is reflected in legal statutes of the time that defined indigenous ways of using as not 'improving it', thus disenfranchising indigenous peoples of the right to 'own' it. Surely, there is a very dark irony here, when one recognizes the Dust Bowl of the 1930s as the results of such 'improvement'. An especially prevalent theme in chapter two, 'The march of civilization', the narrow, unidirectional vision of time, closely bound to hierarchy-based theories of evolution and materialist evaluations of progress, became a metaphor for the justification of racial hierarchies, and for the inevitability of European acquisition of indigenous lands. Specifically, the application of a white supremacist ideology imagined indigenous peoples as literally lesser biologically evolved than the European invaders. This widely held belief justified the coordinated, and often state-supported or state-directed mass murders and brutal repressions of indigenous resisters and warriors, but also of women and children in the hundreds.

By telling this story in the way he does, Samson *denaturalizes* the process by which colonization of indigenous nations took place. The lengths to which Western politicians, scientists and social scientists went to use science and religion to naturalize the colonization, extermination, and assimilation of indigenous populations is countered by Samson's careful *denaturalization* of this process. As he states in his discussion of early treaty agreements, while initial agreements were on their face agreements about land and resource-sharing allegedly made in good faith, there was never actually any question in the hearts of colonial agents about their moral and social superiority to the indigenous peoples of the land. There was never really a possible scenario in which negotiations could have happened in the frame James Tully terms, a 'just dialogue'. By linking the relevant religious, social, and economic contexts of the imperial world from the 16th century onwards, Samson maps out the structural blueprint for the world we see today. Through linking together such moments as the genocides of the past to the youth suicide rates of the present, the deliberate extermination of the Bison by frontier settlers to the prevalence of junk food in on-reserve communities, and connecting the legacies of administrators of murder and displacement, such as Thomas Jefferson, to contemporary colonial governments such as Canada's Stephen Harper and the US's George W. Bush, Samson insists that we never attempt to understand the social, political and health related problems of today without looking closely into the past for our answers. If you entertain any nascent questions regarding the extent to which the American government and, indeed, nation, has intentionally designed, directed, and carried out the cultural and literal genocide of First Nations living upon now claimed Canadian and US territory, this book will have you firmly set your doubts aside. In the wake of such a vast litany of powerful first-hand narrative and carefully researched statistics, Samson describes the extent to which the extermination and displacement of indigenous peoples has always been a pillar of American nationalism,

and, indeed, identity. As anti-violence activist, feminist and Cherokee scholar Andrea Smith writes, ‘genocide is not a mistake or aberration of US democracy, it is foundational to it’.¹

Samson brings to the fore how the unidirectional march towards ‘progress’ and ‘civilization’ has actually meant the violent and chaotic unraveling of the very fabric of Innu societies. Simply, applications of Western ‘progress’ have had the effect of causing death, illness, and dysfunction to indigenous communities, as represented through the narratives and statistics Samson shows throughout, and especially in chapters five and six, ‘Caribou to Chubby Chicken’, and ‘Western diseases’. While showing how provincial legislators of the past and present, as well as present day Mennonite community dwellers and service providers, take for granted that European sanctioned progress is good for the Innu, Samson documents Innu peoples’ sophisticated and nuanced analyses of where problems actually lie, and where solutions to the problems they now face must be found.

The great strength of this book is that the people of Samson’s interviews, narratives, and experiences are rightfully positioned as the experts of their circumstances, and so also the correct and best agents of their own revitalization – the topic of the seventh and final chapter. Drawing examples from across the US and Canada, Samson documents several, mostly food and diet related initiatives that strive to re-center and imbue value to traditional diets. Though Samson does not use this phrase, the term *indigenous food sovereignty* is being increasingly used by indigenous peoples from many nations to describe their philosophies and efforts to re-localize and re-traditionalize food and diets, and to encourage increased indigenous autonomy over indigenous bodies and lives.²

While Samson is the undeniable author, his commitment, palpable through the text, to centering Innu voices, expertise, and analyses allows the reader a complex glimpse into not only another world, where time is circular, death isn’t scary, and the natural world and humans are not at odds. Samson also sparks critical thinking about settler society, encouraging settlers to look into their own worlds using a perspective that makes settler lives look like the foreign, savage, and uncivilized ones (in contrast to how indigenous lives have, and to some extent are, still construed today to members of settler society). The great achievement of this text is that Samson redirects the gaze as being from European/white observer of indigenous persons, to instead from Innu and Innu allies looking back at Canadian society. Through elucidating the contradictions in European and now Canadian thought that catalyze and perpetuate genocide while superficially promoting benevolent designs for the well-being of the Innu, Samson shows us that the world we really do not know is the settler society from which we come.

As any critical text ought to do, this book leaves me with questions that haunt after the last page has been turned. In this case, I am provoked to think through the ethics of possible responses to the difficult knowledge presented. As a settler-Canadian, I grapple with the sense that learning, incorporating different knowledge into my psyche makes certain demands of me – that I am tasked by virtue of *knowing*. When ignorance, and willful ignorance at that, is a dominant mode by which settlers feign innocence in the face of colonialism and their role as beneficiaries of genocide, the shattering of ignorance also means the shattering of innocence. Simply, now that I know better, is there an additional, a contingent requirement to act better? To act towards making the situation better? While this line of questioning is given no explicit space in *A world you do not know*, I know that Samson delivers us these truths, excavated from the depths of our settler souls, to provoke us to think otherwise about Canada and the US. He aims to unsettle our modes of relating to and within settler societies, and hopes to elicit from us something more, something different – something human. Because he makes no reference to how he imagines settlers might *be differently*, thinking that component through is left to the readers.

I confess that it is a real fear of mine that settlers left alone with the truth will do very little with it. Maybe they will keep it close enough to them to ward away accusations of ignorance, but I predict that most will keep it far away, too, at the periphery of consciousness where it will not trip up normal functioning. I am reminded here of settler scholar and anti-violence advocate Amber Dean’s important work on the demands made by the poetry and writing left behind by the over six hundred missing and murdered indigenous women in Canada (data collected by the recently federally defunded Native Women’s Association of Canada). Dean asks us to wonder what sort of response the ‘terrible gift’ of their communication asks for, or, ‘what might it actually mean to inherit what lives on from the women who have been disappeared and murdered, and who are we to claim such a relation of inheritance?’³ What would it mean to live *in relation* to the past in such a way as to avoid becoming overly preoccupied with pity and sorrow, and to instead allow the past to surround our present in unsettling ways?⁴ While many Innu walk and breathe in the land of the living,

1 Andrea Smith, ‘Beyond Restorative Justice: Radical Organizing against Violence’ in *Restorative Justice and Violence Against Women*, ed. James Ptacek, 255–280 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 264.

2 Indigenous Food Systems Network. ‘Indigenous Food Sovereignty’, <http://www.indigenousfoodsystems.org/food-sovereignty> (accessed December 9, 2013).

3 Amber Dean, ‘Inheriting What Lives On: The ‘Terrible Gift of Sarah de Vries’s Poetry’ in *Torn From our Midst: Voices of Grief, Healing and Action From the Missing Indigenous Women Conference, 2008*, eds. A. Brenda Anderson, Wendee Kubik and Mary Rucklos Hampton, 168–181 (Regina, SK: Canadian Plains Research Center, 2010), 175.

4 *ibid.*

themes of extinguishment by external forces – forced residential schools, forced settlement, forced subordination to Canadian legal systems, and the prevalence of deaths by suicide and diet-related illness in Innu communities – remind us that life and death are not metaphors to the Innu and their allies. In learning of the historical features and internal mechanics of early colonial thought, and the particulars of its modern-day conventions and practices, especially when learned through the narrative of Innu individuals who have passed, I believe that Samson's text asks us to engage directly with the dead as with the living. He asks us to contend with the lack of futurity colonialism provides for the living, and spurs us to question the dignity of deaths directly or indirectly attributable to the process of nation-building. What do we owe, what is required of us now, to support the futurity and vitality of the Innu who live now in this precarious moment? What do histories of abuse and violence demand of us living ancestors of Custer and others if we are to do justice to the dead? Or are reparations impossible, now, and our legacy is to live as a country, as a people, who are inescapably haunted by the collateral damage of the fulfillment of our collective national dreams? I thank Samson for his timely contributions to vital conversations on settler de/colonization, and hope that his work will provoke questions, and ultimately, action, on the part of settler beneficiaries of Canada, Britain, the US and from across the Commonwealth.