



DECOLONIAL HISTORIOGRAPHY AND NARRATIVE DISMANTLING IN ROXANNE DUNBAR-ORTIZ'S *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*

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ABSTRACT

Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz's book *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* has received a lot of praise for how thoroughly it covers the genocide, land theft, and settler-colonialism that are at the heart of U.S. history. But the text's most important contribution is not the content of its analysis or its challenge to national myths; it is that it is a project of decolonial historiographical processes. Dunbar-Ortiz's placement of the narrative, her point of storytelling, her repositioning of land and indigeneity as frames of the history, her deliberate naming of genocide and conquest, and her explicit disavowal of American myths and of "disappearance" as a story of Indigenous resistance all disrupt the structures of historiography as it grounds U.S. cultural power on territorial sovereignty. This represents not a specific revision of history, but a decolonial method of historiography that can be transposed to other contexts. This paper looks at how Dunbar-Ortiz effectively creates a historiographical model flexible enough to be instructive to other settler-colonial contexts and modes of knowledge production, asking what ethical historiography looks like and why language, narration, chronology, author positioning, and complicity are crucial issues not only in historical description (which is never neutral, unbiased, or decontextualized), but also in the naming of theory, in the creation of social notions about what the West means, and even in the cliché short and long answer to the question, *What happened?*

KEYWORDS: Decolonial Historiography, Settler Colonialism, Origin Myth, Indigenous Epistemology, Counter-History, Dunbar-Ortiz, U.S. Exceptionalism.

INTRODUCTION

In a moment where conversations of historical production, national memory, and decolonization are debated more brazenly and more publicly than ever, the (re)production of history as a means to further nationalistic discourse assumes a fresh importance (Sierp 6). Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz's *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* has assumed a vaunted position in that national conversation, lauded for its unprecedented condemnation of the larger U. S. national project of settler colonialism. But it is the particular methodology with which Dunbar-Ortiz disrupts the American national origin story, as much as the particular historical content she includes, that demonstrates and reifies the role of the historian in (re)producing, or refusing to reproduce, nationalistic ideologies. This paper asserts that *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* reveals the possibility of an alternative, decolonized way of structuring the telling of the birth and development of the nation-state; one that favors a nonlinear, Indigenous-centric system of representation and meaning making, source material rooted in the landscape and places from which Federal soldiers and agents forcibly removed Indigenous peoples, and language such as genocide, elimination, and colonial conquest. By frustrating the nation-state's ability to legitimize itself by recalling and thus reenacting a comfortable linear narrative of origin built on great men and brave deeds, said microhistories exemplify what precisely is at stake in decolonizing discourses. Dunbar Ortiz claims:

Democracy, equality, and equal rights do not fit well with the dominance of one race by another, much less with genocide, settler colonialism, and empire. It was during the 1820s—the beginning of the era of Jacksonian settler democracy—that the unique U.S. origin myth evolved reconciling rhetoric with reality. (103)

Historiography, Myth, and Power

In other words, all histories are political in nature because no matter who is doing the remembering and the recording, one is influencing how people perceive their worldview in the present by providing them with a narrative to circulate. It would be no surprise that state systems would produce this type of phenomenon, oftentimes referred to as national myths, because national myths are one of the primary vehicles for establishing the authority of a state system. This is what the myths of the United States find their partial basis in covenant ideology, or the belief that the United States is exceptional in that it is covenanted with a higher power who has given the country the right to the land that is under its control, manifest destiny, or territorial expansion through



conquest as a necessity, and exceptionalism, a reframing of how people understand the United States within the context of freedom and exceptional rightness. Dunbar-Ortiz believes that:

The United States is not unique among nations in forging an origin myth, but most of its citizens believe it to be exceptional among nation-states, and this exceptionalist ideology has been used to justify appropriation of the continent and then domination of the rest of the world. (Dunbar-Ortiz 47)

Therefore, Dunbar-Ortiz's explanatory account of these mythologies makes it clear that these myths are far from extra embellishments to a founding narrative. These histories should be understood as constitutive components of a uniquely American mythos that is purposefully structured by an explicit state-based politics. Why this is so important to the revolutionary step Dunbar-Ortiz is taking to provide a decolonial history will become more clear as I delve further her text and method. Her assertion exemplifies it:

By the time of European invasions, Indigenous peoples had occupied and shaped every part of the Americas, established extensive trade networks and roads, and were sustaining their populations by adapting to specific natural environments, but they also adapted nature to suit human ends. (27)

Dunbar-Ortiz's Decolonial Method

The most striking decolonizing move that Dunbar-Ortiz makes is to re-center the temporal structure of her narrative. Most histories of the United States start at 1492 or 1620 at the earliest, reinforcing the notion that real history only started with the arrival of white colonizers. Countering this, Dunbar-Ortiz's first chapter contains a concise and comprehensive (in comparison to most U.S. history texts) overview of the major Native American cultures flourishing in North America prior to colonization, and their innovations in art, architecture, science, and politics. In centering Native Americans as the original and primary actors in historical temporality, she challenges ideas of America being a chosen land for colonization, and America is instead portrayed as a land that has always been civilized. Dunbar-Ortiz's decision to include an earlier point in time as literally first in her narrative seems like an obvious one, but her move works to set *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* firmly outside other U.S. history texts.

Dunbar-Ortiz spreads a narrative of colonial violence through her language. She does not use euphemistic language such as "encounters" or "conflicts." She uses terms like "genocide" and "ethnic cleansing" to name events as she found fit. The decision to use direct and stern language is a political act. The histories of colonialism are often characterized by passive, harmless narrative rhetoric. Colonialist texts and discourse use polite euphemisms; place names and monuments, military records, and newspaper reports disguise the violence of the dispossession of Indigenous peoples through the use of bland language. In her text, Dunbar-Ortiz attempts to restore the histories of Indigenous communities in the Americas, and she attempts this through the use of deliberate, unfettered language. She herself turns to twentieth-century historian Jean O'Brien's terminology of "firsting and lasting," which she says describes the settler historians' practice of designating Indigenous peoples as the first of something, generally the first people in a place, e.g., the first New England or California Indians. As a corollary of firsting, lasting pinpoints the settlers as the last of something. Dunbar-Ortiz's use of honest terms disapproves of the romanticizing rhetoric that makes colonialism fashionable and palatable.

Land is not just a referent to be obtained through settlement and war, but is also the axis for Dunbar-Ortiz's overarching narrative. She points to land ownership as the organizing principle structuring U. S. history: The history of the United States is a history of settler colonialism – the founding of a state based on the ideology of white supremacy, the widespread practice of African slavery, and a policy of genocide and land theft. Dunbar-Ortiz asserts land's importance as a key historical actor, which is understood through Indigenous principles of social responsibility, political organisation, and personal sovereignty.

A critical feature of decolonial history-writing is to change the idea that the Indigenous population just faded from history over time. On this point, we are reminded that resistance did not merely occur in moments or even decades, as Dunbar-Ortiz reminds us of the myriad ways from Tecumseh's confederation to the Pueblo uprising, Apache resistance to Red Power in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, that such presence and resistance can be traced chronologically. This rebels against the idea that Indigenous peoples were, and remain, passive actors, forms of resistance and dissent which eventually led to their "disappearance". Just the opposite, Dunbar-Ortiz injects them into every period of American history.

Narrative Dismantling: Breaking the Architecture of U.S. National Memory



Dunbar-Ortiz traces the selective amnesia of U. S. historians that shapes those narratives. She challenges the natural legitimacy of the settler state. She links its exceptionalism to covenant theology and racism. She situates genocidal violence and ethnic cleansing as practices carried out by the heroes of popular narratives: Andrew Jackson and John Sevier. She traces the U. S. military–industrial complex to indigenous wars, "in which arguments of democracy and freedom are easily deployed," rather than to how it is usually portrayed: a time of peace until Pearl Harbor in 1941. Throughout her narrative, she ties the past to the present. She describes a timeline of militaristic growth. Thus, mythic narratives are central to a decolonial project: U.S. histories of expansion are narratives of growth and elegantly hide the violence of the past behind linear progression:

The continuity between invading and occupying sovereign Indigenous nations in order to achieve continental control in North America and employing the same tactics overseas to achieve global control is key to understanding the future of the United States in the world. The military provided that continuity. (164)

Dunbar-Ortiz in the Context of Decolonial Theory

In discarding neutrality, demonstrating the ties of U.S. institutions to the tentacles of capitalism, and elevating indigenous perspectives, Dunbar-Ortiz's perspective resonates with other historical attempts at decolonizing. What is at stake is to control the writing of one's historical narrative as posited by Fanon ("Frantz Fanon," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*), to strike at writing history with an eye for decolonizing the language as Ngugi wa Thiong'o attempts (Rani), and as Dunbar-Ortiz's text does, going along with Smith's claim that telling the narratives of culture is a struggle in the face of colonization ("Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples").

Implications for Historiographic Practice

Ultimately, Dunbar-Ortiz asks the reader to recognize with her that truth is required to make change; history matters. As we undermine the myths of imagined nation-states, we must confront the question as historians of just whose ends we are serving in the historical enterprise. And to what end does this book serve the perspectives and methodologies we employ in decolonizing history? I think that it has lots to offer, both practically and theoretically, especially to students who need an alternative perspective and textual resource for talking about the war on Indigenous peoples.

CONCLUSION

So, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* is more than just a counter-history. In choosing not to perpetuate the familiar false narratives of U.S. national history and in presenting solely Indigenous perspectives and the consequences of colonialism, Dunbar-Ortiz also develops a new narrative method for Indigenous history telling. She calls the U.S. what it is, grounds the narrative in the land and life, asks hard questions, examines causes of culpability, recalls wars and their warriors, and recuperates noteworthy origin stories. In doing so, she opens important new possibilities for national and transnational counter-histories.

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