



Book Review

Living in Indigenous Sovereignty

Carlson-Manathara, E., with Rowe, G. (2021). Fernwood Press. ISBN 978-1773632384 (paper) CDN\$29.00; ISBN 978-1773632636 (e-book) CDN\$28.99; ISBN 978-1773634517 (pdf) CDN\$28.99. 320 pages.

BRYSON LANDRIAULT

Toronto Metropolitan University, Canada

Informed by the perspectives of prominent Indigenous scholars, knowledge holders and other community members, *Living in Indigenous Sovereignty* (2021) offers a decolonial framework for how Canadian settlers can repair their relationships with Indigenous Peoples and land within the settler-colonial state of Canada. Although intended for all settlers, this book is most concerned with providing an anti-colonial and decolonial foundation for white settlers (or occupiers) of traditional Indigenous lands, whose ancestors were complicit in the colonization, genocide, and widespread displacement of Indigenous Peoples across Turtle Island (North America). These terms – anti-colonialism and decolonization – are central tenets of the framework provided to readers, with anti-colonialism being defined as an indicator of opposition to colonization, and decolonization as radical social justice involving the systemic reversal of colonization. The question authors Elizabeth Carlson Manathara and Gladys Rowe ponder throughout this book is how white settlers can come to terms with their role in Indigenous-led decolonization, and gain a sense of accountability for the ongoing exploitation of Indigenous Peoples and lands by settlers. Guided by a decolonial framework that maintains Indigenous sovereignty, they explore this question through the experiences of white Canadian settler activists who have engaged with decolonization in their own lives and work.

Carlson-Manathara and Rowe's purpose in writing and researching this book is to respond to calls from various Indigenous scholars and community members for active engagement of Euro-Canadian settlers in decolonization, underlining their importance in making colonial governments accountable to

Correspondence Address: Bryson Landriault, Department of Sociology, Toronto Metropolitan University, Toronto, ON, M5B 2K3; email: blandriault@ryerson.ca

ISSN: 1911-4788



Indigenous worldviews and perspectives. Moreover, the lack of decolonial literature addressing non-Indigenous peoples is the gap this book and its authors posit as necessary to address for true reconciliation with Indigenous communities, as well as for settlers to begin working in good relations with Indigenous Peoples. Their main argument throughout the book is that settlers must process the tensions that exist between Indigenous Peoples and themselves, including the generational privilege and wealth stemming from occupying land and exploiting its resources, the violence their ancestors enacted on entire communities through genocide, and enduring the forthcoming guilt and accountability.

Being a white, European settler herself, author Carlson-Manathara understands what it is like to confront these tensions, given her years of decolonization research and time as a social worker. She began her career as a social worker at an Indigenous alternative school in Minneapolis (p. 18), eventually pursuing and achieving a Master's of Social Work (MSW) with a focus on anti-oppression, clinical social work, and intergenerational and cultural trauma. She admits to making a lot of mistakes throughout her life, claiming she likely did more damage than good throughout her years in social work, due in part to some of the colonial beliefs she had held onto growing up in a rural "Canadian" town. Indeed, *Living in Indigenous Sovereignty* is about coming to terms with colonial guilt and understanding what living in Indigenous sovereignty could look like for a European settler, reimagining the colonial lifestyles settlers are accustomed to. These lessons cannot be learned without the guidance of Indigenous worldviews; therefore a majority of this book includes advice from Indigenous community members who the author befriended through her years of working in Canada and the United States. One of these close-friends is Gladys Rowe, co-author of *Living in Indigenous Sovereignty* (2021), with whom Carlson-Manathara has worked on various academic research projects and pursuits. Rowe, who is of Cree and mixed European ancestry, uses her background in social work and her perspective as an Indigenous woman to reinforce what the transformation to living in Indigenous sovereignty should include. Moreover, Rowe emphasizes the need for centring Indigenous knowledge and epistemologies – recognizing the importance in our interconnectedness to other people and the land. Their collaboration makes the book a deeply compelling and essential read for settlers, who the authors believe desperately need more guidance in understanding how to live alongside Indigenous Peoples, on traditional Indigenous land, while being respectful and good relatives.

The book starts with a breakdown of the Indigenous scholarly research, which emphasizes the importance of having these conversations with European settlers, followed by a diverse set of arguments debating the role settlers play in decolonization and Indigenous resistance. Contextualizing the topic with a well-rounded discussion from members of Indigenous communities is important in guiding this discussion, as the book mostly consists of a collection of accounts from white settlers based on interviews

with author Carlson-Manathara, documenting their journeys as settlers who have participated in decolonization work and social justice activism. These settlers vary in age and location across Turtle Island, but they share similar feelings, experiences, and sentiments on their relationship to Indigeneity. For example, Steve Heinrichs, who is featured in Chapter Six, explains his curiosity about Indigenous Peoples and culture while growing up as a Russian Mennonite on unceded Coast Salish Territory in Vancouver (p. 88). This curiosity has forced Heinrichs to confront his identity as a practicing Mennonite, coming to terms with his status as an occupier of Indigenous land and his commitment to the religious community that raised him and with whom he now works closely. Much of his identity has been shrouded in the belief that this land, which was presumed “empty” by his ancestors, was a gift to the Russian Mennonite community for their hard work and commitment to their faith. Heinrichs has since learned how his family has benefited from the exploitation and displacement of Indigenous Peoples, and has educated his family, friends, and community members about this history as well. Adam Barker, another white settler, born in Hamilton, Ontario, who studied in the Indigenous Governance Program (IGOV) at the University of Victoria, shares a similar experience (p.153). Barker has been committed to learning more about Indigenous systems of governance and politics, but he has struggled with justifying working in decolonial spaces as a white Canadian Settler. Barker has felt an overwhelming sense of guilt for his attachment to colonialism and how, similarly to Heinrichs, he has benefitted from the colonization of Indigenous land and nations. The stories of Heinrichs, Barker, and other settlers interviewed in the book help enrich this discussion, highlighting the experiences of non-Indigenous people who have confronted some of the feelings and discomfort that have come with being a colonizer on Indigenous land.

Generally, the settlers interviewed all feel a sense of guilt for the actions of their ancestors, the ways they continue to benefit from colonization, and the knowledge of the injustice towards Indigenous Peoples that has formed the basis of their privilege and wealth in Canada. Many of those interviewed expressed discomfort with their status as a colonizer, where they have experienced the economic advantages of capitalism and colonization at the expense of Indigenous peoples. Understandably, land was a massive topic of conversation throughout the interviews. For instance, how should a settler, who has purchased or inherited property, think about their relationship to the land? Is the responsibility of “landowners” to give land back to Indigenous Peoples? These are difficult questions for settlers, but the authors understand them as necessary to explore when attempting to decolonize and disrupt a settler-colonial lifestyle.

Overall, *Living in Indigenous Sovereignty* (2021) contributes something unique to academic conversations surrounding decolonization and Indigenous-settler relations. The book’s biggest strength is the authors’ ability to map a discussion for settlers to think about the tensions embedded

in their relations with Indigenous Peoples, while maintaining a sense of accountability. The reader is reminded that settlers need to be aware that the lands on which they currently live and from which they benefit are stolen lands that are inextricably connected to Indigenous cultures, practices, and nations that existed long before colonization. Readers may understand this history, but the book pushes them to deeply reflect and analyze what decolonizing really means and requires as we look towards the future. These strengths make this book more than just a jumping off point for readers; it also is a place for even the most aware individuals, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to explore their relationships to colonization. Anyone who wants to engage in decolonial conversations in a critical, academic manner will discover something new, either about themselves or the perspectives of others, in this book.

The novelty of Carlson-Manathara and Rowe's work is what truly makes this book a must-read, as there is little literature on Indigenous-led decolonization from a settler's perspective. These discussions can at times be awkward and undesired by settlers, because they involve deconstructing the colonial lifestyle in which everything in their lives – family, school, and work – is entrenched.

Despite the importance of engaging with these perspectives, Carlson-Manathara and Row's research does neglect a few key areas of the conversation surrounding decolonizing settler perspectives. The first is that by limiting interviews to only white settlers, the book ignores settlers from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences. Although the authors acknowledge that this is intentional, focusing solely on the complicated perspectives of settlers from European backgrounds, this limitation does leave something to be desired. Identity is intersectional and diverse, making the discussions around it and what it means to be a settler all the more important. There are settlers from Black, South-Asian, and other racialized communities who are left out of these conversations and could benefit from the lessons in this book. For example, how should Black Canadian settlers approach these same questions surrounding Indigenous land and Peoples? How might immigrants transition to living in Indigenous sovereignty? Although the stories of white Canadian settlers are relevant to many people, ignoring the diversity of identity and settler experiences limits this discussion in ways that might not be completely necessary or beneficial. Instead of approaching the topic in this way, the intersectionality and nuance of identity could have been reflected in interviewing racialized individuals as well, who have also adopted a colonial lifestyle.

A second limitation is the strictly academic scope of the conversations surrounding decolonizing settler perspectives. The lessons from *Living in Indigenous Sovereignty* (2021) have tremendous importance for improving settler relationships to Indigenous Peoples and land, but are presented in a way that is irrelevant to those without an academic or activist background. As such, this criticism posits that there should have been a broader discussion of

the ways decolonization strategies are addressed pedagogically. For instance, there could have been a chapter discussing how these decolonization exercises and theories can be better integrated in public education curricula and schools, ensuring they are being taught to children and teenagers. In not having these discussions with everyone, its benefits and knowledge only become accessible to academics and social activists who already have an interest in the issues. When truly attempting to decolonize Canadian settler lifestyles in practice, *access* to decolonial knowledge must also be considered for there to be any meaningful social justice or action.

In closing, *Living in Indigenous Sovereignty* (2021) is an important read for anyone looking to critically reflect on the responsibilities settlers have in the process of decolonization. There are some issues with limiting the scope of the book to white settlers, and framing it for academics and activists, but they do not overshadow the importance of this book to discussions surrounding the future of settler-Indigenous relations. With the guidance of Indigenous academics and other community members, these authors are well-intentioned and provide space for Canadian settlers to deeply reflect on their status as occupiers of Indigenous land. This book compels readers to reckon with their colonial legacy and how they benefit from the displacement of Indigenous Peoples, while still finding a love for themselves and their ancestors. Moreover, the process of reflecting upon these situated histories is an important takeaway from reading this book. Indeed, it paves the way for settlers to live a life that respects and operates within Indigenous sovereignty.