

BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

Christensen, Julia. *No Home in a Homeland: Indigenous Peoples and Homelessness in the Canadian North.* Vancouver: UBC Press, 2017, pp. 290, \$34.95, paper, (9780774833950).

Canada as a nation has, supposedly, entered the era of truth and reconciliation with respect to its relationship with Indigenous Peoples of this land. Many believe that a critical element on this path is a detailed documentation of Canada's colonial past and present, in the hopes that it will bring about a greater acknowledgement of the far-reaching damage that colonization continues to inflict, and with the ultimate goal of providing insights into how reconciliation should be approached. Given this setting, geographer Julia Christensen's *No Home in a Homeland* is a timely contribution to this body of knowledge. Christensen provides an insightful and comprehensive ethnographic account of how Indigenous homelessness in the Canadian North—a phenomenon that first became visible in the 1990's—has taken shape. She seeks to contextualize homelessness in Canada's Northwest Territories by connecting history, policy, and social exclusion to present-day geographies of homelessness. She encourages readers to rethink how we conceptualize homelessness, emphasizing place-based understandings that take cultural, historical, and economic factors into consideration. Christensen ultimately puts forth a well-written volume that will be of great value to those personally and professionally invested in this topic.

There are many strengths to this work. First, this book contributes to the ongoing conversation about how the concepts of 'home' and 'homelessness' are defined in a northern Indigenous context, and makes important connections to the role that trauma plays in these definitions. Impactful academic work on the topic of Indigenous homelessness should seek to elaborate, rethink, and expand upon these concepts, as they are increasingly recognized to be deeply tied to both place and culture, and have generally been excluded from the very government policies that have the capacity to improve the material realities of Indigenous people and communities. Christensen accomplishes this by expanding on these concepts. 'Home,' she claims, needs to be understood through the lens of individual agency, and therefore, must account for how people make and seek home through employing strategies of mobility and resistance—a

process she refers to as “homemaking.” The concept of ‘home’ must also incorporate Indigenous cosmologies that view home as situated within nature, other living things, and the spiritual world. This sense of interconnectedness was first disrupted with colonialism. Therefore, to address Indigenous homelessness, Christensen suggests that the very concept of ‘home’ must undergo a process of decolonization in order to incorporate Indigenous worldviews that position ‘home’ as a spiritual, relational, and emotional concept that is often tied to mobility across the land. With this perspective, one’s sense of ‘home’ can be seen to represent *a sense of belonging*, not a singular, fixed location. Through this, she considers the profound sense of home loss and feelings of ‘rootlessness’ that many Indigenous individuals experience from their early years, stemming from being forcefully removed from their birth families and placed into residential schools or into the child welfare system. The deep traumas that emerged from these processes, considered alongside collective Indigenous experiences of dispossession, detachment, and assimilation result in spiritual homelessness—a term not captured or acknowledged by current Canadian policy.

Second, this book details how contemporary policies fail Indigenous people. At times, these policies are paternalistic and at other times, outright neglectful. Christensen is careful not to characterize northern Indigenous homelessness as simply the fallout of a legacy of colonialism or solely the result of housing inadequacies, which remains a reality in many northern communities. Rather, she highlights the failures of contemporary policies that see a disproportionate number of Indigenous people’s lives entangled in state institutions that reproduce relationships of dependency and do little to address the complexities of intergenerational trauma. For example, Christensen notes how a number of Canadian policies deliver a double punishment for some Indigenous people, which she argues further traumatizes Indigenous families. For example, she illustrates how child apprehension into foster care can jeopardize parents’ qualification for public housing, thereby contributing to homelessness. But she also provides a deeper analysis, demonstrating how socio-economic and emotional factors are intertwined as she documents how families who are already devastated by the loss of their children are further traumatized by losing their homes. Christensen thus highlights a critical policy gap by unmasking how Canadian policies effectively abandon families in crisis, all the while offering little to support family reunification.

Third, Christensen’s work makes notable contributions to the discussion of neoliberalism and allows us to consider its failings within an Indigenous context. Although the author does not state an intention to

contribute to the theoretical discussion on neoliberalism, the ethnographic material nonetheless provides a glimpse into the neoliberal logics of northern, Indigenous, and housing policy realms, thus prompting their reconsideration. Neoliberal government policy—associated with welfare state retrenchment (including social housing) and an individualistic emphasis on realizing autonomy and fulfilment within the free market—has interacted with the historical legacies of colonialism to create a homelessness crisis for Indigenous communities in the Canadian north. Christensen accurately points out that a culture of welfare dependency is a central fear of neoliberal ideology, and this fear—crystallized through discourse—has become a prevalent theme in Indigenous social policy. Perhaps this is most apparent in the moralistically-toned “productive choices” program, which provides income support and housing to individuals who engage in (neoliberal) productivity and submit to regular monitoring. Christensen points out that adhering to such a program does not necessarily guarantee an exit from homelessness, but more predictably sustains relationships of domination and dependency. This process of perpetuating neoliberal welfare colonialism through ideology and policy seems to be lost on the majority of policy makers, program administrators, and politicians, and ironically sets the stage for the so-called dependency it seeks to eliminate. Christensen’s work reveals this central paradox of neoliberalism as it contributes to reproducing geographies of northern homelessness.

Fourth, the book’s emphasis on solutions is another strength, which is particularly commendable given the detailed historical and ethnographic accounts offered on this issue. Christensen acknowledges that the patchwork approach to addressing Indigenous homelessness in the north is neither culturally specific nor historically sensitive. She points to the severe lack of mental health resources and Indigenous-focused trauma programming in the territory, coupled with the limited availability of other resources (e.g., supportive housing) that would serve as crucial supports to facilitate an exit from homelessness.

Current policy and programs often fail to address the social determinants of health (e.g., poverty, colonialism, gender) that both cause and sustain chronic homelessness for Indigenous people in the north.

I have two minor criticisms of this book, which I invite others to address in their own work. Christensen ultimately advocates for a decolonization of discourse and policy as they relate to the social and structural causes of Indigenous homelessness. This, she claims, necessitates an acknowledgment of the “real damage of colonialism and policy paternalism and addressing their legacies together through meaningful social and structural change” (220). But this assertion, although correct, is vague

and leaves one wishing for more elaboration. Further, Christensen advocates for approaches that build on strength and resilience to alleviate homelessness, and early on suggests that the effects of colonialism can be countered by promoting Indigenous cultures as a source of strength and “as a positive resource” (36). This could be interpreted as essentializing, as healing paths are unique for every individual, and not every Indigenous person needs or wants to embrace culture on their path of healing. Positioning ‘culture’ as the answer to any problem is a slippery slope, and some have argued that similar conclusions may place an additional burden on communities. The author’s suggestion here is not incorrect but rather initiates a different conversation about what healing and reconciliation will mean for Indigenous people in Canada, and how regional histories and economies can be meaningfully incorporated into these processes.

Ultimately, Christensen’s work is much-needed call to action for a variety of stakeholders, and is one that prompts a rethinking of taken-for-granted concepts embedded in Canadian policy and history.

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