

BOOK REVIEWS

Reframing the Settler: Reconstructing Black, Native, and White Histories in Indian Territory

Roberts, Alaina. *I've Been Here All the While: Black Freedom on Native Land*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021. 224 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8123-5303-0; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-5128-2472-8.

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Indigenous nations and descendants of Black slaves are rarely thought of as “settlers” in United States history. The term more commonly evokes images of the Mayflower or the Euro-American “Boomers” and “Sooners” who expropriated Indigenous lands in the Land Runs of the late 1800s. In *I've Been Here All the While: Black Freedom on Native Land*, historian Alaina E. Roberts boldly reframes traditional definitions of settler colonialism beyond the mere occupation of land through force by emphasizing a broader “transformation in thinking about and rhetorical justification of what it meant to reside in a place formerly occupied by someone else” (2). Rather than confining settler colonial processes to dominant Euro-American groups, Roberts explores how subjugated people also “served the goals of spatial occupation and white supremacy,” or the “dual nature of settler colonialism,” by claiming land, rewriting history, and pursuing federal intervention to reinforce their land rights (2).

Focusing on the post-Removal lands of the Five Tribes (the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Muscogee Creek, and Seminole Nations), Roberts forcefully asserts that the Native peoples coercively removed to Indian Territory, the formerly enslaved Black people forced across the Trail of Tears with them (whom Roberts terms “Indian freedpeople”), and Black American migrants to Indian Territory all practiced settler colonialism prior to Euro-American political dominance in the region. In a second central argument, Roberts expands the timeline of Reconstruction to 1907 (thirty years after the traditional end date of 1877), offering a critical historiographical intervention that marks the moment when Indian freedpeople received their Dawes land allotments and Oklahoma became a state. Roberts’s innovative study draws from her unique stakes and knowledge as a descendant of the Indigenous, Afro-Native, Black, and white Americans she investigates. Throughout the book, Roberts kneads in family histories of her ancestors and embraces her perspective as their descendant “to see how their freedoms and opportunities were begotten by impeding the freedoms and opportunities of others” (11).

In her first chapter, Roberts contends that the Five Tribes engaged in settler colonial processes to “stake a legitimate claim to Indian Territory land and foster a new sense of belonging” after being physically and spiritually “uprooted” during Removal (16, 29): they cast themselves as civilized, in opposition to the supposedly “wild Indians” indigenous to the area and the land they were in the process of “taming.” Roberts astutely argues that Native people “crafted new foundational narratives” by incorporating their oral histories, origin stories, and folktales into their understandings of their new environments and circumstances (13, 22), demonstrating how Native sovereign nations rationalized their presence in new lands externally to the United States federal government and internally among their own citizens through adaptive epistemological and traditional practices.

Chapter two argues that emancipation from enslavement, and the rhetorical strategies evoked by formerly enslaved people advocating for tribal civil rights thereafter, “converted” Indian freedpeople into settlers on their own nations’ lands (43, 53-56). Roberts combines Dawes application jackets (the documents and interviews that Indigenous applicants submitted when claiming their Dawes land allotments) with family histories and letters to government officials to demonstrate how Indian freedpeople fought for the rights to tribal citizenship, voting, education, and judicial processes guaranteed to them by the postbellum Treaties of 1866. Within this struggle, Roberts contends that Indian freedpeople’s rhetoric of superior industriousness, sustained contact with American institutions, and commitment to maintaining residency made them settlers on the lands in which they were previously enslaved. Throughout this chapter, Roberts graces the reader with precious family histories of her Afro-Chickasaw ancestors and provides much needed historical context around Chickasaw freedpeople’s creation of towns, schools, and communities. These additions show the complexities of Chickasaw freedpeople’s lives as stateless subjects in Indian Territory.

Chapters three and four explore what Roberts sees as the “concurrent” settlements of Black and white Americans who used the same paths to establish their own “racial paradise(s)” in Indian Territory (73-4). Roberts maintains that African-Americans who fled Jim Crow laws and white terrorism in the South by migrating to Indian Territory were settlers on Native lands. She contends that Black Americans engaged in settler colonial rhetoric in an attempt to “demonstrate their desire to be a part of the American citizenry and in their efforts to garner governmental assistance in realizing their dreams of landownership and upward mobility” as they fled Southern violence (73). In the final chapter, Roberts argues that white Americans were the final “wave” of settlers in Indian Territory and that in their settler colonial process, they “used the American government [...] to sanction their settlement in Indian Territory, their theft of Indian and Black land, their corporatization of the region, and their violence against Black and Native peoples” (97). She points to the Tulsa Race Massacre as a large-scale representation of the violent reaction to Black wealth in Oklahoma.

Amid the upheaval of forced removals and enslavement, how did Black, Afro-Indigenous, and Indigenous people create meaning on new lands? While remaining attuned to the complicated, intertwined, and traumatic histories of enslavement, racist violence, and forced removal, Roberts daringly contends that these subjugated groups reconstituted community in Indian Territory by becoming settlers themselves. Roberts’s argument about the instrumentation of settler colonialism may be controversial, but it is also an important contribution to the field of Indigenous history. At the same time, further study is warranted. For example, future examinations around the applicability of the settler colonial label might explore how clear-cut and consistent Roberts’s identified waves of settler colonialism actually were on the ground, as the separate groups of defined

settlers had extended contact with each other and varying relationships to the federal government throughout the period she scrutinizes.

With a concise narrative interwoven with Roberts's family stories, *I've Been Here All the While* is accessible to academics as well as those engaging in genealogy, public history, and community-based knowledge-making. It provokes members of invested communities—descendants, historians, Indigenous activists—to ponder how and whether self-advocacy and rhetorical strategies contribute to settler colonialism amid larger contexts of coercion, enslavement, and violence.

Making A White Man's West

Deutsch, Sarah. *Making a Modern U.S. West: The Contested Terrain of a Region and Its Borders, 1898-1940*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2022. x + 640 pp. \$50.00 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1-4962-2861-1.

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The “History of the American West Series,” conceived in the mid-1990s by editors at the University of Nebraska Press as a multivolume cycle overseen by the renowned historian Richard Etulain, has been an extraordinary success. Colin G. Calloway kicked things off with *One Vast Winter Count* (2003), a sweeping survey of the Native American West prior to the expedition of the Corps of Discovery. He passed the baton to Anne F. Hyde, whose *Empires, Nations, and Families* (2011) offered a bold reinterpretation of the region across the first half of the nineteenth century, focusing less on state formation and more on the intimate relations of human networks. Between them, these first two installments of the series amassed an impressive collection of academic hardware, including a pair of major awards from the OAH for Calloway and the Bancroft Prize for Hyde, who was also a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize.

Sarah Deutsch meets these lofty standards with her own contribution to the series, *Making a Modern U.S. West*. As with the best syntheses, Deutsch's book covers extensive terrain, from the Spanish-American War to the nationwide mobilization on the eve of American entry into World War II. But instead of simply unspooling the narrative in chronological fashion, Deutsch advances a provocative and compelling thesis, too. Namely, she argues that the era in question is best understood as a “contest over who could participate in the modern West, whose claims to that participation would be seen as legitimate, [and] whose identities could be fixed or erased” (8). The victors in that struggle, she concludes, belonged primarily to a single group, asserting that “these decades were the glory days of the white man's West” (452).