

***The Iconic North: Cultural Constructions of Aboriginal Life in Postwar Canada.* By Joan Sangster. University of British Columbia Press, 2016. 391 pages.**

Reviewed by Natalie B. Pendergast

The term “iconic” when used in the context of a single person or brand often refers to a widely recognized and appreciated monolith that defines or epitomizes *classically* that which it represents. “Iconic” simultaneously carries the connotation of the visual. Like the symbol, the icon is a sign used in communication; but unlike symbols, which include arbitrarily-appointed letters, numbers, and words, icons bear a likeness to the objects of their reference: think cartoons. With respect to the North, however, Joan Sangster queers the word “iconic” to discuss all that is, indeed, (in) famous about Aboriginal life in postwar Canada, and, more importantly, how and why that whitewashed imaginary has been used by settlers and southerners to politically construct identity markers of entire First Nations and their peoples.

Early on in her 2016 academic book, Sangster effectively removes concerns that her writing might be part of the problem by narrowing her research focus: *The Iconic North* does not contribute to current Aboriginal constructs, but rather to the ongoing critical analysis of those constructs. Even when European descendants in Canada *try to be nice* to Indigenous peoples, they often establish or perpetuate damaging images of them as primitive, naïve, childlike—e.g., the noble savage. Sangster asserts that Canada is tantamount to a colonial project around which territoriality, domination, and asymmetric power relations orbit tightly.

Much of the cultural *fabula* that make up iconic ideas of postwar indigeneity stem not so discreetly from the ongoing and aggressive procurement of the Western frontier, and what the benefits—occupying these Indigenous peoples’ homelands and possessing their resources—

would mean for the White-dominated Canadian government during the Cold War. *The Iconic North* explores what human sacrifices were made in order to bolster state power; and it furthermore asks: how does the government reconcile with or empower those who experienced and continue to experience exploitation, loss, and denigration? Sangster also, importantly, shows that the cultural constructions of Aboriginal life she critiques are part of a bigger ideology.

As a scholar, Sangster stands out for her industrious and resourceful investigation into not only the social and sociological effects of cultural constructs of Indigenous life, but also for her often decidedly humanities-driven approach to addressing and explaining the trauma caused to Indigenous peoples by Canada's take-no-prisoners quest for sovereignty. The empirically-measured, physical relocation of the first peoples of the land now known as Canada, she underscores, is no more factual than cultural marginalization that involves concepts, narratives, assimilation, appropriation, and erasure. The relationship between hard historical evidence and human testimony may be understudied, but Sangster includes both, carefully pointing out that her deconstruction of essentialist tropes is not necessarily meant to expunge Indigenous peoples' identities of all distinction from the White majority. She also provides profound close readings and discursive analyses of her primary sources. The heart of this humanities methodology is how the state and its cultural products narratively sculpt identity along a spectrum of humanized to dehumanized in order to rationalize political action and the pursuit of power. Her work demonstrates that the personal cannot be deemed separate from the political nor vice versa.

Woven in to her analysis of Indigenous stereotypes is an intersectional feminist critique. Within the northern imaginary is absent-minded misogyny, which Sangster examines with utmost aplomb. The adherence to the patriarchal family may as well have been public policy for the settler-colonial nation-state in pre-war times. In the 1950s and thereafter, a new version of white femininity supplanted the vulnerable female domestic: the feminist who viewed herself as equal to any man. Three of Sangster's six chapters and most of the conclusion are on the topic of women, particularly discussions of the kinship, family, and community roles, as well as perceived and real poverty of Indigenous women framed by White women, popular Canadian media (written and visual), travel writing, and

ethnographic discourse. Many times it is, nevertheless, women groups like the Royal Commission on the Status of Women that are more sensitive to the needs of Indigenous women and the harm imposed on them by state-sanctioned initiatives and media.

The other chapters that make up *The Iconic North* offer case studies on *The Beaver*, a nationalist magazine endorsed by the Hudson's Bay Company (renamed *Canada's History* in 2010); National Film Board films; and *RCMP*, a television show that juxtaposes White and Indigenous masculinities. Though the overall impact, i.e., general reception, of these media is unclear, Sangster provides an exhaustive exploration into their content citing both image and text for her readers' reference. Through her reading, she provides clues from these case studies to support her argument that White settlers often mistakenly assumed the absence of education, justice, and economy among Indigenous traditions. Moreover, these readings provide answers to what types of media prefigured contemporary prejudice and stereotypes surrounding the first peoples of the North.

This book is an important contribution to studies of cultural theory, revisionist history, postmodernism, Canada, and feminism. Sangster provides new knowledge concerning both the specific meetings of colonizers with northern Indigenous peoples—that continue long after initial European contact—and the general field of postcolonial studies. By unpacking the essentializing grand narratives that form settler and southerner ideas of Indigenous peoples in a writing style that is accessible, she also equips Europeans, their Canadian descendants, newcomers, and migrant workers with heightened self-awareness when experiencing the North and meeting the Indigenous peoples for whom it is home. Sangster also promotes the value of making space for alternative Indigenous understandings of history and colonialism. In these multiple ways, therefore, *The Iconic North* is nothing short of iconoclast—in the very best way.

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