

## REVIEW

### ***Unsettling the University: Confronting the Colonial Foundations of US Higher Education* by Sharon Stein**

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In *Unsettling the University: Confronting the Colonial Foundations of US Higher Education*, Sharon Stein employs Christina Sharpe's (2016) methodology of decolonial historiography to examine "invisibilized violence" within spaces of higher education in the United States. Drawing on primary and secondary source documents, the author seeks to challenge white settler histories (such as entitlement, innocence, and exceptionalism) and desires of "moving on" or "past" – by making sense of how the past is tied to the neocolonial and neoliberal present. In doing so, Stein examines three periods of time (including the colonial, land grant, and WWII eras) to argue that institutions of higher education are embedded within the economic capitalist system – that which prize wealth accumulation. The author writes from the perspective of a white settler working within a Canadian institution of higher education. Because of her positionality, Stein acknowledges the importance to avoid reproducing tropes such as the "vanishing Native." This is because a settler colonialist perspective tends to associate "land" as a form of "property" – which acts to elide Indigenous knowledges and ontologies. In her book, Stein examines colonial subjectivities and structures to make sense of the foundations of higher education within the US.

Stein (2022) argues that colonialism privileges white people as the "rightful" hierarchical "leaders of humanity," affording them prosperity and security at the expendability, expense, and exploitation of Indigenous and Black peoples. This reminds me of Sara Ahmed's (2012) seminal book entitled *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. This is because both Ahmed (2012) and Stein argue for the importance of having conversations related to diversity, equity, and inclusion rather than reproducing "invisibilized narratives" that seek to devalue the "other." The cost of colonialism essentially has resulted in the denial of alternative knowledges which becomes premised on exclusion. This is because people (particularly white people) working within US institutions of higher education often fail to reflect on their own involvement with institutional and social violence (Stein 2022). Like Ibram Kendi's *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* and Nell Painter's *The History of White People*, Stein's objective is to learn from the colonial past rather than reproduce

it. Stein specifically urges her audience (particularly those working within the academy) to question the dominant narrative as well as to consider the ways in which those deemed as “racialized others” have been elided within spaces of higher education.

In addition to questioning the dominant narrative on historical representation, Stein encourages her audience to challenge conceptions of American exceptionalism (such as notions of individualism, civilization, and benevolence) used to project the image of the “enlightened” university. The author specifically argues that American exceptionalism implies a unilineal evolutionary perspective – that which associates the US with “civilizational supremacy” while prizing Eurocentric ideology. The trope of “American exceptionalism,” as argued by Stein, has been used within higher education to justify domination over “others.” This is because higher education often becomes romanticized with the promise of upward mobility and social progress, though at the expense of BIPOC communities. Stein argues that universities are essentially complicit and financially backed by slavery. I found her arguments against American exceptionalism most intriguing because it is emblematic of the current political legislation (such as SB 266) in the state of Florida. Moreover, the author argues that questioning American exceptionalism ultimately challenges the core principals of the US.

This book is excellent for advanced undergraduates and graduate students in anthropology and other related social science disciplines who are interested in issues pertaining to US higher education, colonialism, and decolonization. Although I highly recommend reading this book, I wish Stein had provided clearer and more salient strategies to disrupt the colonial framework of higher education. Like Kendi (2016) and Painter (2010), Stein provides a starting point to think outside of the box – but not a specific call to action. Future research will need to provide more “actionable” steps to *unsettle* the legacy of American exceptionalism used to historically justify domination over BIPOC and other marginalized communities within spaces of higher education. Furthermore, I believe this research is necessary in identifying specific methods to decolonize higher education (and even beyond the academy itself).

## References

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