

BOOK REVIEWS

War of the Blink

Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas

Vancouver: Locarno Press, 2017.

72 pp. \$24.95 paper.

Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas:

The Seriousness of Play

Nicola Levell

London: Black Dog Publishing,

2016. 160 pp. \$29.95 paper.

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THE THING IS, the main protagonist in Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas's *War of the Blink* is actually the tertiary character, the witnessing fly. Completed in 2017, the key themes and their presentation in *War of the Blink* are timeless and mutable. As with Yahgulanaas's other books, the story opens with the familiar phrase, "Once upon a time this was a true story." Initially, the story appears immediately comprehensible: two nations at war, the one approaching stealthily by canoe in the hopes of startling and overtaking its neighbours along the West Coast

islands of xaayda gwaay.yaay. But the seemingly insignificant fly is of central importance. A being so minute in size, it nonetheless becomes a harbinger of danger, ultimately serving as a kind of interspecies referee and peacemaker between the visitors and the home team. This inhuman presence distracts from the inhumanity of the events that would otherwise transpire, transforming conflict into play, enmity into camaraderie – so much so that declarations of victory or defeat are rendered meaningless.

In Yahgulanaas's presentation of this age-old Haida story, the reader is encouraged to revisit the pages of *War of the Blink* from multiple points of view. The first page is not a definitive starting point but merely a nudge, a suggestion. If the reader is to take the position of the fly rather than that of the warring humans, the importance of page and narrative order lessens just as the depths of the message and the medium increase. The book binding becomes a temporary casing, a carapace that is not meant to encapsulate the revelation of potential meanings. Through its non-pagination and the final presentation of the two-dimensional totem pole, which follows notes about the author, Yahgulanaas prompts the reader to tear out each

leaf so that it may be repositioned in a performative reconstruction of the mosaic image. From this reconfigured perspective, *War of the Blink* challenges different cultural conventions of reading and storytelling. The social mores to not tear pages from a book and to perambulate the stationary totem pole exist within human realms of acceptability, whereas Yahgulanaas's two-dimensional totem pole reveals that the human story itself is framed within the fly's form. And in the upper right-hand corner, a smaller fly hovers or eats into the image, indicating that human and non-human are co-participants in a house of mirrors, witnessing while being witnessed. Furthermore, if one were to tape the pages together, make a single origami central vertical fold, and cup the paper into a V-shape, the simultaneous and parallel formations of human conflicts and their resolutions become identifiable in three dimensions. Finally, if one were so inclined to repeatedly flap both sides of the paper, much like the fluttering of an insect in flight, the message in the fourth dimension shifts again to imply that warfare requires a repetition of similarly antagonistic and directionally oppositional movements in order to create a state of affairs that would cause existential harm to humans and non-humans alike. Reciprocally, de-escalation of potential human conflict may necessitate similarly gracious multidirectional movements in order to establish societal relations that would be of planetary benefit.

In *Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas: The Seriousness of Play*, Nicola Levell offers important insights into Yahgulanaas's artistic pedigree, political career, and environmental activism. Levell approaches Yahgulanaas's body of work from anthropological and museological perspectives steeped within Euro-Western philosophical and artistic

traditions to discuss the artist's carving genealogy and apprenticeship with Robert Davidson, his years serving as chief councillor of the Old Massett Village Council, and early examples of his art and street activism to protect Haida Gwaii from resource extraction and pollution. Written primarily for a North American and Canadian art readership, *The Seriousness of Play* adeptly articulates Yahgulanaas's profound capacity to address cultural, artistic, and political taboos and conventions with a keen sense of playfulness. Levell also attempts to address Yahgulanaas's interest in and study of Chinese and Japanese art practices such as calligraphy and ukiyo-e printmaking. Overall, Levell's retrospective approach to contemplating Yahgulanaas's artistic career is useful as one of several possible entry points into engaging with the breadth and contents of the artist's multidisciplinary practice. However beneficial Levell's book is in establishing the significant contributions that Yahgulanaas has made in the Canadian and Indigenous art worlds, it unwittingly creates a cultural chasm between the artistic affiliations and exchanges long evident in communities that exist along the Pacific and that have been presented brilliantly in the world of Haida manga.

Through Haida manga, Yahgulanaas not only traverses nation-based and Eurocentric artworlds but also exceeds the boundaries between tangible and intangible culture, human and non-human relations. The uncanny resemblances in subject matter and form between Yahgulanaas's Haida manga and manga produced along the West Pacific region point to long-standing cultural exchanges that call for further research. The imagery in *War of the Blink* evokes the hybridization of Hokusai's art during the period when he was known as Taito and his final period, when he referred to

himself as Gakyō Rōjin Manji (Old man mad about art). Hokusai, who had moved ninety times and changed his name more than thirty times during his life, cannot be easily reduced to providing a singular artistic contribution, given that each name change was accompanied by equally distinct artistic explorations. In the fusion of those two named periods, Hokusai's artworks meld together the practice of manga (漫画), which transliterates into "unrestrained art," with the investigation of spiritual and otherworldly existence. Likewise, in *War of the Blink*, with the presence of the shaman and the "strange fly," Yahgulanaas brings forward for deep consideration the agency and reciprocal respond-abilities that exist in human and non-human interactions, a bioculturalism comprised of kinship relations that transcend human-made creative and cultural regulation. Beyond the Pacific regionalism for appreciating the artistry of *War of the Blink*, the eternal message is of global import. In the era of the COVID-19 pandemic, this Haida manga becomes a parable of what has passed and what is yet to come. Epistemically uncontainable and bursting with play, *War of the Blink* is truly worthy of multiple visitations, human and otherwise.

Spirits of the Coast: Orcas in Science, Art and History

Edited by Martha Black, Lorne Hammond, and Gavin Hanke, with Nikki Sanchez

Victoria, BC: Royal BC Museum, 2020. 206 pp. \$29.95 paper.

MEGHAN WALLEY
Vancouver, BC

AS I WRITE, the world has received news that Talequah (or J35), the Southern Resident killer whale who carried her dead newborn for two weeks in 2018, is pregnant again. *Spirits of the Coast: Orcas in Science, Art and History* captures the juxtaposition of hope and tragedy embodied by Talequah's story and the stories of the Southern Resident killer whales of the Salish Sea. It is a multidisciplinary coffee table-style book comprising twenty-one short essays, stories, and poems. It follows from an environmentalist discourse that took off in the 1970s but endeavours to go further in presenting multiple lenses through which the reader can view and connect with killer whales.

In terms of writing, the greatest strength of *Spirits of the Coast* is its multivocality. By providing a variety of cultural, scientific, and experiential lenses, it brings orcas into a three-dimensional view that evokes both reverence and empathy. Beyond the writing, the book is aesthetically beautiful. The cover, designed by Andy Everson, situates the subject in both ecological and cultural contexts through the superimposition of Kwakwaka'wakw motifs against the image of a breaching whale. Inside, there are no wasted opportunities for visual communication. The aesthetics of this book encourage everyone, including those who cannot

read the language printed on the pages, to engage more deeply. As Nikki Sanchez states in her introduction, the artwork included is “not art for adornment, but art as stories” (3). This comes across beautifully.

The book comprises three sections: “Connection,” “Captivity,” and “Consciousness.” While this structure provides framing, I found myself wanting a more coherent flow and a greater sense of interweaving among contributions. This is especially apparent in the “Captivity” section, where editing for redundancy may have enhanced the book’s message.

In her introduction, Sanchez notes that the book presents human perspectives and that the orcas’ side remains to be told. At times contributions focus, with varying levels of self-awareness, on the human-like aspects of orcas. While drawing connections between humans and non-humans can garner empathy and mobilize people, this approach may fail to recognize the value of non-human qualities while de-emphasizing ecological context. Fittingly, the strongest contributions are those that do present context, such as Misty MacDuffee’s essay “A Bond through Salmon, Language and Grandmothers” (17) and those that centre humility in human relationships with non-human beings, such as “The Peace Treaty” (33) by Rande Cook with Charlie Matilpi.

In some areas, the book may have benefitted from more rigorous fact-checking. For example, a mention of the International Whaling Commission’s moratorium on commercial whaling following an assertion that Canada has stopped whaling (140) is misleading because Canada has not signed on to the moratorium, the moratorium does not apply to killer whales, and whales are still an important resource for many northern Indigenous communities.

In general, deeper explorations of the politics of conservation, including a focus on environmental policy, conflicting human interests, and ways forward, would have enhanced this volume.

Despite these few areas that may have been further developed, *Spirits of the Coast* is a beautifully rendered composition of diverse perspectives on killer whales and is appropriate for popular audiences. As is eloquently expressed in Jess Housty’s “Kinship” (175), the way forward in addressing the well-being of the Southern Resident killer whales is through deepened connection. This volume presents a jumping-off point for those of us who want to build towards a future where we are in community with the beings with whom we share our waters.

*Complicated Simplicity: Island
Life in the Pacific Northwest*

Joy Davis

Victoria, BC: Heritage House, 2019.
264 pp. \$22.95 paper.

NICHOLAS STANGER

Western Washington University

Complicated Simplicity is a collection of essays, personal and expository, that explore the nature of living on secluded (non-ferry-serviced) islands within the southwestern part of British Columbia and the Pacific Northwest (and further abroad too). The author, Joy Davis, an emeritus scholar at the University of Victoria, curator, and heritage expert, wades into her own island-identity of growing up on Bath Island in the Gulf Islands as a frame within which to explore people’s relationships with islands. Nissology, or island studies, is a recurring academic

touchstone throughout the book, helping ground the character-driven, story-based descriptions of living remotely within island settings.

Organized into eight chapters that deal with expansive and minute details about island life and “islandness,” Davis plays with the romanticism and realism of community, island time, house building and repairing, sea travel, and the economy. The “book interweaves the voices of numerous islanders to explore what draws people to islands and to consider what it takes to make successful lives off the ferry grid” (x). The timbre of this work falls into a collection of recent (and historical) popular and academic ethnographies (print, podcasts, and video) that tell the stories of homesteading settlers and resource characters on the coast of North America. The paradox of *Complicated Simplicity* explains the physical, emotional, and logistical trials of island life: while away from urban indulgences, islanders’ days are filled with keeping up the systems for living.

Davis’s description of the variety of experiences in island living presents some interesting insights into building and maintaining life on remote islands, including the challenges of telecommuting for work and school. However, at times this book feels like a “how-to guide” – for example, when it refers to the reader as a potential island purchaser. This approach intensely limits the accessibility of the work as it is unlikely that, in her or his lifetime, the average reader will have a chance to even visit, much less purchase or live on, a secluded island. This writing style also contributes to a sense of property ownership that maintains a continuing trend in academia – the popular, but often exclusionary orientation of place-based writing. Despite a single Indigenous interviewee from an island off the coast

of Tofino, and some basic description of Indigenous history of island life, the settler-colonial storylines of place dominate this book in a way that helps further erase Indigenous presence. Of course, this book isn’t the only one oriented in this way, and Davis didn’t invent this genre; however, a significant effort to tell the story of island life in the Pacific Northwest should have helped us consider the fact that these islands have been stolen. In what way could a book like *Complicated Simplicity* contribute to reconciliation?

I don’t dispute Davis’s final paragraph, in which she states: “Solitude creates space for greater self-awareness” (229). I am certain those living on these islands are connected to place in ways that differ from those living in an urban or even ferry-connected setting. Yet I was left wondering: How might that same self-awareness connect islanders to First Nations cultural history and their fight for sovereignty and title?

*In Nature’s Realm:
Early Naturalists Explore
Vancouver Island*

Michael Layland

Victoria, BC: Touchwood Editions,
2019. 288 pp. \$40.00 paper.

NICHOLAS STANGER
Western Washington University

In Nature’s Realm, a third tome from Michael Layland that focuses on the (mostly) colonial histories of Vancouver Island, is an artistic and literary achievement. Layland’s hybrid of chronological and thematic descriptions of Vancouver Island-related material is made up of rigorously researched historical accounts. He uses

a dialogical and biographical narrative style that is punctuated with a time-machine of historical and contemporary sketches, illustrations, photographs, and paintings. Layland reintroduces to us some of the usual naturalist suspects, such as Archibald Menzies, David Douglas, and John Macoun, by describing their various forays into naming, cataloguing, and describing organisms throughout the biomes of the Island. Other less usual communities and projects outlined in the book, at least for accounts of historical naturalist publications, include First Nations, American citizens, women, importation of songbirds, and military history.

Layland does a better job than most but still falls well short of where this kind of book should be in terms of accounting for and celebrating Indigenous knowledge. His positionality and mostly white-settler datasource severely limits the small Indigenous section in the book. Perhaps this is where much of *In Nature's Realm* falters generally: the reification of some mostly male characters, and their financial backers, who had the wherewithal to account for their early trips to Vancouver Island. I recognize that moving away from this narrative is a difficult research pivot since patriarchy dominates historical accounting. Yet the short chapters devoted to women in botany, First Nations, and other marginalized voices are small first attempts at a necessary larger dialogue. To his credit, Layland comments throughout the book on the need for further research in collaboration with these communities.

In particular, I notice where Layland's work bumps up against the naturalists' processes of appropriation. Whether it is how he describes the naturalists connecting to local knowledge or working off of other's notes, Layland speaks to the complexity of motivation behind many of

them. It wasn't usually benign knowledge generation but, rather, capitalism and imperialism that lay behind their work. Despite this acknowledgment, I was still left wondering about the logic of a name-based organizational structure. I recognize the appeal of being able to trace the taxonomic nomenclature of the plants and animals, being someone who has studied these methods for years. Yet I also recognize the further colonization that occurs with the erasure of place and knowledge that is too often a feature of such historical accounts. Could this work have been done in partnership with Indigenous communities to help describe, catalogue, and tell not only the colonial tale but also the narrative of the land and sea and its people?

Layland's work is encyclopaedic by design. At times the book feels like a physical Google search of "early naturalists of Vancouver Island," with pages and pages of short biographies and contributions of various characters. Of course, if you did search this on Google, you would be sorely disappointed to find very little of the descriptions contained in the book. As described in the afterword:

The men and women who appeared in these pages were the first Europeans to investigate and record the natural history of what is now Vancouver Island. These naturalists, as we call them, included scientists and amateurs, some academically trained, others self-taught. They were interested in many different aspects of nature: plants, birds, insects, fish, and other marine life. They saw and wrote of the forests in their pristine state, immense runs of salmon ascending many streams and butterflies in great numbers, and of how local peoples interacted with and used the flora and fauna of their region. (247)

Of course the word “pristine” has its own baggage, but I was left wondering what a book that contributes to Indigenous knowledge rather than profits off its back (as did many of the early naturalists) would look like? How might the many different First Nations of Vancouver Island be supported in developing their own material, celebrating their own places, knowledges, languages, and cultures, while maintaining their own intellectual properties, building capacities, and banks of knowledge? Much of the knowledge of these places and their organisms are derived from early and ongoing contact with knowledge keepers. It is time to write books that treat these relationships with the respect they deserve. Layland calls for this too.

*He Speaks Volumes:
A Biography of George Bowering*
Rebecca Wigod

Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2018.
336 pp. \$24.95 paper.

NICHOLAS BRADLEY
University of Victoria

THE CANADIAN writers who rose (or leapt) to prominence in the 1960s and 1970s, and who are sometimes thought to be synonymous with Canadian literature itself, are now venerable. Although Margaret Atwood remains a formidable public presence, Alice Munro has withdrawn from the writing life. The recent deaths of Leonard Cohen and Patrick Lane confirm the sense that time is quickly passing. As an account of a momentous period in Canadian literary history, and as a depiction of a central figure therein, Rebecca Wigod’s engaging biography of George Bowering is doubly welcome.

Bowering has been a notable author for six decades, his poems and novels widely taught and routinely examined by scholars. Readers of *BC Studies* will recognize his distinguished place in the literary culture of the province. After a childhood in the Okanagan and a false start at Victoria College (Victoria, BC), Bowering attended the University of British Columbia in the late 1950s and early 1960s, making his name as one of the ambitious students behind *Tish*, a literary journal cobbled together under the influence of the US avant-garde. He left Vancouver for work and further studies but returned in the early 1970s to begin a long teaching career at Simon Fraser University. His connection to the city registers in the title of *Kerrisdale Elegies* (1984), probably his most admired book of poems, while his regional interests have shaped his expansive, and still growing, body of work. The novel *Burning Water* (1980) reimagines colonial exploration in the Pacific Northwest, while *Bowering’s BC* (1996) narrates provincial history for a popular audience. Now retired, Bowering continues to live in Vancouver – not in Kerrisdale, however, but in West Point Grey.

In *He Speaks Volumes*, Wigod tells Bowering’s story in twenty chapters, each focusing on one dimension of his personal and professional lives. The book is a mosaic, with Bowering variously “The Varsity Man,” “The Father,” “Mr. Baseball,” “The Success,” and so on. By her own admission, Wigod draws heavily on Bowering’s diaries – an incredible fifty volumes – and partly as a result the biography is sympathetic. I will suggest only two ways in which it stands to be supplemented by future commentators.

The first pertains to aspects of Bowering’s relationships. Although it lasted nearly thirty-seven years, his first marriage was unhappy. Wigod

has little option but to describe Angela Bowering's "often-fraught domestic life with George" (96), their many disputes, and their competing attachments, including his "dangerous liaison" (185) in the 1980s with the writer Constance Rooke. This information is not entirely new. When Rooke died in 2008, an obituary in the *Globe and Mail* made no secret of the fact that she had been "passionately involved" with Bowering. Wigod is tactful rather than prurient, yet she passes somewhat briskly over events that caused considerable anguish, seemingly hesitant to tie such episodes to Bowering's literary pursuits. Readers may find it difficult to reconcile the misery generated by the marriage with the impression, cultivated by Bowering and largely upheld by Wigod, of the poet as blithe spirit.

My second remark concerns the interpretation of Bowering's works. Because his poetry and fiction are typically autobiographical, the connection between life and art might seem self-evident, the rationale for an explanatory biography obvious. Wigod's Bowering is charismatic and accomplished, the recipient of "all manner of accolades and awards" (11), but the biography has relatively little time for the books themselves; it tends to defer to reviewers' opinions rather than to provide original assessments. A lack of commentary is particularly noticeable in the case of Bowering's more demanding works. Wigod observes of *Allophanes* (1976) that, "for the average reader, the poem is a word salad" (134), but she declines to explain at length how this challenging poem might reward readers' persistence. *He Speaks Volumes* is nonetheless a fascinating and undeniably important book that will be esteemed by Bowering's readers and by students, in the widest sense, of Canadian literature. The latter may also conclude that Canadian literary

history is overdue for a thoroughgoing reconsideration – for reappraisals that forgo narratives established by the protagonists, Bowering among them, in favour of novel critical perspectives.

*Postsecondary Education in
British Columbia: Public Policy
and Structural Development,*

1960–2015

Robert Cowin

Vancouver: UBC Press, 2018.

232 pp. \$35 paper.

DONALD FISHER

University of British Columbia

AS DISTINCT from previous historical accounts of postsecondary education in British Columbia, Cowin makes it clear that he will cover the development of the "entire" postsecondary system in the province (3). For Cowin, this means the whole of both the public and private sectors as well as the apprenticeship system and continuing education. Using what he describes as a systems approach, Cowin provides the reader with a straightforward, if somewhat mechanical, partial history of postsecondary education. After setting the stage with a general historical account of the whole period, and a chapter on the three policy rationales the author uses for analysis, the fifty-five years are divided into three chronological periods: 1960–79, 1980–99, and 2000–15.

Cowin's systems approach aims at providing "an integrative and dynamic analysis that concentrates on the interactions among postsecondary sectors" (4). Three policy rationales (social justice, human capital formation, and marketization) are used to analyze one

or two significant historical moments in each of the three time periods. For Cowin, “Historical moments are much shorter than periods, involve at least two postsecondary sectors, and mark disjunctions in development trajectories” (64). Cowin’s methodological approach is to integrate the academic literature with his own writing for professional audiences (eight historical reports) as well as his own observations and experiences over three decades in various positions at Douglas College.

The main body of the book consists of three substantive chapters that cover the three time periods mentioned above. In Chapter 3, “Clear Intentions (1960–79),” a single historical moment, the “Macdonald Era,” comes under the spotlight. Beginning with the Macdonald Report (1962), the author proceeds to trace its impact on all the postsecondary sectors throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

In Chapter 4, “Assumptions Challenged (1980–99),” two historical moments are the focus of attention: first, the contraction of public education in the early 1980s and the following shift in vocational education from the public to the private sector; second, the establishment of a new type of postsecondary institution (university college) at the end of the 1980s. Chapter 5, “Cynicism (2000–15),” covers two historical moments. The first is the “New Era,” which covers the changing relations between the public and private postsecondary sectors during the years 2002 to 2006. The focus here is very much on government action following the election of the Liberal government in 2001. The second is “Post-neoliberalism,” which covers the move away from marketization in the period from 2011 to 2015.

The conclusion introduces four themes that “form a backdrop for any history of the contemporary BC postsecondary system” (162). Given this description, the

positioning of these themes at the end of the book is somewhat disconcerting for the reader. The first three themes (geographical access, federal government, and private sector and entrepreneurship) are predictable and central to the development of probably all federal liberal democratic states. The fourth theme (loss of a shared vision) is categorically different in that it is a more specific description of events in British Columbia as compared with other provinces.

Cowin draws his historical account together in Table 5 (167), in which he assesses the relevance of the three policy rationales for each of the historical moments. For Cowin, the key message that we should take from this table is that “human capital formation has been central to understanding the development of the postsecondary system in British Columbia. Social justice considerations were especially significant in the earlier decades, whereas market-oriented rationales strengthened in more recent ones” (168). The book ends with a plea for more work that utilizes a systems approach and, thereby, does not discriminate against the private sector or the technical/apprenticeship elements of postsecondary education.

*The Sleeping Giant Awakens:
Genocide, Indian Residential
Schools and the Challenge of
Conciliation*

David B. MacDonald

Toronto: University of Toronto
Press, 2019. 240 pp. \$24.95 paper.

*Canada at a Crossroads:
Boundaries, Bridges, and
Laissez-Faire Racism in
Indigenous-Settler Relations*

Jeffrey S. Denis

Toronto: University of Toronto
Press, 2020. 384 pp. \$39.95 paper.

CHRIS MARTIN
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DESPITE Duncan Campbell Scott's now infamous assertion as deputy superintendent general of Indian affairs in 1920 that he "want[ed] to get rid of the Indian problem" (Scott 1920, 55), the question of whether Canada's engagement with First Nations was genocidal remains in dispute. This stems in large part from the question of what constitutes "genocide" and whether the actions of Canadian officials align with these characteristics. The Indian Residential School (IRS) system remains at the forefront of this debate, and with it the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has come under intense scrutiny.

In his far-reaching and comprehensive work, David B. MacDonald seeks not only to assess the impact of residential schooling and the efforts of the TRC but also to situate them within the global political arena of international

law. This he achieves with stunning clarity, distilling complex legislation and centuries of colonial oppression into a powerful and cohesive narrative. Beginning with a comprehensive history of the formation of genocide law, MacDonald demonstrates how the influences of colonial nations effectively removed definitions of genocide that would have implicated their own policies, contextualizing the ongoing struggle of Indigenous survivors within a system designed to ensure their failure. *The Sleeping Giant Awakens* unfolds largely chronologically, with each chapter providing context for those that follow, demonstrating the ripple effect of past actions and the need to reassess preconceptions of understanding.

MacDonald effectively engages critics who argue against labelling the IRS system as genocidal, demonstrating that recognizing genocide is necessary for productive change to Indigenous-settler relations. *The Sleeping Giant Awakens* succeeds in this regard due to MacDonald's meticulous approach to research and captivatingly persuasive style. Drawing on resources from archival material, Indigenous accounts, legal precedent, and academic literature, he skilfully weaves a narrative that is as compelling as it is insightful. He asks the reader to engage in serious reflection and provides the tools to do so through clear language and an engaging style that will be approachable to scholars and casual readers alike.

Perhaps the greatest achievement of this book is that, while MacDonald asks a significant portion of his readers to reassess their own privilege and acknowledge the dark history of their country, he also empowers them to make these changes in practical ways. He reminds readers that contrition and acknowledgment are not enough, that a thoughtful and proactive approach is the

only way to move towards healing and conciliation. Certainly this is a must-read for all seeking to understand and change the legacy of Canadian history, and a significant milestone in the literature of (re)conciliation.

Canada at a Crossroads works in conjunction with *The Sleeping Giant Awakens* to create a critical foundation of literature that addresses macro- and micro-narratives of Indigenous-settler relations in Canada. Jeffrey Denis situates himself firmly within sociological concepts of group theory to understand the motives behind laissez-faire racism in small-town western Ontario. Drawing on eighteen months of ethnographic research and semi-structured interviews, Denis engages with the complexity of intercultural relationships as they play out in individual and intergroup dynamics. Effectively weaving personal accounts from Indigenous and settler occupants of Rainy River district with analytical data and trends in Canada more broadly, he reveals the complexity of national dialogues playing out in small, interconnected communities.

Canada at a Crossroads critically addresses the unique position of Canada as a nation established on top of existing nations and the problematic responses of settler societies to the resilience and self-determination of Indigenous communities. Through focusing on individual responses to perceived threats to settler dominance, Denis reflects on the difficulties of overcoming racism in a settler system that, on the surface, considers there to be no problem, while simultaneously undermining Indigenous cultures. Identifying this “apartheid of the mind” (298), Denis considers how fundamentally disparate concepts of Canada are used to “bridge” and “barrier” attempts at conciliation. Much like MacDonald, Denis shows the paradoxes experienced by Indigenous people

attempting to negotiate a system that was forced upon them, facing the duplicity of settler societies that want them to “be us, but you can’t be us” (144).

Given the focus on group identities in the context of Canada, I was surprised by the absence of discussion of Boas’s influence on concepts of Indigenous groups, as this fundamentally affected how settlers conceived of Indigenous people and how they, in turn, were encouraged to perceive themselves and one another. Similarly, while Denis makes compelling points about the legacy of the IRS system and demonstrates clear divergence between settlers who considered Prime Minister Harper’s 2008 apology an end and Indigenous communities who viewed it as one small step on a journey to healing, the author gives scant background to this devastating aspect of colonial history. This does not detract from the overall success of his work but requires it to be read with at least some prior knowledge of residential schooling and assimilationist policies enacted in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Canada.

Canada at a Crossroads succeeds through its comprehensive attention to detail in a single location that both epitomizes wider trends in Canada and represents individual attempts to overcome laissez-faire racism. It holds a mirror up to settler Canadians and shows how easily racist ideals can poison good intentions. It is eye opening and insightful, adding localized nuance to an issue of national importance.

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