

12-21-2021

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Recommended Citation

Cohen, Judith B. (2021) "Book Review: *An Indigenous Peoples' History Of The United States*," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal*: Vol. 15: Iss. 3: 127–130.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.5038/1911-9933.15.3.1858>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/gsp/vol15/iss3/15>

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Book Review: *An Indigenous Peoples' History of The United States*

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An Indigenous Peoples' History of The United States

Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz

Boston, Beacon Press, 2015

297 Pages; Price: \$16.00 Paperback

Reviewed by Judith B. Cohen

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In *The Purpose of Education*, Martin Luther King Jr., wrote:

...Education must enable one to sit and weigh evidence, to discern the true from the false, the real from the unreal, and the facts from the fiction. The function of education, therefore, is to teach one to think intensely and critically.¹

King's words resonate when reading Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz's *An Indigenous Peoples' History of The United States* which documents the centuries long reluctance for Americans to confront the legacies of settler-colonialism. This thought-provoking book belongs in every classroom, library, and American home. It offers a carefully researched text that reframes hundreds of years of myths, lies, and the concept of American exceptionalism that our educational institutions and culture have embraced and accepted. Dunbar-Ortiz provides a new understanding of the truth that nearly three million people descend from the fifteen million Native peoples who once inhabited America have experienced extreme violence, exploitation, dispossession, and devastation. Dunbar-Ortiz's impetus for writing her book was to create a springboard to dialogue about history, the present reality of Indigenous peoples' experience and the meaning and future of the United States itself.²

It has only been within the last ten years that it has become possible to discuss Native American genocides as *hidden genocides* due to widespread denial that the Indigenous peoples' experiences amounted to genocide.³ Anthropologists of previous generations defended genocidal encounters with Native Americans.⁴ More recently, historians and sociologists have reframed the narrative of western expansion clearing the path for a concrete study of the

¹ Martin Luther King Jr., "The Purpose of Education," in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr. Volume I: Called to Serve, January 1929–June 1951*, eds. Clayborne Carson et al. (Stanford: University of California Press, 1992), 123–124.

² Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of The United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015), xiii.

³ Chris Mato Nunca, "Historical Amnesia: 'The Hidden Genocide' and Destruction of the Indigenous Peoples of the United States," in *Hidden Genocides: Power, Knowledge, Memory*, eds. Alexander Laban Hinton et al. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 96–108; Douglas Irvin-Erickson et al., "Introduction: Hidden Genocides: Power, Knowledge, Memory," in *Hidden Genocides: Power, Knowledge, Memory*, eds. Alexander Laban Hinton et al. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 1–20.

⁴ Alexander Laban Hinton, "The Dark Side of Modernity: Towards an Anthropology of Genocide," in *Annihilating Difference: The Anthropology of Genocide*, ed. Alexander Laban Hinton (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 1–42; David Mayberry-Lewis, "A New World Dilemma: The Indian Question in the Americas," *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 46, no. 7 (1993), 44–59.

treatment of Native Americans as *genocide*.⁵ This was followed by a rediscovery of the importance of Native American case studies to be linked to Raphaël Lemkin's conceptualization of genocide.⁶ Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz's masterfully written *An Indigenous Peoples' History of The United States* must be included in the body of genocide canonical scholarship. She provides the United Nations' Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide's definition of genocide adopted in 1948, "which notably did not become applicable to U.S. Indigenous peoples until the U.S. Senate ratified it in 1988."⁷ Through this lens she provides clear evidence of the genocide of the Native Indians.

Dunbar-Ortiz's contribution is her revised periodization of U.S. history. Rather than starting with the Colonial and Revolutionary periods, she begins with (and follows) the Indigenous experience. Her shift provides an innovative baseline for American history and effectively reframes *traditional* American history to recount the Indigenous experience that was "subjected to colonization, dispossession, settler colonialism, and genocide."⁸ Dunbar-Ortiz takes the reader on a chronological journey that exposes the pervasive myths, stereotypes, injustices, policies, ordinances, and legislation that led to genocide along with the whitewashing of American history that has become entrenched in the traditional narrative of American schools, and embraced by U.S. politicians, and the public. The author meticulously interweaves American folklore, literature, music, monuments, inscriptions, and the media that have reinforced the myths so that they "still persist, not for a lack of free speech or knowledge, but rather for an absence of motivation to ask questions that challenge scripted narrative's core of the origin story, with the key question being, how might acknowledging the reality of U.S. history work to transform society."⁹

The author structures the book into eleven thematic and mostly chronological chapters while juxtaposing the Native Indian's narrative against that of the conventual, and she proceeds to substantiate that the United States' foundations are based upon settler-colonialism that, "as an institution or system, requires violence to attain its goals."¹⁰ The journey is at once dynamic, enlightening, and sobering. By the book's conclusion, the reader is better equipped to compare and contrast both narratives.

Dunbar-Ortiz immediately draws in the reader by challenging the myth of American multiculturalism symbolized by Woody Guthrie's classic, "This Land Is Your Land," against the harsh reality of manifest destiny for the white Anglo population.¹¹ She dismantles the myth of Europeans encountering a vast wilderness of primitive and savage people, gifting her reader with the description of a highly complex, unique, spiritual, and advanced agrarian civilization that existed for thousands of years prior to Columbus' claim to discovering a *New World*. She traces the deep roots and foundations of white supremacy and genocidal colonization to the Crusades' religious zealotry, the racial purity laws of the Inquisition, and the emergence of European land privatization that resulted in the peasant class's self-righteous quests for taking *free lands*, gold, and abundant natural resources abroad. She disputes scholarship claiming the

⁵ Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonassohn, *The History and Sociology of Genocide* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Annette James, ed., *The State of Native American Genocide, Colonization and Resistance* (Boston: South End Press, 1992); David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1995); and David E. Stannard, *American Holocaust: Columbus and the Conquest of the New World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

⁶ Douglas Irvin-Erikson, *Raphaël Lemkin and the Concept of Genocide* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017); and Michael Bryant, "Canaries in the Mineshaft of American Democracy: North American Settler Genocide in the Thought of Raphael Lemkin," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal* 14, no.1 (2020) 5.

⁷ Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of The United States*.

⁸ *Ibid.*, xiii.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

termination of Indigenous peoples was primarily from contracted disease,¹² and examines the religiosity underlying revered American documents, pledges and oaths, calling this cult-like adherence *an anomaly* originating from Ulster Scots' Calvinist notions of divine exceptionality that served to justify the conquest and domination of those *destined* to inherent dark skin.¹³ She dispels the myth of a *natural* territorial expansionism describing policies sanctioning the unlimited brutal warfare that "destroyed Indigenous villages and fields causing starvation, the killing of unarmed civilians."¹⁴ Expansion was not merely battles against random individuals but an intentional destruction of a national group. Dunbar-Ortiz's description of the genocidal roles of the founding fathers and settler rangers, as well as the Native Indian resistance after British withdrawal, is eye-opening. She defines Jackson's life as a *career of genocide*, exploring the Trail of Tears where sixteen thousand Cherokees were forced from their land with half perishing. In criticizing the glorification of Jackson and his militia, she contends that Jackson set a dangerous precedent for future presidents. She magnifies the pernicious continuation of manifest destiny throughout the Southwest and into California, highlighting the overt racism of Walt Whitman's support for the U.S. war against Mexico in 1846. Throughout the book, Dunbar-Ortiz demonstrates how famous poets and writers such as Whitman, Poe, Longfellow, Thoreau, Hawthorne, and Melville reinforced the consensual narrative throughout popular culture.¹⁵ Dunbar-Ortiz goes on to describe the resistance and devastation of the Indigenous people prior to and after the Civil War, the subsequent slaughter of the buffalo, broken treaties, massacres, and enslavement that weakened and displaced thousands of Indigenous peoples to pathetic reservations. Her account of Wounded Knee and the resistant Ghost Dance movement is poignant and haunting. She takes the reader to the present, focusing on U.S. corporate capitalism, industrialization, militarism, and economic self-interests that necessitate warfare and continues to mirror the historical treatment of Native Indians.¹⁶ She highlights modern Native Indian leadership and the idea that *survivoance* is an *active presence* that enables the continuance of Indian narratives and supports present movements for Indigenous reparations, sovereignty and self-determination.¹⁷ She concludes with a call to acknowledge the past, take responsibility, and move towards repairing an ailing world.

Dunbar-Ortiz's eleven chapters provide overwhelming evidence for the charge of genocide against the Indigenous peoples. Each chapter is simultaneously riveting, heartbreaking, and enlightening. While difficult to isolate a single most compelling chapter, Chapter One, *Follow The Corn*, exquisitely personifies "the magnitude of what was lost to all humanity."¹⁸ Dunbar-Ortiz helps the reader appreciate the rich tapestry of life and culture that preceded Columbus when land and harmony were regarded as most sacred. This is germane as we now confront a planet polluted and in crisis, a fractured global, and a militarized community that already has the capacity to annihilate all life with the push of a button. Her call for us to partner with Native Americans who can provide the wisdom and tools for us to learn how to regard the *other* as equal while becoming *stewards of the earth* before it is too late is well-timed.

An Indigenous Peoples' History of The United States' is readable and accessible although it would have benefitted from demographic maps, charts, and timelines which would add clarity for visual learners. Dunbar-Ortiz's work can be adapted for elementary and middle school students and should be required reading for high school and college students. It should be a staple for book clubs and included in the canon of Genocide Studies. White supremacy and racism in the United States undermine the ability to actualize our noble

¹² *Ibid.*, 32–36.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 130.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 162.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 217.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

proclamations of freedom, equality, and justice for all, and Martin Luther King Jr.'s *Purpose of Education* continues to resonate. Our future for a diverse, inclusive and equitable society depends upon our ability to analyze and question, like morally sensitive scientists, antiquated narratives and biases. Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz's *An Indigenous Peoples' History of The United States* is most certainly an essential tool to realize these vital goals.