

Book Review

Fractured Homeland: Federal Recognition and Algonquin Identity in Ontario

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Fractured Homeland: Federal Recognition and Algonquin Identity in Ontario by Bonita Lawrence. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2012. 327 pp. \$90.00 hardcover.

Fractured Homeland: Federal Recognition and Algonquin Identity in Ontario provides insight into the complex web of interrelated factors that underlie Aboriginal identity, and addresses many unique and under-researched issues confronting Non-Status Indians in rural areas. It is the story of federally unrecognized Algonquin communities in Ontario using interviews, primary sources, and historical documents, and author Bonita Lawrence describes how the Algonquin people were dispossessed and dispersed by aggressive settlement of their territories by newcomers, and how the imposition of colonial policies created deep divisions that persist today. Central to this story is how the federal government failed to recognize large segments of the historic Algonquin nation as “Indians,” effectively erasing them as Indigenous people from the official record. The ongoing existence of these federally unrecognized Algonquin communities came to the forefront in 1992, when the Algonquins of Pikwakanagan (the only federally recognized Algonquin reserve in Ontario) initiated a comprehensive land claim to the entirety of the traditional Algonquin territory on the Ontario side of the Ottawa River. *Fractured Homeland* provides an account of how Non-Status Algonquins were brought into the land claim process, and how with little agreement regarding a definition of who could legitimately claim to be Algonquin, controversy and discord followed. Lawrence explores the historical and contemporary experiences of non-status Algonquins as they face the challenges of reclaiming their identities as Algonquin people, and of re-imagining and re-creating Algonquin nationhood. In doing so, she engages with and grounds foundational theoretical questions about Aboriginal identity (What does it truly mean to be Aboriginal? What is Aboriginal nationhood?) in a real-life example.

Fractured Homeland is an important addition to a growing body of literature that tackles the complex issues of Aboriginal identity from the perspective of a particular, local experience, rather than a pan-Aboriginal or more generalized discussion about Aboriginal identity. By delving into the specific challenges facing the Algonquin people, Lawrence is able to more handily grasp and convey to her readers the complexity of the identity issues at play. This historical context, which forms the foundation for understanding the current divisions, is one of the main strengths of the book. Lawrence portrays how the Algonquin nation has been “fractured” by the imposition of the provincial border between Quebec and Ontario, transforming what was previously the heart of their homeland, the Kiji Sibi (Ottawa River), into a divisive borderline. The Indian Act regime of Status Indians and Non-Status Indians also created deep and persistent divisions amongst Algonquin people, to the point where many have come to regard Indian status as synonymous with authentic Algonquin identity. The reader is invited, through the historical accounts provided in the book, to understand how non-status Algonquins became lost to the official historical record, how many Algonquin families and communities came to be regarded as squatters on their own land, and how individuals and families developed strategies to survive in

this new reality (which included “silence” about their Algonquinness). Armed with this knowledge, the reader is better able to understand how potent a symbol the comprehensive land claim has become to many as a means of reclaiming their Algonquin identities (that is, to achieve official recognition as Algonquins). This historical context also helps the reader to navigate the conflicts that the author outlines in her accounts of the contemporary experiences of negotiating the land claim. Descriptions of the controversies, schisms, and disputes are sometimes difficult to wade through, as they can appear superficially petty or malicious. However, Lawrence’s work helps to shine light on this history, allowing the reader to better see how pre-existing divisions have been intensified by the land claim, and to recognize the larger issues at play.

In the introduction, Lawrence states that she has adopted Indigenism as the theoretical approach in this book. Referencing Ward Churchill, she describes this perspective as “taking the rights of Indigenous peoples as the highest priority, drawing upon the knowledge and values of Indigenous communities, and articulating the spirit of resistance that has marked the history of their fight against colonialism” (3). While her discussion of Indigenism as a theoretical approach is brief, it is undeniable that this approach governs the book. For example, both the case study approach and the structure of the book serve to elevate the importance of place. The book is organized according to the various Ontario watersheds where Algonquin people live, as this is in line with the way the historic Algonquin nation would have been organized. While the first part of the book contains a general overview of the shared history of the Algonquin nation and the current policy and legal environment with regard to Aboriginal title and Aboriginal rights, the remainder of the book is a systematic examination of the history and contemporary situations of Algonquin communities in several Ontario watersheds: the Mississippi, Rideau, and Lower Madawaska River watersheds; the Bonnechere and Petawawa River watersheds; the Upper Madawaska and York River watersheds; and the Kiji Sibi. In structuring the book in this way, Lawrence coaxes her reader into a transformative reading of the current issues. Algonquin notions of place are predominant, and in making place the forefront of the discussion, she reinforces her assertions of the centrality of land, and connections to land, to Algonquin identity and nationhood.

An Indigenist approach allows researchers to not be required to maintain an objective or neutral voice; rather, they are able to “articulate a spirit of resistance” (3). Lawrence does not shy away from making bold assertions and assessments, and even gives prescriptive advice regarding approaches to the land claim and identity issues. She strongly advocates for a recording of oral history within the federal unrecognized Algonquin communities, for example, and laments that this has not been made a priority: “A land claim can provide a legal identity card, but a people’s true presence on the land is ultimately established by stories, and it is those stories that will provide a foundation for the renascent nationhood of federally unrecognized Algonquins” (280). Undoubtedly, Lawrence is working within a controversial subject area—events are current, and many individuals are named and their actions discussed. While she is forthcoming with her opinions, she is equally forthcoming

regarding her own positionality in relation to this work. This provides balance, and I would argue is also a part of the Indigenist approach.

Of interest to those engaged in Aboriginal research would be the way that *Fractured Homeland* illustrates the challenges of working within the Tri-Council Policy Statement on ethical conduct for research involving Aboriginal peoples in Canada. While these guidelines are meant to ensure responsible and ethical research in Aboriginal communities, Lawrence's research with federally unrecognized Algonquin communities exposes a limitation to its current codification of Aboriginal research ethics. Although Lawrence, as an Mi'kmaq academic, may be considered by some to be an "insider" to Aboriginal research, she encountered several difficulties in carrying out this research. The requirement to obtain approval from Aboriginal leadership prior to speaking with community members, for example, proved challenging in the context of the federally unrecognized Algonquin communities. Many of these communities lack formal governance structures, and there was much internal dissent even in those that had been organized into a formal structure. Further, two tribal councils in Quebec denied Lawrence permission to carry out the research in the nine Quebec First Nations that they represented. As she points out, this served to truncate the research and omits a large part of the historic Algonquin nation. She expresses hope that another researcher will take on the onerous task of covering the entire historic Algonquin nation, including both sides of the Ottawa River. (12)

In carrying out her research with non-status Algonquins, Lawrence uncovered a diverse group working "to be reborn as a people after almost 200 years of settler engulfment of their homeland, the Ottawa River watershed, and a century of erasure as 'Indians'" (2). While outward expressions of Algonquinness may have been diminished for many in the federally unrecognized Algonquin communities, Lawrence maintains that Algonquin values and connections to land have persevered. She also argues that the way that Non-Status Algonquins were forced to adapt to life with settlers, including becoming "silent" about their Algonquin culture, is a legitimate and integral part of Algonquin history, and a common experience of many Indigenous groups. *Fractured Homeland* makes an important contribution to Aboriginal identity literature not only because it addresses an under-researched group—non-status Indians in rural areas—but also because it serves to open the discussion about what comprises a legitimate and authentic Aboriginal identity in Canada.

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