

*Book Review / Recension d'ouvrage*

## **Decolonizing Solidarity: Dilemmas and Directions for Supporters of Indigenous Struggles**

by Clare Land

London: Zed Books, 2015, 324 pages

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Decolonization, it can be argued, is the most important ethical challenge within Canadian education today. This book by Clare Land is a highly applicable and welcome resource that has been wanting in Canadian settings and decolonization discourse more generally. From the context of Australian Indigenous activism in which Land has been a long-time non-Indigenous supporter, *Decolonizing Solidarity* covers the relatively unexplored and important territory of interaction between Indigenous people and non-Indigenous people struggling against both (neo)colonial societal structure and their own interpersonal expressions. Here, Land usefully draws together a broad literature from decolonization and critical whiteness studies with personal reflection and interviews of long-time activists, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

Land seeks to support non-Indigenous people wishing to work in solidarity with Indigenous people, and to ease the burden of education from Indigenous activists for whom, as Gary Foley of the Gumbaynggirr Nation articulates in his foreword to the book, “some of the most difficult conversations are with people who have insisted they are supporters of the Aboriginal struggle, not opponents” (p. ix). Central to the integrity of her work, Land clearly situates herself as a non-Indigenous supporter and subjective

participant-researcher, and includes self-reflection showing personal learning. Her research benefits from personal and trusted relationships with key Aboriginal leaders.

For me as a non-Indigenous educator and academic with a focus on unsettling colonialism within myself and the world around me, this book is instructive but also changing; reading it challenged my sense of self and understanding of privilege, moving me to a new place of being.

Following from the premise that the state exists within the self—that the personal is political and political is personal—Land challenges non-Indigenous people “to undertake critical self-reflection, to commit to public political action, and to do personal-material work, [that is] to change the shape of our lives” (p. 233). Some particular tasks that Land puts forward throughout the book for non-Indigenous people interested in solidarity include:

- Learn the history of struggles of Indigenous people, particularly those of the area in which you have interest to engage (Chapter 2 is offered as example of this history in the context of southeast Australia).
- Ask yourself (difficult) questions to develop self-understanding of yourself culturally and in relation to colonization and privilege, and to clarify your motivations to work in support of Aboriginal people.
- Recognize that the place where you live and work is Aboriginal land.
- Be approachable to challenge (allowing your perceptions and actions to be changed), adopting a stance of active reflection and humility of the learner.
- Consider material changes you might make in your life to lessen imbalances that are part of your privilege.

Helpful and problematic approaches and actions that non-Indigenous supporters can take are well articulated in Chapter 4 “Collaboration dialogue and friendship,” Chapter 5 “Acting politically” (and with self reflection), Chapter 6 “A moral and political framework for non-Indigenous people’s solidarity,” and Chapter 7 “Reckoning with Complicity.”

This text takes on difficult terrain in which contradiction naturally forms a part, putting forward both “dilemmas and directions” emerging from the research. Land does well to situate contentious decisions (directions) within broader discourses, shown particularly in how the book frames identity (Chapter 3) following from the diverging approaches of a structuralist use of binary versus a more postmodern response in hybridity.

She brings forward the voices of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous activists and scholarship in a way that does not try to create a singular whole, allowing contradictions (dilemmas) to be held in tension, and not imposing objective and conclusive answers where none exist. These unresolved tensions are necessarily emergent, though may be difficult for readers.

Helpful to Land's work would be greater acknowledgement that to overcome paralysis and guilt, and "step up" in helpful ways, the non-Indigenous person must be allowed to be seen as a fully realized person, even within the context of privilege. As Barker acknowledges,

It is no easy thing to be a Settler person committed to acting as an Indigenous ally; combinations of active social and cultural pressures, passive understandings of 'normal,' and internal psychological and emotional barriers often create paralysis for Settlers attempting to act in de/anticolonial ways. (2010, p. 316)

In my experience, both the unsettling and keeping whole are important. Difficult learnings of decolonization require that I be gentle (yet uncompromising) in considering my mistakes. Emily Root (2010) suggests for non-Indigenous people to keep community with other non-Indigenous people on similar paths who can support and challenge learning but also support emotional wellbeing for the long-haul for this work, which, as Land expresses, is defined often by short term commitments by non-Indigenous people. Cultural protocols, important to my learning, are not discussed in the text.

In summary, Clare Land has created an ambitious and important book that comes at a pivotal time. This work strongly supports efforts to respectfully include Aboriginal history and cultural perspectives in place-based classrooms. As Land expresses, "this book speaks to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, but places an emphasis on exploring the kinds of self-questioning that non-Indigenous people are asked to perform" (p. 12). The self-questioning asked for by this book, and its well-presented wealth of knowledge will speak to people throughout education communities, including teachers administrators and academics. It asks that non-Indigenous people take responsibility for educating themselves and other non-Indigenous people in their intimate, work and community lives. I recommend reading it, reflecting, and reading it again.

## References

- Barker, A. (2010). From adversaries to allies: Forging respectful alliances between Indigenous and Settler peoples. In L. Davis (ed.), *Alliances: Re/envisioning Indigenous– non-Indigenous relationships*, pp. 316-33. University of Toronto Press, Toronto.
- Root, E. (2010). This land is our land? This land is your land: The decolonizing journeys of white outdoor environmental educators. *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, 15, 103-119.