

The Deceitful Misnomer: Settler Colonialism

by James W. Springer

On Settler Colonialism: Ideology, Violence and Justice, Adam Kirsch, W.W. Norton & Company, 2024. Pp. 142, \$25 hardcover.

After One Hundred Winters: In Search of Reconciliation on America's Stolen Lands, Margaret D. Jacobs, Princeton University Press, 2021, pp. 343, \$30 hardcover.

The concept of “settlers” as a moral, or more frequently, immoral, type has grown apace among those who make claims to intellectual seriousness. Two books, recently published, offer contrasting views on the matter, and allow us to evaluate this movement and, in so doing, to expose the muddle behind the ideology of settler colonialism.

Adam Kirsch, *Wall Street Journal* editor and author of several books on literature and religion, offers us a brief survey, but concentrates on the modern state of Israel, the Zionist movement, and antisemitism, matters on which I can claim no special knowledge. However, two chapters deal with the history and present status of North American Indians, a subject on which I have made a special study. Kirsch notes, correctly,

that those who view the ideology of settler colonialism as a legitimate, perhaps the only legitimate, perspective on North American history, celebrate American Indians as an exalted category, due to their treatment of “the Earth as a precious entity that gave us life” (64) and their status as victims. By contrast, the settlers, of white European origin, are consumed by greed, not merely for material benefits but also for knowledge, as represented by the natural sciences. It is the “indigenous” that show us the error of the settler mentality, and the study of their history, as recited by them, enables us, even we benighted settlers, to reform the present by creating a “morally legible” past.

One of the most popular expressions of moral legibility is the land acknowledgment, and Kirsch quotes the

acknowledgment published by Northwestern University, located in Evanston, Illinois and a tiny portion of Chicago. The acknowledgment runs as follows:

The Northwestern campus sits on the traditional homelands of the people of the Council of Three Fires, the Ojibwe, Potawatomi, and Odawa as well as the Menominee, Miami and Ho-Chunk nations.

This listing of so many tribes illustrates the difficulty of assigning any particular plot of land to any particular tribe, and the related difficulty of assigning modern Western options of ownership, territoriality, and sovereignty to aboriginal groups. The existence of farming villages (frequently moved); camps for hunting, fishing, and plant collecting; territory used for hunting, fishing, and gathering; land used for warfare, trading, ceremonialism, diplomacy; and land transited for any of the purposes just mentioned, vitiates any attempt at finding ownership and control as modern nation states understand them.

Disruption caused by the introduction of Old World diseases, by colonial/frontier warfare, and by relocation near European and Euro-American forts and trading posts further complicated the matter. To assign a few square miles of Evanston, Illinois to a tribe or multiple tribes is pointless as a historical statement, however useful it may be as an admission of guilt. None of the tribes just mentioned owned or controlled the land now underlying Northwestern University in any sense which a mod-

ern legal system would recognize. This is not to deny the moral claim of the tribes to an honest and fair consideration of their rights to land which they formerly used, and such claims have been, and are, recognized by the United States government. That their recognition has been imperfect, contested, and sometimes ignored is simply to say that it is difficult to reconcile tribal practices with the way of life, including the laws, of a modern nation state. The interminable litigation over Indian land claims and water rights, and the various attempts to resolve these issues legislatively (such as the Indian Claims Commission) testify to the magnitude of the difficulty, as does the intractability of the Hopi-Navajo land dispute.

Kirsch briefly mentions many other examples of recent attempts to idealize Indian cultures, but one deserves at least a brief consideration here. In his 2022 study *Indigenous Continent*, Pekka Hämäläinen is at pains to contrast the ignorance and brutality of Europeans with the wisdom and goodness of North American Indians. He notes the pattern in both the Eastern Woodlands and the Southwest of population growth, increasing reliance on agriculture, monumental architecture, and circulation of exotic goods and materials. In the East, this trend reached its culmination in the city of Cahokia, with its hundreds of mounds, burials of important individuals with elaborate grave goods, and abundant evidence of human sacrifice.

All of this began to disappear around 1200–1300 AD, and the result was that

large areas of the Central Mississippi Valley and its tributaries were almost entirely abandoned. A similar disruption and abandonment was occurring in the American Southwest at almost the same time. Lest any racist Westerner regard this development as some sort of decline, crisis, or collapse, Hämäläinen lectures his readers as follows:

In North America, leaders were not autocrats commanding and coercing subjects. They were instead arbitrators and facilitators striving for consensus.

Kinship was the crucial adhesive that kept people and nations linked together. It would be a mistake to see this adaptation as some kind of a failure or aberration of civilization, as European newcomers almost invariably did. North American Indians had experimented with ranked societies and all-powerful spiritual leaders and had found them deficient and dangerous. They had opted for more horizontal, participatory, and egalitarian ways of being in the world—a communal ethos available to everyone who was capable of proper thoughts and deeds and willing to share their possessions. Their ideal society, according to Hämäläinen, was a boundless commonwealth that could be—at least in theory—extended to outsiders, infinitely.¹

This is a remarkable exposition of the supposed wisdom and insight which the author attributes to his favored people. Would anyone surveying the collapse of Roman power in western Europe claim that the Europeans had come to realize that the magnificence of Rome was bought at too high a price; that the temples, roads, and aqueducts did not justify the aggressive warfare and slavery that supported them; and that the emperors had become arbitrary

and overbearing, and needed to be replaced by rulers with a greater sympathy for the common people?

We know what happened, and it had little to do with the elevated sentiments that I have just recited. It is reasonable to say that with Roman power gone, its replacement by Germanic tribal and later feudal law, all the while that Roman culture and Christianity were held up as ideals, what resulted was a new set of combinations and syntheses, not foreseen or intended by anyone, which evolved into the modern Western world. Everything that we know of human behavior suggests that the Indians of North America were no more guided by preternatural wisdom than were the people of any other part of the world.

Jacobs's *After One Hundred Winters* is a glorious recitation of the themes that Kirsch summarizes. Jacobs is Professor of History and Director of the Center for Great Plains Studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Her thesis is that unless you are an Indian or a Native Alaskan, you are living on stolen land and benefitting from that theft perpetrated by previous generations of settlers. Jacobs does not define Indian or tell us how to recognize members of that racial category, a remarkable omission given the exalted status that she attributes to that race. Federal statutes and court decisions concerning Indians define them by descent from pre-Columbian populations, or by enrollment in a legally recognized tribe—but tribal enrollment and tribal recognition usually depend upon such descent. Given

the amount of racial admixture that has occurred in North America in the last five-hundred years, it seems likely that significant numbers of individuals who do not consider themselves Indian, and are not so considered by others, have some Indian ancestry.

In the best study of which I am aware, Katarzyna Bryc et al.² located individuals whose DNA had been sequenced and who self-identified as African American, Latino, or European American, and estimated their percentage of American Indian ancestry. Among African Americans, the average of such ancestry was approximately one percent, among Latinos approximately 18 to 19 percent, and among European Americans approximately 0.2 percent. However, these percentages varied significantly with location. Among self-reported European Americans, the figure was above 2 percent in most of the western United States and reached over 4 percent in three states.

Is someone whose ancestry is 5 percent Indian to be considered a settler? What about someone whose ancestry is 20 percent Indian? Moreover, is it not likely that many individuals whose chosen affiliation is Indian have significant European American or African American ancestry? Until recently, whether one's ancestry was or was not Indian had little importance except for tribal enrollment, which was left to the unfettered discretion of the tribal authorities. More recently, the right to enrollment has become controverted as the financial benefits from tribal member-

ship, such as income from casinos, have become considerable. Some individuals who do not even claim membership in a tribe practice what they claim to be native American religion and thereby assert the rights of Indians for certain purposes, such as use of peyote or possession of feathers of protected bird species. Shall such individuals be granted the legal immunities accorded to Indians?

The demographic history of North American Indians has become contentious, and not merely for scientific purposes. When authors such as Jacobs accuse settlers of genocide, demography matters. Certainly, American Indian populations were devastated by Old World diseases, but does this constitute genocide? No one, to my knowledge, has accused Central Asian peoples of genocide, although the evidence is strong that some of the plagues that swept the Middle East and Europe had their origin in that area. Jacobs recites, and properly condemns, instances where United States army or militia forces attacked peaceful Indians, massacred indiscriminately, and mutilated the bodies of their victims. Did not some Indians themselves commit such massacres and should they not also be condemned?

Apparently, Jacobs does not believe so, since she places any such "massacres" in quotation marks. A notable example of what she elides is presented by the Iroquois massacre of French farmers, traders, children, and housewives at La Chine on Montreal Island in 1689. Francis Parkman describes it as follows:

Concealed by the tempest and the darkness, fifteen hundred warriors landed at La Chine, and silently posted themselves about the houses of the sleeping settlers, then screeched the war-whoop, and began the most frightful massacre in Canadian history. The houses were burned, and men, women, and children indiscriminately butchered.

He [a French officer] ordered the troops to march. About a hundred armed inhabitants had joined them, and they moved together towards La Chine. Here they found the houses still burning, and the bodies of their inmates strewn among them or hanging from the stakes where they had been tortured.

At length most of them took to their canoes, and recrossed Lake St. Louis in a body, giving ninety yells to show that they had ninety prisoners in their clutches. This was not all; for the whole number carried off was more than a hundred and twenty, besides about two hundred who had the good fortune to be killed on the spot. As the Iroquois passed the forts, they shouted, "Onontio, you deceived us, and now we have deceived you."

Towards evening, they encamped on the farther side of the lake and began to torture and devour their prisoners. On that miserable night stupefied and speechless groups stood gazing from the strand of La Chine at the lights that gleamed along the distant shore of Châteaugay, where their friends, wives, parents, or children agonized in the fires of the Iroquois, and scenes were enacted of indescribable and nameless horror. The greater part of the prisoners were, however, reserved to be distributed among the towns of the confederacy, and there tortured for the diversion of the inhabitants.³

Such an account could hardly be published today among those who consider themselves enlightened, and it would certainly not get the author appointed professor of history at the Uni-

versity of Nebraska-Lincoln. Perhaps the best conclusion to be drawn from the sorry record of human cruelty to other humans is that it is recurrent and that no racial or ethnic group has a monopoly on cruelty.

Naturally Jacobs complains of the scientific study of American Indian skeletons and associated grave goods, demands their immediate and unconditional repatriation, and dismisses their scientific study as "desecration" and "pseudoscientific enterprise." Indeed, Jacobs seems to have no concept of the scientific study of human biology and its contribution to an objective history of North America. I mentioned the effect of introduced Old World diseases, which every observer has recognized, but the accounts from the written documents are generally brief and impressionistic, while the current oral histories favored by Jacobs are even more so. The study of North American Indian skeletons, both historic and prehistoric, when such study was possible, did much to help us understand the diagnosis and effect of the diseases, as well as other changes resulting from contact, such as changes in diet and industrial activities. See, for example, Larsen's study of skeletons from all races at various sites in North America.⁴ In Europe and other parts of the world where such research is not censored, both historic and prehistoric skeletons are studied with great benefit to our understanding of those populations.⁵

Jacobs's book is such a trove of dubious assertions that a mere review can-

not do justice to it. Describing the 1879 visit to the East by Suzette (of Omaha and Ponca ancestry), she states:

“When this reporter countered that Indians were more barbarous in war, Susette pointed out that white men taught Indians scalping—that it was first practiced in New England on the Penobscot Indians when the General Court of the Province of Massachusetts offered a bounty of forty pounds for every scalp of a male Indian and twenty pounds for that of a woman or child” (104-105).

This is such a timeworn claim of Indian activists that it is embarrassing to have to recite the problems with it. Jacobs praises Suzette’s campaign for the Indians, and there is no suggestion that she finds anything wrong with the statement just quoted. But the ethnohistoric evidence was thoroughly reviewed in three articles by James Axtell, who of course did not deny that colonial governments paid bounties for Indian scalps, but concluded that the Indian custom of scalping predated European contact.⁶ The archaeological evidence, which Indian activists work to suppress, clearly shows that the taking of trophies from human bodies was a well-established Indian practice before European contact.⁷ Moreover, in many North American tribes, the taking and displaying of scalps was an essential part of the war honors complex that was central to those tribes’ social life. See, for example, Alfred Bowers’s study of the Hidatsa.⁸ Not one of these works is cited by Jacobs. None of this

is to deny that European and colonial governments paid for Indian scalps or that European governments practiced judicial torture or brutal public executions on their own populations. These grim facts should be recognized and documented as objectively as possible but not ascribed only to a single race or ethnic group.

Jacobs is always on the hunt for negative stereotypes about Indians. In describing a white farmer’s donation of land to the Pawnee, she records the locals’ concerns as to how the land will be used, such as the presence of intoxicated Indians or the building of a casino, which she naturally dismisses as bigotry (276). But is there no problem with alcoholism on Indian reservations? If so, the tribal governments’ attempts to ban the sale of alcohol on the reservations, and even off them, are inexplicable. As for casinos, would not a casino destroy the attractiveness of a rural or small-town ambience, and perhaps bring elements not compatible with residential communities? These are the kinds of issues fiercely contested in town and village halls in front of zoning commissions throughout the American suburbs.

Are not Indian casinos legally favored to such an extent that it is very difficult for “settlers” to prevent their construction or to mitigate their effects? For a remarkably thorough study of one such occurrence (the Foxwoods casino in Connecticut), see Benedict’s *Without Reservation*.⁹ Moreover Indian casinos, because of the peculiar legal

status and immunities of the tribes, are virtually unregulated by even the most basic accounting and oversight that “settler” entities are subject to.¹⁰

Even if it is believed that contemporary North American civilization is built on dispossessing and oppressing native peoples, are there no benefits to those peoples from contact with settler civilization? Jacobs lists items that the settlers stole from the Indians: buffalo, grass, timber, coal, uranium, oil, natural gas, log houses, stoves, chairs, bedsteads, reapers, mowers, a flour mill, horses, and cattle (5-6, 82-83). Are not the structures and artifacts just mentioned the products of modern Western civilization, which the Indians learned to value, and in some cases to make, from their non-Indian neighbors? As for “natural resources,” they only become resources when someone discovers how to use them, and most of the utilization of the resources Jacobs cites were made possible by “settler” technology and invention, or greatly enlarged by them, to the benefit of both the settlers and the Indians. When Jacobs describes her favored people with their pickup trucks, jeans, T shirts, Pendleton blankets, and calico skirts, she shows no recognition that these items are the products of the settler civilization that she despises. In another context, such cross-cultural borrowings would be labeled “cultural appropriation,” and denounced as racist (2, 13).

I suspect that Ms. Jacobs and those of like mind would dismiss the objections I have just raised as mere factual

quibbles, and from their perspective they would be right. Her book, like the general campaign against settler colonialism, is not anthropology, history, or science, or an attempt to practice these disciplines. It is not scholarship in any form. It is ethnic romanticism, moral outrage, polemic, and a call for the sinful to confess and apologize for their sins, from one who confesses to being a sinner. It is noteworthy how often racial activists speak of slavery or racism as “America’s original sin.” While we do, in a sense, live in a secular age, the rhetoric of religion is never far off.

Ms. Jacobs’ proposed remedy for sin is “truth and reconciliation,” and here her indifference to evidence undermines her position. If truth is merely a “morally legible” past, in Kirsch’s phrase, it is difficult to see how she can logically object to the triumphalist rhetoric of nineteenth century historians, such as Parkman, who saw Indians mostly as impediments to progress, admirable perhaps for their courage and independence, but destined to melt away before the advance of civilization. Ms. Jacobs proposes to refute one question begging narrative, to which she objects, by replacing it with another one.

As for reconciliation, Jacobs’ accounts of her participation in many such encounters, involving both Indians and settlers, is valuable and instructive. As an account by a believer, it lacks objectivity and perspective, but its moral and emotional fervor is illuminating. Indeed, even for the outsider who does

not share her views, it is far and away the most valuable part of her book.

Part therapy, part confession of her ancestors' sins for which she is responsible (the sins of the fathers being visited upon the sons), part patronizing and an idealization of her native interlocutors' culture, part nostalgia for a lost way of life, it is a powerful set of attitudes, attractive to so many who have undergone a purportedly liberal education. Her discussion gives no hint of the complexities involved in actually realizing and administering a set of reparations such as she seeks, as manifested, for example, in the convolutions of Indian land claims and the endless litigation over them. Nor does it give an idea of the problems of fairness to those who are not members of the race to whom Jacobs grants such a moral superiority. That such a lack of understanding is apparently being taught to students at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln is a disheartening testament on our system of higher education.

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2. Katarzyna Bryc, et al., "The Genetic Ancestry of African Americans, Latinos, and European Americans across the United States," *The American Journal of Human Genetics* 96 (Jan. 8, 2015): 37 - 53.
3. Francis Parkman, *Count Frontenac and New France Under Louis XIV* (Little, Brown and Company 1898), 185 - 189.
4. Clark Spencer Larsen, *Skeletons in Our Closet: Revealing Our Past Through Bioarcheology* (Princeton University Press 2000).
5. Clark Spencer Larsen, *Bioarcheology: Interpreting Behavior from the Human Skeleton, Second edition* (Cambridge University Press 2015); Elizabeth Weiss, *Reading the Bones: Activity, Biology, and Culture* (University Press of Florida 2017).
6. James Axtell, *The European and the Indian: Essays in the Ethnohistory of Colonial North America* (Oxford University Press 1982), 16-35, 142-144, 207-241.
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8. Alfred W. Bowers, *Hidatsa Social and Ceremonial Organization, Smithsonian Institution Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 194* (U.S. Government Printing Office 1965).
9. Jeff Benedict, *Without Reservation: How a Controversial Indian Tribe Rose to Power and Built The World's Largest Casino* (HarperCollins Publishers 2001).
10. Donald Craig Mitchell, *Wampum: How Indians Tribes, The Mafia, and an Inattentive Congress Invented Indian Gaming and Created a \$28 Billion Gambling Empire* (The Overlook Press 2016).