
When in autumn 2020 Sipekne’katik fishers set their lobster traps, they were harassed and threatened by white fishers. Their traps were destroyed, they were shot at with flares, their boats set adrift and blocked in dangerous manoeuvres on open sea. An Indigenous-owned fish factory was burnt by arson. The events at the Atlantic coast in St. Mary’s Bay, Nova Scotia are just one of many disputes in Indigenous-settler relations and illustrate ongoing settler colonialism, violence, systemic racism maintained by settlers and state institutions alike, and the ignorance of treaty rights of Indigenous people. In his empirical study of a small community in northwestern Ontario, Jeffrey Denis attempts to study these complex issues.

Jeffrey Denis is an Associate Professor of Sociology at McMaster University. “Canada at a Crossroads. Boundaries and Laissez-Faire Racism in Indigenous-Settler Relations” is an empirical study which draws from Denis’ PhD fieldwork in Fort Frances, a small town of some 7,000 residents in northwestern Ontario at the border to Minnesota. Fort Frances is an economic and cultural hub of the Rainy River District in Treaty 3 territory. What makes the town an ideal setting for Denis’ study is the near absence of non-European immigration which means that there are only two main ethnic groups represented in the town: Indigenous (Anishinaabe, Métis) and white people.

Denis remarks that “surprisingly little recent research has been conducted on Indigenous-settler relations in small town-Canada”. While this is true for sociological works, various historians have considered Indigenous-settler relations in Treaty 3 territory. For example, Travis Hay who collaborated with researchers from different disciplines, among them a sociologist, looks at how food insecurity disproportionally affects Indigenous people.


indigenous residents in Sioux Lookout. Next to talking circles, they used surveys in their research which is also among the methods Denis used. In “Dammed: The Politics of Loss and Survival in Anishinaabe Territory” Brittany Luby shows how hydroelectric generating stations in the Lake of the Woods Area were beneficial for settler populations and harmful for Indigenous communities. She combines oral testimony, interviews and archival sources but relies on textual sources only to “supplement oral testimonies”. Scott Rutherford links Indigenous peoples’ resistance against discrimination and dispossession in the 1960s and 1970s in Kenora to decolonial struggles worldwide. He uses a range of archival sources such as government records as well as Indigenous-produced print media and pamphlets. Hay’s and Luby’s approaches follow a similar methodology as Denis while Rutherford seems to employ more classical historiographical methods by focussing on archival records. Denis only uses a few archival records such as court cases and treaty documents and mainly secondary sources to tell “A Brief History of Indigenous-Settler Relations in the Rainy River District” in chapter 1, stating that “a more detailed history [...] would be another project in itself” (313). These historical works not only stand in relation to Denis’ work but complement the study of Indigenous-settler relations in Treaty 3 territory.

Jeffrey Denis aims to study the social psychological underpinnings of racism and colonialism. While this is a mainly qualitative sociological study relying on interviews, and participant observation, his approach is deeply informed by a historical perspective and can be situated at the intersection of how legacies and realities of settler colonialism reproduce racism. How do all these abstract concepts and bigger issues play out on an interpersonal level? What are the implications of settler colonial histories in small-town-Canada?

The ten chapters each have a short conclusion at their end which points out the essence of every chapter and makes it easy for readers to skim the book if one wishes to focus only on certain chapters. The book has extensive endnotes and a rich bibliography which allows one to explore relevant further readings. In addition, it was much appreciated that the book has an index which facilitates searching for certain keywords throughout the book. Moreover, the book is complemented with maps of the Rainy River district and tables which allow for replicability as they show the coding and analyzing methods Denis used to examine the collected data.

According to Denis, one can only explain current group positions and racism by look-

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ing at the history of colonization and anticolonial resistance, specifically, how residents “reproduce or challenge historically rooted structural inequities and racist ideologies” (33). History is crucial to understanding nowadays legacies of settler colonialism and why injustices persist. Denis describes the history of Indigenous settler-relations from signing Treaty 3 in 1873 up to today, as a shift in balance of power. Since the end of the seventeenth century fur trade was conducted by settlers and Indigenous peoples in what is currently known as the Rainy River district. There was a continuous influx of more and more settlers in the subsequent years and roads were constructed through the region. After tense negotiations, Treaty 3 was signed in 1873 between representatives of the Crown and the Anishinaabe. It stated that the Anishinaabe surrender their lands and move to reserves, while receiving annuities, hunting and fishing rights. Interpretations of the treaty are differing and the conflict about different understandings of the treaty has never been resolved. In 1891 settlers became the major population group in the Rainy River district while the Anishinaabe suffered from smallpox and influenza epidemics. In the emerging settler economy Anishinaabe people were disadvantaged and it was forbidden for them to sell agricultural products to settlers which had been a lucrative income for them before. In 1920, it became mandatory for Anishinaabe parents to send their children to residential schools; the local residential school was only closed in 1974. Under the subtitle “Turning Tides: Indigenous Resurgence, Settler Uncertainty, and (Renewed) Group Threat” Denis describes how since the 1970s Indigenous people experience better social and economic conditions as white residents face economic decline. This results in a new perception of group threat by white residents and might reverse the historical trend of a power shift from Indigenous people to settlers (38–54).

Four key concepts of Denis’ analysis are: laissez-faire racism, Indigenous-settler relations, boundaries and bridges. The concept of laissez-faire racism was initially developed to explain attitudes of white people towards African Americans in the post-civil rights era in the U.S. Denis applies this concept to Indigenous-settler relations and looks at “probabilistic [...] stereotyping of Indigenous people” (9). While laissez-faire racism and Indigenous-settler relations as the underlying conditions of boundaries and bridges, are prevalent throughout the book, Denis dedicates specific chapters to the concepts of boundaries and bridges. He resumes that “[o]verall, I found more consensus about what brings Indigenous and non-Indigenous people together than about what divides them” (29).

Boundaries are the subject of chapter three, four and to some extent five as well. To empirically trace boundaries, Denis looks at the group positions of Indigenous and white residents and examines sources of tension or division between these two groups. Sociologically, boundaries are produced and continuously reproduced by active “boundary work and group positioning” (85). Socially constructed boundaries between two groups result into us/them distinctions. What is often described as a boundary by settlers and Indigenous interviewees alike are treaties. Different rights for Indigenous peoples granted in
treaties are perceived as “unfair” as well as certain tax exemption and services for Indigenous peoples provided by the federal government. On the other side, Indigenous peoples fault that treaties are not honoured and criticize the widespread ignorance by settlers for treaty rights. Moreover, questions of land rights are a major source for division. Many Indigenous and settler interviewees agree that the government established boundaries in Indigenous-settler relations through laws and regulation. According to Denis, settlers also do not know why treaty rights exist and how treaties allow settlers to enjoy the privilege of living in Canada with their own laws and government (91). However, there are also settlers who are aware of the (historical) boundaries between them and Indigenous peoples and how their homesteading relatives benefitted from the appropriation of Cree, Assiniboine and Métis lands.

Next to treaties, Denis observes “history as a source of intergroup division” (93). This is of course related to violent colonization, residential schools, removal and theft of lands and resources. Treaties are a very visible historic legacy as they continue to rule Indigenous-settler relations and are the legal basis for the coexistence of these groups in what is currently known as Canada. Another boundary is paternalism, and that white people claim to know what is best for Indigenous people (125–126).

Bridges are the matter in chapter six, seven and eight. Denis develops the concept of bridges as a metaphor to contrast boundaries. He defines bridges as something that brings Indigenous and white people together and can enable cooperation. One of the bridges mentioned by half of the interviewees—Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike—is education. “For some whites, education was a means to ‘help’ Indigenous people succeed in mainstream Canada [...]” (235). On the contrary, for many Indigenous people education was a way for all residents to understand each other better and to foster understanding of Indigenous histories, cultures and treaties. However, Denis found that even post-secondary education does not remove underlying presumptions and actions that perpetuate settler colonial structures. This underlines the relevance of history classes in school curricular and the responsibility of history teachers as outlined by Crystal Fraser and Allyson Stevenson who stress the responsibility and relevance of the discipline of history and teachers “in light of both past and present colonial and genocidal policies”.

Overall, Denis finds that Indigenous-settler relations are improving in Fort Frances and observes a change in the power balance between Indigenous peoples and settlers. This shift in group positions towards more power and opportunities for Indigenous peoples and declining living standards of settlers, might jeopardize Denis’ notion of improvement. As he observes in passing, the result of this power shift will likely result to white residents perceiving Indigenous peoples as a threat towards their privileges which could reinforce racism. In this case laissez-faire racism in Rainy River and so forth.

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could transform to more severe forms of hate or violence akin to the attacks of Mi’kmaw fishers in St. Mary’s Bay. This can be extended to all of North America how subtle and often unnoticed violence in everyday Indigenous-settler interactions can turn into overt violence.

As a reader one gets a lively and empirically informed impression of what Jeffrey Denis means by laissez-faire racism, boundaries and bridges. The reader gets the opportunity to accompany Denis to Fort Frances and learn about oftentimes abstract issues and their historical roots. He uses vivid, everyday language which makes his book easy to follow also for a non-academic audience. For future studies it is of course desirable that they will also be conducted by Indigenous researchers—both in their own communities, but also as outsiders such as Jeffrey Denis in Fort Frances.

While settler colonial theory often comes around as an abstract theoretical concept, Denis manages to show how settler colonialism is a structuring force in a small Canadian town. Next to historical roots of settler colonial structures, settler colonialism is also a structuring and always adapting force of the present. Furthermore, as settler colonial theory in general, his work provides important insights for historians on understanding how past, present and future are connected. How do historical legacies play out in settler colonial settings and how do concepts such as violence or frontier look like in present day Indigenous-settler interactions? Studies such as “Canada at a Crossroads” are an excellent opportunity to think about historiographic methods, consider new archives and community-based research; towards a discipline that goes beyond dusty archives and looks over the rim of the teacup to other disciplines. Sociologists tend to structure their work around concepts such as boundaries and bridges. Moreover, there is a different starting point compared to historical works. Denis looks at current social formations and social relations. For him history is but one variable affecting current social conditions (93). Settler colonial histories are necessarily interdisciplinary because of complex, persisting settler colonial structures and have resulted in fruitful interdisciplinary works from disciplines such as sociology, history and Indigenous Studies.

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