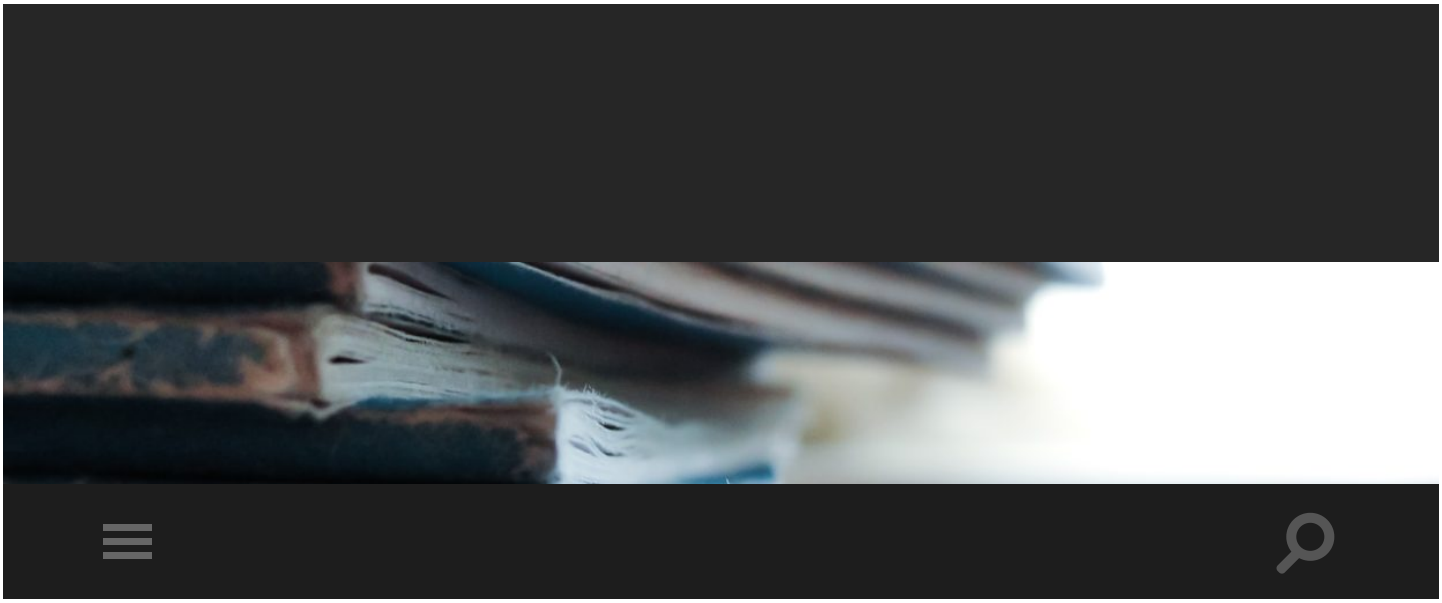
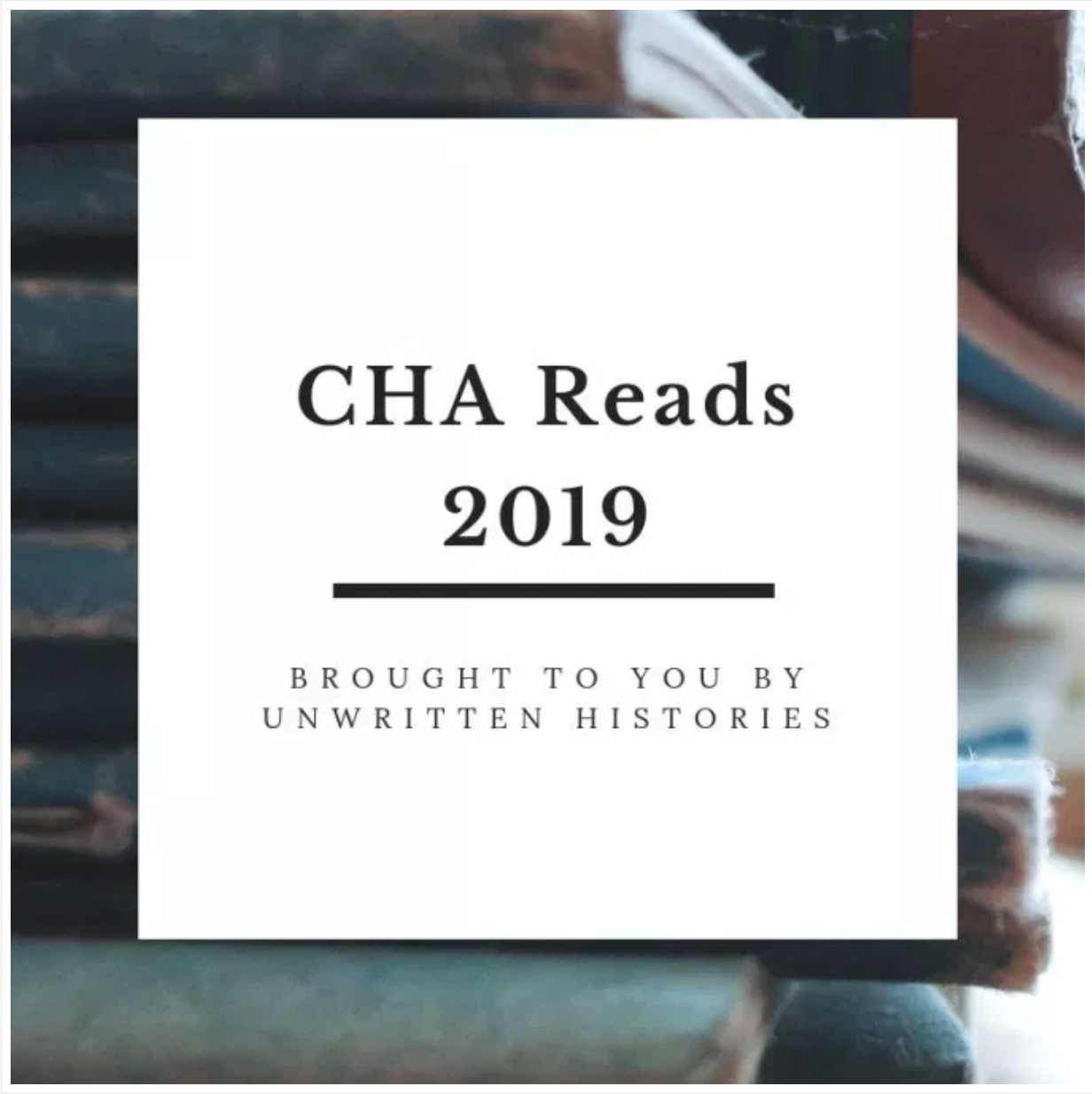


CHA Reads 2019 – Emma Battell Lowman and Adam Barker on Le Piège de la Liberté: Les peuples autochtones dans l'engrenage des régimes coloniaux

MAY 30, 2019 / ANDREA EIDINGER / 0 COMMENTS



Emma Battell Lowman and Adam Barker defend Denys Delâge and Jean-Philippe Warren's *Le Piège de la liberté: Les peuples autochtones dans l'engrenage des régimes coloniaux*

I don't know about you, but it's not often I read a book cover to cover these days. Though I'm always reading, that kind of sustained engagement tends to elude me – whether because of the time pressures of academic work or because mental health challenges can make reading at length uncomfortable and difficult. So, I'm grateful to Andrea for organizing of CHA Reads 2019for helping me prioritize such a pleasurable task as reading a good book I might otherwise not have picked up. And make no mistake, it's absolutely worth picking up Denys Delâge & Jean-Philippe Warren's 2017 *Le Piège de la Liberté: Les peuples autochtones dans l'engrenage des régimes coloniaux*.

Approaching its core questions from a solid grounding in historical sociology, *Le Piège de la Liberté* explores how modernity constituted a trap for Indigenous peoples of the northeastern region of Turtle Island. Using examples from across peoples including the Abénaki, Algonquin, Atikamekw, Cree, Malecite, Huron-Wendat, Innu, Micmac, Mohawkand Naskapi, the authors seek to investigate how a new normative configuration was transplanted from France's Ancièn Regime and developed under British conquest, and how the associated types and structures of power were institutionalised and came to disrupt all elements of Indigenous lifeways with devastating results. The book's intellectual terrain is excitingly large: temporally, it spans the 16thto 20thcenturies; spatially, it is focussed in the north-eastern quadrant but pulls in examples from all over the North American continent; and, intellectually, it engages sociological and anthropological classics primarily of the mid-20thcentury, historical primary sources, and some elements from spatial and political theories. At its core, the book is an argument for the necessity of analysing the cultural conquest of Indigenous peoples by EuroCanadian societies in order to understand how and why Indigenous peoples today face such devastating and complex legacies of colonisation. It calls for this to be seen as more than just the result of warfare or microbes, but rather the result of the forceful imposition an entire intellectual and cultural paradigm rooted in Enlightenment liberalism.

The book is organized into seven chapters plus a concise introduction (available free at: https://www.editionsboreal.qc.ca/catalogue/livres/n-piege-liberte-2583.html) and conclusion. The study begins with consideration of how freedom was conceptualised and practiced in Indigenous societies of the region, with specific attention to the importance of exchange, the sources of chiefly power, and conceptions of right and wrong. Then the authors consider the other side of the 'clash of cultures' and turn attention to the operation and sources of power in the French Ancièn Regime and how these differed from those they encountered in what became Nouvelle France. The body of the book investigates freedom constructed through and limited by the various terrains in which it manifested under French, then British, colonialism. The chapters focussing on commerce, property and work (4, 5, 6) are particularly engaging as they deal with how Indigenous societies were re-formed at every level through pervasive and invasive forms of knowledge and reorientation of political and economic systems backed up by administrative and coercive imperial power. The differences between French and British colonisation and imperialism are drawn out with useful and detail and well-contextualised. This

nuanced attention to not just how (in practice) but *why* these imperial forms differed significantly enriches understandings of this dynamic historical period.

Le Piège de la Liberté pulls no punches when it comes to identifying the "collision" of Indigenous and EuroCanadian peoples as one of inconceivable brutality. What the authors identify as in need of attention is the ways that invading peoples sought to entice, coerce, and force Indigenous individuals and groups into the "powerful universe of the modern economic order." In the name of "progress" and "civilization", the authors assert that Indigenous peoples' relationship to the world and each other was forever altered and seek to reposition this history within larger frameworks of regimes of domination.

A "Clash of Cultures"

Delâge and Warren begin their introduction framing the colonisation of north-eastern North America as 'un choc de cultures'. Their attention to (and prioritisation of) what I would translate as a 'clash of cultures' model of engagement between Europeans and "Amerindians" prompted some serious reflection. To be sure, differences of belief and practice while diverse on both sides certainly coalesced around place-centric, temporally circular Indigenous ontologies and spatially stretched, temporally linear European ontologies, as Vine Deloria, Jr. established in the 1970s.[i] That difference, though, was and is not absolute – there has been a great deal of interchange, learning, métissage, and even cooperation between Europeans (and settlers) and Indigenous people, as the authors identify. Yet, all the same, this division persists through history which is why so many scholars from so many fields have worked to try and understand it.

One major revolution in the way this has been approached is frequently cited to Patrick Wolfe and the publication in 1999 of *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology*,[ii] in which Wolfe meticulously detailed the ways that settler society of Australia imposed their particular views of Indigenous peoples – views differing from those of European forbearers or contemporaries, generally far more dismissive, violent, and apocalyptic – onto not just Indigenous people, but intellectual studies of those people. In essence, as settler colonialism became predominant in Australia, there is not a clash of two cultures, but (at least) three distinct groups: Indigenous cultures, European cultures, and the emergent Settler order. This Settler order demands the authority to define who is Indigenous,

what that means, and how those people should be understood, and exports these views from the settler colony back to the metropole. Wolfe's analysis has been built on since (including being taken up by an emergent but robust sub-discipline of Indigenous studies), and in addition to accounting for the differences between metropole and settler colonials, current understandings also work to account for 'exogenous Others,' people who are of neither the direct colonising society, or the Indigenous societies resisting colonisation. Ultimately, the shift that Delâge and Warren are identifying here is not just a shift in intellectual and cultural perceptions of the world – the importation of modernity, in short – but a shift that is enabled by the establishment of permanent, self-perpetuating settler colonies in the Americas. Given the energetic uptake of settler colonial analyses and critiques in Canada, it was surprising to me that this received no attention in the book – whether to make use of, critique, or dismiss such understandings.

Modernity and Marxism

Settler colonialism must be understood not just as a product of liberalism and modernity, but actually a foundational part of these concepts and cultural practices. Here it should also be mentioned that 'modernity' is itself not monolithic. Those familiar with the work of the respected postcolonial sociologist, Gurminder K. Bhambra, will already be familiar with her analysis of 'multiple modernities' – that the elements of modernity did not simply originate in Europe and then diffuse through the world (even if through European imperialism), but rather emerged in many places independently and at different times.[iii] The bipolar concept of the monolithic, modern 'European empire' in conflict with a rough grouping of Indigenous nations as suggested by the authors, misses the divisions, overlaps, and boundary points between Indigenous and non-Indigenous (and between European and Settler, and so on).[iv] My reading did not pick up on a definition of modernity provided by the authors which made following their arguments on this subject challenging, and modernity was constructed as singular with no discursive space for the existence or emergence of Indigenous modernities. There may well be an argument for why this direction was adopted by the authors and if so, discussion of this would have helped guide the reader more effectively into the analysis and discussions they present.

Le Piège de la Liberté draws on Marxist structural analyses, particularly in discussions about liberty and property regimes. One of the most important interventions in this area of study is, of course, Glen Coulthard's *Red Skin, White Masks*.[v]He argues that colonialism is "a form of structured dispossession" that is deeply entangled with capitalism.[vi]However, while Coulthard argues that Marxist structural analysis remains relevant to understanding the oppression of Indigenous people under capitalist modernity in Canada, he does so with a caveat. Coulthard recognizes that Marxist analyses tend towards the teleological, a critique equally applicable to many structural analyses, as the poststructural turn made clear. As such, Coulthard argues that a modified version of Marxist analysis is required and that the capital relation needs to be replaced with the colonial relation – that is, we should take as our "analytical frame the subject position of the colonized vis-à-vis *colonial dispossession*" rather than from the assumed-universal subject of proletarian struggle.[vii]The authors' approach to Marxist analyses in their study does not explicitly engage colonial analyses (or Coulthard's important intervention), and as such their comparisons between peasantry in Europe and Indigenous peoples in Nouvelle France (and later) risk slippage – even tacitly – into problematic equivocation.

On Sources

Historians are likely to chafe at the relative lack of critical attention to sources and what for our discipline would appear to be a lack of citations for key arguments and evidence. The authors stipulate in the introduction that their study seeks to make use of/construct 'ideal' types, not to produce a detailed ethnography of specific histories. This is consistent with a historical sociology approach but reconstructs overly-generalised and abstracted portraits of historical Indigenous people that for me harken back to Wendy Wickwire's critique of the Boasian archive.[viii] The authors make an effort to include voices of Indigenous individuals, but this is frequently done through early missionary writings, and as someone who has worked with missionary histories for a decade, I would have expected to see more critical engagement with this genre (and rich associated historiography) and attention to how missionary sources represented Indigenous voices to serve their own ends and how this must inform our reading and use of such sources. Further, much of the historical writing on Indigenous peoples from which examples and evidence are drawn are from the 20thcentury, and as such the book has not

benefitted from the important work being done this century to challenge implicit colonial constructions in our discipline and work to understand Indigenous peoples on their own terms and through today's increasingly-abundant Indigenous historical scholarship. For example, the discussion of Indigenous peoples' engagement in wage labour drew on examples from Bruce Trigger but missed John Lutz's important work on moditional economies.[ix] My reading (somewhat complicated by the lack of a bibliography) failed to identify a significant proportion of Indigenous scholars represented in the book's citations. As well, there are a number of excellent histories of Indigenous people from the Northeast of Turtle Island available that could have been referenced. To begin, a recent trio of works on the Haudenosaunee Confederacy – and specifically, the community located on the Grand River in what is currently called Ontario – have been published, all authored by Haudenosaunee scholars, and all presenting different aspects of the clashes between the Confederacy and colonial agents and settlers. These works – Rick Monture's *We Share Our Matters*,[x] Theresa McCarthy's *In Divided Unity*,[xi] and Susan Hill's *The Clay We are Made Of***[xii]**– all begin with detailed Haudenosaunee history prior to the imposition of colonial dispossession, and all finish with 20th or 21st century Haudenosaunee resistance. As the "Iroquois" are a group discussed frequently in the book, these works would have seemed relevant and useful. Other works that would have been similarly useful include Lynn Gehl's *The Truth That Wampum Tells*,[xiii] which reinterprets the meaning of the Treaty of Niagara through the perspective of the Algonquin people, and relates this history to contemporary struggles for land. Other, more orthodox histories, also contribute to this topic, including Jon Parmenter's *The Edge of the Woods*,**[xiv]** which shows how the Haudenosaunee adapted to the increasing presence of Europeans and settlers in their territories, while maintaining their core priorities and beliefs. However, given the reliance on anthropological and sociological works from the mid-20thcentury through the 1980s, *Le Piège de la Liberté* read to me as more as a 90s-era continuation of those efforts and rather than what I would recognize as 21st century Canadian scholarship informed by the reports of the RCAP (1996) and TRC (2015).

Why is this the book that the CHA should read?

My copy of *Le Piège de la Liberté* is covered in scrawled notes, so much so that my hands pick up and smudge the graphite of my pencils when I was thumbing through

its pages. Some of these interjections make no secret of the frustrations that arose for me as I read. I take this as a sign of how much the book provoked me to engage and fill in the gaps I identified, and to see this as a productive intellectual and affective achievement of the text. The scope of the book is broad, its goals lofty and it would be impossible to answer my every 'but what about?' without losing the argumentative focus of the work. Whether my perceived gaps in sources, interpretation, historical specificity, or the issues of language and terminology (decisions that seemed not to have engaged with the ways the terms and linguistic constructions we choose to use can perpetuate denigration of Indigenous peoples and promote settler colonial naturalisation and superiority – see for example Paige Raibmon's excellent discussion: https://thetyee.ca/Opinion/2018/09/28/Relations-Indigenous-Peoples-Europeans/), my engaged reading prompted me to be specific about the sources of my frustration, and about how I think they should have been addressed. Nonetheless, the ideas and arguments presented in *Le Piège de la Liberté* have certainly taken root, and no doubt I will return to these and the instructive approaches adopted by the authors in my own work.

Perhaps there is in this reading experience a reminder about the importance of interdisciplinary work: sociology, like history, has deep colonial roots but history of late has improved in terms of engaging with Indigenous critiques of knowledge production in our discipline. Although we have a long way to go, both our successes and failures have the potential to be instructive to those working in other disciplines and to help research improve more rapidly so as to contribute to the establishment of respectful, decolonizing relationships on these lands. Further, the CHA Reads provocation to read beyond my usual spheres and to reach into Francophone and Québécois scholarship has been incredibly useful. I have a much better sense now of my gaps in understanding fostered through my own lack of engagement beyond English-language and Anglophone research with historical and sociological scholarship about Indigenous-Settler histories. This is absolutely critical not only to robust historical understanding – to which this book has added significantly for me – but also to understanding current contentious issues around claims to indigeneity being asserted by 'eastern métis' communities (including Québécois folks claiming problematic connections to Indigenous heritage and belonging).[xv]

There is so much more I want to say about *Le Piège de la Liberté*, and I hope our Twitter discussions this week are a chance to continue the conversation I have hoped to contribute to in this too-short but probably too-long discussion. Delâge

and Warren's book has done a great deal to help me better understand how the society of which I am a part came to be on this continent, and the nuances of how French and British institutions and understandings transplanted to North America changed and developed here in relationship to efforts to claim Indigenous lands and wholly re-form (or remove) Indigenous peoples. It has reminded me how powerful it is to read challenging work, and to think critically but also, as much as possible, compassionately with authors – as I hope others may do with my work. Perhaps the greatest strength of *Le Piège de la Liberté* is that it explains in fine detail and with reference to political economies, institutions, knowledge production, faith, and discipline how the historical 'they' and contemporary 'we' colonised (and continue to colonise) on this continent. This book gives a strong introduction to understanding elements of north-eastern North American Indigenous peoples at a broad level and for those new to these learnings, this is critical reading. But it is how Delâge and Warren painstakingly reveal the detail of how colonisation was pursued through means direct and indirect, well-meaning and malicious, and by the powerful and the disenfranchised alike that makes this the book the CHA – and Canada – should read.

---

[i]Vine Deloria Jr, *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion*, Colorado: Fulcrum Publishing, 1972.

[ii]Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The politics and poetics of an ethnographic event*, London: Bloomsbury, 1999.

[iii]For a handy introduction to Bhambra's excellent work, see for example: Gurminder K. Bhambra, "The Possibilities of and For a Global Sociology: A poscolonial perspective," *Postcolonial Sociology, Political Power and Social Theory*, Volume 24, 295–314 (2013)

[iv]The authors do note that they are necessarily over-generalising regarding Indigenous people, which is fully understandable given the scope of the topic. My point here is not that generalization is a problem by definition, but rather that there are nuances on the colonial side of the equation that need engagement.

[v]Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*,Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014.

[vi]Coulthard, 2014, 7.

[vii]Coulthard, 2014, 11.

[viii]See for example: Wendy Wickwire, "Stories from the Margins: Toward a More Inclusive British Columbia Historiography," *The Journal of American Folklore*, Volume 118 (470), 453-474, 2005.

[ix]John Lutz, *Makúk: A New History of Aboriginal-White Relations*, Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008.

[x]Rick Monture, *We Share Our Matters: Two Centuries of Writing and Resistance at Six Nations of the Grand River*, Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2014.

[xi]Theresa McCarthy, *In Divided Unity: Haudenosaunee Reclamation at Grand River*, Phoenix: University of Arizona Press, 2016.

[xii]Susan Hill, *The Clay We are Made of: Haudenosaunee Land Tenure on the Grand River*, (University of Toronto Press, 2017.

[xiii]Lynn Gehl, *The Truth that Wampum Tells: My Debwewin on the Algonquin Land Claims Process*, Halifax: Fernwood Press, 2014.

[xiv]Jon Parmenter, *The Edge of the Woods: Iroquoia 1534-1701*, Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2014.

[xv]On this point, see the work of scholars such as Darryl Leroux and Adam Gaudry. For a good summary, see: Darryl Leroux and Adam Gaudry, "Becoming Indigenous: The rise of Eastern Métis in Canada," *The Conversation*, URL: http://theconversation.com/becoming-indigenous-the-rise-of-eastern-metis-in-canada-80794.

Emma Battell Lowman Adam Barker are Settler Canadians originally from the overlapping territories of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe, near Niagara Falls and Hamilton, Ontario. Emma is a Lecturer in the History of the Americas at the University of Hertfordshire, UK. Her work focuses on Indigenous-Settler histories in British Columbia, settler colonialism,

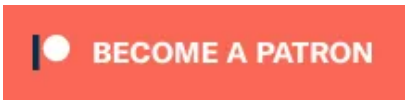
Indigenous resurgence, and decolonization in North America, and the history of crime and punishment in Britain. Emma holds a PhD in Sociology from the University of Warwick (UK) and an MA in History from the University of Victoria. Adam is a Lecturer in Human Geography at the University of Hertfordshire, UK. His work focuses on the production of settler colonial territoriality, space and identity, processes of social change, and contemporary anticolonial activism. Adam holds a PhD in Human Geography from the University of Leicester (UK) and an MA in Indigenous Governance from the University of Victoria. They are the co-authors of the 2015 book, *Settler: Identity and Colonialism in 21st Century Canada*, available from Fernwood Press.

Don't forget to check back tomorrow on Twitter at 1:00 pm PST/4:00 pm EST for our discussion, posted to the blog later in the day!

Don't forget to check out the other posts in the series:

- Series Introduction
- Dan Horner defending Valérie Lapointe-Gagnon's *Panser le Canada: Une histoire intellectuelle de la commission Laurendeau-Dunton*
- Mary-Ann Shantz defending Jean-François Lozier's *Flesh Reborn: The Saint Lawrence Valley Mission Settlements through the Seventeenth Century*
- Heather Green defending Shirley Tillotson's *Give and Take: The Citizen-Taxpayer and the Rise of Canadian Democracy*.
- Jessica DeWitt defending Joshua MacFayden's *Flax Americana: A History of the Fibre and Oil that Covered a Continent*
- Emma Battell Lowman defending Denys Delâge and Jean-Philippe Warren's *Le Piège de la liberté: Les peuples autochtones dans l'engrenage des régimes coloniaux*
- Social Media Discussion

Liked this post? Please take a second to support Unwritten Histories on Patreon!



Related

CHA Reads 2019 - Twitter Discussion
May 31, 2019
In "CHA Reads"

CHA Reads 2019: An Introduction
May 28, 2019
In "CHA Reads"

CHA Reads 2019 - Jessica DeWitt on Flax Americana: A History of the Fibre and Oil that Covered a Continent
May 30, 2019
In "CHA Reads"

CHA Reads

PREVIOUS POST
CHA Reads 2019 – Jessica DeWitt on Flax Americana: A History of the Fibre and Oil that Covered a Continent

NEXT POST
CHA Reads 2019 – Twitter Discussion

Leave a Reply

Your email address will not be published. Required fields are marked *

Comment

Name *

Email *

Website

Notify me of follow-up comments by email.

Notify me of new posts by email.

Post Comment

This site uses Akismet to reduce spam. Learn how your comment data is processed.