

Not “A Nation of Immigrants”: Settler Colonialism, White Supremacy, and a History of Erasure and Exclusion. By Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz. Boston: Beacon Press, 2021. 362 pages. \$27.95 cloth; \$17.95 paper; \$24.99–\$45.00 audio.

Settler colonialism has become so widely used that it is in danger of overuse—much like the term “decolonize.” In her book *Not “A Nation of Immigrants,”* Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz has thwarted the trend by providing a succinct, but comprehensive, explanation of how the structure of settler colonialism in the United States has impacted and interacted with other processes of exploitation to advance a political economy of exclusion—particularly of people of color—that reproduces itself through mythical narratives of inclusion. The title announces the thesis which is later succinctly summarized, “The United States has never been ‘a nation of immigrants.’ It has always been a settler state with a core of descendants from the original colonial settlers, that is, primarily Anglo-Saxon, Scots-Irish, and German” (270).

Dunbar-Ortiz has a gift for presenting history as urgently relevant to the present. *Not “A Nation of Immigrants”* executes this talent through a cyclical narrative. The first chapter reveals how incredibly pervasive the “nation of immigrants” narrative has been in the American psyche by scrutinizing Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton*. The groundbreaking musical, launched during and with the blessing of the Obama administration, survived the xenophobia of the Trump administration and continues to present its namesake as an icon of the promises of an immigrant nation built on an ethic of inclusion and possibility. Dunbar-Ortiz, however, points out that *Hamilton* was not an immigrant, but a citizen of British colonies, raised by merchants in the West Indies whose wealth came from the slave trade. *Hamilton* himself became a slave owner and endorsed a selective policy restricting immigration, while arguing for a fiscal-military state designed to ensure westward expansion by white settlers onto Indigenous lands. That the musical’s creator is Puerto Rican American compounds the irony: a musical obscuring a history of settler colonialism that perpetuates currents of erasure and exclusion toward other marginalized groups as well as Indigenous peoples.

Chapter 2 provides a concise, yet thorough description of settler colonialism as a historically embedded *structure* that has reproduced other structures of othering and exclusion. Rather than rehashing theoretical perspectives on settler colonialism, the author demonstrates the uniquely American developments that informed such processes after the formation of the republic. Dunbar-Ortiz identifies the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 as the blueprint for an unprecedented form of expansionism that justified state militarization to stifle Indigenous resistance and promote orderly Euro-American settlement. While this chapter operationalizes and contextualizes many important concepts, two in particular stand out—the creation of a fiscal-military state, and settler self-Indigenization.

As previously noted, the institutionalization of a fiscal-military state through the Constitution was a hallmark of Hamilton's plan for the young republic. It would ensure a built-in policing mechanism to subdue Indigenous resistance to the dispossession of their territories for "civilized" settlement, and would manifest itself in a number of ways that favored Anglo-Europeans and their progeny into the present. Chapter 3, "Arrivants," distinguishes enslaved Africans from immigrants inasmuch as being transplanted to the Americas was not their choice. In a remarkably accessible historical explanation of critical race theory (although the author does not explicitly use that term), Dunbar-Ortiz reveals how over time, slave codes and antebellum slave patrols in the South fused with the fiscal-military state to establish a deep structure of militarization in police forces across the nation that work against people of color (including federal funding for paramilitary activities and equipment for riot control).

In a similar vein, the fiscal-military state has been mobilized and sculpted to deal with the so-called "yellow peril," which the author addresses in chapter 7. While yellow peril racism dates back to medieval Europe, Dunbar-Ortiz succinctly documents its proliferation through law and media in the United States, beginning with the US Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 (which simultaneously relegated Chinese immigrants to a labor caste to galvanize westward commercial expansion), exacerbated through US wars in southeast Asia in the 1950s through the 1970s, and reinvigorated through the heightened Sinophobia accompanying the outbreak of COVID-19.

The exclusive nature of immigration control in the US has, it seems, been circumscribed by the fiscal-military state all along, which is especially apparent in the case of Hispano-American relations. While Lewis and Clark are cast as culture heroes in nationalist narratives, Dunbar-Ortiz reminds us that the expedition itself was nothing less than espionage. The explorers moved beyond the boundaries of the Louisiana Purchase into Mexican territories, charting the way for US imperialistic movement into the receding territories of the Spanish empire. This martial expansion provided a context for xenophobic policies restricting migration from south of the border by people who would have been treated as citizens under Mexican control of these lands, saw the alienation of lands in Texas by Anglo slaveholders, and the cooptation of a Hispano elite in New Mexico and California to ensure that people of Western European stock were the dominant settlers. Thus, the emergence of the United States as a global economic power ensured pervasive border tensions that remain to date.

The second salient concept—settler self-indigenization—is a narrative process that provides a "rationale" for settler colonialism. The mythic histories describing the hardships and thereby justifying settlement by migrants from the British Isles portray settlers as the "chosen" inhabitants of the land and convey a creation story-like quality. Dunbar-Ortiz begins her assessment of this structural process by scrutinizing narratives of Appalachian settlement and exceptionalism, wherein cultural heroes such as Daniel Boone foretell a people who defy encroachments by outside industries, sometimes identifying with colonized people. The author seemingly was focused on a critique of Appalachian identity politics and missed an opportunity to review the larger corpus of critical Appalachian studies literature that, instead, sees the region as the space in which the "nation of immigrants" motif might be most thoroughly deflated.

But Dunbar-Ortiz's aim is to illuminate the contradictions of nationalist settler narratives that use identity politics and related imagery to establish proprietary claims to land and citizenship. Thus, in chapters 5 and 6 she illustrates how the wave of Irish settlers in the nineteenth century, coming to escape British colonialism, had no intention of identifying with oppressed peoples of color in the nation that had provided them with an escape valve. They were also, under the auspices of Catholic faith, the first to embrace Columbus as a symbol of deliverance to the promised land. A generation later Italians elaborated on the myth to advance a national holiday.

Most unfortunately, this book is not likely to be popular in regions where curricula that seemingly bears the influence of critical race theory is banned. Dunbar-Ortiz has a gift for delivering compelling arguments and explicating complex structures of inequality in a most accessible and engaging way. If the critics of such curricula actually took the time to read this book, they could not help but see the point. Regardless, the author has provided one of the most comprehensive historical assessments of settler colonialism and the manifold ways that it hastened other forms of inequality impacting both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples—forms of inequality that have reached beyond the point of critical mass.

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