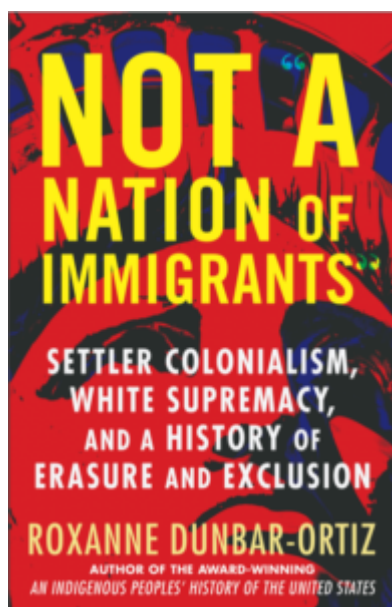
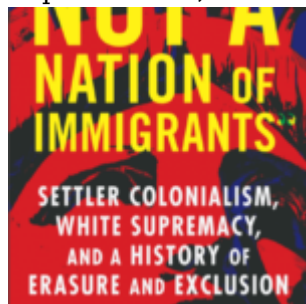


Settler Colonialism, Not a Nation of Immigrants

September 16, 2021



Review of Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *Not “A Nation of Immigrants”: Settler Colonialism, White Supremacy, and a History of Erasure and Exclusion*. Beacon Press, 2021. 392 pages.^[1]

You would be hard pressed to find anyone in mainstream society that would not say that the United States is a nation of immigrants. We are told this story about the US from day one. Though the view itself is well intentioned trying to show strength in diversity and multiculturalism, it continues to erase the true colonial history of the US.

The concept of a nation of immigrants was popularized by then senator John F. Kennedy in 1958 with his essay for the Anti-Defamation League entitled “A Nation of Immigrants.” Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz in her extremely accessible book *Not “A Nation of Immigrants”: Settler Colonialism, White Supremacy, and a History of Erasure and Exclusion* argues against this notion specifically examining US settler colonialism and the story of the struggles immigrants face in the US.

As Dunbar-Ortiz says the “book is a call for all those who have gone through the immigrant or refugee experience or are descendants of immigrants to acknowledge settler colonialism and the Americanization process that sucks them into complicity with white supremacy and erasure of the Indigenous peoples.”^[2]

This book comes out as schools are starting again. Throughout the summer we have seen the debate

over the teaching of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in the classroom, despite conservatives' lack of understanding of CRT. Twenty-eight states have introduced legislation, with eight of them passing legislation, that would make it illegal to fully discuss the role that racism, sexism and oppression has played in the US.^[3] Without a doubt CRT is the new red scare in schools and conservative's responses have been textbook McCarthyism. This book, like Dunbar-Ortiz's others, will be under fire.

The outcry about discussing race and oppression in classrooms did not come out of nowhere. It has been a backlash to this country's largest uprising following the murder of George Floyd, the anti-DAPL protest at Standing Rock, four year of the Trump administration and other resistance movements. Millions joined protests around the world and so many have started to critically examine US history. Historians like Dunbar-Ortiz and the late Howard Zinn have been targets since their scholarship has always gone against the unquestioned patriotic teachings in many schools.

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Not "A Nation of Immigrants" is a continuation of Dunbar-Ortiz's other books such as *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*^[4], *Loaded*^[5], *Roots of Resistance*^[6] and others. As I was reading the book I could feel the connectedness and how they are part of a people's history challenging national myths and demanding action. With all of her books Dunbar-Ortiz does not want one to simply know the history but take action. This book is a tool for activists to recruit people to the movement.

In the book Dunbar-Ortiz makes many arguments from unveiling the real history of Alexander Hamilton contrary to the popularized white washed musical *Hamilton* to the role that American exceptionalism has played in indoctrinating new immigrants. The main argument that runs through the entire book is the story of erasure in American myths, the most glaring being the erasure of Indigenous people and settler colonialism in US society.

Erasure and violence are behind myths such as "Nation of Immigrants" or "Western Expansion". Many activists and liberal pundits will point to Nixon, Reagan or Trump for advancing white nationalist ideas. But what Dunbar-Ortiz argues is that this is and has always been core to the US. At the beginning of the book she discusses how the US military was necessary and central to the US imperialist and capitalist project, not the idea of a nation of immigrants. She says,

The elephant in the room of immigration is the US military invasion and annexation of half of Mexican territory that spanned more than two decades, 1821 to 1848. During that same period, the eastern half of the United States was being ethnically cleansed with the forced removal of Native nations. White supremacy and settler-colonial violence are permanently embedded in US topography. The United States has a foundational problem of white nationalism that wasn't new with Nixon or Reagan or Trump.^[7]

Dunbar-Ortiz calls this the fiscal-military state, which she defines as a state that is built to make war. This is a hard argument to dispute as when the US became independent from Britain it desperately wanted to move further and further west demanding more land and resources.

After discussing Hamilton she focuses on the mechanics of settler colonialism and how by its very nature is genocidal. This is an important argument as this is the framework that she uses throughout the book. If you only look at the US as a nation of immigrants that is accepting of all people it erases the violence of settler colonialism. In today's discussions about multiculturalism and diversity Indigenous people are often simply thrown in as another minority rather than something systematically different in its relationship to the settler state. Dunbar-Ortiz pointed to the

shortcomings of multiculturalism saying it was,

the response to civil rights demands, which required revision of the US history narrative. For this scheme to work—and affirm US historical progress—Indigenous nations and communities had to be left out of the picture or somehow woven into the story. As territorially and treaty-based peoples in North America, they do not fit the grid of multiculturalism but were included by transforming them into an inchoate, oppressed racial group, while oppressed Mexican Americans and colonized Puerto Ricans were dissolved into another such group, variously called “Hispanic” or “Latino,” and more recently “Latinx.” The multicultural approach emphasized the “contributions” of oppressed groups and immigrants to the United States’ presumed greatness. Indigenous peoples were thus credited with contributing corn, beans, buckskin, log cabins, parkas, maple syrup, canoes, hundreds of place names, ecology, Thanksgiving, and even contributing to the US Constitution the concepts of democracy and federalism.^[8]

This argument is important as so many liberals and institutions see multiculturalism as a counter to the racism in our society. Multiculturalism without an examination of the roots of the US continues to perpetuate the erasure of Indigenous people and other colonized people.

The book also takes on that role that slavery and white supremacy played in the the development of the US. She uses the framework of racial capitalism which was popularized and theorized by historian and scholar Cedric Robinson. Robinson’s work such as his 1983 book *Black Marxism* has been republished as more and more people have started to see that in the US there can be no capitalism without racism. Robinson and Dunbar-Ortiz’s historical work challenge even the US left to deconstruct any leanings toward class reductionism in a society founded on a racial caste system and genocide.

In addition to the frameworks of settler colonialism and racial capitalism, she used the framework of continental imperialism to discuss the invasion of Mexico and the stealing of a third of their country with Anglo-Settlers being the foot soldiers for continental imperialist interest. She appropriately calls Lewis and Clark spies as they crept into Indigenous land to provide intelligence of how the US could militarily expand. Dunbar-Ortiz demonstrates how the US was always imperial, countering many historians who mark US imperialism at 1898 when the US gained the Philippines, Guam, Puerto Rico and in-directly Cuba as colonies following the Spanish-American War. She takes issues with historians using passive language

such as “manifest destiny” or “westward movement” or “expansion” in conceptualizing the invasion, conquest, and colonization of Indigenous nations across the continent, as well as the invasion and occupation of the Republic of México, as natural; not colonialism, not imperialism.^[9]

This shows the power of language, different images come to our head when we say expansion versus invasion.

Outside of the brutality of war and invasion Dunbar-Ortiz focuses on some of the ideological struggles and how some groups at different times have self-indigenized. This started around the 1820s when writers and the settlers from Appalachia were set up as if they were the original inhabitants of the region. In fact some writers even called them Indigenous with no mention of the actual Indigenous people of that region. This same practice happens today when you see the Bundy family in 2016 occupy the “Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in eastern Oregon, claiming it as their land, holding the refuge center and offices for forty days.”^[10]

Self-indigenization also happened to Columbus who never stepped foot on what is known as the US today but has since become viewed as the “founder” of the US. We have even seen this in the

southwest as those who are descendants of the Spanish colonizers cry indignity to the Anglo settlers. Dunbar-Ortiz of course goes into each of these cases in extreme detail but the point is that self-indigenization is a powerful ideological tool to convince people who should have no interest with the elite class to side with them on issues of nationalism.

The book also takes up Asian racism specifically geared towards the early Chinese immigrants that came to build the railroad. In fact the very first anti-immigrant legislation was the Chinese Exclusion act. Additionally she takes on the issues of refugees from all of the US war making abroad and the challenges faced by immigrants today and in the past, which is no surprise as we see what is unfolding after 20 years of occupation in Afghanistan and the debate over refugees. While other oppressed groups like the Irish and other European immigrants could eventually fit into a white supremacist society with redefining “white” over generations, immigrants of color did not have that benefit.

This is to say that even if one accepts the “Nation of Immigrants” ideology it says nothing about how anti-immigrant the US has always been. Even though the US is becoming less “white”, with a decrease in the white population for the first time in the 2020 census^[11], that doesn’t wash away the white settler ideology and myths this country is founded on that are deeply ingrained in all of us.

Discussion of settler colonialism has mostly been absent in mainstream society but is now becoming a conversation on the left. Historically the acceptance of settler colonialism on the left has made socialist organizations and others on the left weak. The US left has often just pointed to capitalism as the problem with a blind spots to colonialism and imperialism especially at home. Dunbar-Ortiz says, “The Eurocentric model of a proletarian revolution challenging, much less overcoming, the US fiscal-military capitalist and imperialist state has not and will not work. A revolutionary working class must be able to acknowledge its enemy and eschew not only capitalism but also colonialism and imperialism.”^[12] Unless the left does this there is no hope in a multi-racial working class revolution.

Like all of Dunbar-Ortiz’s books this is easy to read and will force you to confront whatever American myths you still believe. If you want to make the anti-CRT people go wild, pick up this book, read it, share it with your friends, do a study group, and get organized. If you are an educator like me you can go one step further and take the Pledge to Teach the Truth, which is a campaign organized by the Zinn Education Project.^[13]

Notes

^[1] <http://www.beacon.org/Not-A-Nation-of-Immigrants-P1641.aspx>

^[2] Page 281

^[3] <https://www.zinnedproject.org/news/pledge-to-teach-truth>

^[4] <https://isreview.org/issue/97/settler-colonialism-and-its-victims/>

^[5] <https://isreview.org/issue/109/roots-gun-violence-united-states/>

^[6] <https://www.oupres.com/books/9782425/roots-of-resistance>

^[7] Page XX

^[8] Page 270-271

^[9] Page 84

^[10] Page 47

^[11] <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2021/population-changes-nations-diversity.html>

^[12] Page 281

^[13] <https://www.zinnedproject.org/news/pledge-to-teach-truth>