

Book Review: Not From Here: A Memoir

By Allan G. Johnson, Temple University Press, 2015, 176 pages

Review by Dina Gilio-Whitaker

Allan G. Johnson is an acclaimed sociologist, public speaker, and author of several books, both academic non-fiction and fiction. He is best known for his critical work on systemic white privilege and power. *Not From Here* is Johnson's latest offering, a deeply personal, self-reflective treatise on what it means to be "American"—specifically, an American of immigrant stock—in a country built on the dual oppressions of slavery, but especially colonization.

The book is a chronicle of the author's journey to find a final resting place for his deceased father's ashes several years after his passing. Having not left any specific instructions about where to be placed (because it "didn't matter") the decision about what to do with the ashes has fallen to the son. This raises for him troubling questions about belonging, relationship to land, and the ethics of American history and the way it is told. The father's family had been Norwegian immigrants that came to the United States in the mid-nineteenth century four generations back. Johnson's mission takes him on a road trip from his home in New England to various places in the Midwest, but ultimately to the original family farm in Iowa where he meets relatives he's never met before and finds the family cemetery. The book is sometimes cumbersome and slow, having been written in a semi-stream-of-consciousness style, but despite these drawbacks the book is remarkable. It is brutally honest about the kinds of narratives Americans tell themselves about the "Ameri-



can Dream," where America is upheld as the beacon of democracy and justice in the world in the face of its history of ethnic cleansing. What makes the book noteworthy is the way the author personalizes this history. There is none of the usual dismissal of history as something created by someone else in some other time that has no relationship to the present, and the kind of denial of accountability that

inevitably comes with history-telling in a state founded by foreign settlers. Instead, the author's family history weighs heavily on him as he acknowledges the generations of his family as the beneficiaries of genocide.

As a Native American studies scholar, I am naturally inclined to put this book into conversation with other work done by scholars of settler colonialism. I see Johnson's perspective particularly resonant with Philip Deloria's classic work *Playing Indian*. Drawing on the work of D.H. Lawrence and other American writers, Deloria deftly argued (and he is not the only one to do so) that Native American cultural appropriation is the product of a uniquely American identity crisis, the irresolvable anxiety of a settler population who desperately needs to but can never be truly native to the land of their in-migration, no matter how long ago in the past their ancestors came. This ongoing crisis comes out in the kinds of twisted and fraudulent claims to indigeneity that we see in things like sports mascots, fraternal organizations, spiritual movements (New Age), fashion, and other representational phenomenon. It also

fuels the arrogance of exceptionalism and the rhetoric of rugged American individualism, which is inherently exclusionary, not inclusive. As Johnson writes:

‘We are all Americans’ is another way of saying we are all eligible to engage in the same self-interested pursuit in the same political and economic landscape, a bunch of individuals out to achieve the American Dream for ourselves, and everyone else is on their own. And anyone who doesn’t like it is told to go someplace else, not getting the irony of it, that this is how it all began, hundreds and then thousands and then millions of people all going to the same somewhere else.

Johnson’s brutal honesty about the European settlers who created the United States is not just an intellectual exercise in liberalism, but is something he experiences viscerally as a sense of profound loss. He feels the loss of an ancestral homeland, of not really being Norwegian, and not belonging to a definable “people.” Perhaps unintentionally, in this regard he echoes Benedict Anderson who argued that today’s nations (more accurately viewed as states) are imagined communities coalesced around little more than things like a common language, shared symbols, and pride generated by public holidays or by the rallying effect of a national crisis. This is especially true in the U.S. For Johnson this loss is a sense of abandonment to which a narrative of self-sufficiency can be attributed. “In such a land,” he writes, “it is possible to indulge the illusion of being self-made, of self-invention. The wealthy and powerful in particular can imagine they do not need anyone at all and never did, that it’s the other way around, the great mass, needing them.”

Not From Here is an important text not only in the emerging literature on white privilege, but in settler colonial studies. For the tenets of settler colonialism to be meaningful in settler

populations—not just to indigenous peoples—it needs to be relevant to them. It needs to speak to them in ways that they can relate to, and I believe this book is a big step in that direction.

About the reviewer



Dina Gilio-Whitaker (Colville Confederated Tribes) is an independent writer and researcher in indigenous studies, having earned a bachelor’s degree in Native American Studies and a master’s degree

in American Studies from the University of New Mexico, and also holds the position of research associate and associate scholar at the Center for World Indigenous Studies. Her work focuses on issues related to indigenous nationalism, self-determination, and environmental justice, and more recently the emerging field of critical surf studies. She is a co-author (with [Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz](#)) of the forthcoming book from ‘[All the Real Indians Died Off](#)’ and [20 Other Myths about Native Americans](#). An award-winning journalist, she is a frequent contributor to Indian Country Today Media Network. Email: dina@cwis.org

Cite this article as:

Gilio-Whitaker, D. (2016). Book Review: Not from Here: A Memoir. By Allan G. Johnson. *Fourth World Journal*. 15(1) pp. 113-114.