

Book Review

Unsettling the Commons: Social Movements Within, Against, and Beyond Settler Colonialism. By Craig Fortier. ARP Books, 2017. 100 pp.

Reviewed by Nicole Bauberger

I am sitting down most belatedly to review *Unsettling the Commons*. I wanted to review the book when I first read it in 2019. A few things have happened since. Nevertheless, the challenges that this book presents, as well as the ways that its world seems to differ from our situation in the Yukon, seem as relevant as ever.

Craig Fortier, Associate Professor in Social Development Studies at the University of Waterloo and himself a settler weaves together ideas and narrative in a readable way. He builds the book on fifty-one interviews with anti-authoritarian activists across North America. The way he has woven the voices of these other thinkers into the book reminds me of the dialogue chapters in books by American writers and activists bell hooks and Adrienne Maree Brown. It seems useful to me, as a thinker in one of the Norths, to experience writing shaped polyvocally this way.

Fortier begins the book with his “glitter-sparkled sweat” and we are swept up into a nighttime protest march, part of the 2012 Quebec student protests against tuition increases. Fortier and his friends joined their voices to the chants of “Whose streets? Our streets!” in both French and English. But who is “we”? Fortier interviewed Fred Burrill, a white settler, who recounted the push and pull within the movement between groups chanting “A qui le Québec? A nous le Québec!” and others chanting “A qui le Québec? Au Mohawk le Québec ou a les Algonquins le Québec!” (p. 12). It is possible to critique many anti-authoritarian protests, both in Fortier’s personal narrative and in the 2011 “Occupy Wall Street” movements, as a continuation of colonization in their reclamation of public space.. While reclaiming a commons from capitalism can feel empowering, how does that act actually play out in the history of colonization?

Chapter 2 explores “the long history of settler occupations of Manna-hata,” known today as Manhattan. We see how settler uses of a commons (grazing) were at odds with Indigenous uses (hunting, gathering medicine), and how the former pushed out the latter. Later chapters take us into interesting conversations

with activists working in immigration, gentrification, and other issues of human belonging and land.

These activists—for good, long-experienced reasons—do not believe that “statist” governments have any “intention of honouring treaties or respecting Indigenous sovereignty, and so it is incumbent upon social movement activists to ... begin the long process of reconciliation through accountability—not through apologies” (p. 84). In Fortier’s discussion of Kahnawà:ke Mohawk activist and scholar Taiaiake Alfred’s work, he reflects that “most participants within the anti-authoritarian current see the settler state as incapable of contracting authentic relationships of respect, accountability and responsibility” (p. 86). As I read this, I could understand the despair. And yet, as a writer of settler heritage here in the territories of the Kwanlin Dün First Nation and the Ta’an Kwäch’än Council, however, I cannot follow that trail. The modern treaties that I see as negotiating my ability to make my home here draw from the courageous Yukon Indigenous leaders who brought the historic document *Together Today for Our Children Tomorrow* to Ottawa in 1973. If Indigenous people in the Yukon still hope enough to negotiate with the Canadian and Yukon governments, I must follow their lead—and do my part to help hold those governments accountable when necessary.

As Fortier considers what “unsettling” might look like, he suggests as one possible starting point that we “accept the partiality of knowledge.” He quotes University of Victoria scholar Sarah Hunt / Tłaliłila’ogwa’s idea that “the relational, fluid and emergent nature of knowledge means that if we try to fix meaning to the process of unsettling, we are always at risk of missing out on the emergent knowledges and lessons that come from engaging in the act of decolonization itself” (p. 90). As Yukon University, with thirteen campuses throughout the territory, recently changed its identity from Yukon College, it may be uniquely placed to remember that all knowledges are local.

I was grateful to encounter the idea of the “undercommons,” which Fortier cites from the work of Americans Stefano Harney and Fred Moten: “the idea that the changes we are seeking will come not from one grand monolithic movement, but rather from small, diverse, and widespread attempts to live outside the dominant logics of our time” (p. 104). This concept made me differently value some of the things I have done and continue to do. It makes change accessible, whether or not large organizational structures bear it up.

It is difficult to live outside the dominant logics of our time without identifying them first. Fortier cites Yellowknives Dene scholar Glen Coulthard, referring to an ongoing history of “rounds of enclosures” that is still taking place (p. 33). For myself, while I engage ideas of the commons in my art practice, I find my understanding of the history, even of the European-derived ways we approach authority over land, to be undereducated. I am inspired that the Whitehorse

non-profit organization Northern Community Land Trust is using a different understanding of home ownership to create ongoing affordable housing in the new neighbourhood of Whistle Bend. **European-derived concepts of land ownership** have come into power comparatively recently here in the Yukon. If we **unpack their histories**, maybe there are changes we can make. In the meantime, what opportunities are there to make small and diverse gestures towards an unsettled commons in our lives today? Fortier’s book introduces us to a community of activists living this question.

For thinkers in the Yukon, meeting these activists with Fortier can support a sense of a wider community that seeks change and inhabits complexities as it engages with this hard work. We are not alone.

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