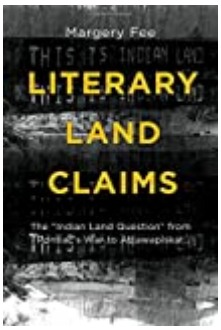
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Margery Fee. *Literary Land Claims: The "Indian Land Question" from Pontiac's War to Attawapiskat.* Indigenous Studies Series. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2015. x + 316 pp. $38.99 (paper), ISBN 978-1-77112-119-4.

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Commissioned by David T. Benac (Western Michigan University)

For Indigenous peoples, land and language are intimately tied together. But, as Margery Fee argues, just as language can convey the ways Indigenous nations seek to honor and reclaim land, Western discourses have actively ignored and erased Indigenous presence in order to justify the dispossession of Indigenous lands. The âcivilized/savageâ binary is most frequently used to distance settler positions from Indigenous ways of life that they see as inferior, uncivilized, and in need of change. As Feeâs work reminds us, this binary is not just historical, as many Canadians believe, but remains pervasive today.

Fee opens her book with an important question: âhow does literature claim land?â (p. 1). What follows are close readings of five thinkersâwith varying and sometimes contested relationships to Indigeneityâwho openly resisted dominant settler narratives. In each case, the author seeks to highlight these acts of resistance through an examination of both their colonial contexts and the perspectives they sought to advance through their writing and recorded speeches in the English language.

Feeâs first two chapters position this work as part of a larger project of decolonization in Canadian literary criticism. She complicates well-established literary theories by Northrup Frye and Margaret Atwood as nationalist discourses that undermine claims of Indigeneity and sovereignty, but at the same time acknowledges, âoften, because it formed me, I find myself writing both with and against Canadian literary nationalist approachesâ (p. 38). These foundational chapters also outline ideas of place, land, identity, authenticity, and the relationship between legal and literary land claims. In chapters 2 and 3, Fee examines the works of John Richardson, who wrote novels about Pontiacâs War and the War of 1812 that, while critical of American and British expansion, were often contradictory. Her close reading of his novels is especially important because it complicates traditional nationalist readings of Richardsonâs work. An equally insightful examination of Louis Rielâs 1885 trial transcript is the focus of chapter 4, where Fee rightly moves beyond historical debates about his character and motivations to argue that the rhetoric he employed in his testimony was culturally specific and was rooted in Indigenous notions of respect. In chapter 5, the author examines the work and identity of Mohawk poet and performer E. Pauline Johnson. While she, too, is a controversial historical figure, Fee seeks to move beyond the pervasive question of âwas she really Mohawk?â (p. 119) to examine how her works critiqued Canadian law and dispossession, and ar-

gues that Johnsonâs performances allowed her to assert her complex identity. Readers of H-Environment may be especially interested in chapter 6, where Fee complicates conservationist Archibald Belaney/Grey Owlâs position as a cultural fraud. She warns against criticizing Belaney too harshly as an imposter because his views were formed through his relationships with Indigenous peoples, and he attempted (not always successfully) to live in accordance with Anishinaabe protocols in a way that challenged the nature/culture binary. Chapter 7 features Wendy Wickwireâs collaboration with Harry Robinson, where Robinson challenges the older salvage anthropological view of literacy as an assimilative process. Indeed, Robinsonâs view of literacy did not compromise his Indigeneity, and he pointed to the ways that it could positively influence Indigenous land claims and activism. Fee concludes her book with an overview of more recent Indigenous sovereignty claims ranging from Oka to Attawapiskat. While the timeline of the book ends in the 1990s, the author briefly explores recent events involving Attawapiskat and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the conclusion.

While Feeâs careful readings of resistance narratives adeptly contextualize Indigenous notions of land rights and tenure, not all of her chosen authors have Indigenous backgrounds. One wonders, for instance, what a richer discussion of the work of Gertrude Bernard (Anahareo), the Mohawk woman married to Archibald Belaney/Grey Owl, could have added to this analysis as an Indigenous female voice. Additionally, a more in-depth examination of social media discussions around events such as #IdleNoMore and their place within a larger historical context of Indigenous assertions of sovereignty would have been a welcome addition to this study.

Ultimately, Fee contributes to the decolonization of literary studies in Canada and readers will benefit from Feeâs contextualization of Indigenous notions of land rights and language. As a work of literary criticism, the book on the whole does not seek to contribute to environmental studies, but scholars interested in issues related to decolonization and Indigenous sovereignty will find this work especially useful.

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