

PAUL MOON

## Book Review

**G. D. Smithers and B. N. Newman (eds.), *Native Diasporas: Indigenous Identities and Settler Colonialism in the Americas*, Nebraska, 2014, University of Nebraska Press, 509pp.**

The steady rise of indigenous studies – in its various manifestations – over the past several decades has been accompanied by a corresponding growth in literature on the subject. However, the very notion of ‘indigenous’ is one beset with problems of definition. From often reductionist arguments about race, ethnicity, and ancestry, through to almost esoteric assertions of distinctiveness, based on religious/spiritual, historical, cultural, and other related categories of classification, there is an almost inescapable element of orientalism in some of these renditions – with the added irony that the attempts to make the indigenous other sufficiently distinct from the (usually) majority European culture in which it is located is often perpetrated by members of the indigenous group itself. It is as though the strength of indigenous identity is defined (and even justified in some cases) by the extent to which it can quantify its points of difference with the mainstream culture that surrounds it. This is a constant source of tension for many indigenous communities, for which dissimilarities with the other are a key component in identity-construction.

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The nexus of identity, culture, and politics becomes even more intricate when the ideas of colonialism are applied. In some contexts, colonialism has acquired a slightly pejorative overtone, yet despite its presumed traits of being invasive, dominating, and destructive of indigeniety, colonialism also has the potential to accentuate aspects of indigenous identity – providing a foil which can offer perspectives on what it means to be indigenous that might otherwise not be available in so pronounced a way.

To complicate matters further (in what is already a complicated realm), so much of the research on indigenous peoples commences with an implicit (albeit admittedly only partial) assumption that there are commonalities between various otherwise disparate indigenous groups – commonalities that allow them to be lumped together in a single eponymous category. To refer to ‘indigenous’ has become as much a point of reference for a series of generalised assumptions, which can include but certainly not be limited to a people who are non-European, who are in possession of the surviving fragments of their pre-European culture, who are struggling to retain their language as it inches towards extinction, who appropriate terminology that at once emphasises, validates, and even exaggerates the authority of the localized, indigenous culture in the face of the overwhelming forces of globalized culture, who draw on issues of race, ethnicity, or ancestry as means of conferring group membership, who cvlaim special connections ith their ancestral land, and who perceive their indigeniety as an aspect of their lives which is engaged in a constant struggle against the immanent forces of social evolution.

It is from this intricately-marbled cultural and academic milieu that *Native Diasporas* has emerged. But as the title signals, this will be more than just another work surveying the already well-traversed terrain of indigenous identity. Yes, this

is a key and unavoidable component, and one that surfaces in various ways in each of its fifteen chapters, but the emphasis on diasporas promises opportunities for all sorts of comparatively little-explored insights into the construct of indigeneity. The subtitle places at least some of this anticipated analysis in the context of 'settler colonialism', which serves as a specific reference point for the book's content – one where, historically, the character of intercultural encounters was often at its most conspicuous and unstable.

The geographical parameters of the *Native Diasporas* extend to encompass the Americas, which has both advantages and potential disadvantages. One of the main advantages is that even though the region comprises numerous distinct indigenous groups, geography and history have brought some commonalities to their experiences. In addition, some of the themes the book addresses could end up becoming more diffuse if the scope of the work was widened to other continents as well. At the same time, though, surveying a range of historical indigenous identity issues across the Americas places demands on the editors to draw together common themes among what are a broad variety of indigenous groups, each of which have had unique experiences of European colonisation.

The editors have tackled the possibility of the material in the book ending up appearing fragmented by dividing the work into three main sections, each of which contains five chapters. Following a concise and unexpectedly accessible introduction (unexpected in the context of similar volumes, where editors have sometimes yielded to the temptation of trying to compress too much content and too many ideas into a constrained space), *Native Diasporas* begins with its first section: 'Adapting Indigenous Identities for the Colonial Diaspora'.

Without exception in this section, the contributions all have something important to say, and do so with an appropriate balance of theoretical perspective and detailed case-study material. There can be a tendency, with so many writers working on the same general theme, that instances of the repetition of theoretical perspectives appear from time to time. Here, however, each chapter is sufficiently distinct in this respect that such tendencies are bypassed. And neither do the chapters in this section (or the subsequent two for that matter) appear in any way structurally formulaic. This is another tribute to the editors, who appear to have decided not to rein in the stylistic preferences of the authors out of any desire for textual uniformity.

Another salient feature of this book is the quality of history in what ostensibly is a work tackling sociological and anthropological issues. Of course, the disciplines are bound to overlap in the sort of topics dealt with here, but the obvious historical specialisation of so many of the authors is noticeable, and elevates considerably the value of the contribution this book makes to the field of indigenous studies. In Linford D. Fisher's chapter 'Religion, Race, and the Formation of Pan-Indian Identities in the Brothertown Movement, 1700-1800', for example, the author's familiarity with the source material and the historiography of the subject is evident throughout. This is more than just history, though. The history is illuminated throughout with insightful theoretical perspectives relating to shifting notions of identity. The two are tightly woven together, as in the case of the analysis of indigenous depopulation from disease, and the consequent and often unexpected impositions this placed on fundamental notions of identity in so many communities.

History and identity acquire a different focus in Felicity Donohoe's "Decoying Them Within": Creek Gender Identities and the Subversion of Civilization'. Here, the role of gender is

teased out and examined in the context of a culture experiencing the full onslaught of eighteenth-century European political, geographical, and moral colonisation. In what is sometimes a surprisingly moving chapter, Donohoe maps the disintegration of tradition, but rather than simply dissecting the stages and consequences of this disintegration, the author investigates the policies and practices of the colonial state, and the mechanisms by which such dramatic change was effected.

At the same time, Donohoe reveals the uneven nature of the changes inflicted on the indigenous society. While the wholesale adjustment of such societies is traced in this chapter, the ambiguous role of indigenous women emerges as being crucial, both in their capacity as stalwarts of their traditional culture, but also as agents of modernisation, bridging the gulf between indigenous and colonial communities, and simultaneously navigating their way through shifting dynamics that emerge with the collision of two patriarchal societies. The result was the expansion, as Donohoe concludes, of 'the repertoire of female identities, withstanding a great deal of change, while retaining essential Indian feminine values'.

The second section of this book is titled 'Asserting Native Identities Through Politics, Work, and Migration'. Here, the intersection of indigenous identity and the politics of the coloniser is examined, with all of the five chapters in this section revealing to varying degrees how the invasive actions of colonisers could result in increasingly politicised (in the Western definition of the term) indigenous communities. This is shown, in certain cases, to operate almost like some Newtonian principle, in which every action by the coloniser is met with an equal but opposite reaction by the indigenous society. This irony is explored in Claudia B. Haake's chapter 'Resistance and Removal: Yaqui and Navajo Identities in the

Southwest Borderlands', in which she observes that the enforced removals of Native Americans 'may actually have helped to create a larger tribal or national identity that may have made them stronger in their dealings with the United States government'.

This and the other chapters in this section of the book succeed by venturing well beyond the expected narratives of diminished indigenous identity as a result of colonialism (which is a theme familiar to indigenous societies across the world), and explore more how indigenous identities evolved into modified forms in the face of government efforts to impose cultural uniformity on the nation, and to 'civilise' the 'savages'.

These forms may have been the result of external forces bearing down on the indigenous societies selected for this chapter, but as is suggested in this section, the affected societies were no less indigenous in many ways after coming through the transitions brought about by colonialism. By implication, the extent of indigeneity cannot be measured using the nature of an indigenous society in previous generations as a yardstick.

One of the biggest threats to the indigenous character of Native Americans in the first half of the twentieth century, as Joy Porter discusses in her chapter 'Progressivism and Native American Self-Expression in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century', were those usually state-sponsored initiatives that, ironically, were intended to 'save' Native Americans. What makes Porter's study so fascinating in this chapter is how she sets these initiatives against a background of swiftly-evolving mainstream American society. Her incisive analysis of the way in which, for example, 'values' such as Christian morality gave way to rising secularism in America over the twentieth century, provides explanations for the corresponding changes in how the state crafted its 'Indian policy'. The tensions that accompanied the evolution of

American society as a whole inevitably were mirrored in how successive governments both perceived and attempted to regulate the country's indigenous population.

Internally, however, it was the combined traits of persistence and resistance that helped to shore up the limits of Native American assimilation into mainstream American culture during this period. Such a perspective is crucial because it is the little-heard counterpoint to the much more heavily-documented state approaches to, and explanations of, Native American indigeneity. Porter emphasises this distinction by highlighting the difference between the types of primary material that form the basis of understanding and interpreting the thinking of governments on the one hand, and the alternative and much more slender category of primary material that can be drawn on to gain some impression of the motives and actions of indigenous communities in America on the other.

*Native Diasporas'* final section – 'Twentieth-Century Reflections on Indigenous and Pan-Indian Identities' – looks predominately at how indigenous communities have responded in the twentieth century to the effects of colonialism in the preceding century and a half. The sorts of adaptations and accommodations that characterise many of these responses reflect the general modernisation of social relations that Neil Smelser and others detailed in the 1960s, with many of the developments – even those that appear to enhance indigeneity – being the result of a structural conduciveness whose parameters have been formulated largely by the state.

Daniel M. Cobb's 'Asserting a Global Indigenous Identity: Native Activism Before and After the Cold War', explores some of the outwardly significant developments that have occurred in the past half-century in the realm of native Americans – developments which seem to be reviving indigenous identity in several ways. He cites the adoption of 'a language of

nationalism, anticolonialism, and decolonization', among some indigenous movements, and points to the rise in profile in the media of global indigenous issues as evidence of the renewed political and social self-confidence of indigenous groups in general. These developments are portrayed as being part of an indigenous revival which has been making ground in the face of continued mainstream indifference, misplaced state altruism, or even occasional hostility.

This sort of narrative – of a determined indigenous society battling to emerge from more than a century of suppression by a colonial authority that has long since assumed political dominance in the country – is common in studies of indigenous groups. However, such outward signs of a more assertive expression of indigeneity than existed in previous generations need to set firmly in the context of a wider society which is dominated by a culture that is more powerful than, and at best ambivalent to indigenous communities. The most important aspect of this approach is the fact that the dominant culture typically prescribes the degree of indigeneity that it is prepared to tolerate. So while the struggle for greater recognition of the status of indigenous peoples may have achieved advances over the past several decades, the reason that these advances have not gone as far or as fast as some indigenous groups would like is precisely because the sorts of indigenous expressions that are deemed acceptable are defined by the state and not the indigenous community. Only when the structure of the state is conducive to particular forms of indigenous expression do those forms become permissible.

Cobb's approach, while sympathetic to elements of this position, never succumbs completely to the structural functionalism of theorists such as Smelser or Walt Rostow. Rather, he allows a careful recounting of the history of the struggle of indigenous groups in America to speak for itself,

without the analysis being burdened by having to comply with a single, prescribed theoretical framework. Moreover, by employing a specifically historical focus, he is able to identify similarities and trends between various indigenous movements – in particular, the ‘autochthonous political tradition of asserting a global indigenous identity that began long before and will continue long after the Cold War’, which is the period he focusses on in his chapter.

One addition to this book which would have been useful – particularly to readers unfamiliar with specific locations in the Americas – is the inclusion of maps. Apart from the reproduction of a late eighteenth-century map of St Vincent, there is no way for a reader to see where the many of the sites referred to are located. Issues of proximity and distance can have political as well as social implications, and a detailed general map, accompanied by other maps referring to the particular areas some of the chapters deal with, would have been helpful. And although it is a practice in decline, the inclusion of a collective bibliography – perhaps divided along the lines of each section or even chapter – would have been beneficial. Otherwise, though, there is no doubt that this work will become a seminal text for people studying in this field. With only fifteen chapters occupying roughly 500 pages, the editors, obviously with the support of the publisher, have opted for depth of analysis over quantity of chapters, and it is this depth, combined with a consistently high standard of scholarship throughout, that makes *Native Diasporas*’ contribution to the burgeoning literature on indigenous identity studies so significant.