

An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States. By Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz. Boston: Beacon Press, 2014. 296 pages. \$27.95 cloth, \$16.00 paper.

Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz's *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* offers an intriguing narrative of United States history. Not so much for the facts that it presents: Dunbar-Ortiz correctly acknowledges that the historical events and research that she has collected and synthesized are well known to those who have studied the histories of indigenous peoples in the Americas. What makes this book unique is Dunbar-Ortiz's challenge of the most fundamental assumptions and narratives in United States history—not only the traditional narratives that still form the basis of much of civic traditions in the United States, but also modern attempts at more multicultural perspectives. For the author, the United States is a “settler colonial” nation that has institutionalized violence in order to extend its authority across the continent (6–8). Insofar as they refuse to acknowledge or confront this essential truth, all other narratives are therefore problematic. This core identity of the United States was born out of conscious, deliberate actions and policies that specifically benefited the colonizers and marginalized the indigenous population. Along with the policies came national narratives designed to support the notion that this was an inevitable process, for according to Dunbar-Ortiz, “the affirmation of democracy requires the denial of colonialism” (116). This fact has generated genocidal policies against indigenous peoples on this continent, and has even seeped into US foreign policy initiatives abroad. It cannot be left in the past or seen as a historical artifact because, in Dunbar-Ortiz's view, it still plays out in domestic and international policies.

This is an explicitly political book because according to the author, this is an explicitly political history. For Dunbar-Ortiz history is not a neutral discipline, and in support of this assertion she draws on the groundbreaking works of the 1960s and 1970s to write what some would term an “activist history.” Dunbar-Ortiz makes a salient point when asserting that modern indigenous communities are born out of their resistance to centuries of settler-colonial policies that set out to destroy, relocate, or assimilate them (7). She extensively explains issues of land appropriation, military campaigns, and indigenous repatriation efforts and also discusses indigenous peoples' work with the United Nations that is bringing a new global perspective to their endeavors. One of the book's more intriguing arguments is that indigenous peoples have been dealing with explicitly modern imperialistic policies for centuries, and that the roots of much of what we see in US foreign policy can be traced to its American Indian policy. It is no surprise that this work is part of the *ReVisioning American History* series. Thoroughly researched, to create her synthesis Dunbar-Ortiz draws upon a litany of well-established and well-respected works across a wide range of disciplines.

However, perhaps the book's strongest contribution is her forthright interpretation, which effectively challenges the established narratives. In her view only an honest look at the historical events faced by indigenous peoples will truly disrupt the “unconscious” sense of manifest destiny that even today most people in the United States have about the country. Perhaps one of the most uncomfortable ideas for readers is her contention

that many efforts to enhance US historical scholarship with multicultural “dialogues” and perspectives—works that many academics believe have contributed much to the historiography of US history—have actually reinforced the very notions they purported to challenge. Works that were intended to recognize the difficult realities of indigenous histories and also acknowledged the racial component of those events still possessed an implicit bias. Their failure lies in inadequately acknowledging that, due to treaties and matters of sovereignty, indigenous communities and nations possess unique status. For Dunbar-Ortiz, the challenge has not been a lack of information or methodology, but “the refusal or inability of US historians to comprehend the nature of their own history, US history. The fundamental problem is the absence of the colonial framework” (7). In this sense, her work is entirely different in its attempt to subvert the narrative of the unbiased historian.

In a book with such a sweeping goal, some topics invariably receive less attention than perhaps they should. Interestingly enough, it is in the area of indigenous resistance that this stands out the most. While Dunbar-Ortiz does a thorough job analyzing issues of land appropriation, militarization, and repatriation through her interpretive framework, other topics seemingly well-suited to her perspective are presented with only a cursory overview. Given the historical use of education as a political tool of the settler-colonizers, of course it is essential that boarding schools are discussed, as are their social legacy and impact on survivors (211–214). However, reservation day schools do not get much attention. This is unfortunate, not only because of the significant role the day schools played in the colonial project, but also as places that recently spawned resistance: some indigenous communities now control the curriculum, transforming day schools into nation schools. More mention might have been made of how indigenous peoples have worked to reshape or reclaim the field of education.

Yet the biggest surprise for readers may be the scant coverage given to indigenous spiritual philosophies and traditions. From the colonial period through today, indigenous spiritual and philosophical teachings have often played a central role in indigenous resistance movements, whether in the form of military resistance, land rights actions, repatriation efforts, or environmentalism. Anyone familiar with the history knows the tremendous effort on the part of settler-colonial agents to stamp out those spiritual and philosophical teachings. Moreover, since Dunbar-Ortiz discusses the Doctrine of Discovery and other religious underpinnings of colonization, it is unfortunate that more examples of indigenous spiritual resistance were not included.

A book like this is bound to generate intense debate, which makes it ideal for a college classroom. Some readers may find her approach difficult at times. In discussions of the work, the author’s assertion of a connection between Indian policy and US militarization may be an area where this tension comes to the fore. However, scholarship cannot move forward without works that directly challenge assumptions. In so eloquently presenting such a challenge, if perhaps incompletely, Dunbar-Ortiz’s *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States* does much to continue this conversation.

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