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Book Review

Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination

by Mark Rifkin

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Indigenous peoples across the globe face ramifications of colonialism to the present day. For example, as was widely covered in 2016 at the Standing Rock Indian Reservation, reservation land is threatened by private interests and corporations¹, and there are numerous cases of this occurring through extractive industry worldwide. These cases represent the physical ways in which Indigenous lands are disrupted, but one of the more

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¹ In 2016 there was a months-long protest that took place on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation located in North Dakota. The protest at this site was in opposition to the Dakota Access Pipeline, which was a natural gas pipeline that would cross into reservation land. The protesters fought for their sovereignty and rights to the land, but ultimately the pipeline was constructed. For more information, visit: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-north-dakota-pipeline-pes-idUSKBN17LoBJ>. For information on issues elsewhere see, <https://www.culturalsurvival.org>.

insidious ways that colonialism plays out in societies across the globe is through the ownership of history—including both how history is represented (and by whom) and how that history is taught. The use of Western canonical history often inadvertently enforces the dominant settler colonial narrative, thus erasing Indigenous experiences, including that of time. Time, which Mark Rifkin tackles in his new book, is meant to convey the sense of movement through life and generations. In other words, an Indigenous experience of time may differ from the settler colonial time in that it is guided by stories that are told by community tribal elders or traditional practices that have existed for generations upon generations, rather than having a recorded date-based history that is today a Western construct. Therefore, “time” remains an ambiguous term that refers to how one group of individuals describes the passing and organization of their history.

In *Beyond Settler Time*,” Rifkin argues “temporal sovereignty” based on this notion of time as relative, referring to how, depending on one’s cultural context, one thinks of the passage of time (whether correlated with history and dates or through stories and ritual). His is a refreshing view on how best to incorporate Indigenous perspectives without erasing their own juridical processes, but rather giving Indigenous peoples the opportunity to embrace *and* express their own dynamic sensations and references when it comes to their unique narrative of the passing of time.

Rifkin opens his argument with a brief background of Einstein’s Theory of Relativity, which posits that depending on the mass, acceleration, and energy in an object, that object can warp spacetime. This means that there is no one constant time that is universal because celestial bodies all have different masses and accelerations, and therefore, spacetime ranges. Using the theory of how time varies across the universe, Rifkin builds his argument that experiences of time here on Earth are also subjective and relative, given cultural context. In other words, Indigenous peoples have the right to express their own conception of time *outside* of the written histories and timeframes used by the settler colonial state. This is a particularly salient introductory point, as Rifkin argues that the inclusion of Indigenous peoples within the settler colonial histories erases the specificity

of Indigenous geopolitical claims and enforces the inactive violence of Indigenous peoples inaccurately portrayed within the “domestic” and “modern” construct of a nation.

Using Sara Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), Rifkin argues orientation to time as the fundamental element of temporal sovereignty. To be oriented, according to Ahmed, is to find familiarity in the direction you choose in life, which is to say that if one is placed in a room, they would be familiar with every piece of furniture or object in that room and would be able to navigate themselves through with ease. This notion of familiarity can extend to a cultural situation or perhaps to living in a particular area. To be oriented in this situation is to understand at the deepest level how to exist in a given environment. Rifkin extends this idea by relating familiarity to continuity in time, stating that to be oriented is thus to “have a sense of place and self in relation to other places and selves as well as a feeling of where one is going, and the pace at which one is heading there” (Rifkin, 2017, p. 2). An example of orientation in Indigenous contexts could be an Indigenous person living in their ancestral homelands who has intrinsic knowledge of the land, plants, and animals of that place. (We would hope) That person also possesses knowledge derived from their cultural worldview, because they have always existed within that worldview in that particular place. Thus, understanding orientation is critical in beginning to understand Indigenous perspectives of time because of their subjective natures. For example, within many Indigenous groups, traditions and ancestors are important aspect of daily life, whether they be expressed through spiritual or cultural rituals. This concept of using and following stories told by ancestors exists outside of the settler colonial time, because it is not directed or enforced by any settler and or state being/time frame/modernity. In this sense, then, Indigenous peoples exist within their own orientation of time.

In order to illustrate the pervasive effects of settler colonial imposition of a colonial standard through the telling of history (i.e. lack of recognition for many tribal nations, loss of traditional lands, loss of native language), Rifkin discusses the film *Lincoln* (2010) and the novels *Sundown* (1988), *Indian Killer* (1996), and *Gardens in the Dunes* (1999). Rifkin recounts

watching the film *Lincoln* and noticing a silent Native looking man in the background of several scenes, who he quickly realized was meant to be Ely S. Parker, a Seneca who served as an aide to Ulysses S. Grant in the Civil War. Moving through this chapter, Rifkin uses Parker as an example for how he has found Indigenous representation in history. Specifically, Rifkin writes, “The silent figure of Ely S. Parker—the mute facticity and fleshliness of his visible Indianness, which has no other meaning within the sense of history—testifies to the colonial force that orients time” (Rifkin, 2017, p. 59). His argument in this chapter is that, with respect to Indigenous peoples, during the Civil War they (and formerly enslaved individuals) were nationalized members of the Union, but shortly after the war concluded, they (the Dakota and Seneca people in this instance) were forcibly removed from their lands and forced to obey legal and civil standards of the U.S. To make his point, Rifkin introduces a discussion of the Dakota War, which took place in 1862 after several unfair annuity payments were made to the Dakota people. The Dakota had become reliant on these payments as a result of a string of treaties, which left them with a 70-mile strip of land and virtually no hunting area. Despite being sovereign peoples recognized through treaties with the U.S., Rifkin points out the distortion exemplified by the Dakota resistance—that Indigenous peoples were expected to become part of the U.S., but they were categorized as in need of civilizing. For the Dakota, Rifkin argues that their perception of time and identity are tied to their land because there had been generations of people living on the land, but because that idea of belonging was incongruent with the expansive drive of the U.S. government, Dakota time was disrupted.

Similarly, in chapter three Rifkin analyzes *Sundown* by John Joseph Matthews. The main character, Chal, experiences mental turmoil because he is caught in the nexus of being a “modern” Osage man who is facing allotment² and going to college, all the while experiencing discomfort with ‘not being Osage enough’ because he is not on his homeland. Here Rifkin makes explicit that Chal’s loss of connection to Osage territorial land is

² For more information on this policy, see the The Osage Allotment Act: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-118/pdf/STATUTE-118-Pg2609.pdf>

linked to identity loss as an Osage person. Moreover, in losing his connection to the “before,” which homelands represent, Chal finds himself unable to reconcile his position within a more modern state (specifically, Oklahoma). Rifkin argues, “Chal’s emotional orientations register the impact of settler temporal narratives given the proliferation and materialization of such narratives in government-initiated remapping of Osage space” (Rifkin, 2017, p. 103).

In chapter four, Rifkin transitions into the twentieth century with *Indian Killer* and *Gardens in the Dunes*. These novels model life after allotment, where the individuals in the stories have been so far removed from their cultural homelands that they no longer understand their identity as Indigenous people. In both novels, the main characters try to find knowledge about “Indians” through history books. What they encounter is a “white” version of the history. Indigenous perspectives are not told in the books or stories they come to know; rather, versions of the events that took place in the nineteenth century are explained from the settler point of view. However, a constant that links these characters to an Indigenous identity, Rifkin argues, is the Ghost Dance³. His main argument here is that there is potential for regeneration of Indigenous identity through learning processes. Rifkin’s choice of these two novels illustrates that when Indigenous peoples are given temporal sovereignty to experience and feel connected to their Indigenous past *without* certain constraints, including “looking Indian,” then there is a real opportunity for growth⁴.

While Rifkin makes an important argument for why temporal sovereignty should be recognized in academia, he fails to mention how

³ The Ghost Dance is said to have originated in 1890 after a man named Wovoka (Jack Wilson) had a dream that he met God, and God told him that he could be reunited with the dead if he performed this dance. It was a prophecy that spread throughout Indian country and came to symbolize Indigenous unity.

⁴ Rifkin also mentions blood quantum as a constraint. For more information on blood quantum policies, there are a number of scholars who write about this, including Eva Marie Garroutte, Kim TallBear and others. For a brief explanation, see: <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2018/02/09/583987261/so-what-exactly-is-blood-quantum>.

Indigenous knowledges and our profound temporal philosophies and realities persist today around the world. In some respects, Rifkin appears to aim to diversify the sources he draws from in the book, such as drawing from Ahmed and other womxn scholars and Queer theorists. Recognizing Queer perspectives is critical as the isolation that Queer individuals face can come from a sense of “modernity” or orientation to the world that is imposed by the settler colonial state. Because of their unique place as being different than the settler norm, Queer individuals are caught within a temporal limbo like Indigenous people. They exist in a space that, historically speaking, has not been a space of acceptance, and therefore their narratives are left out of the heteronormative settler history.

These are important connections; however, one area in the work that needs to be enriched is that it does not fully recognize the critical role of women in both reclaiming Indigenous identities and those connections which Rifkin highlights through his uses of novels and film. An examination of how gender intersects with temporal sovereignty as a theory would be beneficial. While Rifkin does select *Garden in the Dunes* in order to highlight a woman’s experience, the discussion could be improved by including a discussion on the role of women in generational movement. He finds that the transmission of blood and the way one identifies are of importance but seems only concerned with the “chronobiopolitics” of tribal identity and how the U.S. tried to normalize and categorize who could be Native, rather than the ways in which Indigenous identity moves through generations.

Indigenous women’s roles in daily Indigenous realities are explicit in many ways, including multiple forms of teaching younger generations Indigenous cultural practices and beliefs, as well as how Indigenous women and men view their relationships with time. Furthermore, there are very few Indigenous women in academia worldwide, and this is a gap I personally feel in my own training as a scholar where women’s voices in theory, representation as researchers, and presence in the classroom are consistently marginalized or, if present, seem to require constant justification for their presence. Therefore, having Indigenous women’s voices present in the literature across multiple fields is meaningful to me.

Indigenous women add an element of distinct perspectives to any research being done, but their voices are especially significant with respect to generational passing of knowledge and interpretation of time as felt in Indigenous communities. In the same way that Rifkin argues against a settler timeframe because it restricts and imposes a narrative on Indigenous time, having male dominated spaces as normative in academia excludes Indigenous women and their contributions.

What is not the focus of the book but is pertinent to mention, given the major themes of this special issue, is the relationship between temporal sovereignty, settler colonial control of history, education, and Indigenous identities. As an educational philosophy, I wonder how we are considering the teaching of history to young children today in ways that acknowledge the tensions in the relationships Rifkin outlines. As an Indigenous person and the product of schooling in the United States, I see how harmful the trajectory of settler colonial schooling can be to Indigenous students because we do not see our histories presented in the classroom. If we do, they are tellings of history trapped in settler colonial constructions of time and significant historical events, and these are told through Western lenses that isolate Indigenous peoples in our own subjugation. Rifkin's work helps us to approach the very notion of time in a way that is conscientious, deliberately inclusive, and uplifting of Indigenous peoples and our histories. In my view, these arguments are central to Indigenous human rights, where we as Indigenous peoples are claiming the right to education but may not have "all the answers" all of the time regarding what constitutes culturally-specific content in education. Critical human rights education as a transformative framework requires different knowledge contributions, and great benefit can come from creating space in learning which highlights Indigenous peoples' own interpretations of time itself.

I recommend *Beyond Settler Time* to individuals interested in Indigenous studies, history, and education and who wish to expand the way we understand knowledge generation through research. This book is also a thought-provoking read for educators who may want to consider Indigenous theories in development of their curricula and teaching practices.

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