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Abstract

Making and Breaking Settler Space: Five Centuries of Colonization (“Making and Breaking Settler Space”) is a powerful piece published in the area of Indigenous studies and embodies a spatially focussed synthesis of settler colonial literature. The book offers an innovative account of the ways space, power, and identity are produced in settler colonial societies and identifies the cracks, flows, and failures that expose the fragility of the settler colonial assemblage. Adam J. Barker’s work provides theoretical and practical ideas on how to confront and dismantle the settler colonial project through these cracks, which ultimately becomes the text’s raison d’être.

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Book Review

Making and Breaking Settler Space: Five Centuries of Colonization in North America by Adam J. Barker

TRIPAT K. SANDHU

MAKING AND BREAKING SETTLER SPACE: Five Centuries of Colonization (“Making and Breaking Settler Space”) is a powerful piece published in the area of Indigenous studies and embodies a spatially focussed synthesis of settler colonial literature. The book offers an innovative account of the ways space, power, and identity are produced in settler colonial societies and identifies the cracks, flows, and failures that expose the fragility of the settler colonial assemblage. Adam J. Barker’s work provides theoretical and practical ideas on how to confront and dismantle the settler colonial project through these cracks, which ultimately becomes the text’s raison d’être. Barker, a settler Canadian from the territories of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe peoples, is an adjunct research professor in the School of Indigenous and Canadian Studies at Carleton University. Barker writes this book not only with an analysis of settlers and Indigenous peoples across Canada, but also embraces the concept of the “northern bloc” and assesses the nuances of these relations in the United States (“US”). Unlike other works in

1. (UBC Press, 2021), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59962/9780774865425> [Making and Breaking Settler Space].
2. JD Candidate (2024), Osgoode Hall Law School.
3. Making and Breaking Settler Space, supra note 1 at 9. The “northern bloc” refers to the Canadian and American settler colonial states and how these societies continue to pursue and profit from the end goals of settler colonialism.
the field, which are often contained to one geographical area or state, Barker’s northern bloc assessment becomes crucial to exposing the operation of settler colonialism without allowing the geographical separation of Canadian and American laws, policies, and communities to obscure deep entanglements of power and mutual complicity.

Making and Breaking Settler Space draws on various scholarly subdisciplines, including Indigenous studies and settler colonial theory, geographical theories, and social movement studies related to practices of decolonization. While the book is based around breaking oppression and achieving decolonization, Barker takes his analysis a step further by adopting a geographical and spatiality approach to explore how settler spaces have evolved, from Indigenous–settler contact until now, with an emphasis on relationships. This intentionally wide-ranging book conceptualizes the larger historical processes and spatial construction of settler colonial regimes, taking readers through a journey of examining and critiquing liberal, anti-capitalist social groups that often exclude Indigenous voices and sovereignty, and incorporating the “low theory approach” into its analysis. Readers, activists, and those pursuing Indigenous decolonization will come away from this book with resources to confront their own positionality and actions through a lens of Indigenous sovereignty and relationships to place.

Barker’s book compiles years of intellectual and scholarly attempts at theorizing how colonization works and identifying its connections to his own life experiences. As such, each chapter commences with a story from Barker’s personal life, unfolding to connect directly to the chapter’s core concepts. This technique serves as a strength, as readers are inevitably reflecting and making their own personal connections to Barker’s work. His narrative, which embodies humility as he holds himself accountable as a white suburban Ontario settler, reflects the strength of the technique described above. Having worked in the field of Indigenous studies since 2009 and having devoted years of educational

5. Making and Breaking Settler Space, supra note 1 at 17.
6. Ibid at 7.
7. Ibid at 17, 21-24, 202-203, 207-208. The low theory approach will be discussed below.
8. Ibid at 190.
pursuits to Indigenous governance, Barker confronts his positionality in what is one of my favourite passages:

I can intend to be decolonizing and even strive to decolonize, but I remain a settler colonial because I cannot extract myself from the institutions of privilege and flows of power that settler colonialism has and does situate around me. I cannot refuse my way out of settler colonial space.10

Clearly, Barker’s work is not just about studying the intricacies of settler colonialism through a geographical lens; he integrates intellectual analysis with lived experiences to confront settler colonialism as a settler person.

The book is divided into six chapters. The first chapter investigates the large-scale historical legacy of European imperialism and colonization in the northern settler bloc. This chapter visually maps fundamental ways in which European invasions of Turtle Island cascaded across the landscape with the facilitation of concepts like terra nullius.11 Moving away from the scale of international and intercontinental imperialism, chapter two dissects the way that settler colonizers claim and transform the land of Turtle Island, displace and erase Indigenous presence and histories, and build structures that root settler sense of self and belonging to those places.12 The third chapter shows how the settler colonial assemblage recruits bodies and materials and subsumes them into a homogenizing settler colonial landscape, with Barker looking beyond merely the state and capital—two commonly critiqued social constructs. Shifting away from high-level theories of state formation and capital production, chapter four critiques anti-capitalist social movements. Barker suggests that these movements leave settler colonization unaddressed and their leftist calls for racial and minority inclusion or multiculturalism subvert Indigenous demands for the return of land. Chapter four turns its analysis to the Occupy movement between 2008 and 2012. Barker writes in chapter five about his own failings in his efforts to be an activist and utilizes the low theory approach to describe how settlers can engage in

10. Ibid at 219 [emphasis in original].
11. Ibid at 38-39. See also Ken MacMillan, “Benign and Benevolent Conquest?: The Ideology of Elizabethan Atlantic Expansion Revisited” (2011) 9 Early Am Studies 32 at 61, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/eam.2011.0009>. The legal, European concept of terra nullius is that vacant land not occupied by a recognized or civilized nation can be claimed and colonized through the Doctrine of Discovery. Later, English law codified terra nullius, arguing that “improvements” on land, including the construction of mills, farms, and industry buildings, were the litmus test for terra nullius; since Indigenous peoples did not build the kinds of structures European economies had, their lands were free to be taken by anyone who would “improve” the land in accordance with Euro-American perceptions.
grounded, relational, and decolonial projects. The sixth and final chapter explores the possibility of Indigenous resurgence, the necessity of settler-to-settler engagement, and the centring of Indigenous systems of governance, ultimately building decolonial alliances that are transformative at both the individual and societal level.

While research has been done on settler colonial geographies in terms of resource extraction, geographies of radical activism, settler colonizers constructing worlds around the Pacific Rim, and the historical experience of settler colonization from Indigenous perspectives, geographical theories of settler colonization continue to remain underdeveloped. The work in this field is instrumental, but it focuses only on specific geographies or themes. Barker's work is therefore a significant contribution with respect to Indigenous peoples and settler colonialism in both Canada and the US.

To embark on this analysis, Barker shows how settlement colonies break from the metropole and become settler states in the northern bloc. He illustrates this process by providing visuals to help fathom, rather than just imagine, how settler colonialism spread through buildings, infrastructure, and transportation, slowly displacing Indigenous lands and governance. Despite areas such as (current) southern Ontario and upper New York State having British forts and

13. Ibid at 191, 194. Indigenous resurgence is the reassertion of Indigenous nationhood and cultures of place. This is a process of “reconnecting with homelands, cultural practices, and communities, and is centred on reclaiming, restoring, and regenerating homeland relationships.” See Jeff Corntassel & Cheryl Bryce, “Practicing Sustainable Self-Determination: Indigenous Approaches to Cultural Restoration and Revitalization” (2012) 18 Brown J of World Affairs 151 at 153.


18. Making and Breaking Settler Space, supra note 1 at 8.

19. Ibid at 61.

20. Ibid at 57, 60.
settlements prior to the American Revolution, Barker describes how these areas were controlled by Indigenous groups, with the Haudenosaunee playing key economic and political roles.\textsuperscript{21} However, the development of roads and networks reoriented this space, promoting colonial mobility and allowing for the material spread of settlements along transportation infrastructures that overlapped with Indigenous sovereign territory. This ultimately put pressure on local resources and prompted violence on Indigenous lands.\textsuperscript{22} Though readers, such as myself, may be unfamiliar with this geographical concept of spatialities, Barker engages, explains, and simplifies how settler colonialism encroachment occurred through the exploitation of space. Further entanglements of law and order work together with occupation to subsume Indigenous spaces. Assimilatory pressures, such as bringing in newcomers to comply with the settler colonial system of usurpation and assimilation, are also used to displace Indigenous economies.\textsuperscript{23}

Barker’s argument pivots from the trajectory of settler colonialism to its operation in contemporary contexts by investigating the persistence of settler colonialism in anti-capitalist, anti-racist, and other leftist political spaces. There is a clear and significant difference between Indigenous-led movements for decolonization and settler-dominated anti-capitalist and anti-racist movements.\textsuperscript{24} Movements, such as the Occupy movement in 2011, challenged the forces of neoliberal capitalism and the security state. However, as scholar and activist Aziz Choudry concludes, capitalism, gentrification, and globalization are not the sole or direct cause of Indigenous dispossession.\textsuperscript{25} No matter how challenging to elite and financial institutions, Occupy reinforced settler colonialism and posed a threat to Indigenous sovereignty, as it failed to ally itself with Indigenous communities from its commencement, was led by educated, economically secure white students and activists,\textsuperscript{26} and was riddled with colonial sentiments. An Occupy poster declared Wall Street to be Algonquin land, when it is in fact on Lenape land.\textsuperscript{27} The assumption that leftist movements are equivalent to anti-colonialism is far from the truth; Barker ensures that readers come to terms with the idea that contemporary movements can and do reinforce settler

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\textsuperscript{21} Ibid at 56.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid at 61.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid at 120-22.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid at 150.
\textsuperscript{26} Making and Breaking Settler Space, supra note 1 at 156.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid at 157.
This analysis is a fundamental stepping stone for Barker’s argument as he segues into discussing how “no social movement...can be decolonizing if it does not start with an implicit focus on restoring and defending Indigenous connections to people and places”—perhaps at the expense of settler geographies of the northern bloc.29

Barker’s argument is elevated with the innovative and practical idea of “uncertain edges” and how we can utilize these exposed cracks of settler colonialism through the low theory approach. There are uncertain edges in relation to where the settler colonial assemblage ends. Indigenous peoples continue to survive and contest colonialisms across Turtle Island. Put eloquently by Barker himself, the settler project is ongoing and not yet total, “[a]nd since it is not total, there are spaces that do not conform to settler colonial structures—spaces that exist between settler colonialism and Indigeneity.”30 It is here, “where colonial logic does not overwhelmingly structure social space,” that Indigenous resurgence picks at and utilizes these uncertain edges.31

Taking a provocative approach powered by gender theorist Jack Halberstam’s “low theory” of failure,32 Barker builds off Halberstam’s concept of investigating the “failures” of queer folks to live up to society’s standards and status quo.33 This theory attempts to envision the paradoxical possibility that “success is actually found in failing.”34 Halberstam urges people to purposefully embrace failure, challenging the anticipated outcomes dictated by hegemonic power structures.35 Likewise, Barker advocates to frequently seek to do the wrong thing—to do “things that seem to our settler colonial sensibilities to be utter failings of our social projects.”36 Failure, in this sense, is the willful act of being bad at being settler colonizers and also being open to failing in our efforts towards decolonization. Barker is at his most innovative here as he reflects on his own failings, such as the time he assumed he knew enough about an Indigenous community to speak up on an issue and got it wrong very publicly, or the time he unknowingly marginalized Indigenous women in the group for whom he

28. Ibid at 161.
29. Ibid at 184.
30. Ibid at 190-91.
31. Ibid at 191.
33. Making and Breaking Settler Space, supra note 1 at 17, 21-24, 207.
34. Ibid at 22.
35. Ibid at 207.
36. Ibid.
was conducting anti-racism advocacy work.\(^37\) For Barker, without these failures, he could not have learned how to do otherwise; to him, these were productive failures. He had to fail again and again to learn how to succeed—something he asserts he has yet to achieve.\(^38\) As an example, practicing Barker’s low theory of failure would mean openly and publicly questioning the narratives and myths of nationalism, multiculturalism, and prosperity attached to the northern bloc, even if it means failing to participate in polite society and failing to hold peace with friends and family.\(^39\) It would mean not conforming to the expectations of being obedient employees who remain silent in the face of casual expressions of workplace colonialism and racism, even at the expense of workplace efficiency.\(^40\) Ultimately, similar to Barker’s failings, settler individuals must explore how to collaborate “in solidarity with Indigenous movements through an ethic of radical experimentation,” which means failure or many failures on the way to success and into transformation.\(^41\)

Barker’s low theory of failure does raise critique: Should personal failings towards decolonization be hurtful and disrespectful, for example, there is a possibility that Indigenous peoples will refuse to ally with settlers who fail repeatedly. However, Barker reminds us that our experimentations must follow the lead of and add to Indigenous resurgence movements in such a way as to ensure that the failure of our solidarity efforts will not be a deciding factor in the larger efforts of Indigenous communities.\(^42\) Our failures need to be expected and planned for in ways that do not undermine the efforts of Indigenous communities whom we are seeking to support. As Barker puts it: “[W]e must make attempts, however ultimately hesitant or wrong-headed they may be, to build new communal relationships, to accept responsibility as a minimum standard, and to seek out and attend to relationships rooted in accountability.”\(^43\)

Within 250 pages, Barker conceptualizes the larger and historical processes of settler colonialism, examines and critiques social movements that neglect Indigenous sovereignty, and unpacks the innovative and convincing low theory of failure. Most imperatively, Barker’s work testifies not only to his comprehensive understanding of settler colonialism and Indigenous studies, but to his ability to be a self-acknowledged settler writing with humility and vulnerability. This

\(^{37}\) *Ibid* at 188.  
\(^{38}\) *Ibid* at 203.  
\(^{39}\) *Ibid* at 208.  
\(^{40}\) *Ibid*.  
\(^{41}\) *Ibid* at 217-18.  
\(^{42}\) *Ibid*.  
\(^{43}\) *Ibid* at 219 [emphasis in original].
self-awareness is inspiring to readers and pushes us to think about the ways we may be adding to Indigenous displacement. *Making and Breaking Settler Space* is a thought-provoking piece that will greatly benefit activists, students, scholars, and those concerned with Indigenous decolonization. It leaves us with this question:

How do settlers relate to each other and to place as decolonizing people?...It is a question that asks a great deal of settler people. It is a question that settler people must try to answer without ever being sure that there is an answer at all and despite knowing that settler people fear few things more than illegitimacy in place.44

44. *Ibid* at 250.