

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Allotment Stories: Indigenous Land Relations under Settler Siege. Edited by Daniel Heath Justice and Jean M. O'Brien.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6bv8250x>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 46(2)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Bowes, John P.

Publication Date

2023-07-14

DOI

10.17953/aicrj.46.2.reviews.bowes

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

REVIEWS



Allotment Stories: Indigenous Land Relations under Settler Siege. Edited by Daniel Heath Justice and Jean M. O'Brien. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021. 376 pages. \$112.00 cloth; \$28.00 paper.

In the introduction to *Allotment Stories*, Daniel Heath Justice and Jean O'Brien write that they hope the book's content sparks conversation about the effect of land privatization as well as "Indigenous resilience in the face of violent property regimes" (xii). To the extent that any one phrase can capture an edited volume full of insightful and thought-provoking pieces on the topic of allotment, the latter does so effectively. The range of essays across time and place is both noteworthy and sobering—noteworthy because its content illustrates how allotment is not a singular policy limited to the United States; sobering because it explains the comprehensive use and enduring impact of such land policies in colonial regimes across the globe.

Including the introductory essay, the afterword, and interludes that range from poetry to short stories, the four sections of *Allotment Stories* encompass thirty-one different perspectives on and analyses of land privatization. This is not a volume that shies away from difficult topics, especially when it comes to the realities of family histories that can be both beautiful and messy. That directness and honesty is one of its strengths. The scope of topics covered is another asset, for this volume opens the reader's eyes to the damaging tendrils of land privatization that appear in many forms and under various names in the past and the present. Yet, as the introduction asserts, "Indigenous peoples have consistently expressed creative ways of sustaining collective ties, kinship relations, and cultural commitments to territory, sometimes in outright defiance, but sometimes even through the very legal regimes intended to destroy them" (xvii). From the first pages to the afterword written by legal scholar Stacy L. Leeds, it is this core message that shines through most prominently.

In the first section, titled "Family Narrations of Privatization," seven individuals, including the two coeditors, share perspectives on allotment through the lens of personal experience and family histories. These essays examine episodes from California to the White Earth Reservation in Minnesota and discuss the impact of policies from the Dawes Act of 1887 to the Land Buy-Back Program for Tribal Nations of the twenty-first century. Two themes come through clearly in these pieces. The first is what Nick Estes refers to in his essay as the "arithmetic of dispossession" that is at the core of allotment policy. Sold as privatization for advancement or protection, the division of tribal territory aimed at separating Indigenous people from their lands. The second theme builds on the first, as each author describes how that dispossession also separated Native people from each other. In unique and important ways, each family history of allotment is therefore also a history of kinship networks

displaced, family relocations, and consistent efforts to rebuild and restore the relationships that have been damaged in the process.

The second section contains six different written works and is titled, "Racial and Gender Taxonomies." While these pieces are not the only ones in the volume that use race and gender as categories of analysis, examinations of mixed-descent individuals in the American context and Métis in the Canadian context highlight the common places where racialization and dispossession intersect. Susan Gray's analysis of Anishinaabe women's exploitation of provisions in the 1862 Homestead Act as a strategy to retain land and maintain a traditional seasonal round in Michigan conveys well the successes women found in the process. In exploring the actions of some of his own ancestors, Jameson R. Sweet confronts individuals of mixed ancestry who could access whiteness and its benefits, often at the expense of their own relatives.

Section number three is titled "Privatization as State Violence," and it addresses the topic in an even broader geographic framework. The first essay discusses road-building in Guam, the second analyzes land privatization in Hawaii, and the third brings the reader to New Zealand where settler colonial institutions created opportunities for land confiscation in the 1960s. Those three essays and the ones that follow provide glimpses into connections that have been built and continue to be built along social, intellectual, and political pathways among global Indigenous communities. The examinations of shared experiences with governing structures intent on dispossession in the name of civilization, privatization, or any other ideology, highlight the power and importance of such discussions.

The fourth and final section, titled "Resistance and Resurgence," takes the reader to Finland, Mexico, Palestine, California, Washington, DC, and Oklahoma over the course of seven different essays. These essays all speak in some way to the impacts of settler colonial land policies and Indigenous responses to their imposition, both in the past and in the present. For example, Kelly S. McDonough explains how Indigenous peoples in colonial Mexico worked within the Spanish system to create their own version of land titles to maintain their communities. In the very next essay, Argelia Segovia Liga describes how Nahua communities in 1820s Mexico City fought against the forced allotment of communally held lands that were the foundation of social, economic, and political life.

These two analyses of Mexico exemplify what is rewarding and frustrating about a collection like this one. Each essay connects to the larger themes of allotment and Indigenous action even as each expands the reader's understanding of those concepts through different historical contexts. Indeed, *Allotment Stories* opens the door for any scholar of Native American history unsure of how to connect American-centered narratives to international ones. The frustration only arises from how small the open doors are. To accommodate the varied responses to the call for contributions and to keep the volume manageable in size, the essays are relatively short. This means that each offering can be enticing even as it does not provide all the substance the reader might desire.

Yet the relative length of the volume's essays is a minor issue and more a reflection of this reader simply wanting more of a good thing. Jean O'Brien and Daniel Heath

Justice issued a call and people responded. It is a testament to the state of the field and the intellectual community built through organizations like the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association (NAISA) that individuals saw in their work connections to the proposed collection. The coeditors also deserve praise for crafting a structured and accessible volume from those contributions. Not every essay is of equal strength, and that is the nature of such a project. Yet every essay shapes the bigger picture and plays a critical role in supporting the goal of this valuable work.

John P. Bowes
Eastern Kentucky University