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No Study Without Struggle by Leigh Patel (review)

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No Study Without Struggle

Leigh Patel

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Broadly speaking, *No Study Without Struggle* rigorously engages the systemic and structural entanglements of oppression and organized resistance within education and its social contexts. Bringing together historical records, oral histories, and contemporary case examples, Patel beautifully illustrates relationships of power through the analytical lens of settler colonialism. Moreover, the expressed intention of the text is to provide a sense of grounding for the reader about the longstanding symbiosis of study and struggle. As such, Patel provides compelling evidence to demonstrate the connections between higher education as a settler colonial project and the always already confrontations with settler colonial violence. This is noteworthy in that, until recently, the higher education literature has been largely deficient in its engagement with (de)colonization and (de)colonial studies. Yet, as Patel notes, many of the endemic and intractable problems confronting contemporary higher education find their roots in the stolen land and stolen labor and the exploitative and extractive nature of colleges and universities, which continue with their modern function as neoliberal enterprises.

The book includes six chapters, each with a conceptual focus that altogether renders a comprehensive yet succinct analysis of higher and postsecondary education as a settler colonial project. Building from the offering of historian Robin D. G. Kelley's seminal essay "Black

Study, Black Struggle," Chapter 1 provides Patel's argumentative basis for focusing specifically on settler colonialism as a framework. Whereas "naming the problem of racism in higher education is necessary but insufficient," Patel argues settler colonialism offers a more complete framework for understanding the relationships and distinctions between how marginalized and minoritized people experience various forms of what Mustafa (2017) has described as educational violence. As a faculty member whose research and teaching broadly focus on systemic oppression in higher education and its social context, I find this particular critique to be as accurate as it is timely. Although the rhetorics of antiracism and decolonization have permeated postsecondary and institutional discourse in recent years, they have not necessarily been understood as complementary endeavors. Patel, however, reconciles these otherwise discrete categories of analysis in education research and practice by putting racism and settler colonialism in conversation as co-determinants that continue to shape endemic inequities in higher education and society. For contemporary students and emerging professionals in the field of higher education, this book provides an important primer for understanding postsecondary institutions as contested terrains in the advancement and retrenchment of social and political inequity.

In Chapter 2, Patel describes settler colonialism as an ongoing process of three mutually dependent practices: (a) the theft of land/resources, (b) Indigenous erasure, and (c) the theft of labor. In the context of postsecondary education, this is established by stating the accomplished fact that all US colleges and universities occupy stolen land, many of which were also built through stolen labor and

the profits therein. Further, Patel recasts the racialized experiences of minoritized students as concurrent transactions of cultural taxation and indebtedness. These transactions are presented as evidence of gift economies, a colonial structure in which the worthiness of the oppressed is determined by the benevolence of “gifting” opportunity or reprieve from their oppressors. Such framing is deeply instructive given how often postsecondary institutions and their agents purport to be solutions to otherwise inescapable problems, a point that has been widely challenged by critical scholars for decades (la paperson, 2017; Mustafa, 2017).

Chapter 3 interrogates the symbiosis of profit and debt, broadly conceived, in which the accumulation–dispossession paradox of resources (i.e., environmental, financial, and social) has shaped higher education since its inception. Noting sharp increases in tuition and the rising cost-share of attending college for students and families, Patel enumerates the consequences of steep declines in federal subsidies following the 2008 recession. Examples such as the racialized student debt crisis and the re-opening of campuses just months after the COVID-19 pandemic are used to thoroughly illustrate a “racial trade-off” between white beneficiaries (i.e., property, institutions, and people) and the proximal Black (and brown) communities disproportionately subject to injury.

Next, Chapter 4 offers a series of counternarratives to settler colonial imaginations through the concept of fugitivity—both a figurative and literal construct that refuses the conditions and consequences of oppressive power relations. Placed in historical context, Patel references the illegality of learning by enslaved Africans and de jure and de facto disenfranchisement from equitable schooling in the antebellum South. This juxtaposition is critical in that it recognizes how fugitive learning is a communal rather than individual act, one that refuses dominant social and political

norms in exchange for more liberatory dispositions to learning “as a means of escape” (see Woodson, 1933/1998) rather than an artifact of meritocratic achievement.

Chapter 5 takes up the vulnerabilities of study in opposition to the needs and interests of the neoliberal academy as a fugitive practice. That is, when study as an interrogation of power has taken root in the university as a part of its structure (e.g., Black Studies programs), it becomes susceptible to cooptation and exploitation by postsecondary institutions to the point of becoming politically unrecognizable. Building from Harney and Moten’s *The Undercommons*, Patel invites educators to recognize the extent to which our professional and political commitments are inexorably linked and sometimes dissonant, given their own situatedness within the discourses and practices of settler colonialism. This is an especially important contribution in that, rather than merely intellectualizing the history and nature of settler colonialism, Patel makes the otherwise abstract quite concrete for educators seeking to disrupt ways of seeing, being, and doing that perpetuate interpersonal and systemic harm. For instance, consider the preoccupation with subjective metrics for assessing individual students’ performance in student affairs and teacher education programs. Such individual approaches generally belie a broader set of developmental outcomes that would better allow students to deepen their relationships with one another as a community of practice beyond the classroom. The same could be said for our assessments of colleagues in the promotion and tenure processes that elude more complete understandings of scholarly impact beyond articles published solely in peer-reviewed journals. Altogether, Patel compels us to consider a politics of liberation that is, by definition, a collaborative exercise of fugitivity. Still, Patel also cautions there are very real and material consequences from being invested in the work (and not just the words)

of decolonization and antiracism, which I have also explored with others in our conceptualization of activist scholarship in higher education (see Davis et al., 2019).

The concluding chapter is demarcated by a series of confrontations with settler lies, settler symbols, and the insidious nature of settler colonialism to overly determine the boundaries of legitimate study as well as the futility of political struggle. As noted throughout the book but placed at the center of Chapter 6, historical palimpsests of struggle are grounded in praxis that contests (and often surpasses) theoretical possibilities existing separate from the lives of everyday people. This is a point on which Patel, having frequently drawn from the late 1960s, and Chairman Fred Hampton of the Illinois Black Panther Party would strongly agree, the latter noting, “. . . theory is cool, but theory without practice ain’t shit” (Malloy, 2017, p. 9). Still, Patel’s final pages interrogate the incommensurability of symbolism and transformation, noting the former is not the latter and impugning more recent activist demands as less transformative than those of previous student movements. I do not quite agree with Patel’s analysis here in that, as a movement scholar drawing from the work of Rogers (2012) and Biondi (2012), a comparative analysis of student demands across the decades suggests greater similarity than difference. In fact, it could be argued the “radical reconstitution” of higher education resulting from student activism in the 1960s and 1970s set a precedent for the symbolic transformation as a pathway and precursor for institutional change. Nevertheless, what is clear in either assessment is that the inefficacy of struggle can often be attributed to the enduring ability of settler institutions to obscure and conceal the root causes of systemic injustice. However, when fugitive study accompanies struggle, as Patel posits, root causes become legible and thereby make transformation possible.

Overall, this text has many applications and utilities for those committed to reimagining higher education as a life-affirming institution. Whether “tempered radicals” (Meyerson, 2001) within postsecondary administration and student affairs, faculty stretching the boundaries of academic freedom, or courageous students demanding answerability for institutional indebtedness, all can take direction from Patel’s timely and instructive analyses. In particular, scholars and practitioners working in service to the relationship between higher education and democracy, including those who study and facilitate the political engagement of students (and others) through activism, advocacy, and civic participation, are especially encouraged to employ this text as a reference and learning tool. For researchers, the breadth of Patel’s range across fields and disciplines—as applied to education and its social contexts—offers an instructive example of why interdisciplinary thinking is necessary to critically investigate and analyze the complexity of higher education’s role in today’s sociopolitical moment. In doing so, Patel has accomplished an important undertaking that renders a more precise understanding of the overlapping and intersecting systems at work along the continuum of study and struggle.

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